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THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATIONS OF *MOBY-DICK*:
TECHNOLOGY AND VULNERABILITY IN HUMAN/MORE-THAN-HUMAN
RELATIONSHIPS

By

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Thesis

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The Environmental Imaginations of *Moby-Dick*: Technology and Vulnerability in Human/More-than-Human Relationships

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ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, the relationship between the human and the more-than-human is a problem of massive proportions, as we live in an age of climate change, mass-extinction, over-population, and resource depletion. Evaluating how we have arrived where we are and re-thinking the issues at play as we move forward is crucial for future adaptation of human/more-than-human relationships; this is the primary goal of my analysis of the environmental imaginations of *Moby-Dick*.

I argue that the four primary environmental imaginations—the providential, the utilitarian, the Romantic, and the ecological—that have influenced United States culture since European settlement are represented by Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*. Further, I argue that Melville’s representation of these imaginations illuminates the core issues at play in human/more-than-human relationships both for his time, and our contemporary moment. Alongside the four environmental imaginations, I trace the role of technology, vulnerability, the numinous, and the commodity in influencing how we relate to nature. My first chapter details Melville’s representation of the four environmental imaginations: I argue that the providential attitude is found in Ahab, that the utilitarian attitude is found in the crew, and that the Romantic and ecological attitudes are found in both Ahab and Ishmael. My second chapter engages with the implications of these environmental imaginations more fully: I examine how the market and desire for the commodity drives the development of whaling technology; the role of extractivism and technology in the domination of nature; and how vulnerability grounds our relationship to nature.

I develop my argument through literary analysis; surveys of technological habits; and a consultation with cultural, historical, and philosophical analysis’. My primary sources are: Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Jedidiah Purdy’s *After Nature*, Martin Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology,” Lewis Mumford’s *Technics and Civilization*, Donald Worster’s *Nature’s Economy*, Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, John Gatta’s *Making Nature Sacred*, and Davis et. al.’s *In Pursuit of Leviathan*.

Introduction

The term ‘Anthropocene’ has become commonly used in the academic fields that study the environment. While this term is still relatively new and in need of clarification and deeper understanding, its basic premise is unchallengeable: That humans have affected planetary systems in monumental and catastrophic ways. As Jedediah Purdy writes: “It’s not a statement of fact as much as a way of organizing facts to highlight a certain importance that they carry” (2). Thus, as we face the ever-growing evidence regarding species loss, climate change, pollution, and all forms of environmental destruction, ‘Anthropocene’ highlights that the relationship of human to more-than-human is not sound.¹ It is this relationship that I wish to explore in the coming pages, through the novel *Moby-Dick*.

As Raymond Williams writes in “Ideas of Nature:” “We have to look at all our products and activities, good and bad, and to see the relationships between them which are our own real relationships” (296). There are a multitude of environmental imaginations, or ways in which humans imagine our relationship to the more-than-human, yet there are four dominant imaginations which have shaped the habits and discourses of all levels of American culture—from academic, to legal, to popular—and which will help illuminate the connection between *Moby-Dick* and our contemporary moment.² These four environmental imaginations are traced by Purdy in *After Nature*:

¹Following David Abram, “the more-than-human” implies not only that humans are part of nature, but also that nature is not simply a set of resources. “The more-than-human” attempts to recognize that other beings are actants, and at the same time, that humans are imbedded in this world through our senses. (See Abram 28).

² Per Evernden, “Nature” is a socially constructed concept, which has shifted in meaning over time. It is my interest to elaborate on several different imaginations towards what is generally described as nature, and hopefully, this study will provide insight into several factors which influence the relationship between human and nonhuman. My work will contain no stable definition of “nature” since I recognize that there is none—“nature” is imagined differently based on several different ideologies—providential, utilitarian, romantic, and ecological (among others). While the ecological includes humans within nature, the others generally do not. I join Purdy in continuing to use the word “nature,” despite its problems, because of its history in shaping our social practices and ontologies (21).

These are (1) a providential vision, in which the natural world has a purpose, to serve human needs richly, but only if people do their part by filling it up with labor and development; (2) a Romantic vision, in which a key part of the world's value is aesthetic and spiritual, found in the inspiration of mountain peaks, sheer canyon walls, and deep forests; (3) a utilitarian picture, in which nature is a storehouse of resources requiring expert management, especially by scientists and public officials; and (4) an ecological view of the world as being formed of complex and interpenetrating systems, in which both sustenance and poison may travel through air, water, and soil, and in and out of flesh, as each thing becomes something else. (8)

These four paradigms offer the grounds for my analysis. Each vision is at play in some way in *Moby-Dick*, and by understanding each imagination with relationship to this text, we can gain a better understanding of the relationship to the more-than-human that they propose.³

In this analysis, I want to focus on four entry points which help illuminate the stakes of the environmental imaginations: technology, vulnerability, the numinous, and the commodity. While these ideas will be explored in depth in the second chapter, they must be briefly introduced before proceeding, and their relationship to the environmental imaginations must be clarified. The numinous, as theorized by Rudolf Otto is characterized by the feeling of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁴ It is often found in a being (or object) which is 'wholly other.' The Romantic imagination generally finds the numinous in wild and sublime nature, though it may also be found in domestic nature. Additionally, there is some argument to be made

³ Throughout, I use "imagination," "vision," and "attitude" to refer to slightly different components of the environmental imaginations traced by Purdy. While "imagination" and "vision" refer to the epistemological component in the relationship between human and more-than-human, "attitude" refers to the ontological component. Through this shift in terminology I attempt to highlight that our epistemology translates into ontology with very practical impacts.

⁴ Roughly translated as "Fascinating tremendous, or awful, mystery."

that in strains of the dark Romantic imagination and the providential imagination, technology is made numinous. The commodity centers on both use value and market value, yet for our purposes the latter will be more relevant. A commodity is that which is extracted raw from nature and processed until it has market value, and as such, treats nature as Martin Heidegger's "standing reserve," or as resource. The commodity is the result of the utilitarian imagination, as nature becomes pure resource in this vision. Technology is both the mode of extraction and processing of resources and is intimately tied to the commodity.

Technology, however, does not exist only for utilitarian purposes, it also exerts a power and control over the physical world; as Lewis Mumford writes: "the machine as we know it represents the convergence and systematic embodiment of these two prime elements [control and power]" (TC 84). In this way, technology is a mode of achieving dominion, as iterated by the providential vision. Yet, as noted above, technology may also be invested with a numinous force by strains of Romanticism. An increase in power and control is justified by the trend of a higher standard of living; as William Leiss details in *The Domination of Nature*: "The purpose of mastery over nature is the security of life—and its enhancement—alike for individuals and the species" (163). In this way, technology, and by extension the pursuit of commodities, are meant to limit human physical and psychic vulnerability. As strains of the ecological imagination emphasize, as physical beings, humans are vulnerable to the environment and to other beings; as Judith Butler writes: "The body implies a mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence" (26). By limiting vulnerability, however, technology may limit our experience of the numinous, and even an understanding of the other—by erasing vulnerability, nature becomes *pure* resource, or *pure* standing reserve. To be clear, I am not proposing a one to one relationship between these terms

and the environmental imaginations described above; only that a focus on these environmental imaginations illuminates the ontologies which emerge, and which are grounded in a complex tangle of the relationships between technology, vulnerability, the numinous, and the commodity.

In part, what allows these visions of nature to be exhibited in such complexity in *Moby-Dick* is the status of whaling as a frontier industry. By this I mean that it operates in a separate geographical location, often ‘unexplored’ by Euro-Americans, from the civilization which it serves—whaling took place globally, at the time of Melville’s writing, yet the products and capital generated were destined for Euro-American countries. A frontier denotes the ‘progress’ of civilization in transforming wild nature into controlled nature useful for human purposes. Put otherwise, the task of frontiersmen was to transform the wilderness into civilization—an action which came to be interpreted through the phrase “Manifest Destiny” (Nash 41, Purdy 51). Additionally, the frontier is also associated with colonialism, as again, the professed goal was to transform ‘savages’ into ‘civilized men and women.’⁵ Ishmael ties whaling to colonialism and speaks of it as inhabiting a frontier:

For many years past the whale-ship has been the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth. She has explored seas and archipelagoes which had no chart, where no Cook or Vancouver had ever sailed. If American and European men-of-war now peacefully ride in once savage harbors, let them fire salutes to the honor and the glory of the whale-ship, which originally showed them the way, and first interpreted between them and the savages. (93)

⁵ Ania Loomba provides a straightforward definition of colonialism: “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods.” She also suggests that to the extent that colonialism meant “‘forming a community’ in the new land [this] necessarily meant *un-forming* or *re-forming* the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions” (8).

Soon after he writes: “The whale-ship is the true mother of that now mighty colony,” in reference to Australia (94). In his effort to show whaling as respectable, he turns to colonialism—itsself associated with the frontier. The whaleship becomes a “pioneer” which braves “savage” and “remote” parts of the world in search of its commodities. In this passage, Ishmael depicts the colonial project as rosy and heroic, which in reality, was brutal and exploitative. Ishmael describes a frontier—a realm of the unexplored and uninhabited, which is both “savage,” or wild, and “virgin,” or untouched (93). In his logic, the frontier becomes transformed into civilization—an ultimate good in the eyes of those in power—through the efforts of whalers. Additionally, the process of transforming a whale into oil occurs in much the same way: the wildness of the whale is overcome in favor of the control offered by the commodity. A full analysis of whaling as a frontier industry would be a project in and of itself, yet I invoke this term to highlight the attitudes towards nature present in *Moby-Dick* that are often predicated upon this inhabitation of space and professed goal. It is further useful in understanding the market dictates of the whaling industry, which will be examined in my second chapter.

Another key figure which shapes the way that nature is interpreted in the novel, is the title character, Moby Dick. As Robert Wagner writes in *Moby-Dick and the Mythology of Oil*: Moby Dick is “a character of significant numinosity, a mesmerizing entity that is meant to hold significant power between two archetypal poles of humanity, Ahab and Ishmael” (126). This is to say that while both Ishmael and Ahab find Moby Dick to be numinous—he is a *mysterium tremendum* to each—they respond to his numinosity in very different ways. In addition, Moby Dick is wild in his ability to resist human control, and sublime in his extreme power relative to humans. Melville makes apparent Moby Dick’s numinosity, sublimity, and wildness in several

ways: symbolic parallels between Moby Dick and the Leviathan of *The Book of Job* attribute to him a numinous power; his extreme wildness relative to other sperm whales invests him with the feeling that he is wholly other; his color is closely tied to his “awfulness” and otherness; and Ahab’s extreme fascination with him, and investment in him of “malicious agencies” suggest the numinous (148). In the text, each environmental imagination—providential, Romantic, utilitarian, and ecological—is brought to bear upon Moby Dick, and yet, each ultimately seems inadequate.

Moby Dick’s whiteness generates a numinosity which prompts existential questions, and which stems from a Romantic view of nature. As Ishmael states: “It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me” (151). Ishmael attempts to explain why the whiteness of Moby Dick generates such numinosity:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider the other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazoning—...are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if

operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects...with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like willful travelers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol.

Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt? (157)

Ishmael is awestruck by Moby Dick's whiteness because it exposes human frailty and vulnerability in one way or another. He sees the immensity of the universe; an existential void, simultaneously overfull and devoid of meaning; and a predacious, death-filled nature. Given that Ishmael devotes much more space to the latter, we may surmise that this is a question central to his experience of nature, and further, central to *Moby-Dick* in its entirety. Though this passage is worthy of more analysis than can be provided here, the gendered language is critical. Nature becomes a female prostitute who is deceitful yet alluring; she *invites* domination in the same way that Moby Dick's numinosity invites the hunt. The numinous is too much for human comprehension—indeed, it is too much to gaze at without “coloring glasses”—and Ishmael uses it as a justification for the quest to kill Moby Dick, as Ahab does in “The Quarter Deck.”

The projection of evil onto Moby Dick highlights his wildness and numinosity and stems from a providential and dark Romantic vision toward nature. Important to note is that, as Nash tells us, wilderness for the frontiersman “constituted a formidable threat to his very survival...but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol. They shared in the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as a moral vacuum, a cursed and chaotic wasteland” (24). This is precisely the same attitude Ahab adopts towards Moby Dick: “I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate”

(133). Additionally, according to Ishmael, “in [Ahab’s] frantic morbidness he came to identify with [Moby Dick] not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them” (148). The seeming malice of Moby Dick, his wildness in his resistance to human ordering, becomes the impetus for Ahab’s identification of him with a metaphysically evil nature.

In the three parts of “The Chase,” Moby Dick is described in ways which more closely resemble the Romantic vision. Ishmael writes: “A gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness, invested the gliding whale...not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam” (392). He continues: “But soon the fore part of him slowly rose from the water; for an instant his whole marbleized body formed a high arch, like Virginia’s Natural Bridge, and warningly waving his bannered flukes in the air, the grand god revealed himself, sounded, and went out of sight” (392-93). Ishmael represents Moby Dick in the convention of the sublime; he is glorious, godlike, majestic, and parallels one of the first areas in the United States recognized as sublime.⁶

The utilitarian and ecological attitudes brought to bear on Moby Dick are brief; some characters operating from a utilitarian perspective can only see the resource value of Moby Dick, and are blind both to his characteristics as an intelligent animal and to the numinosity that Ishmael and Ahab see. Starbuck’s comment that Moby Dick is a “dumb brute” and his question: “How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab?” reflect a utilitarian understanding of the whale (132-33). Similarly, the captain of the *Samuel Enderby*

⁶ David Nye traces the emergence of the sublime in American thought in his second chapter. Virginia’s Natural Bridge, along with Niagara Falls began to attract attention in the 1820’s because of their sublime characteristics. As Nye notes, sublime landscapes such as these allowed “Americans [to turn to] the landscape as the source of national character” (24).

remarks that “there’s a shipload of precious sperm in [Moby Dick], but, hark ye, he’s best let alone” (325). This captain recognizes the commodity value of Moby Dick, but also his wildness and power (after battling him once). The ecological vision of Moby Dick is less clear and will necessitate a longer argument. Briefly, Ishmael connects Moby Dick to the lines representative of the ecological understanding of nature (later to be examined) (400). Further, his attitude of humility in the final pages of “The Chase” and in the “Epilogue” suggests that Moby Dick’s extreme power and connectedness to other life forms causes Ishmael to fully embrace an ecological attitude of humility. We see that each environmental imagination is brought to bear upon Moby Dick, and yet, each on its own seems inadequate—he resists the human frameworks placed upon him. Nature at large is, in many ways, similar—while none of the environmental imaginations are wrong per se, to remain rigid in a single one is to approach nature with blinders on. To understand our relationship with nature, we must acknowledge that the subjects and objects of nature are at once numinous, wild, standing reserve, able to be dominated, and connected to everything else, including ourselves.

Moby-Dick is a novel which deals with the nature of nature, or as John Gatta puts it, “the problem of metaphysical evil” (117). As such, several studies have been devoted to Melville’s treatment of nature, his environmental vision, the tension in organic and mechanistic imagery in *Moby-Dick*, and his use of the sublime. Some examples include Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*, John Gatta’s *Making Nature Sacred*, Dean Flower’s “Vengeance on a Dumb Brute, Ahab?”, Barbra Glenn’s “Melville and the Sublime in *Moby-Dick*”, and Elizabeth Schultz’s “Melville’s Environmental Vision in *Moby-Dick*”, though others abound. These studies are crucial in understanding how Melville fits into the tradition of American “nature writers” and how he differs in his treatment of the themes noted above. Yet, no close examination of how the

characters of the novel react to and interact with nature has been made, and this is the gap this study seeks to fill. My first chapter will examine how the characters in the novel imagine nature. The analysis will primarily focus on Ahab, Ishmael and the Crew as a whole.⁷ My second chapter will then focus on how these imaginations shape interactions with nature both within and without the novel, with an emphasis on technology and oil extraction. Melville's representation of the primary environmental imaginations that have shaped the United States since European settlement can not only bring greater understanding to the connections between each imagination, but also generate a clearer view of the key issues at play in human/more-than-human relationships which still impact us in the twenty-first century. Specifically, the relationship between nature and technology is explored in *Moby-Dick* in ways that remain useful to consider.

I—The Environmental Imaginations of *Moby-Dick*

The four environmental imaginations detailed by Purdy are visible in *Moby-Dick*: the providential attitude can be seen in Ahab. Though Ahab rejects all metaphysical beings and forces which would preside over him, including the God which justifies the providential vision, there are still substantial parallels to be made. He espouses order and control and eschews wildness and chaos, which, given the position of whaling as a frontier industry, is logical. Ahab's embrace of control and dominion parallels the sense of dominion that defines the providential attitude. Importantly, he justifies his dominion over the crew and nature by making himself into a

⁷ One could differentiate the harpooners from the crew at large, though I do not see enough material to make a true analysis of their attitudes.

god of sorts. The other characters reinforce this claim to power, as Ahab is depicted as an “ungodly, god-like man” (73).

The utilitarian attitude can be most prominently seen in the crew; however, Ishmael also gives voice to it throughout the text. I argue that Ishmael’s voicing of the utilitarian attitude is primarily due to his discomfort with his role and can be read as an attempt to attach to the work of whaling the principles of life that compel him. The crew and industry as a whole, on the other hand, clearly see whales in economic terms, and no other. Their goal is to profit from the material reduction of the whale into commodity, and their attitude towards the whale reflects this, as throughout the text, whales are imagined not as living beings, but rather storehouses of commodities.

The Romantic imagination—the understanding of nature through an aesthetic and spiritual lens—is seen in both Ishmael and Ahab, each of whom use nature as a mirror, so to speak, in an attempt to uncover their inner selves. Ishmael, at times, mirrors the Transcendentalist’s view of nature as a site for spiritual growth. He seeks to interpret the ultimate meaning of the sea and the whale, especially as they relate to his own person, yet fails. Ahab, on the other hand, resembles a Promethean Romantic hero, similar to Frankenstein, Milton’s Satan, or Faust. While nature is interpreted through an aesthetic or spiritual lens, the focus is on the demonic or darker powers in nature. Additionally, the Promethean hero often attempts to transcend nature or social convention through an embrace of the demonic. Ahab is frustrated by nature’s resistance to his will; as noted above he views Moby Dick—and nature at large—as a wall. He attempts to transcend the limitations placed on humans through demonic technology. Thus, Gatta’s focus on the inscrutable is key to illuminating the differing interpretations of nature which divide Ishmael and Ahab. The numinous and the sublime are key to understanding

how each of these characters inhabits the Romantic environmental imagination and will be explored in that section.

Finally, the ecological attitude is found in Ishmael and Ahab. While neither quite grasps the principles of ecology, as these would not emerge in force until the twentieth-century, each begins to understand the interconnectedness of life due to their experience whaling. Yet while Ishmael's ecological vision is arcadian, in that he is humbled by his recognition of the interconnectedness of life-forms, Ahab's is imperial, in that the recognition of interconnectedness is used to enable further exploitation and domination. This chapter will explore Melville's representation of these core environmental imaginations and the interplay within them; I argue that to grasp Melville's complex treatment of nature and technology, we must first attend to the question of how the characters themselves interpret human/more-than-human relationships.

The Providential Attitude: Ahab

The providential imagination holds that nature exists to serve human needs and stems from a reading of Christianity which gives humans dominion over the land and other creatures. We see, in the domination of nature, the drive to return to an idyllic garden. As Merchant writes: "The idea of [reinventing Eden]...combines the Christian idea of the Garden of Eden with the goal of recreating that Eden on earth using the laws of nature, the tools of technology, the politics of capitalism, and the image of a natural law society" (xvii).⁸ Importantly, Purdy ties the providential vision to westward expansion and settlement, and thus, the frontier becomes a central concept to it:

⁸ As I do not have space to fully discuss each of these elements, I will primarily focus on the drive to dominate nature through technology in order to create an idyllic garden—a world without suffering.

A vision suffused these clearing and settlement efforts, a picture of nature with religious and philosophical sources. The world was a potential garden that existed to serve human needs, but only if people developed it with labor and settlement. This vision was the keystone of an idea of national mission: turning the continent into private property. It linked economic development to a cosmology and a sense of planetary purpose. (23-24)

In the providential vision in America, we see the blending of religion, nationalism, and the marketplace. Additionally, both Merchant and Leiss describe the providential attitude as becoming secularized into the myth of progress and as achieved through the use of science and technology. Such a vision imagines wilderness as negative, as Nash puts it: “Insofar as the westward expansion of civilization was thought good, wilderness was bad. It was constructed as much a barrier to progress, prosperity and power as it was to godliness. On every frontier intense enthusiasm greeted the transformation of the wild into the civilized” (40). Both Gatta and Merchant are clear that the providential vision was primarily a justification for domination and exploitation; as Gatta writes: “It is much harder to prove that theological ideas uniquely *motivated* these English colonists to behave as they did toward the nonhuman world” (21-22). Yet, despite such fine distinctions, in this vision, nature invites dominion and control. Additionally, it is teleological (in comparison to the utilitarian vision, which simply focuses on the commodity value of materials), as progress becomes an end in itself.

In this vision of nature, we get a sense of a vision of humanity. In the providential vision, nature is meant to be “improved” through human labor, which begs the question: why? Humans, in this vision, are fallen, and as such are vulnerable without assistance, thus, they must labor for their livelihoods and must suffer. As Purdy writes, citing Locke: “People were needy, vulnerable, and poorly provided for by an ‘un-assisted nature’” (76). Or, put otherwise by Donald Worster:

“the drive to overcome the fear of scarcity has been one of the greatest forces pushing us toward the modern world...A dream began to take form of endless plenty delivered through the benevolent agency of science and technology” (*UWS* 86). This dream stems from the providential vision and ties to the mainstream Recovery Narrative analyzed by Merchant. I argue that Ahab’s attitude towards nature, specifically Moby Dick, has crucial parallels to the providential attitude; he envisions himself as having dominion over everything, even the sun and God, and envisions Moby Dick as a metaphysical agent which challenges human (especially his own) power. Thus, his quest to destroy Moby Dick parallels colonists’ desires to overcome wilderness; I will argue that vulnerability is at the core of Ahab’s quest, and that the providential attitude of dominion extends into his dark Romantic vision.⁹

Ahab’s desire for dominion is made clear in both his physical introduction and treatment of the crew. He is introduced by Ishmael with a series of organic and mechanistic images, which not only “sets the stage for most of the subsequent descriptions of the captain” and introduces a key conflict in the novel, but also begins to link Ahab with the sense of dominion found in the use of industrial technology (Ausband 200). The introduction of Ahab concludes: “There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsunderable willfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance. Not a word he spoke; nor did his officers say aught to him; though by all their minutest gestures and expressions, they plainly showed the uneasy, if not painful, consciousness of being under a troubled master-eye” (103). Ishmael’s rhetoric suggests that Ahab is surveying his domain; that he has the power to challenge nature. Further, the officers assume a subservient role. To Stubb’s suggestion that he muffle his peg-leg, Ahab

⁹ The dark Romantic vision is the vision of the Promethean hero; nature is viewed as metaphysically resistant to human will and must be overcome. In contrast to Romanticism’s celebration of aesthetic nature, dark Romanticism is melancholic.

responds, “Down, dog, and kennel” (105). Further, “The Cabin Table” depicts Ahab as a “sultan,” a “lord and master” and as obsessed with order (120-21). The mates are made to seat themselves in order of rank, are served in order of rank, and dismissed in reverse order. This desire for order and dominion then extends to nature itself.

Science and technology are the mode by which the providential vision is put into practice. In her study of the narratives of the recovery of Eden, Merchant repeatedly stresses that “science, technology, and capitalism [provide] the tools” for the reinvention of wilderness as a garden (2). Additionally, Leiss argues, in *The Domination of Nature*, that “(1) the effort to master and control nature has an essential connection with the modern utopian vision; (2) the mastery of nature is achieved by means of scientific and technological progresses; (3) the attempt to master external nature has a close and perhaps inextricable relationship with the evolution of new means for exercising domination over men” (15).¹⁰ This is all to suggest that Melville, in using mechanistic language to describe Ahab, allies him with a particular set of forces which are used to achieve dominion over nature, and thus complete the providential vision. Ahab is described as having “mechanical humming of the wheels of...vitality in him,” and is paralleled to the “Leyden jar,” or an electric circuit (131, 134). He is described as an anvil and as having an “iron voice” (382, 385). Further, he states: “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents’ beds, unerringly I rush! Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle to the iron way!” (136). Here, Ahab parallels himself to a railroad, as he cannot be “swerved” from his purpose, but neither then can he swerve himself. As such, he imagines that none can oppose him, and invokes sublime natural obstacles to illustrate that they can be overcome through technology.

¹⁰ The “modern utopian vision” is in essence the same drive as Merchant’s “mainstream Recovery Narrative,” as evidenced by their interpretation of similar sources, particularly Francis Bacon.

Of this passage, Leo Marx notes that “Ahab taunts [the gods] in the rhetoric of the technological sublime” (294). The technological sublime is an aesthetic and experience which finds awe and terror in the power of a technological object or process. As Ahab’s rhetoric suggests, it is often manifested in triumphalist language regarding the power of the machine and technology. David Nye discusses the relationship between the railroad and the technological sublime, pointing out that it was one of the first technologies to be invested with the sublime, and that this investment occurs due to the railroad’s ability to annihilate time and space: “Whether the railroad was understood to be a direct expression of the Almighty or a secular force, it was seen as a sublime engine of moral development. The railroad was regarded as an engine of progress and western expansion” (58). Thus, the technological sublime serves not to impose limitations, but rather, to celebrate the *lack* of limitations. The technological sublime will be more fully examined in my section on the Romantic imagination of Ahab. For now, the relationship between the technological sublime and the myth of progress must be emphasized, as the technological sublime becomes key to implementing the providential vision.

Ahab’s speech on the quarter deck, itself a response to Starbuck’s challenging of his authority, reveals Ahab’s desire for order and disdain for chaos. He interprets Moby Dick as a metaphysical agent who offers a personal affront to him. Additionally, he exhibits a view that humans are impotent and vulnerable before the numinous. Ahab lectures:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there’s

naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealously presiding over all creations. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? (133)

This speech draws links between Ahab and the providential attitude, as nature is constructed as an entity which *should* be ordered by humans. Ahab calls attention to human impotence in his first few lines (we are paralleled to prisoners at the hands of nature) and calls for the ability to glimpse some objective reality hiding behind the “pasteboard mask.” For him, Moby Dick becomes a universal symbol of the human inability to grasp metaphysical truths. The sun is then invoked as both a deity and a natural agent, which Ahab asserts that he has some power over, for in his mind, he has no master. Leo Marx writes, “[i]n putting down the recalcitrant mate, Ahab makes the electrifying speech that so vividly expresses his Faustian compulsion to impose his will upon the cosmos” (293). That this passage leads to the crew’s adoption of his purpose and Starbuck’s resignation is of the utmost importance. For Ahab’s desire for order cannot be separated from his role as captain, nor his purpose. As Wilson writes of this passage: “Ahab proclaims his ascendancy over each level of his crew—from Starbuck to the cannibals—as well as over animals and matter. At the same time, he intimates a more temporal chain of being in expressing his desire to progress to the very top of the chain, over sun and God” (136). Wilson’s analysis of Ahab’s relationship to the great chain of being is significant; he shows that Ahab is anthropocentric and hierarchical in his vision of the cosmos in ways which mirror the

providential vision, even as his desire to move to the top would displace the justification of the providential vision, as such, we will return to this passage in an exploration of Ahab's dark Romantic vision.

We see this attitude of dominion over nature again in "The Candles:" Ahab appears to have mastery over nature as he challenges a storm. As Starbuck moves to put lightning rods into the water to conduct any electricity away from the *Pequod*, Ahab accosts him, echoing his previous speech on the quarter deck: "let's have fair play here, though we be the weaker side" (365). Importantly, this scene is infused with the numinous, as St. Elmo's fire infuses the rigging: "like three gigantic wax tapers before an altar" (365). Ahab then asserts his power over lightning: "I own thy speechless, placeless power," to which the lightning seems to respond (367). As Wixon writes of this scene: "Ahab sets himself against one of nature's most inspiring forces. No matter what nature's response, Ahab believes he can deal with it. It is with such magnificence that Ahab is able to maintain control of the crew" (147). As this scene also represents Ahab's worship of fire through defiance, it will be examined again as we explore Ahab's dark Romantic vision. It is notable that the attitude of dominion which Ahab holds bleeds into the way that he challenges a metaphysical nature; put otherwise, Ahab's providential vision bleeds into his dark Romantic vision. Not only do we see the providential attitude towards nature in Ahab's obsession with dominion and control, but also in his negative attitude towards wildness.

Ahab's holds an antipathy towards wildness characteristic of a frontiersman operating from a providential attitude. Before we consider that it is partially Moby Dick's wildness which spurs Ahab to interpret him as a metaphysical manifestation of evil, we see evidence of his hatred for wildness in a soliloquy to the wind:

How the *wild* winds blow it [his hair, compared to common grass]: they whip it about me as the torn shreds of split sails lash the tossed ship they cling to. A *vile* wind that has no doubt blown ere this through prison corridors and cells, and wards of hospitals, and ventilated them, and now comes blowing hither as innocent as fleeces. Out upon it—its tainted. Were I the wind, I'd blow no more on such a wicked, miserable world. I'd crawl somewhere to a cave, and slink there. And yet, 'tis a noble and heroic thing, the wind! *who ever conquered it?* In every fight it has the last and bitterest blow. Run tilting at it, and you but run through it. Ha! a coward wind that strikes stark naked men, but will not stand to receive a single blow. Even Ahab is a braver thing—a nobler thing than *that*. Would now the wind but had a body; but all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents. There's a most special, a most cunning, oh, a most *malicious* difference! (403, emphasis added, emphasis original on "that")¹¹

It is worth note that the wind was the principal energy source for whaling vessels until the 1880's, and this puts humans in a position of vulnerability to the elements; as Davis et. al. write: "When steam was finally introduced to the American fleet in 1880, it produced a technical revolution in the Western Arctic. Steam barks cruised at nine, rather than six, knots and, since *they didn't have to wait for the vagaries of nature*, could call on those nine knots at any time. In addition, steam-powered vessels were much more maneuverable" (45, emphasis added).¹² Ahab, without the aid of these technologies, both admires and hates the wildness of the wind. He sees

¹¹ Note that Ahab's vision of the world is that it is "wicked" and "miserable," further reinforcing the claim that his goal is to transcend these elements.

¹² A reading of this thread may be enhanced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, as the wind plays an integral role in the plot of marine disaster. Dean Flower discusses the parallels between *Moby-Dick* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in his essay "Vengeance on a Dumb Brute, Ahab: An Environmentalist Reading of *Moby-Dick*?"

the wind as an agent, as having some autonomy, just as the other invisible forces that have influence over humans. This attitude has a direct referent in the providential pioneers and colonists; as Nash writes: “On the direct, physical level, [wilderness] constituted a formidable threat to his very survival...but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol” (24). Moby Dick is not just a physical threat to Ahab, but becomes a metaphysical agent representing the negative powers of the world and their power over humans. Further, Nash later notes that “American frontiersmen rarely...spoke of their relation to [wilderness] in other than a military metaphor” (43), which Ahab does: “Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep” (389). Ahab’s antipathy for wildness is illustrated by his soliloquy to the wind and his militaristic description of whaling; this disdain for wildness further links Ahab to the providential vision. We see this disdain manifested in Ahab’s understanding of Moby Dick.

Moby Dick is represented as an extremely wild sperm whale with parallels to the mythic Leviathan, as noted in my introduction. I argue that Ahab’s projection of evil onto Moby Dick parallels pioneers’ projection of evil onto wilderness. As an illustration of this link in *Moby-Dick* I turn to Wagner: “the dichotomy of Melville’s [reverential] treatment of whales and his descriptions of Moby Dick’s behavior as malicious seems to be another representation by Melville...of the perversity of some of the mythos of the time” namely “the American settler’s attitudes towards the Native American Indians;” American Indians themselves being associated with the wild, chaotic, and demonic by those seeking to order the land into Eden (123). Ishmael later describes Ahab’s attitude:

No turbaned Turk, no hired Venetian or Malay, could have smote him with more seeming *malice*...[and] in his frantic morbidness he came to identify with [Moby Dick] not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those *malicious* agencies which some deep men feel eating in them...That intangible *malignity* which has been from the beginning; to whose *dominion* even modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds; which the ancient Ophites of the east revered in their statue devil;—Ahab did not fall down and worship it like them; but deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself all mutilated against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; *all truth with malice* in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; *all evil*, to crazy Ahab, *were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick.* (148, emphasis added)

That malignity is first a metaphysical force that is later transferred onto Moby Dick reflects Ahab's negative view of a nature that does not conform to human desires. Additionally, the insertion of race into this passage illustrates the associations between the disdain for wildness and Christian providentialism. Both Merchant and Worster note Melville's encounter with and depiction of a fallen world which is antithetical to human desires; it is this world which Ahab cannot accept. Thus, Ausband ties Ahab's ability to glimpse a malignant universe to his vision of a mechanical man (203). Ahab projects all his vulnerabilities onto Moby Dick precisely because of his wildness, then transforms the being who inspires this vulnerability into an object of pure evil and malice.

Crucially, Ahab believes that his hunt is for the good of humankind, and thus draws further parallels to the providential urge to recreate the wilderness as a garden; by eliminating

Moby Dick, Ahab seeks to make nature hospitable for humans. In the quarter deck speech, quoted above, Ahab interprets a material whale, Moby Dick, as a metaphysical agent of extreme maliciousness precisely because he resists human ordering, in the same way that nature at large may appear to be indifferent to human desires. Merchant, Gatta and Flower put Melville into conversation with Darwin and Tennyson, as each of these writers sees nature as indifferent; as Melville writes in *Moby-Dick*: “the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began” (215). It is seemingly this indifference which Ahab reacts so strongly against, and which spurs his urge for dominion. As Ishmael tells us of Ahab: “He was intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge,” a purpose which attracts the crew: “what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life” (150). Under Ahab’s influence, according to Ishmael, the crew begin to see Moby Dick in the same way—as a metaphysical agent of all that is evil in nature. As Gatta writes: “Ahab sees himself sympathetically engaged with the larger spiritual plight of all humankind...Killing the whale would consummate his rebellion against the indifference of a cosmos—or whatever divine or demonic power *might* govern reality—that permits affliction to be visited on innocent humankind” (118, emphasis original). This interpretation mirrors the providential interpretation of a fallen world, and which drives the mainstream Recovery Narrative traced by Merchant: “The Recovery of Eden through its reinvention on earth is premised on the transformation of wilderness into garden. Nature must move from outlaw to law...Nature’s chaos must be subdued” (54). Moby Dick is represented as chaos, and as we have seen this leads to Ahab’s interpretation of him as a metaphysical evil; Ahab hopes that by killing him he will help create a more orderable world.

The Utilitarian Attitude: The Crew

In the utilitarian vision, nature is a storehouse of resources—its chief value is economic. Purdy adds specificity to this term by extending it to the managerial relationship toward nature that emerged with conservationism; in this view nature was a storehouse of resources to be expertly managed in order to continue progress without fully depleting the land. Yet nature may be seen as pure resource as a result of market and cultural influence; this vision does not rely on the ideal of expert management; significantly the managerial utilitarian vision retains core ties to profit and an instrumental view of nature. As Nash writes of the pioneer: “The pioneer, in short, lived too close to wilderness for appreciation. Understandably his attitude was hostile and his dominant criteria utilitarian. The *conquest* of wilderness was his major concern” (24, emphasis original). Further, “[w]henver they encountered wild country they viewed it through utilitarian spectacles: trees became lumber, prairies farms, and canyons the sites of hydroelectric dams” (31). The relationship between the human and the more-than-human is predicated upon market and use value. Similarly, the mates and crew of the *Pequod*, along with the various other whalers that Melville details, exhibit a utilitarian attitude towards whales, in that whales are both literally and figuratively reduced into oil, which represents cash to the whaler. Again, we see the link between the frontiersman and the whaler—though the distinction between the providential view and the utilitarian view must be made clear: the providential imagination is primarily interested in dominion and property and has foundations in Christianity and nationalism; while the utilitarian imagination is only focused on profit, with foundations in the market. So, while the two overlap, the relationship between the human and more-than-human is markedly different. Specifically, nature appears to lose its agency—and thus its wildness and its numinosity—within the utilitarian vision. As Karl Marx writes: “Nature becomes...purely an

object for men, something merely useful, and is no longer recognized as a power working for itself” (Marx as quoted in Leiss 73).

The utilitarian vision views nature as pure resource—a reduction that hinges on control. In *Moby-Dick*, we can locate the utilitarian vision in both the characters who represent the command structure of the industry—excluding Ahab—and a linguistic reduction which transforms the whale’s body into gallons of oil and dollar value—an act even Ishmael participates in. The utilitarian attitude is noted early in the novel, as Ishmael calls attention to the irony of Quakers controlling the whaling industry:

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 heterogenous. For some of these Quakers are the most sanguinary of all sailors and whale-hunters. They are fighting Quakers; they are Quakers with a vengeance. (68)

Hershel Parker has several footnotes within this passage referring to the contradictions present in the idea of a “fighting Quaker” or a “Quaker with a vengeance,” as such concepts contradict the basic premise of Quakerism. By prefacing the above passage with a note on the public investment in vessels, Ishmael links the irony of violent Quakers to capitalism. He elaborates on this theme on the next page:

Though refusing, from conscientious scruples, to bear arms against land invaders, yet [Bildad] himself had illimitably invaded the Atlantic and Pacific; and though a sworn foe to human bloodshed, yet had he in his straight-bodied coat, spilled turns upon turns of leviathan gore. How now in the contemplative evening of his days, the pious Bildad

reconciled these things in the reminiscence, I do not know; but it did not seem to concern him much, and very probably he had long since come to the sage and sensible conclusion that a man's religion is one thing, and this practical world quite another. This world pays dividends. (69)

The contradiction comes to a head, and Ishmael casually reconciles the paradox by acknowledging its presence. His assertion is not just that Bildad sees a fundamental difference between humans and whales which allows him to slaughter them; his argument is that Bildad accepts a utilitarian ideology in favor of his Quaker religion, as the former makes him rich. According to Ishmael's logic, Bildad exiles cetaceans from his moral framework, effectively turning them into pure resource, or standing reserve, only because they have a high market value.

The crew of the *Pequod* view whales as commodity: on several occasions, whales are reduced into oil and cash-value before any literal reduction takes place. This linguistic reduction is voiced by the mates, as well as Ishmael. Ishmael, however, is merely participating in the culture in which he is immersed, since as we will see, he more privately exhibits a radically different attitude towards cetaceans. As Scott writes: "Speaking of a whale's body in economic terms was commonplace," and we can read Ishmael as adopting the vernacular (8). On several occasions, Ishmael describes a whale, or an aspect of a whale in terms of its gallons of oil: "the young males, or forty barrel-bulls, as *they* call them" (294, emphasis added). One of the first instances of this linguistic reduction prefigures the entire act. Speaking of how a whale may become recognizable to the entire fishery, Ishmael states: "Why such a whale became thus marked was not altogether and originally owing to his bodily peculiarities as distinguished from other whales; for however peculiar in that respect any chance whale may be, *they* soon put an end to his peculiarities by killing him, and boiling him down into a peculiarly valuable oil" (163,

emphasis added). Ishmael describes the outcome of whaling: whales are stripped of their animate characteristics and individuality by a series of market and technological factors which reduce the whale to resource. Ishmael does, however, qualify each of these instances by deferring responsibility with the pronoun “they.” By making these descriptions the actions of “they,” he distances himself from the act and the ideology surrounding it.

Yet, Ishmael is enthusiastic about the whaling project for a significant portion of the novel and attempts to come to terms with the utilitarian imagination which sees whales only in terms of oil. Though Ishmael does not ultimately adhere to this vision of nature, his voicing of the utilitarian vision reveals the dominant paradigm of whaling. For instance, in “The Advocate,” Ishmael attempts to refute the opinion that whaling is “a rather unpoetical and disreputable pursuit” by invoking several different ideas about whaling (92). He touches on its cosmopolitan aspects, its sublimity in opposition to its butchery, its relationship to colonialism, its aesthetics, its dignity, and concludes: “here I prospectively ascribe all the honor and glory to whaling” (95). In the midst of his grand claims Ishmael invokes the economics of whaling as a key to its reputability:

how comes it that we whalers of America now outnumber all the rest of the banded whalers in the world; sail a navy of upwards of seven hundred vessels; manned by eighteen thousand men; yearly consuming 4,000,000 of dollars; the ships worth, at the time of sailing, \$20,000,000; and every year importing into our harbors a well reaped harvest of \$7,000,000. How comes all this, if there be not something puissant in whaling?
(93)

While Ishmael voices the utilitarian vision by outlining whaling’s economics, his scattershot method of attempting to attribute less tangible values to the industry highlights his own

reluctance to participate in the whaling enterprise. As Davis et. al. write: “There was no need to justify whaling in terms other than the economic” as it ranked fifth, at the time in the United States, in economic output and provided crucial raw materials (4); in Ishmael’s attempt to add some desirable qualities to whaling beyond its mere economic values, he partially reveals his discomfort. Similarly, in “Cetology” Ishmael is uncomfortable using any single methodology to understand the whale—he uses science alongside mythology in his attempt. The chapter, however, primarily functions as a summary of the economic values of various whales. Ishmael “systematically” examines each whale known to him, yet he primarily focuses on the quality and utility of the resources each species may hold in their bodies, and focuses less on the species itself. For instance, on the right whale, Ishmael writes: “In one respect this is the most venerable of the leviathans, being the one first regularly hunted by man. It yields the article commonly known as whalebone or baleen; and the oil specially known as ‘whale oil,’ an inferior article in commerce” (112). Throughout the chapter, he routinely describes the whale’s body in economic terms, thus exhibiting the utilitarian imagination. Ishmael, however, appears to be merely voicing the dominant understanding of the whale present in the whaling industry, as he clearly exhibits other environmental imaginations throughout the text.

The utilitarian imagination is best voiced by the mates, who routinely reduce the whale to commodity before it is even captured. For instance, while in pursuit of a whale, Starbuck cries: “There’s hogsheads of sperm ahead, Mr. Stubb, and that’s what ye came for...Sperm, sperm’s the play! This at least is duty; duty and profit hand in hand” (174). The whales are immediately transformed into the commodity that humans produce from their corpses, and this commodity is then transformed again into “duty” and “profit.” Later on, as the captain of a German whaler comes begging for oil to fill his lamp-feeder and oil-can, Ishmael narrates that upon seeing

whales, “he slewed round his boat, and made after the leviathan lamp-feeders” (265). In this instance, whales are, like a lamp-feeder, perceived merely as a container for oil. Quickly following this passage, Flask voices a similar reduction; while in pursuit of a large, slow, whale, he encourages his crew: “oh, *do, do*, spring—he’s a hundred barreler...Oh! won’t ye pull for your duff, my lads—such a sog! such a sogger! Don’t ye love sperm? There goes three thousand dollars, men!—a bank!—a whole bank! The bank of England!—Oh, *do, do, do!*” (266, original emphasis). “Duff” refers to a pudding made from dried fruit, so by referencing this Flask calls attention to the room and board that whalers receive whilst on a voyage, motivating them to earn their keep. More importantly, he calls attention to the number of barrels they may be able to process the whale into, and the monetary value that they may receive after sale on the market. As will be explored below, this incentivization only works due to the lay system, however, it also relies on a linguistic reduction that interprets nature as pure resource for human purposes. Whalemens view whales through “utilitarian spectacles:” due to the influence of the market, whales become oil and dollars.

Starbuck illuminates how the market drives the utilitarian ideology; he is the only one who challenges Ahab’s alteration of their goal from utility to vengeance, and he is consistently concerned with the owners of the *Pequod*, or more specifically, with their profit margins. As Purdy writes of the relationship between market and utilitarian vision: “The market economy, with its demand for productive effort from all...[is a system that treats] the natural world as a storehouse of goods to serve human appetites” (142). Starbuck is described in Chapter 26: “Knights and Squires” as “careful” and concerned with only the traits “useful” to him. Ishmael writes: “For, thought Starbuck, I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living, and not to be killed by them for theirs” (97). Starbuck echoes this sentiment himself after Ahab

informs the crew that vengeance is their task and questions if Starbuck is willing to participate in the hunt: “I am game for his crooked jaw, and for the jaws of Death too, Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander’s vengeance. How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? it will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market.” As Myers writes: “Starbuck...would never turn back because of the loss of life or a boat; for him Ahab’s madness lies in wasting on a single whale the pertinacity needed in the pursuit of all whales” (25). Starbuck continues: “Vengeance on a dumb brute!...that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous” (132-33). Starbuck is unconcerned with the nonmaterial unless it is useful to him in his task of transforming whales into oil. Significantly, Flower details how Starbuck’s view is in fact a misreading of the whale; Ishmael tells us, as does modern science, that the sperm whale is incredibly intelligent, and is thus no mere “dumb brute” (146-47). Starbuck attempts to refute Ahab by invoking the factors that rule their voyage beyond the confines of the vessel itself and in doing so, like the captain of the *Samuel Enderby*, Starbuck does not attribute any agency, personality, or intelligence to Moby Dick (Melville 325). Rather, he thinks only of the White Whale in terms of his oil, unlike Ishmael and Ahab who find him to be numinous. Additionally, Starbuck, unlike Ahab, is concerned with the leakage of the oil in the hold in Chapter 109: “We must up Burtons and break out...or waste in one day more oil than we may make good in a year. What we come twenty thousand miles to get is worth saving, sir.” In convincing Ahab, he again invokes the larger context—“What will the owners say, sir?” (347).¹³ Starbuck’s concern with the purpose of the voyage—to produce commodities for sale on the market—reveals his

¹³ Note that Starbuck’s concern for waste in some ways prefaces conservationism, the utilitarian system concerned with the elimination of all waste (Purdy 164).

utilitarian imagination. He is primarily concerned with the profit that their voyage produces, and thus, sees whales only in terms of the oil which they represent. Starbuck is, however, wrong about *Moby Dick*, as the final three chapters attest.

The Romantic Attitude: Ishmael and Ahab

Most broadly, the Romantic vision sees nature through an aesthetic and spiritual lens; nature is neither divinely sanctioned to be exploited, nor exploited solely for profit—it is the immaterial (which can be found through the material) that fascinates the Romantic imagination. As Nash writes: “‘Romanticism’ resists definition, but in general it implies an enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary, and mysterious” (47). Thus, in contrast to the way in which the providential and utilitarian visions hold an antipathy for wildness, the (American) Romantic imagination reveres the wild. On this opposition, Purdy writes: for Romantics of the Sierra Club, “[f]rontier culture had cast nature as a mere storehouse of productive resources, ignoring it as a source of inspiration, enlightenment, and spiritual restoration” (134). Thus, the sublime is often an aesthetic category associated with the Romantic view and is undoubtedly an aesthetic category that is at the heart of *Moby-Dick*. Though scholars have focused critical attention on the Burkean and Kantian sublime in the novel, I will focus my attention on three of its forms which are useful in understanding the relationship between the human and more-than-human as predicated upon the aesthetic and spiritual, as shown through the key differences between Ishmael and Ahab: the technological sublime, the egotistical sublime, and the ecological sublime.¹⁴ Both Ahab and Ishmael exhibit the Romantic vision and invoke the sublime, yet in radically different ways. Ahab primarily invokes the technological sublime—the investment in technology of immaterial power and triumphalist impulses. This use of the technological sublime, combined with Ahab’s

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that these scholars’ attention is misplaced, but rather to simplify my discussion due to limited space.

focus on the demonic powers of both nature and technology, suggests a dark Romantic vision. Ishmael, on the other hand, primarily invokes the egotistical sublime—he is awestruck by nature, but often asserts the ascendancy of his ego after a momentary shock. His experience of the egotistical sublime generates parallels to Transcendentalism. Yet Ishmael increasingly experiences the ecological sublime—in which the subject remains in a moment of awe and humility. These various forms of the sublime will be more fully explored below. I argue that Ahab’s will to dominate, shown in his providential vision, bridges into a dark Romantic vision which seeks to supplant metaphysical agents—god, nature, and fate—while Ishmael’s Transcendentalist-like attitude is replaced by an ecological vision of nature which accepts human vulnerability.¹⁵

In the United States, the Romantic vision was best found in the tradition of the Transcendentalists and the preservationists, with its impacts on law and culture owing primarily to the latter.¹⁶ In tracing the impacts of Romanticism on attitudes towards wilderness, Nash writes: “While appreciation of wild country existed, it was seldom unqualified. Romanticism, including deism and the aesthetics of the wild, had cleared away enough of the old assumptions to permit a favorable attitude towards wilderness without entirely eliminating the instinctive fear and hostility a wilderness condition had produced” (66). Yet, by the late nineteenth century, the idea of wild country “as a source of beauty and spiritual truth” regained favor, due to its “new urgency and unprecedented public appeal” (Nash 156-57). Thus, preservation of wilderness became law; of the Sierra Club, Purdy writes that a “movement founded on aesthetic and

¹⁵ It is worth note that Ahab’s complex relationship to Fate deserves more attention than it gets in this work. While at times Ahab conceives of himself as an agent of Fate, by the end of the novel, he finds himself unable to act on his own, it seems. Because of this, I lump Fate in with other metaphysical agents that Ahab disdains, yet I must acknowledge that there is more nuance here.

¹⁶ Transcendentalism can be dated to the early 19th century, while the preservationists can be dated to the late nineteenth century.

spiritual experiences of nature had fully entered federal land-use politics” (139). The Romantic paradigm of an aesthetic and spiritual nature directly led to the preservation of wilderness in the United States, and thus, influenced the recreation habits of many Americans.

Making nature sublime and numinous certainly helped curb exploitation to a degree, yet this is not to say that the Romantic vision was without faults. Though Thoreau and Emerson wrote about relatively domestic scenes, their legacy could be argued to be the preservation of vast and chaotic wilderness—scenes which fit with the ideals of the sublime. Yet, the ideal of wilderness itself has flaws, voiced succinctly by William Cronon in “The Trouble with Wilderness.” Cronon argues that wilderness does not stand in opposition to civilization, as is the common dialectic: “It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization” (69). He traces the transformation of wilderness as negative (as in the providential imagination) to wilderness as positive to the influences of the sublime and the myth of the frontier. He argues wilderness was made sacred and seen as a source of “natural renewal” (73, 76). Crucially, Cronon argues that these ideals show that “[o]nly people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings to make their living from the land” (81). Additionally, Cronon points out the way that wilderness preservation tended to obscure indigenous people’s long relationships to the land (79). Seen in this light, the sublime, while it certainly was useful in protecting wilderness, does not leave room for an ethical relationship to nature. The sublime, it could be said, ornamentalizes nature; nature exists only as a supplement to civilization, as a cure to the psychological ills that civilization brings. This is Ishmael’s

attitude: “[the sea] is my substitute for pistol and ball” (16). Through Ishmael, Melville critiques the Romantic impulse to see nature as an ornament to civilization or the self; through Ahab, Melville critiques the way that the values of Romanticism—the numinous and the sublime—can be invested in technology and used to further exploit nature.

The sublime has several forms which must be examined in order to understand how the sublime fits into the Romantic vision. The sublime “has a basic structure,” according to David Nye, “[a]n object, natural or man-made, disrupts ordinary perception and astonishes the senses, forcing the observer to grapple mentally with its immensity and power” (15). Thus, following Hitt, the sublime is generally evaluated “as an expression of asymmetrical power relationships” (602).¹⁷ This encounter can lead to an altered mode of being but does not do so automatically; nor is this altered mode of being predictable; it does not necessarily produce an ecocentric relationship (as Nye thoroughly makes clear [6]). While there are a multitude of different sublimes, each stemming from a different object and suggesting a different relationship, as stated above, the three which I will focus on here are: the egotistical sublime, the ecological sublime, and the technological sublime. The egotistical sublime uses a sublime moment to assert the primacy of human reason: “[the] subject experiences weakness and insignificance, but then recuperates a sense of self-worth, because the mind is able to conceive something larger and more powerful than the senses can grasp. In this experience the subject passes through humiliation and awe to a heightened awareness of reason” (Nye 7). The egotistical sublime is most often associated with high-Romanticism and Transcendentalism, which, as we will see, were rejected by Melville. The technological sublime is in many ways similar to the egotistical sublime. Nye writes that it “encouraged men to believe in their power to manipulate and control

¹⁷ In the following pages, my references to simply “the sublime” refer to this more general structure noted by Nye and Hitt.

the world. Those enthralled by [the technological sublime] felt omnipotence and exaltation, counterpointed by fears of individual powerlessness and insignificance” (295). It is worth note that the technological sublime emerges in many ways from the egotistical sublime. In this way, both Ahab and Ishmael begin at a common point, yet diverge as the novel unfolds. Ishmael’s adoption of the ecological sublime highlights this divergence. The ecological sublime refers to an experience of the sublime in which the subject does not experience the self-apotheosis of the egotistical sublime, but rather remains in a moment of humility before nature. Hitt writes that the ecological sublime, “[can] remind us [that reason can never master nature] by restoring the wonder, the inaccessibility of wild nature” (620). Put otherwise, “[t]his aesthetic moment prompts responsible engagements with natural spaces, and it recalls crucial links between human subject and nonhuman world” (Rozelle 1). We move now to the depiction of the sublime in *Moby-Dick*.

Moby-Dick is a book built around various experiences with the sublime, and much has been written on it in this regard. As a cursory study of how the sublime has been treated in *Moby-Dick*, we will examine arguments from Barbara Glenn, Bryan Wolf, and Zackary Vernon. Glenn argues that “Melville’s depiction of the sublime in *Moby-Dick* is exhaustively and exclusively demonic” (178). While she is somewhat correct in this final claim—Ahab’s Faustian quest is certainly associated with the demonic—her association of deists with the demonic is unclear. Nor does Glenn’s argument get at the heart of Ishmael’s experience of whales. Indeed, Ishmael is almost entirely left out of her analysis. Thus, we turn to Wolf, who gives a more comprehensive analysis of Ishmael’s relationship to the sublime: “Ishmael’s story represents an egotistical sublime continually testing its own limits” through language (164). Importantly, Wolf parallels Ishmael to Emerson—a parallel which I will return to. Vernon, however, argues that for

Ishmael “the confrontation with the sublime results in an egalitarian vision wherein [he] imagine[s] the interconnectedness and interdependency of all people and all earthly materiality” (64). How then do we reconcile this contradiction with Wolf’s reading? Ishmael undergoes a transition through his first experience working in the whaling industry—he engages in the egotistical sublime for much of the novel, yet gradually transitions into an ecological sublime. Though he does not specifically write about the sublime with relationship to *Moby-Dick*, Leo Marx’s analysis of pastoralism in the novel is worth mentioning. He argues that Ishmael represents Melville’s critique of the “all” feeling found in Transcendentalist and Romantic literature, and that Ishmael’s ability to reconcile nature and culture at the end of the novel is critical to his transformation. I refer to these critics to suggest that Glenn’s analysis of the demonic applies to Ahab’s use of the technological sublime and dark-Romantic quest, Wolf’s analysis applies to Ishmael’s egotistical sublime, and Vernon’s analysis applies to Ishmael’s ecological sublime (as his title suggests).

The egotistical sublime can be found early on in Ishmael, who confesses that when he feels melancholy, the sea becomes his cure: “[The sea] is my substitute for pistol and ball” (16). Further, he claims:

as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever...

...Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the *ungraspable phantom of life*; and this is the key to it all. (17-18, emphasis added)

Ishmael prefaces that his is a search for existential meaning, which he hopes to find in the sea, yet as he recognizes, this meaning is ungraspable yet paradoxically present. Additionally—though, as Parker notes, Ishmael gives a mistaken account of Narcissus here—Ishmael interprets his own quest as perilous. Similarly, in his oft-quoted reverie on the mast head, Ishmael invokes the egotistical sublime:

...lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every stage, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over. (129).

This “youth” is Ishmael, for on the previous page, he acknowledges that he “kept but sorry guard” with “the universe revolving in” him (128). Additionally, in this passage, we see echoes of his early invocation of Narcissus; the sea in its sublimity becomes a material counterpart to one’s soul. Yet, here again, Ishmael admonishes himself and recognizes that the egotistical sublime is perilous: “There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God...perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through

that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists” (129). Yet, again, he returns to such a state much later in the novel (220).

The invocation of the egotistical sublime draws parallels between Ishmael and Transcendentalism. Leo Marx ties the mast-head reverie to the “all” feeling exemplified in Emerson’s *Nature*—“I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (Emerson 8)—and writes that “Melville’s theme... is that the romantic attitude toward external nature is finally narcissistic” (Marx 290-91). Citing a letter from Melville to Hawthorne, Marx notes that Melville himself rejects the “all” feeling found in Transcendentalism: “the extravagant claims of that doctrine, Melville is saying, stem from a tendency to confuse a transitory state of mind—the ‘all’ feeling—with the universal condition of things” (280-81). Wolf writes that “[what Ishmael and Emerson share] is a rapaciousness of vision that swallows reality whole and converts it into a vision of the self.” He continues: “each represents an American version of the sublime” (154). As summarized by Nye, “the American sublime fused with religion, nationalism, and technology, diverging in practice significantly from European theory” (43). In this way, perhaps the sublime mirrors “Manifest Destiny,” and may be useful in explaining Ishmael’s simultaneous rapture over both whales and whaling. Wolf, however, ultimately does not acknowledge that Ishmael undergoes a transition, and embodies a critique of the behavior that he exhibits, so while he is correct in noting the parallels to the American sublime, it would be a mistake to end here. Ishmael’s continual slippage into the ‘all’ feeling of the egotistical sublime critiques Transcendentalism, as ultimately Ishmael does not rest on this vision of nature as simply a mode of achieving a heightened consciousness. Ishmael’s experience of the sublime becomes more nuanced as we consider his encounters with whales.

While occasionally he interprets the whale through an egotistical frame, Ishmael increasingly comes to understand the whale as a numinous entity which cannot be reduced to simple lessons. Operating from the egotistical Romantic vision, Ishmael turns his examination of the whale into a moral: “Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale!” (236). Additionally, Ishmael attempts over and over to adopt some framework—be it science, painting, or religion—which would enable him to understand the whale.¹⁸ Yet, he never comes up with a stable answer, and concludes alongside Ahab that the whale, and nature at large, is inscrutable. This inscrutability is often translated into the numinous.

Ishmael frequently locates the sublime and the numinous in whales; his descriptions focus on their power, monstrosity, magnitude, mystery, timelessness, divinity, and wildness. Ishmael states that of the motivations that induced him to sign onto a whaling vessel, rather than a merchant vessel, “[c]hief...was the *overwhelming* idea of the great whale himself. Such a *portentous* and *mysterious* monster roused all my curiosity. Then the *wild* and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the *undeliverable*, nameless perils of the whale; these...helped sway me to my wish” (20, emphasis added). For Ishmael, the whale is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Yet, at the same time, Ishmael invokes the sublime as he considers the movement of the whale. Consider Ishmael’s description of a breach: “Rising with his utmost velocity from the furthest depths, the Sperm Whale thus booms his entire bulk into the pure element of air, and piling up a mountain of dazzling foam, shows his place to the distance of seven miles and more. In those moments, the torn, enraged waves he shakes off, seem his mane” (399). Not only is this phenomenon earlier described as sublime, but his language invokes the whale’s immensity, power, and mastery over the ocean—all descriptors that traditionally connote the sublime (282).

¹⁸ Chapters 32, 55-57, 74, 75, 85, 86, and 102-105 are especially notable in this regard.

While the sublime relies on a difference in power between the beholder and the “object,” the numinous hinges on otherness, or as Hitt writes: the numinous differs from the sublime in “its status as something that is possible only outside the realm of conceptualization” (614).

The conflicting urges of Ishmael’s Romantic imagination may be observed through a comparison of chapters 102-105 to chapter 86; moments of the determinacy of the sublime are replaced by the indeterminacy of the numinous. In the former, Ishmael describes his encounter with the skeleton of a sperm whale (which takes place before the plot of *Moby-Dick*); as Leo Marx points out: “Here, growing in the whale’s skeleton, is the greenness Ishmael has been seeking, yet that same greenness has the aspect of a factory... Art and nature are inextricably tangled at the center. Hence there is no way to apprehend the absolute meaning of a natural fact” (312). Ishmael laments his inability to comprehend the whale:

How vain and foolish, then, thought I, for timid untraveled 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 eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out. (333)

Here, the whale’s skeleton evokes the numinous, as it lies outside conceptualization. A rational examination of it does not yield an understanding of the whale, as Ishmael had hoped, but rather, confounds understanding. He comes to recognize that the whale can only be comprehended in the midst of its motion—its kinetic qualities are what invest it with the power to capture the imagination. Such descriptions are dispersed throughout the text. Consider Ishmael’s description of the tail of the sperm whale: “in the tail the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point. Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it.

Nor does this—the amazing strength, at all tend to cripple the graceful flexion of its motions; where infantileness of ease undulates through a Titanism of power. On the contrary, those motions derive their most appalling beauty from it” (281). Here, Ishmael invokes the sublime. He is astonished by the conflict between power and grace, then he shifts from kinetic language to aesthetic language. Thus, we see the egotistical sublime at work, as the human subject is able to explain the phenomenon in familiar terms. Indeed, Ishmael loses focus on the tail itself, and begins theorizing about the difference between grace and power. Here, Ishmael arrives at more of an understanding than in his inquiry into the skeleton. Yet, even this is inadequate.

It is in moments of the numinous that Ishmael is able to accept the incomprehensibility of the whale, and by extension nature at large. The motions of the tail culminate in the peaking of flukes, “perhaps the grandest sight to be seen in all animated nature:”

Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven...But in gazing at such scenes, it is all in all what mood you are in; if in the Dantean, the devils will occur to you; if in that of Isaiah, the archangels. Standing at the mast-head of my ship during a sunrise that crimsoned sky and sea, I once saw a large herd of whales in the east, all heading towards the sun, and for a moment vibrating in concert with peaked flukes. As it seemed to me at the time, such a grand embodiment of adoration of gods was never beheld, even in Persia, the home of the fire worshippers.

(283)

The numinosity of the whale then, can be interpreted as either demonic or divine. Additionally, Ishmael’s description of yet another experience on the mast-head raises questions, as he neither calls out, as his job requires him to in the event of the sighting of a whale, nor does he fall into the egotistical sublime. His focus remains on the whale, of which he ultimately writes: “The

more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it...Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; *I know him not, and never will*" (283, emphasis added).

After this, Ishmael becomes unintelligible for a moment, drowning in his inability to put language to any aspect of the whale. This inexpressibility and unknowability are the core elements of the numinous—and they may humble the human beholder. It is crucial that Ishmael finds the numinous in the living and embodied sperm whale, as this form resists egotistical transcendence on the part of the beholder. The numinous forces of nature are not so easily accepted by Ahab, however.

Ahab bridges a providential vision of dominion over nature into a dark Romantic vision of transcendence over the forces which control humans. In the quarter deck speech, Ahab states "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me," suggesting that he wishes for his dominion over the crew and over the sperm whales he can capture to extend to the cosmos itself, for, as he asks: "Who's over me? (133). Several critics have commented on Ahab's relationship to Romanticism. Alonzo Myers writes: "In so far as he gloomily views nature as fundamentally evil, he follows the Calvinist tradition. In so far as he resolves to rid nature of the principle of evil, as though evil were an accident in the universe, he is a child of romanticism" (30). Thomas Woodson's argument of the parallels between Ahab and Prometheus adds specificity to this understanding of Ahab, as he concludes that "Ahab's character is a unique feature of American Romanticism," in that he looks not at nature but through it (to use Gatta's description of the Transcendentalists) and sees "the ultimate emptiness on the other side of the mirror" (368-69). I would not go so far to suggest that Ahab believes that he can only become himself by destroying the other that is Moby Dick, as Woodson does; articulating that Ahab approaches nature from a dark Romantic

perspective—in that he interprets the predaciousness and destructiveness of nature as a personal affront and seeks to overcome it—is sufficient for this section.

This challenging of metaphysical forces is most easily seen in Ahab's reaction to Moby Dick. To reiterate, Moby Dick is numinous and has parallels to the Leviathan from *The Book of Job*; similarly, Ahab has parallels to Job “in his questioning of man's uncomplaining acceptance of the existence of human tribulation and misery on earth” (Pachmuss 26-27). Crucially, the God of *The Book of Job* ultimately refutes Job's challenging of the goodness of creation through a series of images of wild animals who, though they suffer, are profoundly alive; this series of images culminates in the Behemoth and Leviathan. Of the Leviathan, God states:

Will merchants bid for his carcass

and parcel him out to shops?

Will you riddle his skin with spears,

split his head with harpoons?

Go ahead: attack him:

you will never try it again. (86)

Look: hope is a lie:

you would faint at the very sight of him.

Who would dare to arouse him?

Who would stand in his way?...

When he rises the waves fall back

and the breakers tremble before him.

He makes the ocean boil,

lashes the sea to a froth.
His wake glistens behind him;
the waters are white with foam.
No one on earth is his equal—
a creature without fear.
He looks down on the highest.

He is king over all the proud beasts. (86-87)

The image of the Leviathan is one of supreme power, chaos, and otherness. God shows that it is folly to try and conquer him. Job answers with humility before God after hearing such a description:

I have spoken of the unspeakable
and tried to grasp the infinite...
Therefore I will be quiet
comforted that I am dust. (88)

Ahab takes on the role of Job in calling into question higher powers, but unlike Job, cannot accept humility and vulnerability in his direct experience with the numinous, and rather, chooses to try and overcome his vulnerability through technology, which we will turn to shortly.

Ahab's challenging of the cosmos goes further, as he questions his deity, the sun, at several key moments. Paul Miller analyzes Ahab as a Zoroastrian and writes: "fire and sun have been taken to symbolize in *Moby Dick* rejection of conventional deity and acceptance of the primitive, pagan life force. Ahab comes not only to reject the conventional god, but to defy the pagan god whose deity he recognizes" (143). In "The Candles," Ahab states: "Oh! Thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act

so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance” (367). Yet, this straightforward reading of Ahab’s rejection of the numinosity of fire may be complicated by Ausband’s: “The sun, natural fire, suggests the light in the natural world. The fire under the try pots, the fire in Perth’s forge...and the fire that forges the harpoons are the weapons of an industrial, mechanical world in its fight against nature. Ahab was burned by natural fire; he now defies natural fire, arms himself with artificial fire, industrial fire, and almost literally fights fire with fire” (205). Thus, Ahab is Romantic in his spiritualizing of nature, but dark Romantic in his challenging of its authority through the use of industrial technology. Thus, the technological sublime will be examined next.

Ahab, we have already seen, is described mechanically and has an affinity for technology, which is the key way in which he challenges nature; thus, the technological sublime is central to the way in which technology is used to challenge the numinosity of nature. Wolf notes chapter 37 “Sunset” as a moment in which nature is framed and aestheticized in a way which mirrors the Romantics of the Hudson River School. Wolf, however, continues on to note a crucial element of Ahab’s experience with the sublime: “His strength depends upon his ability to subdue the world outside himself and render it malleable to his own will.” Thus, “Ahab describes himself according to the conventions of the [technological] sublime” (143). The scene opens with Ahab gazing out his cabin window, the sun is setting over the waves: “Yonder by the ever-brimming goblet’s rim, the warm waves blush like wine. The gold brow plumbs the blue. The diver sun—slow dived from noon,—goes down; my soul mounts up!” (135-36). Just as the sublime is introduced, Ahab turns towards increasingly mechanistic language. He turns away from the window, lamenting that he cannot be soothed by a sunset due to his obsession with power. Images of iron, cogs, and a railroad then replace the sunset outside. He challenges forth

the gods: “Come, Ahab’s compliments to ye; come and see if you can swerve me. Swerve me? ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves!...The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run...Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle to the iron way!” (136). Importantly, Parker notes that Ahab is uncertain of which gods he opposes, yet that he believes technology to be the route to opposing them is critical.

By investing technology with the sublime and the numinous Ahab is able to justify his dominion over nature and the crew; nature’s numinosity no longer acts as a counter for exploitation as the numinous can be found elsewhere. Of Ahab’s foreclosure of the numinous with technology, Wolf argues “[n]ature died the moment it was framed,” yet there is more to consider (144). Ahab’s image invokes a cultural symbol of both the physical and moral power of technology: the railroad (discussed above). Leo Marx’s chapter, “The Machine” details the dominant rhetoric of the nineteenth century regarding the machine (specifically the railroad); his first point details the relationship between the machine and nature. Citing several writers, but specifically citing Ahab’s soliloquy in “Sunset,” Marx ties the attitude of dominion which the machine makes reality to the frontier and to the technological sublime (194-96). Of note here is that Ahab is operating within a well-established discourse of the sublimity of technology, especially for the time in which Melville was writing; while not unprecedented, Ahab’s use of the sublime to challenge the gods was certainly striking. While writers of the nineteenth century hoped for a union of art and nature in the machine, Nye reveals the way that the technological sublime displaced nature: “When nature ceased to be the only source of sublimity, the technician became the creator of experiences. Instead of searching for fundamental relations between man and nature, the inventor found ways to dominate and control nature” (64). Thus, domination precludes numinous experience.

The technological sublime in *Moby-Dick* culminates in “The Forge;” Ahab exhibits a faith in technology that goes beyond its material capabilities and baptizes his newly forged harpoon in demonic powers. Glenn comprehensively details the relationship of the sublime to demonic powers in *Moby-Dick*: “Ahab’s sublimity is wicked; he is possessed by a demonic sublime...Only the sublime is associated with evil and the demonic in *Moby-Dick*; the machinery of the Devil is notably absent in the interludes of the beautiful” (178). I would argue that these demonic powers are more specifically associated with the technological sublime (though they appear in *Moby Dick* as well). Ahab tasks the blacksmith with creating a harpoon for “the white fiend,” which is specially made out of high-quality steel with razor blades for barbs. Upon its completion, Ahab howls “Ego non baptize te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diabolic” (356).¹⁹ By consecrating his harpoon in demonic powers, Ahab invests it with both the numinous and the technological sublime. Note that Nye’s description of the technological sublime invokes vulnerability: “The sense of weakness and humiliation before the superior power of nature was thus redirected, because the power displayed was not that of God or nature but that of particular human beings” (60). Thus, by appearing to overcome limitations on human power, the technological sublime occurs when the vulnerability of the human is erased, and human dominion is increased through a new technology.²⁰ To Ahab, the harpoon represents the ability to kill Moby Dick, or the “supernatural” entity which exposes his vulnerability; the faith Ahab exhibits that his harpoon will do each of these things is unchallengeable: “here in this hand I hold [Moby Dick’s] death! Tempered in blood, and tempered by lightning are these barbs; and I swear to temper them triply in that hot place...where the White Whale most feels his accursed life”

¹⁹ Latin: “I do not baptize you in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil.”

²⁰ Nye notes throughout *The American Technological Sublime* that a technology loses its sublimity over time, as the next generation is no longer in awe of it (60).

(387). Further, during the battle with Moby Dick, Ahab continually asks if his harpoon has survived the whale's assaults, exhibiting more concern for it than for his crew.

While Ahab's harpoon is made from better quality steel, has been tempered in the blood of the pagan harpooners, and has been struck by lightning, there is nothing to suggest that the harpoon would be more effective in capturing a whale—and a brief study of harpoon's may suggest that it was even inferior. Indeed, Davis et. al. note that of the three types of harpoons, the one-flued and the toggle were most effective as they would less often pull loose from a whale once attached (see Fig. 1). While it is not explicit, Ahab's harpoon seems to be a two-flued, as it is described as an "arrowy shape" (356). Additionally, Davis et. al. note:

The one-flued harpoon—with only one following edge—was designed to minimize the chance that the whale would escape; it was widely thought to be superior to its predecessor, the two-flued. The point of the harpoon that entered the whale was narrow. When the whale pulled against it, the single barb-or flue-caught in its flesh, the soft neck of the iron bent, and the harpoon turned parallel to the body of the whale, thus firmly attaching the animal to the line and, in turn, to the boat. The toggle iron achieved the same result more effectively. (286)

Thus, as a two-flued harpoon made from inflexible steel, Ahab's harpoon may have been less effective at capturing a whale. His extreme faith in it is then baseless, and highlights that technology is invested with a power that goes beyond its material capabilities—the technological sublime.

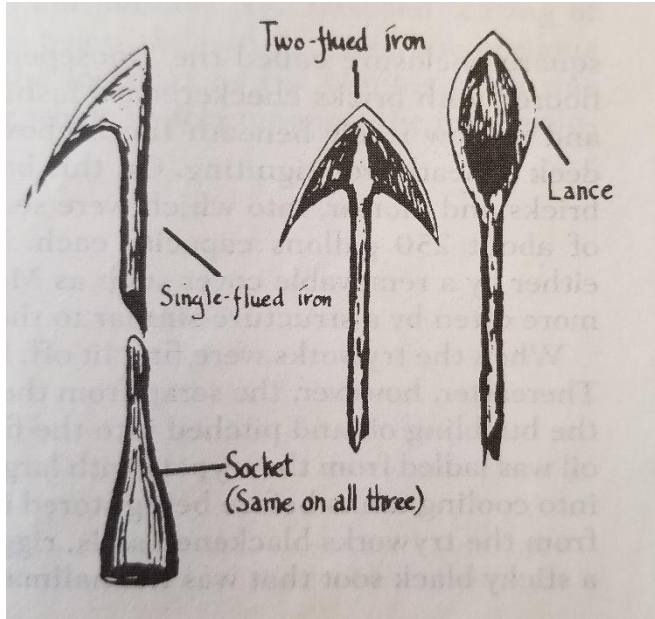


Figure 1: A sketch of the single-flued, or one-flued, harpoon; the two-flued harpoon; and the whaling lance. While the toggle iron is not represented here, it looks very similar to the one-flued.

*Source: John B. Putnam, “Whaling and Whalecraft: A Pictorial Account,” *Moby-Dick* (Edited by Hershel Parker, Third Norton Critical Ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), pp. 443.*

Both Ahab and Ishmael exhibit a Romantic view of nature; for each, nature has aesthetic and spiritual qualities, yet they differ in their interpretations of these qualities. Their differences can be most felt in their interpretation of Moby Dick; while Ahab sees a fiend, Ishmael sees a “grand god” (393). Yet their differing interpretations of the sublime and numinous are more than a simple difference in optimism or pessimism; these differing interpretations stem from the degree to which each accepts vulnerability. Ahab sees that there is something inscrutable about nature, cannot abide the vulnerability that he feels, and therefore seeks to conquer it. His will to dominate the crew and nature extends to the cosmos itself; as Wilson writes: “[Ahab expresses] his desire to progress to the very top of the chain, over sun and God” (136). Ahab locates the numinous in himself and in technology, while Ishmael finds the numinous in whales. Ishmael, however, ultimately resists egotistical attempts to know the inscrutability of nature and accepts his limitations as he encounters the numinous.

The Ecological Attitude: Ishmael and Ahab

The ecological imagination recognizes the interconnection between living beings and their environments. Donald Worster traces two strains of this in *Nature’s Economy*: the “arcadian”

and the “imperial.” While the arcadian uses interconnection as a site for humility, the imperial uses it for further exploitation. Importantly, the Romantic vision is in many ways a precursor to the ecological vision. Purdy traces the historical transition from a Romantic vision to an ecological vision in his chapter “A Wilderness Passage into Ecology,” in which he writes:

Like their allies in the Sierra Club, [wilderness advocates] cared about special, heightened forms of consciousness. Like later environmentalists of the ecological age, they cared about the wild, tangled fabric of nature as such, just because it existed, apart from its service to human beings. These two values—human consciousness and inhuman nature—were linked for them because the consciousness they prized was precisely awareness of, and attunement to, *indifferent*, alien nature. They came to describe this as an attitude of ‘humility’—a word that connoted...at-homeness but also smallness and modesty. (192, emphasis added)

I argue that this is the frame that Ishmael comes to inhabit. While he clearly exhibits the Romantic attitude in his experience of the egotistical sublime and the numinous, he also increasingly recognizes networks and the greater ecological world surrounding him. This is a different conception of the sublime, as it involves no sheer awe and terror, but rather ends in “something that often resembles love” (Vernon 70). By the end of the novel, Ishmael comes to experience the ecological sublime—“the awe and terror of a heightened awareness of the ecological home” (Rozelle 1)—theorized by Lee Rozelle and Christopher Hitt. Thus, Ishmael comes to resemble the wilderness advocates described by Purdy in the passage above—he retains aspects of the egotistical sublime, in that he does achieve a heightened consciousness as a result of his sublime encounters, yet this consciousness is of and for the world around him, rather than self-knowledge. The meekness of the “Epilogue,” along with its focus on the more-than-human,

suggests that Ishmael finds humility. I will argue that Ishmael recognizes networks and entanglement between the human and the more-than-human and comes to adopt an ecological attitude of humility; yet, it is important to recognize that he does not have deep knowledge of the science of ecology, and thus is limited in his understanding and appreciation for ecological ideas. Further, I will argue that Ahab also adopts an ecological attitude to a degree, which is used to further his dominion over nature.

Before an analysis of Ishmael, it is worthwhile to briefly describe ecology, especially as it relates to Romantic and Darwinian thought. Relevant here, is that Worster extends the foundational ideas of ecology to a time before the science itself emerged; he places Thoreau and Darwin in the tradition that leads up to the twentieth century science of ecology.²¹ Thus, the Romantic vision becomes a predecessor to the ecological vision:

Romantics found this field of science a modern approach to the old pagan intuition that all nature is alive and pulsing with energy or spirit. No other single idea was more important to them. And at the very core of this Romantic view of nature was what later generations would come to call an ecological perspective: that is, a search for holistic or integrated perception, an emphasis on interdependence and relatedness in nature, and an intense desire to restore man to a place of intimate intercourse with the vast organism that constitutes the earth. (Worster *NE* 82)

As noted above (and as Worster later notes), however, Romantics also sought self-knowledge and often used nature as a mirror for the self. The Romantic vision of nature was in some ways

²¹ Worster notes that “[t]he term ‘ecology’ did not appear until 1866, and it took almost another hundred years for it to enter the vernacular. But the *idea* of ecology is much older than the name. Its modern history begins in the eighteenth century, when it emerged as a more comprehensive way of looking at the earth’s fabric of life: a point of view that sought to describe all of the living organisms of the earth as an interacting whole, often referred to as the ‘economy of nature’” (*NE* x).

refuted by Darwinism, which focused more attention on the dark, competitive side of nature: “To dwell on the violence and suffering in nature was, from the mid-nineteenth century on, to be ‘realistic’” (Worster *NE* 128). Importantly, Worster draws parallels between Darwin and Melville in encountering a hostile nature (*NE* 121). Darwin, however, gives greater credence to the idea of ‘entanglement’ or interconnection between life forms, and it is not entirely fair to focus only on the pessimistic conception of nature of his writing and of his times. Darwin’s writings entangle humans with nature, yet he was interpreted in different ways—as a justification for progress and dominion, or as a decentering and return to animal status (Glendening 14). Ishmael’s ecological attitude is arcadian; in him the recognition of interconnectedness bridges to an attitude of wonder and humility, which partially stems from his Romantic roots. Ahab’s ecological attitude is imperial; the recognition of interconnectedness furthers his ability to control and dominate the environment.

By the end of the novel, Ishmael’s attitude towards nature has transitioned from a Romantic—often egotistical—view, to an ecological view. In contrast to Ahab’s conception of himself as located atop a “great chain of being,” to invoke Wilson’s argument, Ishmael’s vision of nature comes to appreciate networks and his insignificant place among them. He does not see a single line stretching from animals at the bottom to humans on top as Ahab does, but rather, he sees a network. Leo Marx’s outline of the role of pastoralism in the text is important to recognize before turning towards Ishmael’s ecological view: “[Ishmael] has relocated greenness, shifting it from the green fields of the Republic to a necessary, but by no means sufficient, principle of survival. In accomplishing Ishmael’s ‘salvation,’ Melville in effect puts his blessing upon the Ishmaelian view of life: a complex pastoralism in which the ideal is inseparably yoked to its opposite;” greenness only comes to have meaning in contrast to the mechanical (318). Marx’s

note of the principle of survival is key here; Ishmael comes to have a more realistic view of the environment through his growing understanding of networks. Additionally, as Marx notes, in Ishmael's survival, Melville seems to support his final view on the relationship of human to more-than-human. Yet, this reading is not accepted by all critics; Gatta suggests that Melville's vision of a world devoid of spiritual meaning shows that Ishmael's survival "scarcely demonstrates the narrator's singular virtue. It is just a quirky, amoral turn of events that illustrates life's unpredictability rather than divine justice" (124). The tension between these readings is manifested in the ecological vision of nature; the ecological vision focuses on the material connections between beings, and as such does not necessarily justify any ethic. Yet, behaviors that are materially harmful are suggested to eventually damage all other beings, and thus the ecological vision is indicative of a conscientious ethic.

The material connection of the ecological imagination is represented as lines in *Moby-Dick*. Lines appear throughout the novel, and signify the network and connection between beings—the lines on Ahab's charts, the lines on Queequeg, the "veins" whales swim in, the whale-line, the monkey-rope, the umbilical cords of whales in "The Grand Armada," the ball of yarn Ishmael weaves with, the lines trailing off from Moby Dick, and the lines described to exist between characters. Vernon writes on Ishmael's encounter with the network in terms of the sublime: "Thus, the ethics of the ecological sublime, developed through the confrontation of the sublime object and the negotiation of the network, accepts the interconnectedness of all things and necessitates the interdependency of all things" (67). We see this acceptance of the interconnectedness of all things in "The Mat-Maker," in which Ishmael accepts that "chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together" (171).

Alongside his understanding of interconnectedness, Ishmael comes to accept both the pastoral and the wild, and the dynamic nature of the sea: “Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth: consider them both, the sea and the land” (215). This passage is later mirrored by his lament of the “horrible vultureism of earth! from which not the mightiest whale is free (237). Critics often reference the first part the “universal cannibalism” passage as indicative of Melville’s pessimistic (Victorian) vision of nature, but less often cite the full passage. Gatta and Schultz argue that his passage reflects Melville’s nihilistic universe, or a Darwinian, rapacious view of nature (Gatta 116-117, Schultz 102). Yet Dean Flower writes that “Melville’s purpose in these grim formulations is not to lament a godless universe. It is rather to restore a vision of both the grandeur and ultimate overmastering power of Nature” in the sublime (139). Yet we must consider that the rapaciousness and Darwinian view of nature is placed alongside a pastoral vision of harmony, as Ishmael asks the reader to “consider them both, the sea and the land.” In this suggestion, Ishmael adopts an ecological vision which recognizes both the predacious side of nature (including humans) and the cooperative side; he does not limit himself to a single viewpoint which exaggerates a particular moral vision of nature. Further, these passages illustrate a growing disillusionment with the whaling enterprise and its impacts as Ishmael recognizes the networks that he is entangled in.

Ishmael’s disillusionment comes to a head in chapters 96-98, which depict the boiling down of the whale and the bottling up of the oil. Up to this point, Ishmael has been interested in the whole whale, and its violent reduction seems to cause him doubt. Chapter 96: “The Try-Works” describes the boiling down of the whale into oil in ghastly detail and in the conventions

of the technological sublime.²² Ishmael describes the engineering necessary for this apparatus before narrating his experience with the process, thus linking whaling technology to the demonism that he sees (311-312). The ship appears to be a “red hell” in contrast to the “blackness of the sea and night,” the harpooners become “barbaric,” “unholy,” “uncivilized,” and fiendish. He describes the irony that “the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body” in that blubber is used to feed the flames of the try-pots. Oil itself becomes animate, and “seem[s] all eagerness to leap into” the faces of the harpooners. Ishmael sums the scene up thusly: “the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul.” According to Ishmael, “[w]rapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others. The continual sight of the fiend shapes before me, capering half in smoke and half in fire, these at last begat kindred visions in my soul” (312-313). Leo Marx notes that in this scene, the fire from Hawthorne’s “Ethan Brand” reappears, thus elucidating the connection between the fire of the try-works and the machine-age in America (278).²³ Additionally, it is crucial that Ishmael is disillusioned by the same technological sublime that Ahab espouses. Further, note the language that opens Chapter 98:

Already has it been related how the great leviathan is afar off descried from the mast-head; how he is *chased* over the watery moors, and *slaughtered* in the valleys of the deep; how he is then towed alongside and *beheaded*; and how...his great padded surtout

²² See Nye chapter 5: “The Factory.”

²³ Hawthorne and Melville were close friends, and there is substantial evidence that in the writing of *Moby-Dick*, Melville was heavily influenced by Hawthorne. “Ethan Brand” is a short story in which Brand becomes possessed by the fire of a kiln. He seeks knowledge of the “Unpardonable sin” and ultimately finds it in his own quest for absolute knowledge, and thus kills himself. Leo Marx argues Brand’s alienation comes both from the fire of the kiln, which “may have been Satan himself,” and from the industrialization of America (270-72).

becomes the *property* of his executioner; how in due time, he is *condemned* to the pots, and...[how] his spermaceti, oil, and bone pass unscathed through the fire;—but now it remains to conclude the last chapter of this part of the description by rehearsing...the romantic proceeding of decanting off his oil into casks and striking them down into the hold, where once again leviathan returns to his native profundities, sliding along beneath the surface as before; but, alas! never more to rise and blow. (315, emphasis added)

Ishmael is troubled by the work he has participated in, as shown in his violent yet lamenting language. Importantly, his disillusionment not only stems from the technologized process of oil extraction, which mirrors a hell, but also Ishmael's disillusionment with whaling comes about as a result of his empathic identification with whales. The passage above clearly illustrates that Ishmael is troubled by the transformation of an animated, and at times numinous, being into inert resource.

Ishmael's disillusionment with whaling turns him towards a different view of nature, as evidenced by "A Bower in the Arascides:" "The wood was green as mosses of the Icy Glen; the trees stood high and haughty, feeling their living sap; the industrious earth beneath was a weaver's loom...Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver!—pause!—one word!—whither flows the fabric?...The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we too...are deafened" (331). Ishmael's vision of nature turns towards a network; though he ends this passage with a similar warning to the warning to the Romantic pantheist—"Ah, mortal! then, be heedful; for so, in all this din of the great world's loom, thy subtlest thinkings may be overheard afar"—the focus of the danger shifts (331). While the pantheist should be worried that he dissolves himself too far (and is thus anthropocentric);

here Ishmael's warning reflects an ecological view, as it depicts a network in which humans are not supreme rulers of the earth and its systems, and thus must be careful.

Above the whale's skeleton was shown to be both sublime and numinous, and it is crucial that these feelings bleed into Ishmael's understanding of the network. The whale's skeleton highlights the network, or web, of life and death:

Now, amid the green, life-restless loom of that Arascidean wood, the great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging—a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories. (331)

Importantly, the network brings about a recognition of the constant material interplay between life and death. Leo Marx notes that in the whale's skeleton, Ishmael finds both greenness and the factory, and writes: "Art and nature are inextricably tangled at the center" (312). Thus, in this "weaving" Ishmael finds both the human and the more-than-human linked together, incapable of being fully separated. This passage has important connotations for our reading of the "Try-Works;" while here, the industrious aspects of nature (including humans) are valorized, in the "Try-Works" industrialization appears destructive. This difference seems to lie in the appearance of the demonic industrial fire. As Wilson writes: "Ishmael's descriptions of the world as interconnected and evolving are transformed into maxims for wise living, for adapting: to avoid the *hypos*, depression, monomania, melancholia, all of which affect the static Ahab [and the Romantic Ishmael] one must *circulate*, evolve, become an eddy in the forward flow" (146). Put another way, "nature must now be seen as a creative, innovative force. Within it and in all its

organic beings lay the potential to devise new ways of living, an energy and an innate resourcefulness...Only in an uncreative world, locked into rigid patterns of survival, need scarcity and conflict become an inescapable fate” (Worster *NE* 162).

If Ishmael develops towards an arcadian ecological attitude predicated on humility, Ahab exhibits a very different ecological attitude towards nature, the imperial. That Ahab understands nature through an ecological lens is made clear in “The Chart.” His charts not only hold the same lines which represent interconnectedness in the text but is also a clear precursor to scientific work done in oceanography. Ahab is shown to be obsessive in his use of charts; to the extent that they provide him with a measure of control over the oceans, he hopes that they will allow him to locate Moby Dick:

Almost every night [the charts] were brought out; almost every night some pencil marks were effaced, and others were substituted. For with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought in his soul.

Now, 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 them in particular latitudes; could arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching certainties, concerning the timeliest day to be upon this or that ground in search of his prey. (158-59)

T. Hugh Crawford notes that Ahab’s use of charts to obtain knowledge and mastery over the ocean prefigures the work done by Matthew Fontane Maury—the first person to offer

comprehensive charts of the oceans—and that each can be read through Bruno Latour’s “actor-network theory” due to their use of both human and more-than-human actants in the pursuit of their goals. Crawford argues that Maury’s goal was to “marshal these particular features [of Nature] in order to produce a network of representatives that both translates nature’s language and controls ‘her’ fury” (1). Importantly, Ahab’s understanding of the ocean takes into consideration the multitude of factors which may influence the movement of his prey: the “veins” the whales swim in, food distribution, currents, eddies, tides, etc.. Significantly, however, Ahab’s understanding of interconnectedness does not bring about an attitude of humility; interconnectedness between the material world and the actors within seems to largely ignore humans. Further, the humans in Ahab’s vision remain at the top of a hierarchy of being, partially because they can grasp the relationships between other beings and exploit them.

It is worth note that the imperial ecological imagination and the providential imagination are by no means incompatible, and in many ways are complementary. Worster describes the roots of the imperial ecological tradition in the Christian providentialism, but notes: “for, more explicitly than Christianity ever did, [the imperial view of nature] has made the domination of the earth...one of modern man’s most important ends” (*NE* 29-30). Of further significance, is the tie between the great chain of being and an ecological understanding of nature. As Worster writes: “The chain of being was a system of economic interdependence and mutual assistance” (*NE* 46). So, to follow Wilson’s argument, Ahab adopts an ecological vision which resembles the great chain of being: “On the one hand, he yearns for a static scale of nature, in which hierarchically grouped animals and men are utterly fated to be what they are, moving with the regularity of machines. On the other hand, he wishes for himself to progress, to evolve, to the very top of the chain, from which place he will hold the other species below him” (135). On the

other hand, Ishmael exhibits a more arcadian ecological vision: “Melville’s protagonist, in contradistinction to Ahab, eschews anthropocentrism, embraces his affinity with other forms of life, opens himself to the random, and allows unbegrudgingly, the forces of the environment to alter him” (Wilson 141). The ecological attitude is then colored by the other environmental imaginations one accepts—it can be made to fit with the providential attitude, the Romantic attitude, and even the utilitarian attitude. Having analyzed Melville’s representation of the environmental imaginations in *Moby-Dick*, we turn now to their roots and impacts more directly.

II—The Cultural Roots of the Environmental Imaginations in *Moby-Dick*

In the first chapter, I examined the environmental imaginations at work in *Moby-Dick*. The providential imagination was seen in Ahab; the utilitarian imagination was seen in both Ishmael and the crew; the Romantic imagination was seen in Ishmael and Ahab; and the ecological imagination was seen in Ishmael. The foundations of the relationship between human and more-than-human, however, have not been explicitly examined. Thus, this chapter will illustrate the ways in which the central concerns of each environmental imagination works with or against those of the others, and how these concerns are useful for understanding the relationships which arise from these environmental imaginations. As shown above, in *Moby-Dick*, characters may inhabit a multitude of imaginations in ways which are not necessarily contradictory; a representation which is supported by cultural and political realities. Thus, this chapter will explore the framework which governs whaling, the question of how technology drives domination of the more-than-human, and how vulnerability may lead either to the will to dominate or to humility.

Driving Forces: The Commodity

How is nature imagined when the market place dictates individual actions? when shareholders and owners are the primary concern? Like all industries, whaling was primarily driven by the pursuit of profit. Success meant maximum acquisition of products with minimal cost in outfitting. These products, or raw materials, were generally, “ambergris, spermaceti, and sperm oil from sperm whales, whale oil and whale-bone from baleens;” the oils were primarily used for lighting and lubrication (Davis et. al. 29). As the analysis of Davis et. al. in *In Pursuit of Leviathan* makes clear, to acquire these materials in significant enough quantities to make a profit, decisions regarding productivity were made—including, the ground to be hunted, the type of vessel, manning decisions, and technological decisions (10-11). Not only do such decisions cause the whaling vessel to mirror the firm and the factory, but they also illuminate the foundations of the utilitarian imagination. An analysis of the structures of whaling shows that the utilitarian imagination is brought about by the demands of the marketplace and investors and is achieved through technological and organizational adaptations.

Before we delve into an analysis of the market structure of whaling and the technologies which allow the material transformation of a whale into oil, it is useful to understand how both market and technology create a framework which conditions the utilitarian imagination. Whaling technology may be elucidated by Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology.” Heidegger asserts that the instrumental definition of technology—technology as merely a tool for human purposes, which can be used for good or ill—is correct, but not true. Rather, he shows that “[t]echnology...is no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing,” or a means of getting at truth (318). He continues: “The revealing that rules throughout modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be

extracted and stored as such” (320). Thus, whaling falls into this analysis; we have seen that the project of whaling was to supply both energy and raw materials for industrial use by killing whales and transforming their corpses into oil. Heidegger continues: “Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it standing-reserve” (322). By transforming living matter into energy, for use at a later date, the whaling industry creates standing-reserve, or resources, out of whales, and since “[w]hatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object,” the whale loses its animate and numinous force (Heidegger 322). Heidegger arrives at an understanding of modern technology as a framework: “Enframing means the gathering together of the setting-upon that sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the actual, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means the way of revealing that holds sway in the essence of modern technology and that is itself nothing technological” (325). In other words, technology creates a framework which orders humans to the project of extracting energy from nature in the form of resources.

In whaling, the technologies that we have outlined above belong to this framework: yet, as I have stated previously, the prevalence of whaling in its day is owed both to technological developments and to the influence of the market. As Heidegger is not explicit about the relationship of market to technology, philosopher of technology (and Heideggerian scholar) Albert Borgmann provides critical analysis on this point: “The ensemble of commodities constitutes the foreground of technology in which we move by way of consumption. The machinery of devices constitutes the background of technology” (77). Put otherwise, the market and the commodities in which it is grounded are the visible consequence of technology, while its

literal moving pieces and apparatuses are largely invisible. I argue that technological development—improvements to vessels, developments in oceanography, improvements in harpoons, and the addition of the try-works—allow humans to hunt whales at a rate useful for industrial capitalism, and that industrial capitalism conditions the hunting of whales and development of new technologies.²⁴ Thus, they create a framework in which whalers challenge nature and reduce it to pure resource. The framework of market and technology produces a utilitarian imagination, in which whales are imagined as pure resource, or commodity, and are treated as such.

First, it must be made clear that the individual vessel is an economic enterprise and has parallels to a firm and a factory. Understanding a vessel as a firm allows us to better understand the organization of capital on each voyage, how the vessel fits into larger market forces, and the utilitarian vision of the more-than-human this organization prompted; while understanding a vessel as a factory allows us to understand the more direct relationship between human and more-than-human on board a vessel, as well as the treatment of the common worker. Davis et. al. write: “each voyage is treated as a firm. That is a reasonable procedure, if not precisely correct, since each voyage involved new planning, refitting the vessel, new provisioning, raising a new crew, and, frequently, a turnover of owners, or captain, or agent, or all three” (381). The analysis done by Davis et. al. allows us to glimpse the partnerships required for a voyage and begin to comprehend how they fit into the larger marketplace. Each voyage was invested in by the agent—the person responsible for outfitting the vessel—the captain, and the general population. Davis et. al. show that the agents made substantial profits from their investments and work (a

²⁴ To engage in a debate of whether technology predicates market development, or whether market predicates technological development is not my goal; this is a “chicken or the egg” kind of discussion. My point is that the twinning of market and technology produces a utilitarian imagination, and that the two reinforce one another.

pure profit rate totaling between 28 and 44 percent per year) (411). It is important to note that agents were wealthy enough to make such large investments and that they were also generally owners of the vessels that they managed; however, investors included a wide range of people, most of which were in some other way involved in marine activities (Davis et. al. 414). Through the reality of the joint ownership and substantial investment in a single vessel (averaging at \$30,500, close to \$1,000,000 in today's money) we can get a sense of how the market held power over a single vessel (Davis et. al. 214). Recall that in *Moby-Dick*, Starbuck repeatedly invokes the market imperatives of the voyage; he does so not only preceding the quarter deck speech: "How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab?" but, more significantly, as he attempts to convince Ahab to stop the leaking oil in the hold: "What will the owners say, sir?" (347). Starbuck, the most visible representation of the utilitarian imagination continually refers to the purpose of whaling in terms of profit. Yet, he is not primarily concerned with his own profit, it is the profits of the owners and investors that he is worried about. This connection makes clear that the market conditions a utilitarian vision of the more-than-human. This conclusion can be furthered by a quick examination of the lay system.

The lay system was a method of incentivizing the individual whaleman to be more effective in killing whales.²⁵ Ishmael discusses the lay system in "The Ship:" "in the whaling business they paid no wages; but all hands, including the captain, received certain shares of the profits called *lays*, and...these lays were proportioned to the degree of importance pertaining to the respective duties of the ship's company" (70, emphasis original). Davis et. al. note two effects of this system of payment: "First, from the point of view of the owner, it addressed the riskiness of the business...Second, profits aside, the form of the contract had a direct effect on

²⁵ A contemporary parallel to the lay system is the incentivization through commission. By offering greater payments to those who sell more, companies invite greater productivity.

productivity” (15). By giving crewmen a direct stake in the voyage, productivity was bolstered. As whalemens did not make very good wages on average, this system gave hope that one could become wealthy from a single successful voyage (Davis et. al. 186). It is through personal incentivization that the mates are able to push the crew of their boats to their limit. Recall this passage, quoted above: “oh, *do, do*, spring—he’s a hundred barreler—don’t lose him now—don’t, oh, *don’t!*...Oh! won’t ye pull for your duff, my lads...Don’t ye love sperm? There goes three thousand dollars, men!—a bank!—a whole bank!” (Melville 266). Flask motivates his crew to row faster by invoking both the possibility of money that they will receive from the sale of oil, through the lay system, and by noting the room and board which whalemens received as part of their compensation. Both the overarching market structure of an investment driven industry and the personalized incentivization of the lay system show how profit alone is the measure of success in whaling; further, the drive for profit leads directly to the utilitarian imagination of nature, in which nature is envisioned as pure resource. Next, it is worth examining the parallels between the whaling vessel and the factory.

The whaling vessel mirrors the factory in both organization and purpose. We have touched on organization in the paragraphs above, but it is worth exploring further. In the context of *Moby-Dick* we have a captain (Ahab), three mates (Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask), and three harpooners (Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo). The rest of the crew is either directly included in the enterprise of hunting whales, or there to assist with the functioning of the ship (Perth, the carpenter, Pip, etc.). We see a hierarchical organization at play most notably in the chapter “The Cabin-Table,” where Ahab is figured as a sultan at the head of three Emirs. Ishmael states that “[t]hey were as little children before Ahab,” in reference to the way that the hierarchy of the cabin made the mates humble towards their master. Additionally, we see the hierarchy of the

mates unfold as they are served in order of rank, and must finish in reverse order, thus: “Flask was the last person down at the dinner, and Flask is the first up” (122). Yet this intense hierarchy is not specific to Ahab, as Ishmael writes at the end of the chapter: “In this one matter, Ahab seemed no exception to most American whale captains, who as a set, rather incline to the opinion that by rights the ships cabin belongs to them; and it is by courtesy alone that anybody else is, at any time, permitted there” (124). Further, this hierarchy remains present in the individual whaleboat: the mate steers while the crew rows, putting their bodies under tremendous strain. Kopacz summarizes this point: “the first ‘Knights and Squire’s’ chapter...confirms the principle the strict hierarchy and rigid employment tasks of the factory, as well as the social hierarchy” (81). We can categorize this intense organization as the will-to-order, which, as Lewis Mumford writes, “appeared once more in the monastery and the army and the counting-house before it finally manifested itself in the factory” (*TC* 3). These places and occupations are not insignificant; the factory appears as the culmination of ordering, built on the foundations of religion, warfare, and capitalism. The intense social regimentation of the factory has ties to productivity and mechanization, but also exploitation and environmental degradation and the will to dominate. Hierarchical social organization is used in both the whaling vessel and the factory to ensure maximum efficiency, productivity, and profits—it is market driven. That Ahab uses his power over the crew to disobey market dictates is of no small significance. The vessel then mirrors the factory further, as its purpose is to process raw material and transform it into commercial products.

The shift from inshore to offshore whaling reflects the shift in vessels becoming more factory-like. Davis et. al. provide a detailed study of the changes in whaling techniques in their second chapter of *In Pursuit of Leviathan*, entitled “Whales and Whaling.” They describe the

progression from the discovery of dead whales on the shore, to inshore whaling—which involved small boats which would tow the whale to the shore to process—to boat whaling—which would last for weeks, while the part of the processing was done on the voyage—to offshore whaling—which was done from larger ships and extended the hunting area significantly, as well as the species of whale targeted. Offshore whaling depended on two innovations: the shift of both cutting-in and trying-out from land to vessel—an action which depended on the transfer of the try-works to the ship (34-36). To reiterate, the purpose of whaling was to produce commodities for sale on the market; from a sperm whale these were case oil, the junk, white horse, blubber, and, occasionally, ambergris (Davis et al. 343). The former three come from the head. Case oil is essentially pure spermaceti and needed no processing, while the others (excluding ambergris) were lesser derivatives which needed processing. In offshore whaling, part of this processing took place on the ship itself, through the addition of the try-works to the vessel. Kopacz notes Melville’s representation of the stages of processing, which culminate in the argument that the whale vessel resembles the factory:

Melville delineates the [many stages of hunting and using whales, including] harpooning a whale, taking a Nantucket sleigh-ride, using the lance, cutting off the blubber, mincing it into small pieces, boiling out the oil, extracting the precious ambergris, stowing the whale oil below deck, and cleaning up the greasy [and bloody] mess—processes that make the whale ship at sea most like the mill factory at home. (80-81)

Specifically, by boiling the oil while at sea (rather than having to return to shore to fully process the oil), a ship could eliminate spoilage and stay on voyages longer, thus increasing productivity. Heidi Scott argues that “professional whaling outfits built floating factories that held all the necessary equipment and expertise to seek, kill, retrieve, and render a whale into tidy barrels

below decks using an on-board try-works... These floating factories remained on the seas for years, and for profit's sake would not return home until the ship sailed heavy in the water" (6). Scott's focus on the relationship of technology to the transformation of the whale reveals that as whaling vessels become de-facto factories, whales become standing reserve.

It is worth expanding on "the necessary equipment" that Scott notes to elaborate on the process by which whales become standing reserve. Wagner summarizes the relationship of technology to the growth of the whaling industry:

From its roots as a bay whaling trade, the industry also developed a series of very efficient processes for hunting, killing, and rendering sperm whales. These included larger ships capable of larger crews and more extensive voyages; faster, sleeker whaleboats; careful mapping of whale migrations leading to enhanced strategies to find whales; more aggressive tactics used in the actual hunting and killing process; and refinements of the tools and processes for landing whales and dismembering the body parts. (29)

As such, there are several core whaling technologies that must be taken into account: the try-works, harpoons, oceanography, and vessel design. Vessel design is not significantly noted in *Moby-Dick*, yet we must recognize that the innovation of the bark allowed for greater productivity in whaling, thus played a key role in the transformation of whales into standing reserve.²⁶ As Davis et. al. note, the bark allowed for easier handling of rigging, and thus for greater maneuverability in the Arctic (270). There was also a substantial increase in vessel size during the nineteenth century, which made longer voyages and greater productivity possible (Davis et. al. 39). The innovations in oceanography, especially that of Matthew Fontaine Maury,

²⁶ A type of vessel defined by a difference in the rigging of its sails. It allowed for smaller crews, and could be larger than a standard ship.

also greatly increased success in whaling: his works “covered such diverse topics as the ‘prevailing winds and currents, their limits and general characteristics, and, in general, all the physical features of the ocean, including its meteorology, the limits of icebergs, the feeding grounds of whales, and all the facts of interest and value to the maritime community’” (Davis et. al. 282). As navigational technology increases, the wildness of the ocean is minimized, and it becomes useful in the hunting of whales—the ocean is ordered and “[w]hatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it standing reserve” (Heidegger 322).

Harpooning technology was also key in achieving greater success in the hunting of whales. Part of this innovation came with the attachment of the harpoon to the whaleboat itself: “In early ocean whaling the harpoon was attached to log floats, designed to tire the whale as it swam away...the oarsmen had to row hard and long to keep up with the fleeing animal. All too often they tired before the whale did. In the 1760’s the floats were junked, and the harpoon was fastened to the whaleboat itself...with it the probability of capture rose substantially” (Davis et. al. 37). Ishmael describes the whale-line in extremely technical detail in Chapter 60—hinging on its potential danger to the crew—and we see the line in action in Chapter 61: “The harpoon was hurled...the same moment something went hot and hissing along every one of their wrists. It was the magical line...Whole Atlantics and Pacifics seemed passed as [Stubb’s crew] shot on their way, till at length the whale somewhat slackened his fight” (221-22). By introducing the line in technical detail, and then exhibiting its action in the following chapter, Melville draws attention to the role that the line has in the killing of a whale. In addition, harpoons themselves were also improved upon in the mid-nineteenth century (noted in chapter I): the two-flued was pulled out too often, thus the one-flued replaced it. The toggle iron quickly followed and dominated. The one-flued and toggle were innovative in that they either bent or turned so that they could not

easily be pulled out, thus keeping the whaleboat secured to the whale (Davis et. al. 286-87). Melville expands on the harpoon and the technique by which it is hurled in Chapter 62 and 63; again, elaborating on the technical details of what was witnessed in the previous chapter. As Davis et. al. note: “The hunting technique [of fastening with harpoons, tiring the whale out, and killing with a lance] remained essentially unchanged” (286). This is the exact description that Melville gives, as harpoons are attached and Stubb kills the whale with a lance. Yet, the passage in which the killing of the whale is described reflects the relationship of technology to the reduction of the whale into commodity for sale on the market: “Stubb slowly churned his long sharp lance into the fish...as if cautiously seeking to feel after some gold watch that the whale might have swallowed...But the gold watch he sought was the innermost life of the fish” (222). By referencing gold, Melville reminds the reader of the ultimate goal of the work of whaling, and by tying the gold to the “innermost life of the fish,” he shows the reduction made on the part of the marketplace. Melville details the relationship of technology to whaling; he gives technical details of each instrument, yet also maintains focus on how technology relates to the slaughter of whales. Further, by making this tie, Melville implicitly connects the utilitarian imagination to the technology which it relies on to accomplish the reduction from animal to resource.

The final set of technologies that we will examine have to do with the cutting-in and trying-out of the whale—in other words, the processing itself. Melville devotes substantial space to descriptions of the processing of whales, yet often, Ishmael uses such moments to spring into reverie, thus distracting from the bloody vision in front of him. Chapter 67: “Cutting In” depicts the whale that Stubb has recently killed being stripped of its blubber. Ishmael opens: “It was a Saturday night, and such a Sabbath as followed! Ex officio professors of Sabbath breaking are all whalemen. The ivory Pequod was turned into what seemed a shamble; every sailor a butcher.

You would have thought we were offering up ten thousand red oxen to the sea gods” (233). His attempts at humor here convey his discomfort, yet his reference to the lack of sacredness placed on the killing unnerves him; his note that “you would have thought” highlights that, in fact, this was the opposite of what the whalers were doing. The following paragraph gives a technical description of cutting-in, too long to be quoted here. To summarize: the whale is suspended over the side of the ship and a “blubber hook” is inserted, which, using a windlass, begins to peel the blubber off the whale “precisely as an orange is sometimes stripped by spiralizing it.” This process is then repeated until the blubber is completely stripped off. Importantly, Ishmael describes the whale as a “prodigious blood-dripping mass” to connote the transformation which has taken place (233-34). Ishmael later describes the way in which the whale was beheaded, so as to get into the spermaceti within (237). The process of extracting the spermaceti is then described in Chapter 78: “Cistern and Buckets.” Here, Ishmael again describes this process in technical detail, and Tashtego as a “treasure-hunter” (258). Only after this series of chapters describing the technical details of whaling do we get a description of the actual processing itself.

Though previously examined in Chapter I, “The Try-Works” is worth returning to; in this chapter Melville not only provides the technical details of the technology required for the processing of a whale, but also, invokes the trope of understanding industrial technologies as hellish. Ishmael devotes the first several paragraphs of the chapter to a description of how the try-works are situated on the vessel and how they operate. In a grim parody of a religious ritual, Ishmael describes the try-pots as “silver punch-bowls” and as sites of “confidential communication.” Additionally, he provides an image that closely resembles a child in a womb: “During the night-watches some cynical old sailors will crawl into [the try-pots] and coil themselves away there for a nap.” Finally, he writes that the try-pots are sites of “profound

mathematical meditation” (312). This early description of the try-pots seems to generate images of the technological sublime. They seem to be a place of fraternal and maternal comfort, of lofty insights. Yet, as he proceeds, the try-works becomes a mouth: “Removing the fire-board from the front of the try-works, the bare masonry of that side is exposed, penetrated by the two iron mouths of the furnaces, directly underneath the pots. These mouths are fitted with heavy doors of iron. The intense heat of the fire is prevented from communicating itself to the deck” (312). This description has significant parallels to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Ethan Brand,” as Leo Marx notes; the fire appears to be some sort of fiend in need of restraint (270, 278).²⁷ The scene on the ship is then described as a “red hell” for the next several pages, and, as noted above, leads to Ishmael’s disillusionment with the whaling enterprise. Through this series of chapters which describe the technical details of the hunting, killing, and rendering of whales, Melville ties the material transformation of the whale (numinous animal) into oil (commodity) to an industrialized hell; he brings the reader’s gaze to the production of industrial commodities and exposes the butchery and hellishness which they emerge from—a topic which will be explored in the next section.

An analysis of whaling structures, in history and in *Moby-Dick*, shows that the utilitarian attitude toward nature is produced by both market pressures and technological adaptations. In Heideggerian language, nature becomes “standing reserve,” or pure resources; while in Marx’s language, nature becomes an object for utility. As Ishmael writes of the transition from right

²⁷ Marx writes: “But what is the cause of Brand’s alienation [his separation of intellect from the heart]? According to local legend, Brand’s intellectual obsession emanated from the fire. We learn that ‘he had been accustomed to evoke a fiend from the hot furnace of the lime-kiln’...But the fiend, who may have been Satan himself, always retreated through the ‘iron door’ of the furnace at the first glimmer of sunlight” (270). Further: “In describing Ethan’s reflections while he sits alone beside the kiln, Hawthorne supplies a second (historical) explanation for his fall. This version makes the protagonist an embodiment of a changing America...Ethan is at once an agent and a victim of scientific empiricism or ‘mechanism’” (271).

whaling to sperm whaling: “such men protesting that although other leviathans might be hopefully pursued, yet to chase and point lance at such an apparition as the Sperm Whale was not for mortal man. That to attempt it, would be inevitably to be torn into a quick eternity” (146). As Wagner and Davis et. al. show, sperm whales were eventually hunted as a result of greater technological capability and due to the great profit they represented; technology and market challenge nature, and in doing so obscure all qualities except those of resources.

While whaling technology and market structure provide the framework for whaling to be a successful industry and condition the utilitarian imagination of nature, this characterization of whaling does not appear to be complete. Linking technology and market, Davis et. al. write:

Both the cost of hunting and the value of the catch have influenced whalers’ choices of prey, but cost seems to have dominated. On the one hand, if technology had not improved, it would have been impossible for the type of animal harvested to have progressed from what was initially the least costly to what was initially the most costly—that is, from dead whales to slow whales to fast whales. *On the other hand, no matter what the market may have dictated, at the end of a voyage a captain with space in his hold attempted to harpoon any cetacean that crossed his path.* (Davis et. al. 21, emphasis added)

Because of the profit structure of the individual vessel, the overarching market influences and technological innovations, and even the lay system, cetaceans were subjected to often brutal pursuit and capture and rendering into commercial products. The fervor with which this took place contributed to overhunting to the point of non-replenishment of certain species of whales, both globally and in local areas. Yet, Davis et. al. also suggest that whaling may have not been totally governed by this market-technology structure that I have been arguing for.

Domination of the More-than-human: Extractivism and Technology

When nature becomes pure resource, “standing reserve,” or a thing of utility, what is the consequence? Melville shows that it is butchery. In this way, violence is directly related to extractivism—an economic model which depends upon resource extraction for sale on the market. Naomi Klein defines extractivism as “a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking...It is the reduction of life into objects for the use of others, giving them no integrity or value of their own” (169).²⁸ In the middle chapters of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael’s descriptions of the hunting and killing of whales increasingly sympathize with the animals. In my first chapter, I note that Ishmael becomes disillusioned with the whaling enterprise; this disillusionment helps expose the foundations of the whaling industry and refutes the heroic images of whaling found in advertisements through a focus on blood and butchery. Additionally, Melville parallels the image of “sharkishness”—shown by Henry Nash Smith to represent techno-capitalist society—to butchery, thus critiquing the society which benefits from this slaughter. Melville shows that the utilitarian imagination of whales as resource leads to extractivism; further, he makes the extractivism visible to the reader, making his contemporaries complicit in the death he exposes. Additionally, a focus on extractivism in *Moby-Dick* makes clear the close relationship between the utilitarian and providential imaginations.

Extractivism is an economic model with ties to resource depletion, technological domination, and colonial-capitalism. Relevant to extractivism in *Moby-Dick* is the idea of sacrifice zones: “places that, to their extractors, somehow don’t count and can therefore be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress”

²⁸ While Klein notes that this “term originally [was] originally used to describe economies based on removing ever more raw materials from the earth, usually for export to traditional colonial powers” she extends it to apply to the ethics underlying this practice. The term then gets at the dominance based relationship of extractive industries, and I use it to reflect the ethics of extraction.

(Klein 169). In other words, these places are not only expendable, but invisible to the society which benefits from resource extraction. As whaling is in a sense, placeless, and operates on the “frontier” it fits this description; there are no local residents which can voice a damaged environment, or disappearing species, thus, the entire ocean becomes a sacrifice zone. Klein writes that fossil fuels always require a sacrifice zone, as compared to earlier forms of energy which (ironically) rely on wind and water power; thus, “[t]he harnessing of fossil fuel power [through new technology] seemed...to have freed large parts of humanity from the need to be in constant dialogue with nature” (174). In other words, technology and energy erase vulnerability to nature through domination; importantly, this is precisely the modern utopian vision traced by Leiss in *The Domination of Nature*. It is worth note that the utilitarian and providential imaginations differ somewhat with their relationship to resource extraction. The providential imagination offers the foundations of an extractivist relationship—domination, control, progress, frontier, etc.—but ultimately does not explicitly support a view of the more-than-human as pure resource. Yet, insofar as extractivism stems from the ideals of the providential imagination, and can lead to material abundance (for some, at the sacrifice of others), extractivism illuminates the ties between the providential and utilitarian imaginations. As Leiss writes of this link: “Nature has a double aspect. In its immediate presence, as the source of satisfaction for vital human needs, it necessarily arouses utilitarian modes of behavior; reflectively, however, nature appears as the visible testimony of God’s providence” (34). Thus, the utilitarian imagination may be understood as a fully secularized version of the providential imagination.

The extractivist relationship found in whaling is conditioned by the larger culture of market and technology. As shown in the previous section, whaling is an industry governed by profit and driven by technology—in much the same way as many industries today. Heidegger

makes clear that technology creates a framework within which nature is reduced to pure resource, and further, that nature invites its own domination (Borgmann “Heidegger and Technology”). The stakes of extractivism are best voiced by Donald Worster:

This profound cultural revolution [based on the belief on the necessity of banishing all material scarcity from the earth] has drastically changed our species’ relationship to the rest of nature. It has made man the measure of all things, elevated him to be the end and goal of history, set him up as the master of the planet. It could hardly be otherwise. To banish all conceivable scarcity requires our total domination of nature...When nature becomes purely a matter of utility, a thing inviting its domination by technology, it dies for us. It ceases to be significant in our lives, except as we can turn it to use. Henceforth we live alienated from it. (87)

The dream of banishing material scarcity is present in both the utilitarian and providential imaginations—though in different ways—and are thus, indicative of the domination of nature and extractivism. Worster highlights the links between the domination of nature by technology, and more importantly, the elevation of the human and the deadening of the nonhuman which occur in the same structure. Similarly, *Moby-Dick* highlights the underpinnings of abundance; as Leo Marx writes: “[Melville] discloses the elemental aspect of physical dependence, plunder, and exploit that underlies the deceptively mild, abstract quality of life in our technical civilization...[he] uses machine imagery to relate the undisguised killing and butchery of whaling to the concealed violence of ‘civilized’ Western society” (295-96). Thus, we turn now to Melville’s representation of extractivism in *Moby-Dick*, beginning with the bloodiness of whaling.

References to the bloodiness of whaling abound in *Moby-Dick*, which subvert the sublime and heroic image of whaling publicized by the industry. Heidi Scott writes: “Whale oil culture is deeply immersed in the adventure of its acquisition. As a commodity, whale oil was sold using the romantic danger of whaling as a marketing strategy that actively promoted its harrowing intrigue” (6). It is this image of the romance of whaling that Ishmael builds on in “The Advocate.” He argues against the idea that “one leading reason why the world declines honoring us whalers, is this: they think that, at best, our vocation amounts to a butchering sort of business; and that when actively engaged therein, we are surrounded by all manner of defilements.” While he acknowledges that “[b]utchers we are, that is true,” he deflects attention by referencing the butchery of war, and in doing so, lessens the stakes of the butchery of whales (92). Yet, throughout the novel, blood is continually referenced. If, as “The Advocate” suggests, Ishmael’s goal is to give a vision of whaling that is similar to the whaling advertisements of the day—per Scott’s analysis—then his willingness to allow his readers to witness its bloodiness is illogical. Consider his description of the killing of a whale:

The red tide now poured from all sides of the monster like brooks down a hill. His tormented body rolled not in brine but in blood, which bubbled and seethed for furlongs behind in their wake. The slanting sun playing upon this crimson pond in the sea, sent back its reflection into every face, so that they all glowed to each other like red men...
...And now abating in his flurry, the whale once more rolled out into view; surging from side to side; spasmodically dilating and contracting his spout hole, with sharp, cracking, agonizing respirations. At last, gush after gush of clotted red gore, as if it had been the purple lees of red wine, shot into the frightened air; and falling back again, ran dripping down his motionless flanks into the sea. His heart had burst! (222)

The presence of words such as “tormented,” “agonizing,” and “frighted” generate an image of a tortured death. Further, the replacement of the sea with a pond of blood replaces a sublime arena with one of squalor. Ishmael concludes that the whale has become a “vast corpse,” acknowledging the presence of the death that whaling is built upon. Such vivid descriptions of blood erode a sense of “sublime adventure,” that advocates of whaling extoll, and reflect a sense of immorality onto the whaling industry (Scott 9-11).

Melville depicts whaling as extractivist through the negative image of the butchery of whaling. Though Ishmael attempts to refute butchery as a negative trait in “The Advocate,” his focus on butchery here problematizes it and ties it to the rapaciousness of industrial capitalism:

Though amid all the smoking horror and diabolism of a sea-fight, sharks will be seen longingly gazing up to the ship’s decks, like hungry dogs round a table where red meat is being carved, ready to bolt down every killed man that is tossed to them; and though, while the valiant butchers over the deck-table are thus cannibally carving each other’s live meat with carving-knives all gilded and tasselled, the sharks, also, with their jewel-hilted mouths, are quarrelsome carving away under the table at the dead meat; and though, were you to turn the whole affair upside down, it would still be pretty much the same thing, that is to say, a shocking sharkish business enough for all parties. (226)

Though this passage focuses on warfare rather than whaling, Ishmael continues, tying whaling to sharkishness: there is “no conceivable time or occasion when you will find them in such countless numbers, and in gayer or more jovial spirits, than around a dead sperm whale” (226).

As several critics have noted, Melville had deep concerns with industrialism and the plight of the common worker. Smith writes: “It is evident that...Melville can develop no sanction for the institutions of organized society. The state and political theories, the law, property rights—none

has ethical standing; all are expressions of force, thinly masked by fraud” (65). This point is illustrated through Smith’s analysis of sharks in the text, which concludes that sharks represent the rapaciousness of capitalism (though this is complicated by the “Epilogue”) (72).²⁹ Thus, in the passage above, as sharks and humans come to resemble each other in both the butchery of warfare and the butchery of whaling, Melville calls into question the ethics of whaling.

Finally, extractivism is called into question through Melville’s symbolic ties between whaling and the American West—the frontier. As Smith shows, Melville draws material from his contemporary society, and thus, “makes especially wide and various use of allusions to the West and to the machine” (59). The allusions to the machine are discussed in my first chapter, with regards to Ahab, but an example of the allusions to the west comes in the comparison of whales to buffalo, or bison:

Comparing the humped herds of whales with the humped herds of buffalo, which, not forty years ago, overspread by tens of thousands the prairies of Illinois and Missouri, and shook their iron manes and scowled with their thunder-clotted brows upon the sites of populous river-capitals, where now the polite broker sells you land at a dollar an inch; in such a comparison an irresistible argument would seem furnished, to show that the hunted whale cannot now escape speedy extinction.

But you must look at this matter in every light. Though so short a period ago—not a good life time—the census of the buffalo in Illinois exceeded the census of men now in London, and though at the present day not one horn or hoof of them remains in all that region; and though the cause of this wonderous extermination was the spear of man; yet the far different nature of the whale-hunt peremptorily forbids so inglorious an end to the

²⁹ The sharks of the “Epilogue” are described as having padlocks on their mouths.

Leviathan. Forty men in one ship hunting the Sperm Whale for forty-eight months think they have done extremely well, and thank God, if at last they carry home the oil of forty fish. Whereas, in the days of the old Canadian and Indian hunters and trappers of the West, when the far west (in whose sunset suns still rise) was a wilderness and a virgin, the same number of moccasined men, for the same number of months, mounted on horse instead of sailing in ships, would have slain not forty, but forty thousand and more buffaloes; a fact that, if need were, could be statistically stated. (338)

Melville ties whaling to the frontier through the comparison of whales to buffalo and the dialectic of “virgin” wilderness and civilization. The first paragraph recognizes the relationship between buffalo and whales, in that they are each overhunted and are subjected to domination by humans. Further, Ishmael connects westward expansion to the extermination of the buffalo, referencing the providential vision in the “polite broker.” The second paragraph, however, attempts to undermine the connections established, yet, it is entirely unconvincing due to its factual inaccuracies; not the least of which is that Ishmael blames Native Americans on horseback using spears for the extermination of buffalo, rather than white men on trains using modern firearms, thus attempting to obscure the relationship of the slaughter of buffalo to colonialism. Melville’s parallel between whaling and the extermination of buffalo reinforces the idea that whaling is an extractivist industry, as the hunting of buffalo was itself extractivist, and the hunting of buffalo brings to mind the colonial project in the United States, which Klein writes is the ultimate extractivist relationship (170).

Vulnerability to the More-than-Human: The Romantic and Ecological Imaginations

In the first chapter, I argued that Ishmael and Ahab operate from the same broad environmental imaginations; each has a Romantic vision, and each has an ecological vision. As Leo Marx writes: “Ishmael tells us, his views had had a good deal in common with Ahab’s” (287). In Ishmael, the experiences of the numinous and the sublime lead towards an ecological attitude, while in Ahab, these experiences more forcefully bring out his will to power. Similarly, in Ishmael the recognition of the interconnection between living and nonliving entities leads to an attitude of humility, while in Ahab this recognition leads to an act of charting which makes his quest of domination more manageable. What sets the two characters apart? Melville’s representation of Ahab’s and Ishmael’s environmental imaginations shows that these imaginations do not necessitate a particular ontology. I argue that Ishmael differs from Ahab in his willingness to accept vulnerability and that this difference leads to a fundamentally different relationship between the human and the more-than-human, despite similar environmental imaginations.

Vulnerability is not a concept that is easily defined, as it largely depends on what one is vulnerable to. For our purposes, vulnerability may be understood as an openness to otherness—whether found in a human, animal, environment, or idea. Vulnerability implies an ability to be affected. Emmanuel Levinas theorizes an ethics based on the vulnerability of the face: “To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question” (“Dialogue” 24). Similarly, Judith Butler discusses the potential politics which may arise from vulnerability: “In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt...Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-

military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery can fuel the instruments of war” (29). Put simply, Butler and Levinas argue that a shared vulnerability between self and other is the basis for ethical interaction. Crucially, vulnerability begins as a physical experience, as Levinas’ description of the face suggests, yet I will argue that physical vulnerability is the precursor to spiritual experience.

Both the numinous and sublime are experiences which begin with vulnerability. The numinous, Otto writes, involves a “creature-feeling. It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures” (10). Further, the elements of the *mysterium tremendum*—Otto’s description of the numinous—are awfulness, overpoweringness (might or power), energy (will, force, movement), and the wholly other. These categories each relate to vulnerability and I argue that vulnerability is a necessary component to a numinous experience. We see something similar in the sublime: David Nye writes the sublime experience occurs when “an object, natural or man-made, disrupts ordinary perception and astonishes the senses, forcing the observer to grapple mentally with its immensity and power” (15). In this stage, the observer experiences extreme vulnerability in the face of the sublime entity. Nye then notes that while the observer may overcome the experience, realizing our superiority over internal and external nature, “this is not necessarily the conclusion everyone will draw from a sublime experience” (16). This stage has long been the center of discussions regarding the sublime; I will simply note that if the observer overcomes the sublime entity, he or she affirms their invulnerability to it. Different experiences of the sublime and numinous, and different relationships to death highlight the difference between the Romantic attitudes of Ishmael and Ahab.

While Ahab can primarily be described by the technological sublime—which connotes an invulnerability—Ishmael can be described by both the egotistical sublime and the ecological sublime—the latter of which connotes vulnerability. Ahab puts his faith in technology and invests it with a power that goes beyond its material capabilities. In the first chapter, his use of the technological sublime to challenge metaphysical powers was explored, as was his deployment of the technological sublime in the forging of his harpoon. While the structure of the sublime remains the same (or very similar), the relationships suggested by the ecological sublime and the technological sublime differ radically. “The attribution of sublimity to human creations radically modified the psychological process that the sublime involved. Whereas in a sublime encounter in nature human reason intervenes and triumphs when the imagination finds itself overwhelmed, in the technological sublime reason had a new meaning” as the “sublime object itself was a manifestation of reason” (Nye 60). Thus, the technological sublime is more of a celebration of human capabilities than a moment of vulnerability before a powerful entity beyond human control.³⁰ The technological sublime produces a feeling of invulnerability. As Armstrong writes: “Ahab embodies contemporary ‘American hopes that technology will empower free men,’ and his quest becomes an allegory of that attempt to master nature which characterized industrial capitalism in its new found confidence” (1042). In contrast, Ishmael’s experience of the ecological sublime—seen in his experience of networks and his final encounter with Moby Dick—is characterized by a lingering in the space of the numinous. Christopher Hitt

³⁰ Nye later notes that even the technological sublime may produce feelings of vulnerability: “This opposition [to the technological sublime] suggests a contradiction at the heart of the technological sublime that invites the observer to interpret a sudden expansion of perceptual experience as the corollary to an expansion of human power and yet simultaneously evokes the sense of individual insignificance and powerlessness” (285). Yet, these feelings are produced in the masses, so to speak—it is the feeling of those who do not have control over the technology around them. Ahab differs; he is in full control of his technology (he believes) and shows an exuberance for the increase in control and power that it gives him.

argues that “a sublime encounter with nature seems to have the power to jolt us momentarily out of a perspective constructed by reason and language” (617). He argues that experience of the ecological sublime does not involve the third moment of the Romantic sublime (what I have been calling the egotistical sublime), but rather the reassertion of the self is replaced by the numinous. In this experience, the observer lingers in a space unmediated by language and reason and is able to recognize human limitations and more-than-human individuality (Hitt 613-15). In other words, the experience of the ecological sublime is one of vulnerability to the other. Nye draws attention to the difference in vulnerability shown in the natural sublime and the technological sublime: “Thomas Weiskel wrote of the natural sublime that ‘there can be no sublime moment without the implicit, dialectical endorsement of human limitations.’ The technological sublime does not endorse human limitations; rather, it manifests a split between those who understand and control machines and those who do not” (60). Important to note is that the Romantic vision contains both the will to dominate nature to become invulnerable, and the will to humble oneself before nature.

The difference in vulnerability between Ahab and Ishmael is also highlighted by their understanding of death; Ahab believes he is beyond death while Ishmael accepts it as inevitable. In “The Whale Watch,” Ahab and Fedallah discuss the prophecy which seems to govern Ahab’s fate. Before his death, Ahab will see two hearses; “the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America” (361). Additionally, Fedallah tells Ahab that “[h]emp only can kill thee,” to which Ahab replies: “The gallows, ye mean.—I am immortal then, on land and on sea” (362). He misinterprets Fedallah’s prophecy—which suggests that Ahab will be killed by the whale line (which he is)—in favor of the small suggestion that he cannot be killed. Given that the whale line is also the most dangerous piece of equipment on the

ship, as Ishmael earlier tells us, Ahab's triumphalism is striking. On the final day of "The Chase" Ahab recites the prophecy, taunting the waves: "Drive, drive in your nails, oh ye waves! to their uttermost heads drive them in! ye but strike a thing without a lid; and no coffin and no hearse can be mine:—and hemp only can kill me! Ha! ha!" (405). Because of the prophecy, Ahab feels invulnerable; he feels as though the waves cannot affect him in any way. Yet his feeling of invulnerability is soon reversed as he begins to recognize the signs of the prophecy. After realizing that the *Pequod's* wood is American, he laments:

I turn my body from the sun...Oh lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief...Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! *Thus*, I give up the spear! (409)

Contained in this passage is not only the acknowledgement of his own death, so long denied, but also the futility that he now feels in the recognition of his vulnerability. Further, he states "give up the spear," which contains more than a little of a suggestion that he relinquishes his sublime harpoon, another site for the belief in his invulnerability. This passage suggests that Ahab becomes vulnerable, yet it is worth note that his vulnerability prompts a lament; Ahab's final attack is full of hatred for the impotence and vulnerability that he feels in the face of Moby Dick—precisely the same hatred that he exhibits in his speech on the quarter deck.

In contrast to Ahab's refusal of death, Ishmael accepts his death early on, a moment which is signified in Ishmael's survival in a coffin. On the third day of the chase, Ishmael joins the whaleboats in the assault of Moby Dick; he is thrown from Ahab's boat and only survives

due to the life buoy made from Queequeg's coffin. Ishmael describes his survival in the "Epilogue:" "Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main. The unharmed sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks" (410). That Ishmael survives in a coffin is significant, for it invokes Ishmael's earlier acceptance of death, as well as Ahab's claim: "no coffin and no hearse can be mine:—and hemp only can kill me" (405). After a paragraph describing the ways that his life is put in danger by whaling (specifically noting the voyage to pursue Moby Dick) Ishmael writes: "After the ceremony [of the drafting his will] was concluded upon the present occasion, I felt all the easier; a stone was rolled away from my heart...I survived myself; my death and burial were locked up in my chest. I looked round me tranquilly and contentedly, like a quiet ghost with a clean conscience sitting inside the bars of a snug family vault" (180). In accepting death, Ishmael accepts that humans are vulnerable beings that will eventually die; his will is made as an assurance that some of his wishes will be honored. As opposed to Ahab, Ishmael's death belongs to him—in a way he has already died. Death is an act which cannot be avoided by any living being, similarly, the awareness of death presses upon humans. Death then highlights vulnerability; to accept it as inevitable is to accept vulnerability as an ontology, while to reject it is to embrace a fantasy of invulnerability. We turn now to the relationship of vulnerability to the ecological vision of nature.

The two strains of the ecological imagination differ radically in their expression of vulnerability; the imperial tradition furthers the domination of nature through the science of ecology, while the arcadian tradition uses the recognition of interconnectedness between entities as a basis for humility. Worster writes that the arcadian impulse is the "ideal of a simple rural life in close harmony with nature...As an environmental vision in modern times, arcadianism has

often been a naïve surrender to nostalgia, but it has nonetheless contributed to the growth of an ecological ethic of coexistence rather than domination; humility rather than self-assertion; man as a part of, rather than superior to, nature” (*NE* 387). In contrast, the imperial impulse is the “view that man’s proper role on earth is to extend his power over nature as far as possible...Francis Bacon was the first to suggest that...dominion should be achieved by the human species over the natural world, through the aid of a science-based technology” (388-89). Not only does Ishmael frequently deploy the ecological sublime and numinous throughout “The Chase” to describe Moby Dick, but the symbol of the network reappears in the figure of Moby Dick, highlighting the ecological vision. “That instant, the White Whale made a sudden rush among the remaining tangles of the other lines; by doing so, irresistibly involved boats of Stubb and Flask towards his flukes.” Further: “But soon, as if satisfied that his work for that time was done, [Moby Dick] pushed his pleated forehead through the ocean, and trailing after him the intertangled lines, continued his leeward way at a traveler’s methodic pace” (400). Not only is the network centered on Moby Dick, but these paired images suggest both predacious and tranquil nature which Leo Marx argues is the basis for Ishmael’s complex pastoralism (313). In other words, Ishmael’s arcadian impulse does not rely on a quiet rural life, but rather, can exist in the midst of a battle with a sperm whale in the middle of the ocean.

Further, the “Epilogue” suggests an acceptance of vulnerability and humility, not only in the reference to his coffin life-buoy, but in his alignment with Job’s messengers as well. The novel then concludes: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (410). The final line of the novel seems to offer a profound ecological image; Melville gives an image of (relatively) deep time suffused with the

inconsequence of human lives and actions. Further, the image of Ishmael circling the whirlpool in the “Epilogue” suggests that humans are vulnerable and easily overpowered by the large forces of nature. Ishmael then speaks directly to the reader as one of Job’s messengers: “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (410). In this phrase Ishmael aligns himself with the narrator of *The Book of Job*, a story with a similar focus as *Moby-Dick*. Each engages the question of the metaphysical justification for human suffering; yet while Job is ultimately humbled by God, Ahab refuses humility and dies due to his hubris. As Leo Marx writes: “Ishmael’s relation to us, the readers of *Moby-Dick*, is like that of Job’s messengers to Job...Ishmael’s survival—the contrast between his attitude and Ahab’s is the root of the matter” (287). Ishmael tells the reader, and by extension the larger society, that humility and vulnerability are necessary and must be accepted. The “Epilogue” suggests an ecological vision of nature coupled with an acceptance of vulnerability and embrace of humility before the powers of nature.

In stark contrast to Ishmael, Ahab uses an ecological understanding of nature to limit his vulnerability and achieve greater power. In the first chapter I argued that Ahab’s charting represented his imperial ecological understanding of nature; throughout the text, Ahab’s charts come to signify the vulnerability Ahab feels, but seeks to overcome. In “The Spirit Spout,” as the *Pequod* chases what they interpret to be Moby Dick, Ahab takes “almost continual command of the drenched and dangerous deck” (185). In his monomania, he takes as much control as he possibly can to increase the chances that he will succeed in his quest. Ishmael draws attention to the irony here, pointing out that humans are impotent before a storm: “In tempestuous times like these, after everything above and aloft has been secured, nothing more can be done but passively to await the issue of the gale” (185). The chapter then concludes:

By night the same muteness of humanity before the shrieks of the ocean prevailed; still in silence the men swung in their bowlines; still wordless Ahab stood up to the blast. Even when wearied nature seemed demanding repose he would not seek that repose in his hammock. Never could Starbuck forget the old man's aspect, when one night going down into the cabin to mark how the barometer stood, he saw him with closed eyes sitting straight in his flood-screwed chair; the rain and half-melted sleet of the storm from which he had some time before emerged, still slowly dripping from the unremoved hat and coat. On the table beside him lay unrolled one of those charts of tides and currents which have previously been spoken of. His lantern swung from his tightly clenched hand. Though the body was erect, the head was thrown back so that the closed eyes were pointed towards the needle of the tell-tale that swung from a beam in the ceiling.

Terrible old man! thought Starbuck with a shudder, sleeping in this gale, still thou steadfastly eyest thy purpose. (185)

Melville describes Ahab as resisting the storm in the hunt for the spirit spout, despite the futility in this action; he then concludes with an image that moves from the “muteness of humanity” before the storm—a metaphor for humility—to an image of Ahab finding comfort and rest in his charts, rather than his hammock. In other words, Ahab's vulnerability to the powers greater than him—the storm, Moby Dick, the sun, etc.—something he attempts to overcome by using the charts. The charts also, to a degree, work in this respect; Ahab is able to achieve relative mastery of the ocean and predict the behavior of his prey. Yet despite his intellectual mastery of the ocean and its inhabitants, Ahab remains subject to the material reality, and his fantasy of invulnerability is just that. As Wilson writes: “Ishmael takes to the sea not to control it (as Ahab does) but to merge with it, to align himself with its rhythms, laws, circulations.” Further,

“Ishmael likely befriends the wild, the unpredictable, the alogical, because he finds the same energy sustaining and structuring himself and all humans” (141-42). In effect, Wilson describes the difference between the arcadian and imperial traditions of ecology.

As I have shown, the drive to dominate nature may be found in each of the environmental imaginations: the providential makes this drive explicit, as it stems from the Biblical mandate of “dominion;” the utilitarian uses the domination of nature as a mode of achieving maximum profit, as shown in the way that the market drives the reduction of nature into resource; the dark-Romantic impulse is to overcome the spiritual forces of the universe and (at least in Ahab) thereby gain power, an act which is generally accomplished through a mythic technology; finally, the ecological contains the imperial tradition as traced by Worster, which may be understood as a secularized providential attitude which uses ecology to achieve greater domination. As Mumford writes, tracing the will to dominate to a vulnerability to higher powers:

Each element in life forms part of a cultural mesh: one part implicates, restrains, helps to express the other. During [the close of the Middle Ages] the mesh was broken, and a fragment escaped and launched itself on a separate career—the will to dominate the environment. To dominate, not to cultivate: to seize power, not to achieve form. One cannot, plainly, embrace a complex series of events in such simple terms alone. Another factor in the change may have been due to an intensified sense of inferiority: this perhaps arose through the humiliating disparity between man’s ideal pretensions and his real accomplishments. (*TC* 43-44).

As William Leiss reminds us, the domination of nature “was formulated in universal terms as a great *human* task, the benefits of which would accrue to the species as a whole rather than to any particular group. ‘Relief of the inconveniences of man’s estate’ was its announced objective.

More than three centuries later, however, the goal remains immeasurably distant” (170, emphasis original). In the first section of *The Domination of Nature*, Leiss details how this objective—what I might call the pursuit of invulnerability—came to be viewed as the realm of science and technology. Leiss seems to argue that the domination of nature is a necessary condition for human survival, and that harmony may only be achieved through rational management (106, 177). As the above passage suggests, however, rational management and equal distribution are ideals which have never been truly realized, as the desire for profit and increased production generally takes over.³¹

In dominating nature through modern technology, we preclude a healthy and sustainable relationship between human and more-than-human. In Carolyn Merchant’s language, there can be no “partnership ethic” between dominator and dominated. The divergence of Ahab and Ishmael highlights that when vulnerability is incorporated into an environmental imagination, it leads to a more egalitarian relationship between human and more-than-human; conversely, it also highlights the way that technology is used in an attempt to overcome vulnerability. Importantly, Melville represents this attempt as futile, as Ahab ultimately is revealed as vulnerable and is killed, not by Moby Dick, but by the very technology he puts his faith in (the whale-line of his numinous harpoon). As Ishmael writes of technology’s relationship to the numinous and vulnerability:

however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he

³¹ For more proof of this assertion, one need only look at the very irrational way in which water has been managed in the United States, or the conflicting mandates on federal agencies charged with land management.

can make; nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impressions, man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it. (214)

Ishmael's focus on the physical vulnerability of humans relative to the larger environment, suggests, for him, a need for humility to these powers.

The acceptance of humility is not so straightforward, however. As Hitt writes of vulnerability:

We must be careful, however, before embracing a sense of humility, mortality, and dependence as either a panacea for our environmental predicament or as the defining element of an ecological sublime. The difficulty is that the consistent response of Western civilization...to this recognition of vulnerability has *not* been the eventual acceptance, but dogged resistance. The unfathomable otherness of nature unnerves us, and the idea that we are somehow part of this alien entity shocks us. Hence we devise ways to circumvent, deny, escape, or overcome it. (611)

Hitt clearly refers to technology and industrial society in his final sentence. I will conclude, however, by raising the question of whether the circumvention of vulnerability is a fundamental component in the use of technology. As Mumford writes: "Other civilizations reached a high degree of technical proficiency without, apparently, being profoundly influenced by the methods and aims of technics," in other words, without being profoundly influence by the desire to dominate nature and the drive for endless profit (4). Indeed, David Abram opens *The Spell of the Sensuous* with the assertion that while our technologies may make sensuous (vulnerable) participation with the more-than-human world more difficult, these technologies are also a part of this world and that participation with the more-than-human world helps to assess their limitations.

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