

Walter Benjamin's 115th Dream

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"I drove twice around the foundry, looking for signs of some erstwhile German presence. I drove past the row houses. They were set on a steep hill, narrow-fronted frame houses, a climbing line of pitched roofs. I drove past the bus terminal, through the beating rain. It took a while to find the motel, a one-story building set against the concrete pier of an elevated roadway. It was called the Roadway Motel."

-- Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985)

108. Full of the German Metaphysics

In October of 1849, Herman Melville was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Shortly before composing *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville had traveled to England to sell the publishing rights to his novel *White Jacket*. Aboard ship he found a conversation partner, one George Adler, a German émigré and professor of philosophy. "He is full of the German metaphysics," wrote Melville, "& discourses of Kant, Swedenborg, &c." Resembling the sickly grammarian and sub-sub-librarian who serve to introduce *Moby-Dick* to the reader, Adler was "the author of a formidable lexicon, (German & English); in compiling which he almost ruined his health. He was almost crazy, he tells me, for a time." By the time Melville had written *White Jacket*, he was in the process of turning against the adventure-seeking audience and the snappy plots which had been

responsible for his relative degree of fame and fortune. As Melville's fiction increasingly revolved around metaphysical questions, Adler's ideas were not unfamiliar. Indeed, they were becoming quite common among a certain class of liberal religionists: "Walked the deck with the German, Mr. Adler, till a late hour, talking of "Fixed Fate. Free-will, foreknowledge absolute" &c. His philosophy is *Coleredgian*: he accepts the Scriptures as divine, & yet leaves himself free to inquire into Nature. He does not take it, that the Bible is absolutely infallible, & that anything opposed to it in Science must be wrong. He believes that there are things *out* of God and independant [sic] of him,--things that would have existed were there no God:--such as that two & two make four; for it is not that God so decrees mathematically, but that in the very nature of things, the fact is thus."¹

Melville's journal entry positions Adler's theological perspective vis-à-vis British and German Romanticism as well as an evolving ideology of secularism.² Adler, according to

¹ Herman Melville, *Journals*, eds. Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 4-5.

² The coinage of the word "secularism" is often attributed to George Jacob Holyoake's 1851 address to the London Hall of Science and his founding of the "Society of Reasoners," later renamed the "Secular Society." See, for example, George Jacob Holyoake, "Principles of Secularism Defined," in *The Principles of Secularism* (London: Austin and Co., 1870), 11-13. Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 91. "Secularism," however, was in use before as a pejorative for the more radical strains of Enlightenment thought. See, for example, "Dr. Arnold's Miscellaneous Writings," *The North American Review* 62:130 (January 1846), 181. Regardless of where and when one locates the origins of the ideological moniker, the "secular" received a discursive boost in the mid-nineteenth century when "Freethinkers" on both sides of the Atlantic used the term "secularism" to encompass a worldview defined by its non-reference to God and seclusion from things divine. According to Holyoake, for example, secularism denoted a space and time set off from the authority of religious or monastic orders—those notorious centers of mystification and clerical intrigue. This modern notion of secularism, so closely allied to the nineteenth-century rhetoric of "progress" and "civilization," referred to both an epistemological regime and political discourse erected as a bulwark against the

Melville, waxed poetically (*Coloredgian* to be precise) about a notion of divine order that was neither transcendent nor immanent but both at the same time. According to Adler, Christian divinity coursed through the material world and where it did not, things pulsed at their own pace. Universal laws of “Nature” “would have existed were there no God.” Adler’s was a Common Sense reading of European romanticism, his way of acknowledging issues of terror and the sublime so as to diffuse their disruptive potential. The world was infinitely complex but so, too, was the mind’s eye in its capacity for calculation. Common Sense was something that Adler, as well as his adopted countrymen, could get their head around. In antebellum America the idea that truth was evident in the material world and to the self who gazes intently enough upon it was a truth that had, itself, become self-evident.³

Although an earlier Melville had entertained the project of merging Romanticism with empirical certainty, by the time he found himself in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, Melville had become suspicious of both. Melville, for example, impugns one of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “representative men,” Johann von Goethe, for his wide-eyed Platonism. “In reading some of Goethe’s sayings, so worshipped by his votaries, I came across this, ‘Live in the all.’ That is to say, your separate identity is but a wretched one,—good; but get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods, that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the fixed stars. What nonsense! Here is

threats of illegibility. In other words, it described *and* prescribed a transparent world set apart from secrets, primitive survivals, and things that went bump in the night. For a genealogical treatment of “secularism,” see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

³ On the secretions of Scottish Common Sense, see Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) as well as David Jaffe, “The Village Enlightenment in New England, 1760-1820,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, XLVII: 3 (July 1990): 327-346.

fellow with a raging toothache. ‘My dear boy,’ Goethe says to him. ‘you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must live in the all, and then you will be happy!’ As with all great genius, there is an immense deal of flummery in Goethe, and in proportion to my own contact with him, a monstrous deal in me.”⁴ In playfully pointing to his own Romantic proclivities as a form of original sin, Melville recognizes the ease of discounting the excess of the material world, an excess that cannot be reduced to or contained by the residual category of the “spiritual.”

So how are we to read Melville’s reading of Adler’s translation of the oversoul into an epistemological praxis of living “in the all” into the dialect of Baconian induction? To what degree does Melville frame Adler’s position, in being “full of the German metaphysics,” as speaking a theological dialect that one could describe as approaching the metaphysics of secularism, or more accurately, as a theological dialect that legitimated secularism? Might Melville’s chance encounter with Adler catalyzed his critique of an emergent “secular” world as soul-centered and self-aggrandizing—a deep longing for the experience of loss amidst the overwhelming presence of order, an order that went unquestioned because the means of accessing that order were deemed natural and true?

For Melville, such dreams of an Enlightenment truth just beyond the epistemological and/or historical horizon were too easily had at the expense of ignoring the dream-like reality of waking life—the “there and not there and yet” aspect of the “very nature of things.” For Melville, the recognition of such tension *as the real*—of that atmospheric space where binaries crystallize and melt away—served as a point of embarkation. For to fail to recognize this process of fiction and the fact that with every step you take you are also falling—stepping forward, falling, and catching yourself—was to assume a blithe form of nihilism.⁵ For it was the act of countering *resentiment* (a

⁴ Melville, *Correspondence*, 193-94.

⁵ Laurie Anderson, “Walking & Falling,” *Big Science*. Warner Bros. 1982.

theological act for Melville) that generated conscience, that is, the epistemological joy taken in walking and falling and catching yourself. Or as Melville declared in April of 1851,

We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little more information upon certain points Himself. We mortals astonish Him as much as He us. But it is this *Being* of the matter; there lies the knot with which we choke ourselves. As soon as you say *Me*, a *God*, a *Nature*, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam.⁶

The practical relationality between subject and object, sacred and profane, nature and culture became narrative pivots within *Moby-Dick*. In his relentless assault on the readerly sensorium Melville insisted that we enter into, or at the very least, are implicated in, what we intuit, perceive, or read—be it divinity, the past, or another living person.

As a storyteller, Melville addresses this “*Being* of the matter” in and through the looming presence of Moby Dick, a sperm whale who is feared to be both ubiquitous and immortal. For the majority of the book the white whale is a highly charged idea, an excuse it would seem for the author to relate the finer points of how brute nature is conquered, manufactured, and put up for sale. Moby Dick, however, assumes a physical character, in and of itself, only at the very end of Ishmael’s “tale” when the air aboard the Pequod has become so saturated with the idea of the whale that a typhoon envelops the “noble craft,” forcing it off course and toward its final confrontation with the whale. Throughout the book, leviathan is not of the empirical world but a disembodied name. It is a name whose authority operates from a distance, affects the individual personality, and provokes responses in the form of human activities and institutions. As such Moby Dick possesses the textual attributes of the Calvinist

⁶ Melville, *Correspondence*, 186.

God of absence and wrath. On the other hand, the creature of the sea inhabits the same reality as each of the characters—from Captain Ahab and his “phantom” oarsmen to Starbuck and Aunt Charity to the “savage” harpooners, Queequeg, Daggoo, and Tashtego. They are as susceptible to the whale as the whale is to them. Within their Romantic universe there is mutual acknowledgment, direct contact and dependency, as well as bloodshed. The text is speaking back, suggesting an agency of its own.

These seemingly polar identities of the whale, by the time Melville has staged his rather intricate and elegant play of language, have not only collapsed but have shown themselves to be mutually constitutive. As Melville’s narrator suggests, “the idea of the great whale himself” is “overwhelming,” a dangerous force that confounds any mode of perception or language that neatly divides up the world into present and past, matter and spirit, presence and absence. Aboard the Pequod, the American ship of State, something is amiss. Ishmael, if you did not know already, is the only survivor. Left alone to tell the tale, perhaps because he was the only one who appreciated the art of storytelling and the deadly precision of fiction.

Published in New York City in November of 1851, *Moby-Dick* was a retelling of a story that had already been circulating in antebellum America. Melville drew upon the folklore of whaling as well as a variety of sources that detailed the exploits of sperm whales bent on revenge, including J.N. Reynolds’ “Mocha Dick” (1839), itself a fictionalized account of the stoving of the Nantucket whaleship *Essex* by a sperm whale in 1820.⁷ *Moby-Dick* was also a story about storytelling. Melville was interested not only in those stories Americans told

⁷ J.N. Reynolds, “Mocha Dick: Or the white whale of the Pacific: A leaf from a manuscript journal,” *Knickerbocker* 12 (May 1839): 377-392; see, also, Owen Chase, *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex, of Nantucket; Which Was Attacked and Finally Destroyed by a Large Spermaceti-Whale in the Pacific Ocean . . .* (New York: W.B. Gilley, 1821)

themselves in order to be themselves but also in the process of narration itself. As Melville understood it at the time, storytelling was a technology of re-enchantment, a way of enabling the dead to speak their honest truths to the living. “For in this world of lies,” wrote Melville in 1850, “Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands.”⁸ And whereas William Wordsworth’s “The White Doe of Rylestone” (1807), may have been the overwrought symbol of Romantic melancholy, a passive animal on which humans project their deeper sentiments, the white whale might project its anger upon you.

109. The Carnival of History

Like Moby Dick, *Moby-Dick* remains unpainted to the last. Which brings us to the crux of this essay—not another meditation on “this world of lies” (although the density of deception I would suggest has yet to be effectively accounted for) but a question—if the past, like the doe or the whale, remains “unpainted to the last,” how might “historians”—those interested in approaching the past “responsibly” and with a degree of honesty about its non-presence—even begin? If the past is ungraspable, or at the very least, unquantifiable, how best to measure it? Is the minimum criteria of historical scholarship—to account for “change over time”—to be defended? Or, should this secular standard of historical objectivity be exposed as a lie that keeps the Enlightenment-capitalist-evangelical resonance machine well-oiled and running smoothly in the service of a memory that is always ever the same? Or, more provocatively, what does historical scholarship look like after historians renounce their “desire for total knowledge” and resist the

⁸ Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” in *Moby-Dick*, eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 523.

demagogic invocation of “objectivity, the accuracy of facts, and the permanence of the past”?⁹

The question remains open as to what extent such renunciation is desirable or even possible. Within Religious studies, such demagoguery has its own posterboy—Mircea Eliade—whose cosmic Christian structuralism coordinated practices and representations in the present with their archetypal referents *in illo tempore*. One need not condemn Eliade as a closet fascist in order to see a lurking totalitarianism within his work. Too often, however, Eliade’s overarching constructivism has been simply reduced to “religious” bias—something best avoided, critics of Eliade inform us, when assuming the scientific responsibility of studying religion. But is the problem with Eliade reducible to the fact that he smuggled a religious perspective into his scholarship or does it have more to do with the kind of religious perspective and the style of existential response that he assumed? In other words, might “God” still have a place in our collective efforts to renounce Eliade and what “God” might we call on to help exorcise the ghosts of *homo religious*? Perhaps, suggests Michel Foucault, such a “God” has more to do with abiding issues of insufficiency or uncertainty—a politics of “deep pluralism”—than it does with the search for referential truth.¹⁰ Perhaps such a “God is [] not so much a region beyond knowledge as something prior to the sentences we speak.”¹¹

But as Nancy K. Levene has recently argued, Foucault’s genealogical method, what he once described as “history in the form of a concerted carnival,” is insufficiently skeptical (deconstructive) of the “concept of history.” Levene, writing as a philosopher, a literary critic, and perhaps a theologian, exposes

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. By Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 158.

¹⁰ William E. Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” *Political Theory* 33:6 (December 2005): 881.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 298.

the limits of the Foucauldian project—not so much on Foucault’s terms but as those terms have been employed by American historians. Specifically, Levene calls out and calls short the historiographical interventions of two rather sophisticated scholars who see themselves as “doing history,” Joan Scott and Bruce Lincoln. According to Levene, the concepts of history deployed by Scott and Lincoln are not adequate to the radicality of the genealogical method. So even though Scott and Lincoln jettison any rhetorical claims to nature and/or truth, Levene argues that a lingering metaphysics of presence circulates in the rarefied air of post-Foucauldian genealogy. What Scott, Lincoln, and others still cling to, Levene writes, is the “concept of history” as a “universal solvent” and as that which guarantees that everything has a history and, by extension, that everything was constructed by humans and therefore subject to reversibility. But such open-endedness, for Levene, devolves into mere play when the “history of something like gender or religion” is only “about dissolution and dispersal” rather than about “construction.” According to Levene, digging beneath the sheen of universalism and getting your hands dirty in the epistemic muck is, itself, not an *accounting for* but merely a *transcription of* the enabling fictions that make up the past. Practicing “history without entirely believing in it” is only the first step toward a more radical epistemological position of believing, passionately, in the contingency of truth, historical or otherwise.¹²

What Levene takes issue with is the failure to reckon with the very “concept of history” and not necessarily the political trajectory of Scott and Lincoln’s work. Invoking the image of Angelie Jolie’s secret agent character in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, Levene offers a polite, polished, and devastating philosophical critique. The methodologies of Scott and Lincoln, she contends, because they do not interrogate the “concept of history” as a formation of the secular, are reactionary inversions of the Eliadean paradigm of fitting all the facts into a given and

¹² Nancy K. Levene, “Sources of History: Myth and Image,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74:1 (March 2006), 93, 87-88.

normalized ontological matrix. Whereas Eliade had his archetypes and archaic ontology, Lincoln and Scott cling to the notion that everything in the present refers (including themselves and their methodological stances), in some way, to the past. For Levene, such longing for a referential ground, whether cultivated in the service of past- or future-nostalgia, results in scholarship that makes too much sense. Indeed, it creates a bulwark of sensibility that serves to protect the “concept of history” from any kind of intellectual scrutiny. The genealogical treatments of Lincoln and Scott, by working so hard to distinguish themselves from what they see as the circumscribed horizon of myth, end up delimiting their own political aspirations. According to Levene, to do the exact opposite of Eliade—to demystify mythology and to privilege history—is to rehearse his suspect ideas and politics in a different key. The song does not necessarily remain the same but the melody is vaguely familiar—the difference akin to the sonic (and political) differences between, say, Lynryd Skynyrd’s defensive, baptized in blood anthem, “Sweet Home Alabama” (1974) and the Steve Miller Band’s paean to the spectacle of bourgeoisie-youth rebellion, “Take the Money and Run” (1976).¹³

¹³ Lynryd Skynyrd’s second album, *Second Helping* (1974) expressed its own kind of cosmic Christianity—a version of the Southern civil religion of the lost cause—with pastoral accounts (“Swamp Music”), critiques of industrial labor practices (“Workin’ for MCA”), as well as the identification of “good-ol boy” practices with the ethical imperative of the Holy Spirit (“Mr. Breeze”). “Sweet Home Alabama” is the clearest and most geographically specific naturalization of Alabama as the “Lord’s” chosen land where the “governor’s true,” “the skies are so blue,” and the crimes of the Nixon administration are but the latest hypocrisy and instance of Northern aggression against state’s rights. Whereas “Sweet Home Alabama” can be read as an invocation of *in illo tempore* (particularly in its defense of the segregationist politics of Governor George Wallace), The Steve Miller Band’s album, *Fly Like an Eagle* (1976), takes a different tact. Beginning with the first instrumental track, “Space Intro,” a dreamy minute and a half that segues into “Fly Like an Eagle,” one of the Steve Miller Band’s most overtly political songs about poverty and social inequality. The opening lyric of “Fly Like an Eagle” gestures toward the sentiment motivating the genealogist to write, in Foucault’s words, a “history of the present”—“Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’, / into the future.” By track #7, “Take the Money and Run,” there appears an even more radical suggestion

To gain historical leverage upon the concept of history is, by definition, an impossible task. It is the kind of impossibility invoked by Talal Asad when he asks “what might an anthropology of secularism look like?”¹⁴ It is a tragic line of questioning that Foucault has identified as the “attitude of modernity,” one lying dormant between the lines of Immanuel Kant’s infamous article, “Was ist Aufklärung?” Such an attitude is a redoubled effort “to be wise,” to consummate a Nietzschean desire of no longer “believ[ing] in grammar.” For “if Western man is inseparable from [God], it is not because of some invincible propensity to go beyond the frontiers of experience, but because his language ceaselessly foments him in the shadow of his laws.”¹⁵

Although Levene points to the reticence of some genealogists to subject themselves to the same degree of skepticism as their subject matter, Foucault, I argue, clearly broaches a series of questions that lead the prospective historian down the rabbit hole of modernity. How does the “historian”

that politics, in general, is a fool’s game. Rather than “sit around the house, get high, and watch the tube,” the song’s protagonists, Billy Joe and Bobby Sue, decide “to cut loose.” In the process, Billy Joe and Bobby Sue, on the run from Detective Billie Mack from Texas who “knows just exactly what the facts is,” offer a genealogical perspective on the concept of justice within a post-Watergate America. But as in Levene’s reading of Lincoln and Scott, even the Foucauldian “impatience for liberty” practiced by Billy Joe and Bobby Sue may be curtailed, not by Billie Mack’s actions but by conceptions of agency and social change that are still contingent upon and called into being by a transcendental presence. Although differing in intention from “Sweet home Alabama / Lord, I’m comin’ home to you,” the second strophe of “Fly Like an Eagle” ends on a decidedly logocentric note—“I want to fly like an eagle, / To the sea, / Fly like an eagle, / Let my spirit carry me, / I want to fly like an eagle, / Till I’m free, / Oh, Lord, through the revolution.”

Thanks to Faylor Love for detailing various acoustic structures as well as for our lengthy discussions about the concepts of resonance and frequency.

¹⁴ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 21-66.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 38; *The Order of Things*, 298.

account for radical contingency, chance encounter, and heterogeneity that Foucault insisted constituted the space between moments? Might the present be much more (or much less) than a prefiguring of the future? How to become “historical”—to tell stories about the mythic time before today—while also cultivating an “impatience for liberty”? And where might theology, variously construed, come into play when coming to terms with and providing terms for yesterday? “Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of bodies,” wrote Foucault, “knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge.”¹⁶ As Foucault implies here, to assume that the past is something out there, present and in need of discovery and transcription, is to adopt a rather pernicious approach to knowledge as such. It is a crass will to power that fails to “account” for the discontinuity of the subject, the ironic play of dominations, and the chance encounters that make life appear as something consistent and immutable. Such an approach to knowledge was at work in various colonial regimes and on many a whaling ship in the nineteenth century.

Which brings us back to Melville and his tale about what happens, or better yet, what could happen, when humans leave themselves to their own devices. For when *Moby-Dick* was published in October of 1851 it was already true. The past and present quite literally converged when in November reports began to reach land about the August sinking of the *Ann Alexander* by a whale in the South Pacific. The story about the *Ann Alexander* originally appeared in the Panama *Herald* on October 16 and was reprinted the following month in *New-York Daily Tribune* and *Littell’s Living Age*:

It is stated that such a circumstance as the attack of a whale upon a ship, has never been known to occur but once in the whole history of whale-

¹⁶ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 161, 163.

fishing, and that was the destruction of the ship
Essex, some twenty or twenty-five years ago.

Upon reading the article Melville remarked to his publisher, “the Whale had almost completely slipped me for the time (& I was the merrier for it) when Crash! comes Moby Dick himself . . . It is really & truly a surprising coincidence—to say the least. I make no doubt it is Moby Dick himself . . . I wonder if my evil art has raised this monster.”¹⁷

110. Slippin’ Into the Future

Despite Melville’s flippant dismissal of Goethe, it is interesting to note Goethe’s notion of “after-images” upon Melville’s understanding of the white whale.¹⁸ Although

¹⁷ “A Ship Sunk by a Whale,” *Littell’s Living Age* (29 November 1851), 415; Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, Volume 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville*, ed. Lynne Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 209.

¹⁸ Indeed, Melville’s familiarity with Goethe as well as his deep appreciation for the works of J.M.W. Turner, himself influenced by Goethe, heightened Melville’s interest in the processes of perception, which, by the 1840s, had become a common object of investigation among philosophers and artists. See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Locke Eastlake (London: John Murray, 1840). In January of 1849, Melville withdrew from the Boston Athenaeum Charles Eastlake’s *Contributions to the Literature of the Fine Arts*, which included extracts from his translation of *Theory of Colours*. These extracts, among other things, included Goethe’s ideas on the non-absolute quality of color, including his discussion of the color white. Although there is no record of Melville ever having consulted Eastman’s 1840 translation, it is likely that Melville consulted this work before or during the composition of *Moby-Dick* given his habits of reading, and the fact that *Theory of Colours* was widely available in New York City throughout the 1840s. In addition to the fact that Eastman’s translation of *Theory of Colours* was published by the same London publisher of *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville purchased Goethe’s *Autobiography* in December of 1849, borrowed *Wilhelm Meister* in 1850, and acquired his *Iphigenia in Tauris* in January of 1851. On Melville’s reading of Eastman’s *Contributions*, see Robert K. Wallace, *Melville & Turner: Spheres of Love and Fright* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 168-177, 595, 603. See also Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville’s Reading: A*

Melville may have been skeptical of Goethe’s blithe insistence to “live in the all,” he did appreciate Goethe’s appreciation for the way the past perceptually impinges upon the present. Goethe’s notion of “after-images” also played a role in Walter Benjamin’s formulation of “unconscious optics.”¹⁹ Both Melville and Benjamin had little patience for epistemological economies of origination. Both writers were relentless critics of the physical and metaphysical exploitation they believed had become instituted under the sign of the market economy. Both understood effects as far outnumbering causes. And both used theological language to gain leverage upon a situation that did not necessarily lend itself to sober and objective analysis as well as to register their cultural criticism.

The remainder of this essay asks, among others, the following question: given Benjamin’s practice of a particular theological sensibility, one that acknowledges the powerful fantasy of a divine logos and the presence of a non-space of creation, what are contemporary historians to make of his visionary mode of criticism? Must we adopt his theology in order to approach the “profoundest truths” of which he speaks? To what extent must historians share Benjamin’s theological

Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 62.

¹⁹ Benjamin wrote that the category of originality had been challenged by cinematic technologies that “capture images which escape natural vision” and put copies “of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself.” The decay of the “aura” of authenticity and the blurring of original and reproduction enabled individuals to recognize the fact that they were implicated in the perceptual field and no longer insulated from what they saw or heard. According to Benjamin, mechanical means of reproduction had liberated the perceptual capacities of humanity and resulted in the “tremendous shattering of tradition” and “liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.” See “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 220, 237, 240, 221. In regards to the influence of Goethe upon Benjamin, see Benjamin’s essays from the early 1920s: “Truth and Truths/Knowledge and Elements of Knowledge” and “Goethe’s Elective Affinities.” In *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

assumption that the past is fully redeemed, that is, fully understood on “Judgment Day”?²⁰ While some in the academy may recoil from even the hint of theological language, I believe that it is an assumption worth thinking about, particularly in light of those who, in their failure to appreciate how the present may condition the future, have already failed to appreciate how the past may decondition the present. To account for the transformative potential of the past is not easy when historical knowledge is widely seen as therapeutic and accommodating to present concerns.

Writing within the history separating Melville and Foucault, Benjamin viewed the practice of storytelling as a kind of religious vocation—a call to confusion, parody, transgression combined with “relentless erudition.” Benjamin, in other words, calls for empiricism in the service of the fictional (a traditional Romantic trope) but, more importantly, for the slipperiness of the fictional to be understood as the first principle of any metaphysical scheme or methodology. And it is precisely this sublimity of the past *and the future*, derived from the Romantics, that Benjamin, himself, acknowledges as the *first assumption* that the historian must make. For it is only through such humility that the past may be allowed to speak for itself and its “profoundest truths” be heard.

111. Walter Benjamin: Midnight Toker

Deeply troubled by the state of things to come Benjamin spent much of his life gazing at the detritus of Anglo-European modernity—the reality effects given off by ruins of various kinds—toys, discarded newspapers, decaying architecture. When reading Benjamin one becomes privy to a temporal synaesthesia—not a convergence of past, present, and future into a kind of cosmic consciousness but a sensitivity to the ways in which the past, present, and future are *both* independent *and*

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, 254.

mutually constitutive. How, then, to write history while acknowledging that you and your categories have been invented by people you have never met? What does “change over time” mean and how does one approach historicity when both of these concepts do not exist in the empirical sense of that term? What is the epistemological price one must pay to enter the carnival?

In avoiding “the stamp of the definitive,” Benjamin sought to recover “new, unforeseen constellations” in the present material world but even more so in the realm of the past.²¹ His method of avoidance is in direct opposition to the correspondence theory of historical empiricism, most famously espoused by Leopold von Ranke’s dictum *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, knowing history as it actually happened. In “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin castigates historians who content themselves “with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history.” For Benjamin, the cause and effect historicism of the Rankean variety peddles triumphalism in the present at the expense of the persistent indeterminacy of the past. In offering a consensus model of evolutionary progression, such narrations too often ignore the personal dimension of the past and their interruptive capacity in the present. While Benjamin does not deny that there are connections to be found in history, he turns on its head the empiricism that assumes causes in the past precede their effects in the present. “No fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical,” writes Benjamin.

It became historical post-humously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.²²

²¹ Benjamin, “Naples,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 1*, 416.

²² Benjamin, “Theses,” in *Illuminations*, 263.

By illuminating how the past is always, in part, constructed by the present, in dialogue and not by imperial fiat, Benjamin implies that any narration of the past is at the same time a narration of the present. (Indeed, the Latin root for “gnarus” invests knowledge with an emotional dimension and a kind of personal intimacy).

Once the “unforeseen constellations” are recovered in the present, the question then becomes what to make of them and how to represent them. “To articulate the past historically,” writes Benjamin, does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”²³ In learning how to seize such flashes as they flit by, the historian jettisons the empiricism and instrumental reasoning in favor of a more distracted gaze, a mode of perception (and eventually, representation) that accounts for what takes place on the peripheries of our vision. Having made the argument for an “optical unconscious,” Benjamin makes the case, implicitly, for the “historical unconscious”—a dialectical intoxication by which the nature of the past is penetrated only to the degree that it is recognized as a spectral entity in the present. The historical materialist, through such dialectical intoxication, becomes aware of “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one.”²⁴ In other words, the past speaks to us in its own language, indecipherable to those who choose, in their self-affirming sobriety, to listen only to themselves.²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁵ Despite the increased sophistication and sensitivity to the fashions of postmodernism the field of American religious history continues to be haunted, at least partially, by the ghost of Leopold Von Ranke and his nineteenth-century dictum to know history as it actually happened. Too often histories of American religion have been fraught with this nostalgia for certainty—a longing for ground zero, that moment when religious belief and practice did not traffic in signs but announced itself directly, meaning what it said and saying what it meant. An example of such nostalgia, *par excellence*, is Sydney E.

One is reminded here of Benjamin’s second experience with hashish when he discovered that such intoxication was a benefit, not a hindrance, in understanding the nature of the past. “The great moments of world history,” he realized, “are merely costumes beneath which they exchange understanding looks with nothingness, the base, and the commonplace.” It is this secret conversation, between a lived reality in the past and the future that had yet to be realized, that the historian must strive to engage. The actors and the events of the past once spoke, to each other and to the void that was then the future. We now inhabit that void, a homogeneous, empty time, and the pasts continue to speak. “They reply,” as Benjamin wrote, “to the ambiguous wink from nirvana.”²⁶

The historical materialist, in his desire to assume the aggressive character of this wink, has no choice but to attempt to enter into this conversation utilizing the language of the present. And it is precisely because this conversation is ongoing that the past is essentially mysterious, its truth content “untotalizable” in the fashionable parlance of the academy, a secret that refuses to be deciphered. “Truth,” as Benjamin writes, “is not an unveiling, which annihilates the mystery, but a revelation and a manifestation that does it justice.”²⁷ The historian who acknowledges his or her paradoxical task of doing justice—to somehow represent that which cannot be represented—puts forth

Ahlstrom’s *A Religious History of The American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972). While this nostalgia is most evident in consensus histories such as Ahlstrom’s, liturgical definitions of religion that posit a direct correspondence between belief and practice continue to pervade more recent revisionist works. See Martin E. Marty’s *Modern American Religion* series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 1991, and 1996), R. Laurence Moore’s conflict driven *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), as well as Noll’s magisterial history of evangelicalism, *America’s God* (2004).

²⁶ Benjamin, “Main Features of My Second Impression of Hashish,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 85-86.

²⁷ Quoted in Jurgen Habermas, “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique,” in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, Gary Smith, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 106.

a secret history. The history is secret because the secret is kept, the dream-like language of the past preserved.²⁸ The “profoundest truths” in history become reflected *through* the “irresponsible dreamer.” Benjamin’s bottom line: in order to become responsibly attentive to the language of the past one must act irresponsibly in the present by resisting *its* deterministic claims.²⁹

The primary goal of the historian is to enter into a conversation, one whose origins remain fuzzy and whose participants speak in a foreign tongue. His primary task, then, is to translate this idiom into the language of the present. For

²⁸ This is fundamentally a surrealistic understanding of the past. Benjamin, himself, was greatly influenced by this artistic movement that emerged in the wake of Dada. Benjamin derived his notion of “profane illumination” from Surrealism, a notion that underscores Benjamin’s method of “dialectical intoxication.” See Andre Breton’s 1925 “Manifesto of Surrealism,” in which he longs for the moment when “mysteries which really are not will give way to the great Mystery. I believe in the future resolution of those two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak.” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 14. While Benjamin was sympathetic to Surrealism’s project “to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,” he lamented its “inadequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication” and its “fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious.” In other words, Benjamin appreciated the moment of awakening as much as the dream itself. “Surrealism,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 215-16.

²⁹ Such irresponsibility is also akin to children’s play. Without romanticizing the innocence of childhood Benjamin continually points to the critical leverage that can be gained in assuming a child-like way of seeing. It is precisely because children do not follow the rules that they are able to intuit the world on its own terms. In “One-Way Street,” Benjamin juxtaposes children with those Enlightenment philosophers that purport to study them. Not only do children undermine Enlightenment categories of rational empiricism and mind-body dualism, they provide a new mode of seeing. “Children,” writes Benjamin, “are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship.” *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, 449-50.

Benjamin, the historian and the past he hopes to translate find themselves in a precarious position. The translator must confront the enemy of conformism - the life-extinguishing force that overpowers the past, renders it mute, and silences the dead in the name of an absolutist interpretation of what actually happened. In other words, the past is constantly under threat by bad translators, who preserve “the state in which [their] own language happens to be instead of allowing [their] language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.”³⁰

Inferior histories, like inferior translations, are defined by Benjamin as “the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content.” He argues that superior translations do not undertake to serve the reader, that is, to communicate content. On the contrary, a translation is a mere representation, a “form” whose governing laws “lie within the original.” “A real translation,” Benjamin argues, “is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.” In other words, it illuminates, it magnifies through its tangentiality, touching “the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point.”³¹

This superior form of translation, then, does not serve the reader but redeems the past, and in the process, changes the present. In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin speaks directly to the vitality of the past and the redemptive capacity of what I am calling a secret history. “The concept of life,” writes Benjamin, “is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting of history, is credited with life.”³² In other words, there is a vital connection *between* the original and the translation, *between* the past and its secret history. In preserving this vital connection the “secret” historian is never seduced by the “whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in

³⁰ Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, 262.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 253, 260, 261.

³² *Ibid.*, 255.

historicism's bordello." Instead, he or she "supplies a unique experience with the past" by blasting "open the continuum of history."³³ Because a translation issues from the afterlife of the original, it is, by definition, a ghost, a haunting, a spectral continuation of the life of the original. A secret history, then, is the ideal form of translation where by one reads "between the lines" in order to create an "interlinear version."³⁴

Benjamin's implicit understanding of the past spilling over into the present speaks directly to the religiosity of American history, that is, what is religious about this country's past. In the American grain, an "interlinear version" of the past addresses and amplifies those dreams of America that once served as the terms of salvation for both self and country. These are the claims of a world elsewhere that must be redeemed in the present. These are the imaginative renderings of individuals that litter the past. Instead of sweeping these shards back under the cultural carpet, they must be seen for what they are—an overflow of religious meaning that must be accounted for in the here and now. Just as religion is often associated with excess in anthropological circles, so, too, must historians account for what Michael Taussig refers to as the "representational pathos" of religion. Whether looking the present of the past, this characteristic of religion is the fundamental challenge for those wishing to explain it.³⁵

Of particular relevance to the historian of religion who is attempting to at least account for such excess, Taussig points to

³³ Benjamin, "Theses," in *Illuminations*, 262.

³⁴ Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, 263.

³⁵ Michael Taussig, "Transgression," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 352. Because religion is primarily the work of the imagination—the vehicle by which people come to understand their world and express themselves within it—those who study religion must be attentive to the variety of ways in which meanings and symbols of ultimacy are generated. Furthermore, they must continually struggle to describe this imaginative faculty at work, how existing worlds are repossessed and made anew, and conversely, how worlds elsewhere are brought to bear on those existent.

how such an explanatory mode could prove redemptive in the Benjaminian vein: "What we do with that radical uncertainty is the measure not only of our ability to resist the appeal for closure, but also of our ability to prise open history's closure with the lever of its utterly terrible incompleteness."³⁶ Such redemption is achieved through the juxtaposition of a reality as it was really made up by historical actors with the one imposed upon them from without. Only in showing this really made-up reality for what it was—experiences that transcended space and time and, more often than not, failed to leave their mark on the power structures of this world—does America become a permissible dream.³⁷

³⁶ Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 161.

³⁷ Recently, the British historian Niall Ferguson has promoted the value of "counterfactual" thinking when investigating the historical record. While "counterfactual" history is not "redemptive" in the sense that I am employing the term—bring to light imaginings that left no "factual traces"—it nonetheless provides a contemporary instance of brushing history against the grain. Ferguson claims that the historian is obligated to test his or her hypotheses by imagining what might have happened. As an antidote to determinism of all kinds, he calls for historians to embrace the chaotic nature of the past and to capture the sense of possibility that defines reality as it was actually lived. As Ferguson writes:

Now, if all history is the history of (recorded) thought, surely we must attach equal significance to *all* the outcomes thought about. The historian who allows his knowledge as to which of these outcomes subsequently happened to obliterate the other outcomes people regarded as plausible cannot hope to recapture the past 'as it actually was'. For, in considering only the possibility which was actually realised, he commits the most elementary teleological error. To understand how it actually was, we therefore need to understand how it actually wasn't—but, to contemporaries, it might have been.

In imagining what history would look like if Charles I had avoided the English Civil War or if John Wilkes Booth had failed in his assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Ferguson believes that historians may approach a deeper reality of the past, a randomness that occurs within even the most deterministic of systems. In *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, ed. Niall Ferguson

As they lie dormant, the unredeemed possibilities of the past have been bound up with the sacralization of the symbol of America. As Giles Gunn has noted, such reflections on America have been framed in a variety of ways: the importance of the land, the character of its native inhabitants, the purpose of community, the problem of cultural identity, the destiny of the nation, the uses of the past, and the centrality of nature to name only a few.³⁸ What, then, would a Benjaminian history of American religion look like? Such a question goes beyond the confines of this essay but a place to begin may be Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the various "sacralizations" (in the apophatic sense of unmaking and dissolution) that have been achieved through the engagement with Melville's text. Indeed, beginning with Melville, himself, and extending through academic critics such as Lewis Mumford, F.O. Matthiessen, and C.L.R. James, literary and visual artists such as Richard Wright, Charles Olson, Ralph Ellison, William S. Burroughs, Don DeLillo, Rockwell Kent, Toni Morrison, and Laurie Anderson, *Moby-Dick* has provided the language through which they worked through the terms of their own salvation and, more often than not, the terms of their country's as well. By now such interpretations/representations of America constitute an imagic palimpsest, image layer inscribed upon image layer without any ever coming into full resolution. In other words, these sacralizations of both self and country have rarely come to pass, the symbolic renderings never un-made into a reality. The mystery of pure potentiality, in both its transcendent and tragic

(London: Picador, 1997), 86-87. Such ironic distance, however, runs the risk of discounting the tragic, that is, the inevitability of particular ideological formations to replicate themselves. Secularism, for example, has become as an "authorizing discourse" due, in part, to its ability to deny its emergence as a discourse as well as to its viral capacity to infect those beliefs and practices that emerge in response to it.

³⁸ Giles Gunn, ed. *New World Metaphysics: Readings on the Religious Meaning of the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

dimensions, continues to dwell. It is an "image," as Ishmael tells us, "of the ungraspable phantom; and this is the key to it all."³⁹

112. That Inscrutable Thing is Chiefly What I Hate

What makes a Benjaminian history of *Moby-Dick* so appropriate is the fact that Benjamin and Melville share some basic assumptions about the practice of representation. In each of their critical endeavors form was never more than an extension of content, depth never more than an extension of surface. Like Benjamin, Melville understood that a vivid representation must pay deference to the living quality of its subject matter. For example, when Ishmael focuses on the "visible surface of the Sperm Whale . . . crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks," it is a surface that possesses a radical depth. The marks are not impressed upon the skin "but seem to be seen through it, as if they were engraved upon the body itself." Despite their hieroglyphic character and indecipherability of the markings, the skin, nonetheless, offers an opportunity to the would-be interpreter. Ishmael reminds that reader that he has sometimes used "the skin of the skin," the thin, transparent film covering the whale as leverage for understanding (305-306).

being laid upon the printed page, I have sometimes pleased myself with fancying it exerted a magnifying influence. At any rate, it is pleasant to read about whales through their own spectacles, as you may say.

It is the bodily substance, the dried flesh of the whale that does justice to any interpretive act even as it undermines the strictly analytical reading of surfaces. The "magnifying influence" of which Ishmael speaks has nothing to do with size but subtlety, an

³⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 5. All subsequent references to this text cited parenthetically.

interpretive process that honors the mystery of being in its multiplicity (306).

If *Moby-Dick* is anything it is a profound act of de(con)struction, a relentless dismantling of the physical, psychological, and ontological character of the white whale. “Unpainted to the last,” the representation of Moby Dick is never resolved despite Ahab’s hatred for “that inscrutable thing.”

The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters, and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight, like a launched line-of-battle ship; and out of that element it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air, so as to preserve all his mighty swells and undulations (263).

Melville inhabited the paradox of representation—vivifying his object of scrutiny in the very act of narrating it. He penetrated the mystery of the white whale only to the extent that the mystery became even more mysterious. For Melville, representation is not a form of resolution. It reveals only to the extent that it conceals. Through the ongoing process of interpretation Melville allows the white whale to go on living. At no time does he allow his curiosity to overwhelm him. At no time does he allow his own language to take precedent over his subject matter. As Ishmael warns,

there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be

too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan (264).

On one hand, it is this sense of life in the full range of its shading that speaks to what Benjamin and Melville were after in their respective critical ventures. Both went “a whaling.” On the other hand, it is precisely this quality of being that the historical materialist can illuminate by taking the text of *Moby-Dick* as his leverage point into the past.

In his essay, “Literary History and the Study of Literature,” Benjamin lamented “the false universalism of the methods of cultural history” whereby “research was demoted to the status of an auxiliary in a cult in which ‘eternal values’ were celebrated.”⁴⁰ He called for a “materialist literary history” that would necessitate “a creative interaction with the past” and preserve “the shock of recognition” that any narration of the past should precipitate. His is a starting point from which a secret history of *Moby-Dick* may be pursued. As the historian begins his struggle with the literary works of the past, writes Benjamin,

their entire life and their effects should have the right to stand alongside the history of their composition. In other words, their fate, their reception by their contemporaries, their translations, their fame. For with this the work is transformed inwardly into a microcosm, or indeed, a microeon. What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them—our age—in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce

⁴⁰ Benjamin, “Literary History and the Study of Literature,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 460-61.

literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian.⁴¹

In Benjaminian terms, a work such as *Moby-Dick* has a history of its own, made up by its origination from the life of Melville, the different moments of its receptions, and its transformation into a “classic” of American literature, indeed, a benchmark of American cultural production. As an “organon of history,” *Moby-Dick* becomes an instrument of knowledge used by generations of Americans to carry out some process of reasoning or discovery. And it is this process, for good and for ill, that becomes the task of the historian to represent. It is a logic of history that is lived and embodied, a residue of the past that still speaks in the present.

As noted earlier, the sacralization of the symbol of America, in both its personal and cultural dimensions, is a major thread of this country’s religious history.⁴² Because *Moby-Dick* has played such a role in defining Americanness in the twentieth century, it has implicitly set limits on cultural identity and put forward possibilities. But at the same time it has provided opportunities to redraw these boundaries according to a new map. For many Americans, even those who never read it, *Moby-Dick* affected their life in that it affected the way in which this sacralization was carried out and forward. This is not to argue that *Moby-Dick* held omnipotent status as a marker of religious identity. On the contrary, *Moby-Dick*’s influence in American history is uneven. In some periods and situations it is altogether absent. But even in its absence it is omnipresent, an object of celebration and derision whose shadow encompasses the whole of America. In other words, *Moby-Dick* is a nexus between a public America and private ruminations, a point of interpenetration between a lived reality and a world elsewhere.

⁴¹ Ibid., 464.

⁴² For an elegant statement on this matter, see Conrad Cherry, ed., *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

In the language of Benjamin, it is a document of cultural barbarism.

So what might Benjamin make of a text like *Moby-Dick* in all its canonized grandeur?

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures . . . They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore disassociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.⁴³

As a document of barbarism, *Moby-Dick* is embedded in the ways in which America has presented itself to itself, a presentation that since the 1920s serves a delimiting if not a hegemonic function. Dismissed or otherwise ignored upon publication in 1851, *Moby-Dick* has since come to define an essential quality of Americanness, variously construed by each generation of interpreters.

⁴³ Benjamin, “Theses,” in *Illuminations*, 256-57.

113. Toward a Secret-ive History of *Moby-Dick*

William Spanos has argued that since at least the Cold War phase of Melville criticism, *Moby-Dick* has more often than not been used to affirm America's geo-political superiority. Under the aegis of the New Critical establishment and its dismissal of biographical and historical criticism, *Moby-Dick* became an allegorical representation of democratic resistance to European fascism. Along with the other writers from the American Renaissance—Poe, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau—Melville was celebrated as having transcended ideology, a move then celebrated as the democratic sublime. As Spanos writes, these artists were viewed as part of a “collective achievement of an autochthonic and autonomous American literature that transcended the politics of its occasion.” Ishmael became the quintessential American who is victorious over the Ahabian forces of both fascism and communism. During the 1960s and 1970s, *Moby-Dick* was re-narrativized yet again as domestic resentment grew over America's military presence in Vietnam.⁴⁴

Spanos's ideological critique of Melville scholarship is neither wrong nor entirely convincing. During the “Melville revival” of the 1920s and celebrations marking the centenary of Melville's birth, critics became enamored with the tragic dimensions of his personal biography—his youthful rise to literary fame with his first novels, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), and his equally brisk slide into obscurity after the fact. Melville, himself, came to be seen as a tragic figure whose literary genius was denied by a materialist and oppressive Puritan ethic. *Moby-Dick* was celebrated for everything that Puritanism was not—the creativity of the sovereign individual, a radically democratic spirituality that eschewed institutions, and its hostility to the vulgar materialism of the literary marketplace.

⁴⁴ William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 31.

Revivalists such as D.H. Lawrence, Van Wyck Brooks, Raymond Weaver, Lewis Mumford, and Rockwell Kent were attuned to experiential ruptures initiated by human ideas and industry. As principles of autonomy, originality, and authenticity became increasingly suspect among an intellectual elite, these figures felt a moral obligation to reimagine them for a contemporary audience. Instead of retreating from the so-called forces of secularization, they engaged the forces of illusionment directly, using *Moby-Dick* to distill lessons concerning fundamental human values and to draw new boundaries that marked differences between the temporal and eternal, the real and the imagined, the known and the unknown. The aim of their “thought [was] neither mere action nor further thought” but rather “to be more fully alive, more attuned to the possibilities of mystery, morality, and melioration.”⁴⁵ As Lawrence, Brooks, Weaver, Mumford, and Kent confronted an increasingly mediated world pervaded by the directives of advertising and mass culture each used *Moby-Dick* as both resource and spur to delineate such possibilities.⁴⁶

Amidst economic desperation and political uncertainty in the 1930s the epistemological anxieties of a previous generation did not dissipate. Whereas Brooks, Mumford, and Kent tended to emphasize the threats of flawed perception and self-deception—a crisis of the real—a new generation of Melvilleans were more sensitive to the sources of such deception—a crisis of the really made up—and focused their critical energies on the ideological conditions that hindered proper assessment from without. Inspired by Melville's “frantic

⁴⁵ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 56.

⁴⁶ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*. 1923 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1951); Van Wyck Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past,” *The Dial*, LXIV, (April 11, 1918):337-41 as well as his *America's Coming-of-Age*. 1915 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1958); Raymond Weaver, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921); Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1929); see, also, Rockwell Kent illustrations for *Moby-Dick* (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1930)

democracy,” F.O. Matthiessen, C.L.R. James, Ralph Ellison, and Orson Welles each used *Moby-Dick* to speak to a betrayal of American ideals, focusing on such issues as institutionalized hypocrisy, false consciousness, racial injustice, and the abuses of mass media, respectively.⁴⁷ Their work was an extension of their political activism and shared much of the critical urgency that animated the Popular Front, and by extension, the emerging academic field of American Studies. Given the more expressly politicized character of their work, Matthiessen, James, Ellison, and Welles each read *Moby-Dick* in terms of one of the most distinctive genres to emerge from the Popular Front: the anti-fascist allegory.⁴⁸ Whereas Matthiessen concerned himself with the totalitarian tendencies of American ideals, James, Ellison, and Welles understood these tendencies to be embedded in the very fabric of American institutions. By using *Moby-Dick* to expose and potentially counter these tendencies, they avoided the more nihilistic conclusions reached by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their incisive yet flawed essay, “The Culture Industry.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941); C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*. 1953. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001), Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. 1952 (New York: Vintage Books, 1972). Not only did Orson Welles play Father Mapple in the 1956 big screen version of *Moby-Dick* directed by John Houston, he wrote a play in the late 1940s that distilled his vision of the book as the principle of incompleteness. See, Orson Welles, *Moby-Dick Rehearsed* (New York: Samuel French, 1965).

⁴⁸ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997).

⁴⁹ “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944), written by Frankfurt School critics Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer while in exile in the United States, analyzed the techniques of “mass deception” wielded by radio broadcasts, movies, advertisers and their products.

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining

Since the 1960s, *Moby-Dick* has been a favored text for those attempting to gain leverage upon the bewildering experience of living within a hyper-capitalist economy and image-saturated environment. Alternatively labeled “postmodernism,” post-Fordism, hyperreality, or the “society of the spectacle,” this condition coincides with the saturation of consumer markets; the acceleration of fashion cycles to the degree that they have begun to spiral nostalgically inward, cannibalizing themselves in fits of increasingly sophisticated pastiche; the move toward limited production runs and faster turnovers in order to keep pace with these cycles; increased surveillance of consumer needs and desires as well as detailed and simultaneous purchasing records that get fed back to the producer allowing for continual adjustments to market demand.⁵⁰

In the realm of ideas, this condition has been envisioned as the impossibility of original creation or sustained coherence. It is a situation in which individuals have exhausted themselves in the creation of an increasingly complex feedback loop in which all identities are fictions, all signs are signs of other signs, and all truths have lost their capacity to legitimate themselves. Guy Debord describes this postmodern *Leviathan* as such. “The spectacle,” he writes, “is self-generated, and it makes up its own rules: it is a specious form of the sacred. And it makes no secret of what it is, namely, hierarchical power evolving on its own, in

white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions. The Triumph of Advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.

Human experience, in other words, had come to be quantified, measured, and commodified to such a degree that it was no longer capable of realizing its own ground. Instead of physical coercion or violence, Adorno and Horkheimer pointed to the regimentation of consciousness by popular culture and the pacifying effects of mass media as *de facto* totalitarianism. See “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993), 167.

⁵⁰ Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 189-91.

its separateness, thanks to an increasing productivity based on an ever more refined division of labor, an ever greater consummation of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market. In the course of this development all community and critical awareness have ceased to be.”⁵¹

In light of such pronouncements figures as varied as experimental writer William S. Burroughs, novelist Don DeLillo, performance artist Laurie Anderson, and novelist and critic Toni Morrison have used *Moby-Dick* to affirm the potential to move beyond the notion of social life as a closed system of significance and “disconcerting possibility that all the interlinked signifiers of a given culture *signify nothing but one another*, in an eternal circular or labyrinthine traffic of ‘meaning’ which never attains an authentic signified.”⁵² Each has used *Moby-Dick* to assuage the anxiety over how to amend, revise, reorder, and recode the values, explanations, hierarchies, and signs of reality when one is firmly ensconced within that reality.⁵³ Each has relied on Melville’s human response to the moment in which established ways of knowing and feeling the world have not only shown themselves to be inadequate but have pointed beyond themselves at the point of their dissolution.

Burroughs, for example, began with the assumption that language could serve as a system of control that “locked” consciousness into certain patterns of thought and expression. He responded by donning a three-piece suit while living among criminals and hustlers and other drug addicts. Beginning in the

⁵¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 20-21.

⁵² Christopher Herbert, *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 19.

⁵³ William S. Burroughs (and Brion Gysin), *The Exterminator* (San Francisco: The Auerhahn Press, 1960); Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985); Laurie Anderson, *Songs and Stories from Moby-Dick* (1999) and “Program Notes: Songs and Stories from Moby Dick,” *Performing Arts* (October 1999): 5-7; Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Winter 1989): 1-34 as well as her *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992)

late 1950s Burroughs began his “cut-up” experiments, a “new method of writing” that would confront the censorship of consciousness and serve to expose the authoritarian agendas of contemporary political, economic, and moral orders.⁵⁴ The cut-up method involved the process of cutting out passages from various texts—literary works, newspapers, advertisements—and reassembling them at random. Its goal was to create a text that would defy traditional classifications and logic, one that could potentially propel the reader into unexplored areas of consciousness. In the first published examples of the cut-up method Burroughs, along with his co-collaborator Brion Gysin, named the enemy in its various guises of control—“A STATEMENT OF AMERICAN POLICYCAPTAIN AHAB ORDERS.” How, then, to resist, this history of conditioning, to escape the self-perpetuating linguistic feedback loop?

Cut the Word Lines with scissors or switch blade as preferred. The Word Lines keep you in..Cut the in lines..Make out lines to Space. Take a page of your own writing of you write or a letter or a newspaper article or a page or less or more of an writer living or dead..Cut into sections. Down the middle. And cross the sides..Rearrange the sections..Write the result message..

Who wrote the original words is still there in any rearrangement of his or her or whatever words..Can recognise Rimbaud cut up as Rimbaud..A Melville cut up as Mell ville.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ William S. Burroughs, *The Letters of William S. Burroughs, 1945-1959*, ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Viking, 1993), 431.

⁵⁵ William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Exterminator* (San Francisco: The Auerhahn Press, 1960), 5-6.

Burroughs did not seek to conserve the traditional notion of authorship but recognized the lie of “Aristotle’s *is* of identity.” The “word virus,” however, had inculcated the idea of “either/or,” structured the phenomenal world as a surface/depth proposition, and denied the permeable boundaries between self and other. In doing so, it had “assumed a specially malignant and lethal form in the white race.” Burroughs, like all Americans, was infected. Instead of ignoring this state of emergency, the “white word virus” could be overcome through literary collaboration and by employing the carny barker’s strategy of moral dissimulation in the service of “not believ[ing] in language.” Only if the cut-up method was sustained over time could an alternative future “leak[] out,” one that was not already encoded within existing discursive structures.⁵⁶

As Burroughs’s example suggests, in addition to its ideological utility for an exceptionalist America, Melville’s text has also been the site of subversion and critical possibility. For it has been through the language of *Moby-Dick* that many critics and artists have called into question these larger constructions. On one hand, *Moby-Dick* is a site of contested cultural power, where the symbol of America is the desired object of capture. As mentioned earlier, religion as a marker of personal and cultural identity is bound up in these presentations. But even more interesting, *Moby-Dick*—its content, its form, the very words that comprise it—has become for many a religious document in its own right. Consequently, the very process of approaching *Moby-Dick* becomes a religious endeavor whereby the imagination encounters the limits of its purview. In short, it has become a “barbaric” occasion for many to out-imagine their imaginations. “Barbarism?” asks Benjamin. “Yes, indeed.”

⁵⁶ Daniel Oldier, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 49, 200, 28. For a similar reading of the “whiteness” of scientific and philological modes of Western thought, see Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” *New Literary History* 6 (Autumn 1974): 5-74 and Cornel West, “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,” *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 45-65.

We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa. They need a drawing table; they were constructors.⁵⁷

With *Moby-Dick* as drawing table, many Americans have addressed their “poverty of experience” by producing a significant amount of religious work. To use an Emersonian phrase in a wholly ironic way, *Moby-Dick* has become a “spiritual discipline” unto itself, a site where religion *happens*. It has the dual qualities of a rosetta stone and a child’s toy - a rhythm of its own “in which we first gain possession of ourselves.”⁵⁸

114. The Logos Surrealistically Understood

This essay began with a question: given Benjamin’s theological commitment to a divine logos, a deep-seated logic that organizes all of history, indeed, all of reality, must we, as historians, adopt his theology in order to approach the “profoundest truths” of which he speaks? The answer, I believe, is a tentative yes. While the professional historian should not espouse belief in a theological unity, he or she can replace Benjamin’s theological language with something more tangible. The assumption of unity that would drive a Benjaminian history of *Moby-Dick* is the text of *Moby-Dick* itself, an American logos

⁵⁷ Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 732.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, “Toys and Play,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 120.

that is decidedly anti-monistic, a text about radical difference that has been circulating in material form since 1851. Months before publication, as Melville labored at putting together the final proofs, he had anticipated as much. “Though I wrote the Gospels in this century,” he was resigned to the fact that he “should die in the gutter.”⁵⁹

The language of *Moby-Dick* has since 1851 devolved into the language of a variety of men and women who have translated it into their own idiom. As Benjamin, himself, notes, the imagination is first and foremost the process of deformation. In this sense, *Moby-Dick* has been written over, reworked, deformed, and altogether recreated during its history of reception. Melville, himself, believed he was creating a new Bible, a pluralistic language that would ground the salvation of America’s democratic experiment. And in some ways this is precisely what he did.

Once *Moby-Dick* is assumed to take on the character of an American *logos*, the historian becomes a *kind of* midrashic interpreter, searching out the “surprising” connections *on the surface* of its material production and reproductions. In the words of Benjamin, the historian looks for the “nonsensual similarities,” that is, those connections that are related precisely through their differences. In order to do justice to these relationships, the historian must show the world of the past to be one “in which the true surrealistic face of existence breaks through.”⁶⁰ Again, there is a conversation in the past that

⁵⁹ Melville, *Correspondence*, 192. The continuing development of mass culture, the rise of the social novel, Victorian religious tastes, as well as the advances in documentary photography through the Civil War period were all factors in the critical and popular dismissal of his “wicked book.” In an irony not lost on Melville, his work fell victim to a cultural situation he so relentlessly dissected.

⁶⁰ Benjamin, “On the Image of Proust,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 240.

overflows into the present, what Benjamin called in another context “a silent signifying dialogue.”⁶¹

Because the past is surreal, montage becomes the proper mode through which to represent the living history of *Moby-Dick* in the present. When Benjamin proposes to “carry the montage principle over into history,” he is not making the case for chaos and unrepresentability, precisely the opposite.⁶² The past becomes meaningless not because it lacks meaning but because there is an overabundance of meaning. Indeed, there is too much “out there,” too much, in fact, to declare prematurely any sense of closure when narrating the past. This is what Benjamin is getting at when he declares “to write history therefore means to quote history.” By rejecting absolute authorial control, Benjamin is redeeming history by allowing it to live in the present, allowing the past to “become citable in all its moments.”⁶³ If the past is a site of contestation in the present, Benjamin allows the past, itself, to become a contestant. In using the montage principle the historian is blasting open the false continuum of history. He or she does not so much negate other versions of the past but make room for the ongoing task of reassembly. The objective, writes Benjamin, is

to build up the large constructions out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements. Indeed, to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moment.⁶⁴

In other words, the historical materialist is attentive to the connections between, so much so, that he or she locates the meaning of the past in these relationships - between events,

⁶¹ Benjamin, “The Cultural History of Toys,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 116.

⁶² Quoted in Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 112.

⁶³ Benjamin, “Theses,” in *Illuminations*, 254.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 112.

actors, and historical phenomena, in the juxtapositions themselves.

When meaning in the past does not have an independent existence it becomes inexhaustible and, consequently, a leverage point for the historical materialist in her fight “for the oppressed past.” Intoxication via montage is the process by which this leverage can be most utilized. “Materialist historiography,” writes Benjamin,

is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure, he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.

In organizing the past spatially, narrative sequences are shown to be artificial constructions, previously disparate facts made contiguous.⁶⁵ The method is premised on an immersion into the past, a process that leads to the destruction of both the objective character of the past and the subjective character of the historian. It is an annihilating act of *translation*.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Benjamin, “Theses,” in *Illuminations*, 262-63.

⁶⁶ Benjamin, “Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, 295. In the “Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*,” a youthful Benjamin speaks of a revolution in form—“a journal that sets out to articulate the experience of a particular way of thinking.” The new form will come by way of a “terrorist campaign,” writes Benjamin, “an annihilating criticism” that does not “instruct by means of historical descriptions or to educate through comparisons,” but cognizes “by immersing itself in the object” (292-93).

According to Benjamin, the “truth” of the past must be considered a living reality. Or an absent cause in the words of Fredric Jameson, that which is “inaccessible to us except in textual form,” but nonetheless, is passed down to us “through its prior textualization[s].”⁶⁷ Jameson, as Benjamin before him, is getting at the paradoxical situation that the historian inhabits: that the focus of his entire search, the referent of his historical narrative, is ultimately incomprehensible given the tools of his trade, that is, language. Given this paradox, the historian must be willing to revise the terms of the present (including the categories of representation) at the same time he envisions the past. He must be willing to concede that the “profoundest truths” of the past—a historical reality that despite its ethereality was really made up by living actors—must be approached through intuition and non-discursive means. In other words, the historian must be able to dream precisely because “dreaming has a share in history.” As Benjamin asserts, the utopian hopes and dystopian impulses reside within the dreams of the past. “Dreams,” he writes, “have started wars, and wars, from the very earliest times, have determined the propriety and impropriety—indeed, the range— of dreams.”⁶⁸ There is a feedback loop at work here, between dream and reality and back again.

If there is any logic to be found in the past it is in the dialectical interaction between dreams and their realization in the waking moments of historical actors.⁶⁹ As acts of the religious imagination, sources of new experience and knowledge, and the

⁶⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 35.

⁶⁸ Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927-1934*, 3.

⁶⁹ Again, this is a surrealist insight in that it broaches the category of betweenness. “Surrealism,” wrote André Breton, “examine[s] with a critical eye the notions of reality and unreality, reason and irrationality, reflection and impulse, knowledge and ‘fatal’ ignorance, usefulness and uselessness, [and] is analogous at least in one respect with historical materialism in that it tends to take as its point of departure the ‘colossal abortion’ of the Hegelian system.” “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 140.

sites where the waking life is reassembled, dreams are the archive of both concrete historical situations (wars) and unconsummated possibilities. And it is precisely the latter, these avenues imagined but never pursued, that are one of the most important foci of the historian of religion. For even when such dreams were never fully realized, they possessed reality effects. In other words, in their non-realizability, they erupted in the most surprising and mysterious of ways. They are the human residue that leaves its invisible mark on the past, unseen traces that continue to haunt the day.

Such a historical methodology would, like Melville's cultural criticism, assume a permeable notion of selfhood. Benjamin, like Melville before him, had utilized the insights of Goethe to argue perception cannot be construed as a one-to-one correspondence between observer and observed, a bedrock principle of the scientific method. Contrary to the Lockean and Kantian notions that the individual is a mere cipher that accumulates and stores perceptions, Benjamin understood perception to be an intersubjective process. As Ishmael writes, observing the savage Queequeg the other end of the taut monkey-rope, "I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound." For Ishmael, the observed had tactile effects upon the observer. "I saw this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he one way or the other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (320). Implying that the epistemological positions of both Locke and Kant are but "Laplandish speculations," Ishmael refers here to his previous comment in "The Whiteness of the Whale" regarding the "wilful travelers in Lapland" who fail to account for the cultural medium in which and through which one sees (328, 195). Imagining the Pequod being weighed down by "Locke's head" on side and "Kant's" on the other, Ishmael pleads, "Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right" (327).

Unlike the self-contained and self-regulating individual that found expression in economic, scientific, and metaphysical spheres, Melville forged a perspective on identity that did not affirm either monotheism or pantheism (according to Melville, different sides of the same theological coin). In other words, Melville did not begin his investigation into the buzzing intangibility of social life with the assumption that this energy was reducible to a totalizing structure, be it God, natural law, or the strictly empirical. On the contrary, Melville was open to the notion of a polytheistic universe, to the conditions of freeplay, and to the possibility that such agency never had a center to begin with. As a transposition of theology into a new key, Melville's criticism called into question the very meaning of ultimacy. From Melville's perspective, ultimacy had less to do with the really real than the really made up—other people's version of those "things *out* of God and independant [sic] of him."

115. Columbus Day

By way of Walter Benjamin this essay suggests that the performativity of *Moby-Dick* and the performances it has generated tell a different story about the role of religion in American history. As a form of culture that has been incessantly worked through, a particular history of *Moby-Dick's* appropriation foregrounds the relationship between Melville's scene of writing, the religious sensibility brought to the text by certain readers, and the religious sense they made of their contemporary situation in and through the text. By exploring these frequencies of *Moby-Dick's* meaning in American history, it emerges as a ritual site from which to write American religious history.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ See Tamar Frankiel, "Ritual Sites in the Narrative of American Religion," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 60.

In her essay, “A Theory of Resonance,” Wai-Chee Dimock outlines an interdisciplinary approach to literary history that gives consideration to the aesthetic, treats “literature as a democratic institution,” and argues against “the primacy of the eye in the West” in favor of how a text “sounds” in and through time.⁷¹ What she is after is nothing less than the historicity of a text—its place within history as both a resource and spur, as shaped by and simultaneously shaping a particular context. Following her methodological example, treating *Moby-Dick* as a “diachronic object” allows one to chart its behavior across time, exploring the changing energy of the text.⁷² Citing Paul Ricoeur (and inspired by the last line of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,⁷³) Dimock advocates a different kind of literary history, one that explores “the traveling frequencies of literary texts: frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places.”⁷⁴ In keeping with Dimock’s notion of resonance, this essay argues that *Moby-Dick* did not endure in its original form. Its meaning has persisted not in its integrity but in its unraveling. It has deformed and reformed and generated “newly possible meaning[s].” It has been alive. To focus, then, on the (after)life of *Moby-Dick*—what one might call its

⁷¹ Wai-Chee Dimock, “A Theory of Resonance,” *PMLA* (Oct 1997), 1060.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1060

⁷³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 568. Although the intertextual relationship between Melville, Ellison, and Don DeLillo will be taken up in my final chapter, it is interesting to note the similarity between the last line of *Invisible Man*—“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” and first line of *Underworld* (New York: Scribner’s, 1997), referring to the young African American, Cotter Martin—“He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eye that’s halfway hopeful.” See also the “young negro” in DeLillo’s first published story, “The River Jordan,” *Epoch* 10:2 (1960), 105-20.

⁷⁴ In more Ricoeurian language, Dimock advocates a diachronic historicism that “acknowledges that the hermeneutical horizon of the text might extend beyond the moment of composition, that future circumstances might bring other possibilities for meaning,” and that the “passage of time . . . can give a past text a semantic life that is an effect of the present, rather than of the age when the text was produced.” “A Theory of Resonance,” 1061.

specters—is to attend to American religious history from a different angle. Such an angle would not so much challenge more denominational kinds of histories but supplement them in hopes of broadening both our understanding of religion and its role within particular historical contexts.⁷⁵

So, to trace the specters of *Moby-Dick* (and their manifestations in the material world), in Dimock’s words, its “nonintegral survival, marked not by [its] endurance as a sealed package but by its tendency to fall apart, to pick up noise, to break out in a riot of tongues,” was to follow a path earlier hinted at by Benjamin, who, in “Literary History and the Study of Literature,” insisted that the entire life and effects of a text—its receptions, translations, and fame—must stand beside the moment of its composition. He called for a deep contextualization of a work’s reception history in order to examine how it had been used in the past to reimagine social, political, and economic realities from a religious perspective.⁷⁶ This, argued Benjamin, was the religious work that literature, with the aid of its readers, performed within culture.⁷⁷

The primary task of the historian is to narrate the past, fill in the gaps of the historical record with new-found information, reinterpret the historical record where need be, and

⁷⁵ Dimock, “A Theory of Resonance,” 1062.

⁷⁶ Benjamin, “Literary History and the Study of Literature,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2*, 464, 460-61.

⁷⁷ Clifford Geertz’s ethnographic approach to both religion and art complements Benjamin’s “materialist literary history” by focusing attention on how, precisely, religious perspectives are embedded within cultural forms. In “Art as a Cultural System,” Geertz calls for an “ethnography” of art, a “natural history” of particular “vehicles of meaning” in order to investigate what roles, religious and otherwise, they have played in the shaping of a particular culture. Such an approach to literary history, to paraphrase Geertz, locates the sources of *Moby-Dick*’s spell in the tenor of its settings. What takes place, then, through this tenor, and not necessarily in the settings themselves, is the symbolic process whereby a wide range of experiences—intellectual, emotional, moral—become religious, that is, emotionally convincing and uniquely realistic. Clifford Geertz, “Art as a Cultural System,” in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 120.

during more confident moments, reweave the narrative threads that make up the stories their audience has told itself in order to be itself. Historians are the arch-revisionists as every generation interprets itself, and consequently its past, anew. But too often historians are the most persecuted victims of fashion. Because the currency of historians is revelation, they often think of themselves as divulgers of secrets, “secret” in this context referring to those historical actors and events that were previously not part of the story of record. Even within a climate of information overload this mode of un-forgetting retains a tawdry cachet—*Acid: The Secret History of LSD, The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy, Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII, The Secret History of Rock: The Most Influential Bands You’ve Never Heard Of*. Witness too the History Channel’s penchant for attaching “secret” or its equivalent to their prime time schedule—“Secrets of World War II,” “History: Lost and Found,” “Little Big Horn: The Untold Story.” As advertised, such histories usually end with the secret being revealed, the voiceless given a voice, overlooked evidence given a hearing.

While there is a certain validity in the claims of such “secret” histories, more often than not, the past of which they speak remains very much in the past, condemned to a purgatory of representation whereby its language is simply translated into the idiom of the present. I submit to you that a “secret” historiography should be the mode of the religious historian. The historian of religion finds him- or herself in a peculiar position, of narrating the imagination at work. This is a story of excess, transgression, hopelessness, and terror. It is a story that, in the end, refuses to divulge its secret. It is a story that does not conform to a familiar narrative frame. Indeed, it is a story that is not even a story at all.

As I have argued in this essay, we can only approach the past distractedly, through a dream-like state whereby we imagine the goings on of other eras, far-away places in both space and the mind. But if the past is only a dream, it is one that demands, for

its sake and ours, that we eventually wake up and tell the tale. Take, for instance, Bob Dylan, who in 1964 traveled across America in an attempt to rediscover it and himself. During his Beat-inspired journey, Dylan had a dream of his own, his “115th” to be exact.⁷⁸ In it he saw the present, past, and the future intertwined. Claims were being issued, liens upon his soul being made. By the time Dylan awoke he had reimagined the American folk tradition in terms of the mechanistic bombast of rock-n-roll. Dialectically intoxicated, he had brought “it” all back home:

I was riding on the Mayflower
 When I thought I spied some land
 I yelled for Captain Arab
 I have yuh understand
 Who came running to the deck
 Said “Boys forget the whale
 Look on over yonder
 Cut the engines
 Change the sail
 Haul on the bowline”
 We sang that melody
 Like all tough sailors do
 When they are far away at sea.

In July of 1965 Dylan went “electric” at the Newport Folk Festival to the dismay of his traditionalist fans. After his phantasmagoric experience on the Pequod, amplification seemed the only way to resist the claims made upon him by both the imperialist monomania of the Vietnam strategists in Washington and the stifling forms of the folk idiom.

Like Ishmael, Dylan had gone “a whaling” and had embraced the contradictions of his situation as an opportunity. In

⁷⁸ “Bob Dylan’s 115th Dream” appears on his album, *Bringing It All Back Home*. Columbia Records, 1965.

his dream he had attempted to wrest the meaning of America as pure potentiality from those who would fix it in space and time.

“I think I’ll call it America
I said as we hit land
I took a deep breath
I fell down, I could not stand
Captain Arab he started
Writing up some deeds
He said, “Let’s set up fort
And start buying the place with beads”
Just then this cop comes down
Crazy as a loon
He throw us all in jail
For carryin’ harpoons.

Dylan’s “115th Dream,” in all its Rimbauvian and hallucinatory grandeur, broaches the fundamental question with which the historical materialist must wrestle: how to bring the “it” of the past back home to the present? How to re-present the past without denying the claims that it made on its own future?

Well the last I heard of Arab he was stuck on the side of a whale
That was married to the deputy sheriff of the jail,
But the funniest thing was - as I was leavin’ the bay -
I saw three ships sailing and they were all headed my way.
So I asked the Captain what his name was and how come he
didn’t drive a truck?
He said his name was Columbus and I just said “Good luck...”

Dylan’s absurd ending—the moment when he wakes up—suggests that the past and the present are always engaged in a dialectal play. Absence and presence. Two things, switching. But in that switching there is a fleeting glimpse of what can never come to pass. One might call it a “white doe,” “dialectical intoxication,” that “dangerous” Derridean supplement, or even

the future. Or as Melville wrote one year before the sinking of the *Ann Alexander*, “You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in; especially, when it seems to have an aspect of newness, as America did in 1492, though it was then just as old, and perhaps older than Asia, only those sagacious philosophers, the common sailors, had never seen it before; swearing it was all water and moonshine there.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” 525.