ISHMAEL AS TELLER:
SELF-CONSCIOUS FORM IN
MOBY-DICK
Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down in any map; true places never are.

Moby-Dick
With its portrait of the artist as counterfeiter, *White Jacket* apparently represents the logical conclusion of Melville’s experiments with self-conscious form in the early novels, but the mode is neither fully justified nor completely mastered until *Moby-Dick*. Unlike its predecessors, *Moby-Dick* is almost completely self-contained and self-referring. Although anchored by the weight of its how-to-do-it material, it is always moving away from the objective or factual world and persistently calling attention to itself as fiction.

Ishmael’s narrative strategy, as he understands, is grounded in a supreme fiction. He tells the story of his life in the form of interesting adventures, although he is aware that experience is composed of gratuitous events and disconnected sensations without significance or direction. This disturbing truth, which makes an orderly life impossible, usually remains hidden behind the many forms which man imposes on his world, since he convinces himself that they are inherent in the nature of experience itself. However, because the form of *Moby-Dick* is a self-consciously created one, the novel serves to undermine the traditional barriers which man has constructed between himself and his world. Ishmael’s creative gestures are a reminder to man that whatever seems stable in experience has been put there by himself. The hierarchical social structure aboard a well-ordered ship, the constructs of science and pseudo-science, pagan and Christian religious systems, even the concepts of space and time—all of the forms which man uses to assure himself that everything which happens follows certain laws—are revealed, in *Moby-Dick*, as “passing fables.”

In his short introduction to the whaling extracts which preface the novel Ishmael destroys the reassuring but naïve assumption that the world can be explained and controlled by the collection of its facts and description of its objects. No matter how “authentic” the facts compiled by the “mere painstaking burrower and grubworm of a poor devil of a Sub-Sub” may seem, they cannot be taken for “gospel cetology” (xxxix). As Ishmael will later demonstrate in detail, natural objects are a kind of hieroglyphic writing. Although apparently clear and self-explanatory, they really produce
confusion rather than clarity. Their meaning is not to be found in the surfaces which they present to man, but seems to lie enigmatically behind them. You will not solve my mystery by staring at me, they seem to say; to read me you must possess something quite different from a knowledge of my surface.

For Ishmael, knowledge does not result from bringing man face to face with a collection of pure facts. It involves, paradoxically, a turning away from the factual world, a retreat into an imaginary reality where the only visible objects are literary ones, products of the imaginative realm they inhabit. As the Sub-Sub's "commentator," Ishmael seeks a more successful road to truth than those "long Vaticans and street stalls of the earth" through which the Sub-Sub has wandered "picking up whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane" (xxxix). Truth-telling books, for Ishmael, are not those which are guides to the actual world or are collections of facts about it. The Sub-Sub is mistaken in believing this. Rather, as verbal constructs, meaningful books are products of a mind which has turned away from the chaos and confusion of the world toward a contemplation of its own activity.

Surrounding and structuring Ishmael's encyclopedic treatment of whaling is the metaphor of the whale as book, a device which always serves to remind the reader that he is encountering an imaginative reality which is the invention of an isolated consciousness. Correspondingly, the experiences of Ahab, the young Ishmael, and the rest of the "Pequod"'s crew are not presented as a series of past events but, as the dramatic chapters complete with stage directions and soliloquies suggest, as part of a tragic drama composed by the mature narrator. This great play, moreover, is an obvious spatialization of a series of disconnected sensations and events. Contained within the creative consciousness of Ishmael are several versions of his past self which form an account of a self continuously develop-
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ing through time. Like the image Narcissus saw in the fountain, Ishmael's inner exploration is the "key to it all." But because he seeks the "ungraspable phantom of life" (I, 3) in the mirror of art rather than in nature, choosing the role of teller rather than actor, he avoids the fatal plunge of Narcissus.

i. Ishmael as Teller

Most of the first chapter of *Moby-Dick* is, significantly, in the present tense. In the first sentence of the novel the reader is introduced to the voice of the storyteller: "Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world" (1). As Paul Brodtkorb, Jr., has noted, it is significant that the narrator does not say that his name is Ishmael. The reader is invited to share an experience with someone who apparently, for reasons of his own, has chosen to conceal his identity behind an unlikely Biblical pseudonym. The narrator's motives do not remain wholly mysterious, however, if they are seen in the context of Melville's theory of fiction as expressed in his Hawthorne essay. For Melville the name "Ishmael" has important literary as well as Biblical associations. Its use by Cooper, Byron, Carlyle, and other nineteenth-century writers gives it overtones which make it especially useful to a man who believes that the "names of all fine authors are fictitious ones." By taking another name the author hopes to escape the tie which binds him to the "world of lies." In assuming a new name, especially one as heavily allusive as Ishmael, he leaves behind his "own proper character" along with the discarded patronym and takes on a whole new set of possibilities—in effect, occupies a new world. Since this world, like the name which invokes it, is

*1 Ishmael's White World* (New Haven, Conn., 1965), p. 123. Brodtkorb's analysis centers, as mine does, on Ishmael's function as storyteller.
an obviously literary one, the reader, from the beginning, sees the narrator within a clearly defined context. Nevertheless, the affable invitation to the reader in the book's first sentence, with the desire for intimacy which it implies, suggests that Ishmael has been wrongly named. The "splintered heart and maddened hand" (X, 50) of the outcast Ishmael are in evidence neither in the first sentence nor anywhere else in the first chapter. Although the chapter title, "Loomings," suggests that it will deal with serious or even tragic matters, such is not the case. The narrator possesses an ironic, almost comic, vision which seems to deny the authenticity of Ishmael-ism:

What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament? Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything the less of me, because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunks in that particular instance? Who aint a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content. (I, 4)

In this passage the narrator emphasizes an aspect of the human condition which binds men together. As is not the case with his Biblical namesake and the related figures of Cain, Job, and Jonah, Ishmael sees his alienation as one small manifestation of the "universal thump" rather than as a fate uniquely his own. Although he is "quick to perceive a horror," he, unlike Ahab, is capable of being social with it, "since it is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in" (6). Inhabiting a world which, like the "sharkish sea" (XXXVIII, 167), has unknown terrors "treach-
erously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure” (LVIII, 274), a world where all men are cannibals, Ishmael exalts the pleasures of food, drink, and good companionship and jokingly maintains that “I myself am a savage; owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him” (LVII, 270). No Byronic hero, he is an outcast in name only.

The verbal identity assumed by the narrator of Moby-Dick, then, seems a paradoxical one. He deliberately chooses a name with a rich Biblical and literary tradition and then goes on to deny the identity attributed to him by the name. For Ishmael identity is not imposed on man from the outside by a name or by anything else. Like the other fictitious forms with which man surrounds himself, a name appears at first glance to possess the dignity of an essence. Because it seems to await man in experience, to have been there before he knew it, he sometimes mistakenly assumes that his destiny and reality are defined by it.2 Ishmael's name, however, is a self-assumed one, a mask which at the most serves to define a role he had once chosen to play. Since he is at the time of writing a teller rather than an actor, his name is no more than a verbal convention: it designates a self which no longer exists. At the time of writing the narrator is called Ishmael precisely because he no longer plays the role identified by the name. No longer actor but teller, he names himself in order to reveal that all names are pseudonyms.

By calling himself Ishmael, the narrator establishes his identity as a purely verbal one, and then goes on to explore the implications of his act by defining his past in obviously literary terms.

Though I cannot tell why it was exactly that those stage managers, the Fates, put me down for this shabby part of a whaling voy-

age, when others were set down for magnificent parts in high tragedies, and short and easy parts in genteel comedies, and jolly parts in farces—though I cannot tell why this was exactly; yet, now that I recall all the circumstances, I think I can see a little into the springs and motives which being cunningly presented to me under various disguises, induced me to set about performing the part I did, besides cajoling me into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased freewill and discriminating judgment. (I, 5–6)

Ishmael’s dramatic metaphor is suggestive because it defines the origins, quality, and dimensions of the “Pequod”’s world. The conventions of Shakespearean drama, which are used throughout the novel, invoke a world where a necessity external to man (“those stage managers, the Fates”) provides his actions with direction and meaning. The tragic world which Ahab and the young Ishmael inhabit is stable and immutable. Here careful exploration leads to the revelation of the “springs and motives” which lie behind human action and the operation of nature. As actors in a traditional and ritualistic drama they necessarily follow a set of conventional patterns of behavior. The many allusions to the incidents and heroes of Biblical and secular tragedy supply the pattern for the story’s plot, while the use of devices from the epic and drama provide the elements of its form.

But it is important to note that this traditional world is a literary one, the product of Ishmael, who, like Shakespeare, is an actor turned dramatist. The sense of permanence and stability is illusory because it is the product of a set of fictitious (because wholly intellectual) bonds which the dramatist uses to tie together a series of diverse happenings. As the soliloquies, stage directions, and other devices from Elizabethan drama suggest, the Fates themselves are but one of a series of dramatic conventions from which Ishmael constructs his theatrical world. Time and again, he exercises both “free will” and “discriminating judgment.”

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round
them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! who didst not refuse to the swart convict, Bunyan, the pale, poetic pearl; Thou who didst clothe with doubly hammered leaves of finest gold, the stumped and paupered arm of old Cervantes. . . . (XXVI, 114)

Placing his discussion within the context of the traditional epic invocation of the muse of inspiration, Ishmael here insists that each sailor who “comes in person on this stage” (CVII, 462) is the product of his art. The words “ascribe,” “weave,” “touch,” and “spread” denote the creative gestures of the poet-dramatist. The metaphors of light and color, however, suggest that, for Ishmael, the invocation is a useful but empty convention. Reversing the Miltonic method, he calls the name but not the meaning. 3 He, not God, is the source of divine “ethereal light” and the creator of the rainbow. For him there is no theater standing behind and supporting his fictional stage but merely a white emptiness. The democratic God to whom he calls is “a circle, whose center . . . is every where, but his circumference . . . is noe where,” or in other words a naught or a no thing. 4 Like the “Pequod”’s “omnitooled” carpenter who is His portrait, Ishmael’s God is a “stript abstract; an un-fractioned integral” (464). For this reason his call for inspiration is an ironic shout into emptiness and his art, necessarily, a creation ex nihilo.

Even Ahab, the character described by one critic as the

3 In Book 7 of Paradise Lost, Milton invokes Urania, the traditional muse of inspiration, but identifies himself as a Christian poet by writing, “the meaning, not the name, I call” (line 5).

4 As Mansfield and Vincent point out (M-D, 665), Melville could have found this traditional metaphor, which seems to collaborate his view of God as a positive absence, in the copy of Sir Thomas Browne’s Pseudodoxia Epidemica which he borrowed from E. A. Duyckinck.
book's "Alpha and Omega,"\textsuperscript{5} owes his existence to the creative voice of Ishmael. In the chapter "The Specksynder," while discussing the nature and extent of the captain's control of the "Pequod"'s crew, Ishmael, fittingly, associates him with the traditional tragic hero:

For be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base. This it is, that for ever keeps God's true princes of the Empire from the world's hustings; and leaves the highest honors that this air can give, to those men who become famous more through their infinite inferiority to the choice hidden handful of the Divine Inert, than through their undoubted superiority over the dead level of the mass. . . . Nor, will the tragic dramatist who would depict mortal indomitableness in its fullest sweep and direct swing, ever forget a hint, incidentally so important in his art, as the one now alluded to. (XXXIII, 144–45)

The realization that the superior man must at times mask himself with the "forms and usages" (144) of the world he despises is of central importance to an understanding of Ahab. In the chapter "The Quarter-Deck"—which begins with stage directions ("Enter Ahab: Then, all")—Ishmael, in his role of tragic dramatist, describes Ahab's use of "external arts and entrenchments" to gain control of the crew. By means of the power of his hypnotizing oratory and the appeals of a gold doubloon and large measures of grog, Ahab is able to command both souls and bodies of the crew, thereby associating himself with the traditional tragic hero.

The world of the "Pequod," structured as it is by Ishmael's self-conscious use of a number of traditional literary conventions, is obviously a fictional one. The characters who walk the decks of the stage-like ship are best described by words which the narrator applies specifically to Starbuck, "whose life for the most part was a telling pantomime of action, and not a tame chapter of sounds" (XXVI, 112). Their world, in

other words, is a literary one, and they can be understood only when seen in this context.

Ishmael's artistic task is not completed with the creation of plot, character, and dialogue. Although he uses elements from the drama, he is a novelist and is responsible, too, for the construction of the "one grand stage" where the characters play their "various parts" (CVII, 463). As any reader of Moby-Dick is well aware, this "stage" is not limited to the deck of the "Pequod," but in its "comprehensiveness of sweep" includes the "whole universe, not excluding its suburbs" (CIV, 452). At the center of this grand theater is the huge body of the great sperm whale. Having been "before all time" and destined to "exist after all humane ages are over," the "antemosaic" whale (454), "in his own osseous post-diluvian reality" (455), is, for Ishmael, that mysterious "it," the "dead, blind wall" of materiality (LXXVI, 335). This silent, heavy, ageless, mysterious mass is the ultimate fact, which man must learn to read and control if he is to survive in the alien world in which he finds himself. For this reason Ishmael regards whaling as both a philosophical and a commercial enterprise. The thinker and the consumer, the philosopher and the technologist, have similar goals. The philosopher is a whaleman because he builds systems with the intention of capturing and assimilating the mysterious other in the net of consciousness. Correspondingly, the commercial whaleman journeys to every corner of the earth seeking to destroy the other and transform it into a product made in man's own image and destined to serve him. It is the whale ship, Ishmael notes, which has been "the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth" (XXIV, 108) and which has provided France, Britain, and America with a large part of their national incomes.

Ishmael, however, views the intellectual, political, and economic history of man as a series of imaginative constructs, each one designed as an attempt to decipher the "hieroglyphical whale." Indeed, the "high and mighty business of whaling"
may be regarded "as that Egyptian mother, who bore offspring
themselves pregnant from her womb" (107). Since Melville
regarded Egypt as the birthplace of the gods, as well as the
cradle of civilization, Ishmael's reference to Nut, mother of
Isis, Osiris, and Typhon, is especially suggestive. Born in
the home of all mythology, the Osiris myth is the first of a
number of fictions which attempt to explain the nature of the
material world and man's relationship to it. Not surprisingly,
Ishmael finds that the whale plays a central role not only in
the seminal Egyptian myth but in the later and derivative
Hebrew, Hindu, and Christian ones as well.

As he pushes his "researches up to the very spring-head" of
whaling, he finds large numbers of "demi-gods and heroes,
prophets of all sorts" (LXXXII, 359), all of whom are related
in ways which suggest a common origin. After identifying
Perseus, son of Jupiter, as the first whaleman, Ishmael goes on
to associate the account of the rescue of Andromeda with the
stories of Jonah, St. George and the dragon, and Hercules and
the whale. This account of the "Honor and Glory of Whaling"
fittingly ends with his naming as "whaleman" "the dread
Vishnoo, one of the three persons in the godhead of the
Hindoos" (362). From whaling, that old Egyptian mother,
came the first gods pregnant with other versions of themselves.

It is important, then, that Ishmael announces with con­siderable gusto, "I am transported with the reflection that I
myself belong, though but subordinately, to so emblazoned a
fraternity" (359–60). His membership is, of course, a double
one. As a "whaleman" he satisfies the primary initiation re­quirement, but since "the whaleman is wrapped by influences
all tending to make his fancy pregnant with many a mighty
birth" (LXI, 177), he is, in addition, a "whale author," another
child of the old Egyptian mother born pregnant from the
womb:

*See H. Bruce Franklin's discussion of the function of the Osiris-
And, as for me, if, by any possibility, there be any as yet undiscovered prime thing in me; if I shall ever deserve any real repute in that small but high hushed world which I might not be unreasonably ambitious of; if hereafter I shall do anything that, upon the whole, a man might rather have done than to have left undone; if, at my death, my executors, or more properly my creditors, find any precious MSS. in my desk, then here I prospectively ascribe all the honor and the glory to whaling. . . . (XXIV, 110)

That the product of Ishmael's whaling experience is a literary one validates his claim of kinship with the "dread Vishnoo." The Hindu god of creation dives to the bottom of the sea in quest of the sacred Vedas, "whose perusal would seem to have been indispensable to Vishnoo before beginning the creation, and which therefore must have contained something in the shape of practical hints to young architects" (LXXXII, 362); and Ishmael, proclaiming himself "the architect, not the builder," swims "through libraries" in the search of an "easy outline" (XXXII, 131) which will enable him to begin his "classification of the constituents of a chaos" (129). The emphasis on books is significant. In both cases the creative act begins not with the material to be shaped but with an exploration of previous verbal plans for creation. Man's creative powers depend on the scope of his reading, and his reading, in turn, is limited to the things he has made. This circular epistemology denies man any "real knowledge" of the whale (129), since it implies that he can never impose his own order on the material world.

Ishmael's creative act, like those which precede it, is purely verbal. He attempts to write the heretofore "unwritten life" of the whale. He knows, however, that this is "a ponderous task; no ordinary letter-sorter in the Post-office is equal to it. To grope down into the bottom of the sea after them; to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing" (131). He recognizes, in other words, the limits of his architectural aspirations. Although he may "stagger . . . under the weightiest words of
the dictionary” (CIV, 452), he is merely a “letter-sorter.” The foundations of his construct are verbal fictions, since the material ones are unspeakable because unknowable. So it is that his great “cetological system” not only remains unfinished but refers to nothing outside of itself. The design produced is identical with the method which creates it. By naming the main divisions of his cetological construct “Folio,” “Octavo,” and “Duodecimo” and calling the smaller units “Chapters,” he turns whales into books. Attempting to write the “life” of the whale, he tells instead the life of a book: “And if you descend into the bowels of the various leviathans, why there you will not find distinctions a fiftieth part as available to the systematizer as those external ones already enumerated. What then remains? nothing but to take hold of the whales bodily, in their entire liberal volume, and boldly sort them that way. And this is the Bibliographical system here adopted” (XXXII, 136; italics mine). As this passage suggests, Ishmael finds it impossible to escape from his library because he tries to organize the whaling world by the same method which he (presumably) has used to order his bookish one. His attempt to “comprehend them all, both small and large” (133) is in fact a literary tour de force. He includes among his list of aliases for the sperm whale “Macrocephalus of the Long Words” (133), glosses over the mystery of the use of the Narwhale’s horn with the remark that “it would certainly be very convenient to him for a folder in reading pamphlets” (139), and then goes on to amuse himself with the thoughts of other kinds of horns: “An Irish author avers that the Earl of Leicester, on bended knees, did likewise present to her highness another horn, pertaining to a land beast of the unicorn nature” (139). The phallic jokes, which are found throughout the “whaling materials,” are a part of Ishmael’s Rabelaisian pose, a literary convention especially popular in mid-nineteenth-century America; and, like the other conventions employed in Moby-Dick, it serves to emphasize the self-
reflexive quality of the book's world. The jokes force the reader to turn away from the factual starting point (in the above example, the horn of the Narwhale) and to consider instead internal verbal relationships which are "full of Leviathanism, but signifying nothing" (142).

Even at moments of highest inspiration, when he is apparently overwhelmed with the wonders of the whaling world, Ishmael's primary concern is with the act of writing. "Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand!" he cries, as he tries to "rise and swell" with his subject (CIV, 452). This artistic narcissism is nowhere more obvious than in his detailed descriptions of the sperm whale. As he examines the whale piece by piece—moving gradually from the outside to the inside—his discoveries force him to assume a more and more obviously fictional mode until, finally, he appears as the author of "fish stories."

His investigations, however, from the beginning, are literary rather than scientific, as he demonstrates in his discussion of the "thin, isinglass substance" which covers the body of the whale:

from the unmarred dead body of the whale, you may scrape off with your hand an infinitely thin, transparent substance, somewhat resembling the thinnest shreds of isinglass, only it is almost as flexible and soft as satin; that is, previous to being dried, when it not only contracts and thickens, but becomes rather hard and brittle. I have several such dried bits, which I use for marks in my whale-books. It is transparent, as I said before; and 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. But what I am driving at here is this. That same infinitely thin, isinglass substance, which, I admit, invests the entire body of the whale, is not so much to be regarded as the skin of the creature, as the skin of the skin, so to speak; for it were simply ridiculous to say, that the proper skin of the tremendous whale is thinner and more tender than the skin of a new-born child. But no more of this. (LXVIII, 304)
Faced with the mystery and wonder of a small piece of that which is not man, Ishmael retreats to the security of his library. Because books are at once material objects and products of consciousness, they provide a security not available in the “whaling world.” To write or to read a whaling book is to imply that the whale itself has been assimilated by consciousness and thereby rendered harmless. Surrounded by objects which are extensions of the self and used as an aid for the self’s contemplation of its own objects, the small piece of material seems to have lost both its mystery and its uniqueness.

The intellectual hunger which compels Ishmael to try to absorb the whale into his consciousness parallels the physical one which causes Stubb to “feed upon the creature that feeds his lamp, and . . . eat him by his own light” (LXV, 297). Man carves his roast beef with a bonehandled knife and picks his teeth with the feather of the goose he has just devoured for the same reason that Ishmael “reads about whales through their own spectacles.” He is motivated by the primitive, cannibalistic belief that whatever he consumes he can control.

“Who is not a cannibal?” (299), asks Ishmael as he contemplates Stubb’s meal, thereby implying that he is fully aware of the implications of his own acts. He knows that his whaling books give him neither understanding nor control of the great monster. Although he is able to regard the whale as a vast book, since its skin is “all over obliquely crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array” which are “hieroglyphical,” he is unable to read its meaning. Like “those mysterious cyphers on the walls of the pyramids” or “the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi” (LXVIII, 305), the markings on the whale’s skin are undecipherable. While phonetic writing suggests that man, in some way, has absorbed and transformed the thing he names, hieroglyphic writing seems merely an attempt at representation and hence is as mysterious as the thing it describes. Like Queequeg, the whale is a “riddle to unfold; a
wondrous work in one volume” which is destined to remain “unsolved to the last” (CX, 477).

That technology and science, like the phonetic alphabet, are useless to man when he faces the mystery of the great whale is demonstrated by Ishmael when he turns from a discussion of its skin to a consideration of its head. Assuming the roles of physiognomist and phrenologist, he attempts to read the meaning of the “Battering-Ram.” As with the markings on the skin, however, the cranial and facial characteristics of the whale prove undecipherable. All sciences and pseudo-sciences are pure fictions:

Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man’s and every being’s face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. If then, Sir William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant’s face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow? (LXXIX, 345)

Science, like religion, is a fictive creation of man, born of his attempts to penetrate beneath the surfaces of an enigmatic world—symbolized here by Egypt, birthplace of the gods and of hieroglyphic writing as well. Like a hieroglyph, the whale’s “broad firmament of a forehead” is “pleated with riddles,” and like the “deified . . . crocodile of the Nile,” its “pyramidal silence” indicates that it is tongueless (345). At first glance it seems a reflection of man’s consciousness: like a book it presents him with a surface which asks to be read. But this clarity of surface confuses rather than clarifies, “for you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none, proper” (345). Ishmael’s view of the whale as a hieroglyph, then, is a profound comment on both the operation of consciousness and the nature of the material world. It points to man’s attempt to make everything an object of consciousness, and, at the
same time, suggests that he must necessarily fail because ma-terial objects are “dead, blind wall[s]” of silence (LXXXVI, 335). They resist the transforming powers of the phonet-alphabet and may be represented only by enigmatic figures.

Although he associates himself with the scientific seekers of truth, Ishmael differs from them in at least one important way. He knows that his system is the result of his turning away from the world rather than of a comprehensive classification of its facts. “Dissect him how I may, then, . . . I know him not, and never will” he writes (376), when confronted by the faceless, tongueless enigma which is the largest, most dangerous thing alive and yet at the same time is a “no thing.” “But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face, I say again he has no face” (377).

Moreover, the deeper he probes into the body of the whale, “using my boat-hatchet and jack-knife, and breaking the seal and reading all the contents” (CII, 445), the more he comes to associate it with absence and silence. Hence he turns away from the enigmatic material world and immerses himself in his own verbal one:

That for six thousand years—and no one knows how many millions of ages before—the great whales should have been spouting all over the sea, and sprinkling and mistifying the gardens of the deep, as with so many sprinkling or mistifying pots; and that for some centuries back, thousands of hunters should have been close by the fountain of the whale, watching those sprinklings and spoutings—that all this should be, and yet, that down to this blessed minute (fifteen and a quarter minutes past one o'clock P.M. of this sixteenth day of December, A.D. 1851), it should still remain a problem, whether these spoutings are, after all, really water, or nothing but vapor—this is surely a noteworthy thing. (LXXXV, 367)

The most striking aspect of this passage is the unusual reference to the exact time of writing, a technique which serves to overshadow the practical problem of determining the nature of the composition of the whale's spoutings with the
more immediate concern of literary composition. This is, however, as it should be because the "answer" to the age-old mystery is discovered and justified through literary activity. Since "among whalemen, the spout is deemed poisonous" and is said to be blinding "if the jet is fairly spouted into your eyes," Ishmael recognizes that the "wisest thing the investigator can do . . . is to let this deadly spout alone" (371). For this reason he turns away from the dangerous and mysterious object to a fictional hypothesis about it:

My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist. . . . He [the whale] is both ponderous and profound. And I am convinced that from the heads of all ponderous profound beings . . . there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts. While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon; this seems an additional argument for the above supposition.

And how nobly it raises our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor. . . . (371-72)

Ishmael has turned from the blinding mists of the sperm whale to the comforting vapors of the mind, from the material object to a literary conceit. Within this purely fanciful realm the mystery may be solved poetically, for here whales are mirror images of man—not merely objects of consciousness, but conscious beings themselves, who present no dangers to the eyes of the man who would read them.

In an even more whimsical mood, Ishmael justifies his knowledge of the skeletal dimensions of the whale by referring to uniquely preserved statistics which he obtained from personal observation of a skeleton on Tranque, one of the Arsacides:
The skeleton dimensions I shall now proceed to set down are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed; as in my wild wanderings at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics. But as I was crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing . . . I did not trouble myself with the odd inches; nor, indeed, should inches at all enter into a congenial admeasurement of the whale. (CII, 448-49)

Here at last Ishmael takes his literary account of the whale to the extreme of a “fish story,” as he turns himself into a “wondrous book in one volume.” As always, however, his method is a Joycean “joco-serious” one. His identity, like his world, is a purely verbal one; he exists only as the teller of a story—a story which has as its aim the portrayal of the world as it exists beneath man’s fictive creations. But how is this to be done when, apparently, what remains after man’s veil of forms is lifted is indescribable facelessness and silence? The answer lies in Ishmael’s treatment of the great white whale. Unlike whales in general, Moby-Dick has a physical characteristic which may be used as a starting point for the imaginative investigator. Moby-Dick is white.

Whiteness is, first of all, a paradoxical sensible experience. Although nominally a color, it is perceived as “the visible absence of color” (XLII, 193), in the same way that perfect silence is sometimes experienced as the audible absence of sound. In the presence of pure whiteness man does not experience colorlessness abstractly or imaginatively as that which would remain if all colors suddenly disappeared. A confrontation with whiteness is a positive and direct encounter with blankness.

Unlike Conrad’s darkness, which it resembles in part, Melville’s whiteness initially is experienced as a quality belonging to an object. But, as Ishmael’s discussion of this “expressive hue of the shroud” suggests (189), the white object is immediately swallowed up by its color. Whiteness does not serve, as other colors do, to emphasize the thing-ness of objects by calling attention to their forms and textures. Because it is a
“visible absence of color,” it tends to rob things of their individuality by absorbing their forms into its colorlessness. The white objects in Ishmael’s encyclopedic list have their individual forms swallowed up by the color which they all share. It is no accident that the great whale himself is lost in Ishmael’s “white-lead chapter about whiteness” (192). Although the first and largest, he is but one of a number of terrifying white objects.

The white object differs from all others in that its meaning does not seem to lie within or behind it. It does not present man with a clearly defined profile which invites him to probe beneath its surface but “by its indefiniteness . . . shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe” (193). It is a “dumb blankness, full of meaning” precisely because it does not appear to man as an enigmatic hieroglyph. Unlike the gold doubloon and all other colored objects, the white object neither requires nor invites interpretation but, through its “visible absence,” seems to threaten the now useless interpreter with destruction. It “stabs” him “from behind with the thought of annihilation” (193).

Whiteness, then, is the “intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind” (193) because it is a positive threat to consciousness. Confronted with whiteness, the mind is deprived of its objects and becomes, necessarily, “a blankness in itself” (XLIV, 200). Whiteness is especially terrifying, Ishmael notes, “when exhibited under any form at all approaching to muteness or universality” (XLII, 191). Passivity, rest, and silence are all linked to whiteness, and all are potential threats to the verbal wanderer Ishmael or, for that matter, to every man.

But white objects are more than appalling empty spots in a colored world. They are also an indication, which is even more frightening, that color itself is an illusion:

And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues—every stately or lovely emblazon-
MELVILLE'S THEMATICS OF FORM

ing—the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge—pondering all this, the pallsed universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. (193–94)

The traditional view of color as the imperfection of white radiance is given here a uniquely Melvilleian twist. The colors of nature (the Many) usually associated with the imperfection and mortality characteristic of earthly existence would seem the logical symbol for the “charnel-house” of this world. For Ishmael, however, disease and death are associated with white light (the One), while color—traditionally understood as the imperfect individualization of the One—is seen as the mask with which white light hides its destructive nature. Colored objects, then, like the attractive but diseased harlot, both allure and destroy. They invite familiarity and plead to be understood, but they threaten with syphilitic blindness and death the man who attempts to know them intimately. To the “wilful travellers” who attempt to read the mysteries with which the world presents them, all objects are in essence white.

Having destroyed his quadrant, which “was furnished with colored glasses” (CXVIII, 493), Ahab, facing the spouting whale for the last time, cries: “I grow blind; hands! stretch out before me that I may yet grope my way” (CXXXV, 563). As Ishmael makes clear in his description of his captain’s

1 For example, see Earl R. Wasserman’s discussion of Shelley’s use of light and color in Adonais in The Subtler Language (Baltimore, 1959), pp. 336–42.
frenzied attempts to escape his “vivid dreams of the night” (XLIV, 199), his blindness, like that of the travelers in Lapland, is the result of his “sheer inveteracy of will”:

For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab’s case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. Therefore, the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. (199–200)

This difficult and widely discussed passage is of crucial importance in understanding Ahab’s relationship to Ishmael’s white whale. The captain’s determination to “chase and point lance at such an apparition” (XLI, 178) has totally disrupted the ordinary activities of his consciousness. “Thoughts and fancies”—products of the “characterizing mind” which usually furnishes objects for the soul (a “ray of living light”) to color—are willfully replaced by a material object which is a “mystic sign” of the “heartless voids and immensities of the universe.” When the mind is forced to surrender its creative powers, the soul is deprived of the fictional objects which protect it from its own blankness. Hence, while the will sleeps, both soul and mind (“the common vitality”) flee in horror from the material thing which Ahab has made the object of consciousness.
Whereas Ishmael retreats from the white world to a private one composed of his own “thoughts and fancies,” Ahab tries to make that white world his own. He acts out the role of the tragic hero, who, finding himself in a world where he does not belong, tries to reach and change its hidden essence. Moby-Dick is an appropriate object for his hate since it is the one thing in his experience which does not mirror “back his own mysterious self” (XCIX, 428) but threatens him with dismemberment and death. While Ishmael’s vision begins with the whale and expands, Ahab’s vision gradually becomes more concentrated until he can see only Moby-Dick. By piling “upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down,” he has taken that “intangible malignity . . . to whose dominion even the modern Christians ascribe one-half of the worlds,” and has reduced it to a still large but now “practically assailable” cancer-like center (XLI, 181). Moby-Dick, therefore, becomes for Ahab the “unreasoning” wall of materiality (XXXVI, 161), the “inscrutable thing” (162) which he must master and destroy. But, as Ishmael knows, Moby-Dick is but one white object in a white universe; and the color white is evidence enough for the imaginative man that material objects can never be “visible image[s] of that deep, blue, bottomless soul” (XXXV, 157) because they are “visible absence[s]” which must be carefully avoided. As the “Samuel Enderby”’s Captain Boomer wisely observes, “Moby Dick doesn’t bite so much as he swallows” (C, 438).

ii. Ishmael as Actor

What then of the young Ishmael? Even the man without Ahab’s will to power, his determination to know and control material objects, is not safe. Pip, who “loved life, and all life’s peaceable securities” (XCIII, 410), is by chance momentarily abandoned in the middle of a “heartless immensity” (412) and has the conscious self destroyed. From the time of his rescue until his death he refers to himself in the third person, as he
seeks to find "a little negro lad, five feet high, hang-dog look, and cowardly" (CXXIX, 526). That the young Ishmael's situation is similar to Pip's is suggested by the narrator's reference to the "like abandonment [which] befell myself" (XCIII, 413). Like Pip, who "saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad" (413), the abandoned Ishmael is also concerned with the speaking of truth. As the epigraph to the Epilogue emphasizes, he escapes "alone to tell" ("Epilogue," 567).

There is, however, a significant and obvious difference between Pip's selfless (and hence insane) speaking and the self-conscious telling of Ishmael. As Ishmael repeatedly reminds us, to gaze into the mysterious sea or into the enigmatic surfaces of objects is to be drawn by the "ungraspable phantom of life" toward the empty white voids of the universe. To survive one must turn away from the real world toward the "thoughts and fancies" of an imaginative one. At first glance, however, this strategy seems doomed to failure. Ishmael's tendency to retreat from the realm of objects to a verbal realm of his own creation would seem to imprison him in a world as solipsistic as Ahab's. Nevertheless, as the experiences of the young Ishmael aboard the "Pequod" demonstrate, the narrator's language and the truth which lurks behind it put him in touch with other men. His self-conscious lies, like the one told by Marlow at the end of "Heart of Darkness," although leaving a "taint of death, a flavor of mortality," keep the heavens from falling and provide the first link in the chain of conversation which binds men together.

As many of Moby-Dick's critics have noted, the experiences of the young Ishmael which are described in the chapters "A Squeeze of the Hand" and "The Try-Works" point to his rejection of Ahab's intellectual quest and his acceptance of the "wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (XCIV, 415). This shifting of one's "conceit

*Youth and Two Other Stories (New York, 1915), p. 93.
of attainable felicity” (415), however, is not so easy as it first appears, as the other appearances of the young Ishmael suggest. His discovery of the destiny which he shares in common with other men is one result of his movement from actor to teller. Only when he comes to regard his life as a story he is telling does he discover and communicate with other men. In this sense, language is the very basis of his existence.

It is significant that when the young Ishmael is for the first time distinguished from the crew which had taken the “oaths of violence and revenge” (XLI, 175), he, with the aid of Queequeg, is self-consciously weaving a sword-mat:

I say so strange a dreaminess did there then reign all over the ship and all over the sea . . . that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg’s impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this savage’s sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together. (XLVII, 212–13)

Here Ishmael first considers the possibility of creating the pattern of his own life rather than giving himself up to the workings of the universal loom. With the “ball of free will” in his hands, he refuses to allow the Fates to knit him into the design of their fabric. Instead he weaves “away at the Fates,” thereby achieving “the last featuring blow at events” (213). This initial experience, however, is only momentary, for he
drops the ball of free will and is caught up again in the flow of experience as soon as the first whale is sighted.

So in the chapter "The Monkey-rope" the reader finds the young Ishmael in actuality involved in the workings of the universal loom. Here he watches Queequeg, who, surrounded by the dangers of the "whaling world," "only prayed to his Yojo, and gave up his life into the hands of his gods" (LXXII, 320). And Ishmael, bound by the monkey-rope to both Queequeg and his threatening world, seems in a "sad pickle and peril" (320). The monkey-rope and the even more dangerous whale line are indications of the "silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life" (LX, 281). "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks" (281). These two lines, along with all the other ropes and threads in Moby-Dick, form the "mingled, mingling threads of life" (CXIV, 486) from which the destinies of the characters are woven; they, like Queequeg, place themselves in the hands of the weaving Fates. For this reason Fedallah's assurance to Ahab that "hemp only can kill thee" (CXVII, 492) is not so much a prophecy as it is a statement of the necessary result of man's involvement in the world.

It is just this involvement which Ishmael hopes to avoid by weaving his own destiny. He retains the loom metaphor to describe his creative gestures ("weave round them tragic graces") and invokes it, appropriately, in the title of the novel's first chapter, "Loomings." The necessity of creating one's own loom is dramatized both by the fate of Pip, "who saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom," and by Ishmael's encounter with the universal loom as he examines the whale's skeleton in the Arsacides: *See Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York, 1965), pp. 272-78, for a differing interpretation of the weaving metaphor.
the trees stood high and haughty, feeling their living sap; the industrious earth beneath was as a weaver’s loom, with a gorgeous carpet on it, whereof the ground-vine tendrils formed the warp and woof, and the living flowers the figures. . . . Through the lacings of the leaves, the great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. . . . The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. For even so it is in all material factories. The spoken words that are inaudible among the flying spindles; these same words are plainly heard without the walls, bursting from the opened casements. . . .

Now, amid the green, life-restless loom of that Arsacidean wood, the great, white, worshipped skeleton lay lounging—a gigantic idler! Yet, as the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with vines . . . but himself a skeleton. (CII, 446–47)

Here, as in the chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael points to the dangers inherent in an exploration of the natural world. To question the weaver-god is to expose oneself to the threat of deafness, for just as the colors of nature are illusory cosmetics which hide a blinding blankness, so too its sounds are a disguise for an awful deafening silence. Both the movement of the loom and the colors of its product belie the nature of the “mighty idler” who is “himself a skeleton.” Only by escaping from the loom of nature is man able safely to recognize the truth inherent in its “flying spindles.” This Ishmael manages by weaving a world of words which allows him to approach the sounds and sights of the world indirectly. Recognizing that “material factories” are no places for men, he builds a house of fiction and through its magic casements hears the “sane madness of vital truth.”

Since Ishmael’s vision is the product of “many prolonged, repeated experiences” (XCIV, 415), it develops gradually. As a young man, who momentarily dropped the “ball of free will” and resigned his life “into the hands of him who steered
the boat" (XLIX, 226), he reacts to the shock of his "first lowering" by weaving an account of his death rather than of his life. At this point, regarding the "whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object" with a "free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" (226), he makes his will and prepares to take a "cool, collected dive at death and destruction" (227).

It may seem strange that of all men sailors should be tinkering at their last wills and testaments, but there are no people in the world more fond of that diversion. This was the fourth time in my nautical life that I had done the same thing. After the ceremony was concluded upon the present occasion, I felt all the easier; a stone was rolled away from my heart. Besides, all the days I should now live would be as good as the days that Lazarus lived after his resurrection; a supplementary clean gain of so many months or weeks as the case might be. I survived myself; my death and burial were locked up in my chest. I looked round me tranquilly and contentedly, like a quiet ghost with a clean conscience sitting inside the bars of a snug family vault. (227)

By anticipating his own death and imprisoning that event in words, Ishmael has apparently turned the threatening future into a harmless phantom and has successfully removed himself from the dangerous reality of the present. Fictive suicide, however, is only a temporary answer. The fictive "will" is finally destined to become the real one. It, like the resurrection of Lazarus, only postpones the inevitable. Several chapters later, in "The Try-Works," young Ishmael is suddenly overwhelmed by "a stark, bewildered feeling, as of death" (XCVI, 421), as his "snug family vault" is filled with the stink of materiality, an odor "such as may lurk in the vicinity of funereal pyres" (420).

As with his initial use of the loom metaphor, however, Ishmael's early and partial resurrection is a step in the right direction. He will resurrect himself again, this time by providing himself with a fictive life rather than a death. The figure who survives "to tell" at the end of the novel is not
the ghost of an old self but a new one who will inhabit a world of words rather than objects. Because he is a teller, he lives not in experience but in an illusory realm where sharks wear “padlocks on their mouths” and sea hawks sail with “sheathed beaks” (“Epilogue,” 567).

The portrait of the artist as a young man which is partially painted in the narrator’s descriptions of young Ishmael is completed by Ishmael’s account of himself as he was after the voyage but before the period of creative authorship. This transitional Ishmael appears in the chapter “The Town-Ho’s Story,” as a result of the narrator’s unusual way of describing the circumstances surrounding the meeting of the “Pequod” and the “Town-Ho.” The chapter’s subtitle, “(As told at the Golden Inn),” distinguishes its narrative mode from that of the rest of the novel and indicates that the account presented is but one of several versions of the same story. Originally told in confidence to Tashtego by three sailors from the “Town-Ho,” it is revealed to the crew of the “Pequod” when the harpooner talks in his sleep. It is subsequently narrated by Ishmael at the Golden Inn, and this version is repeated by him at the time of writing: “For my humor’s sake, I shall preserve the style in which I once narrated it at Lima, to a lounging circle of my Spanish friends, one saint’s eve, smoking upon the thick-gilt tiled piazza of the Golden Inn. Of those fine cavaliers, the young Dons, Pedro and Sebastian, were on the closer terms with me; and hence the interluding questions they occasionally put, and which are duly answered at the time” (LIV, 241). Clearly, this is another example of Ishmael’s use of self-conscious form. The emphasis which he places on his own method of narration as well as his description of other versions of the same events calls attention to the story as story. Moreover, as a story within a story, it is but part of a longer and more complex fiction. In answer to a question by Don Sebastian concerning the identity and history of Moby-Dick, Ishmael replies, “A very white, and famous, and most deadly immortal monster, Don;—but that would be too long
a story" (257). The story exists in the interior of the novel, and the meaning of the shorter fiction depends on a set of literary correspondences between it and the longer one. In other words, its form becomes its content, since the way it is told is its meaning.

The young Ishmael escapes “alone to tell,” and, as “The Town-Ho’s Story” demonstrates, he fulfills his destined role, although he does not remain alone. Surrounded by friends, he drinks, smokes, and talks—denying the implications of his name and hence creating a new self as well as a new story. As he organizes his fiction by “interweaving in its proper place this darker thread [the secret part of the tale] with the story as publicly narrated on the ship” (241), he both recalls his weaving experience aboard the “Pequod” and anticipates his novelistic use of the loom metaphor.

Anticipating the novel, too, is the fact that the story is woven against a white background. Told in Lima, the city which “has taken the white veil” and is characterized by the “whiteness of her woe” (XLII, 191), it is an early example of Ishmael's remarkable ability to avoid the dangers of the whiteness which surrounds him. When he refers to the “Venetianly corrupt” life of the area of the Great Lakes (LIV, 248), one of his auditors comments on the delicacy of his metaphor: “‘A moment! Pardon!’ cried another of the company. ‘In the name of all us Limeese, I but desire to express to you, sir sailor, that we have by no means overlooked your delicacy in not substituting present Lima for distant Venice in your corrupt comparison. Oh! do not bow and look surprised; you know the proverb all along this coast—‘Corrupt as Lima’” (249).

It is important that Ishmael acknowledges neither this comment nor the later observation of Don Pedro (“No need to travel! The world's one Lima” [250]) but in each case returns immediately to his story. The motives which cause him to avoid such an obvious metaphor, however, are probably different from those which precipitate the “strange delicacy” shown by the crew of the “Pequod” when they keep the
"Town-Ho"'s secret "among themselves so that it never transpired abaft the Pequod's main-mast" (241). In "The Town-Ho's Story," Moby-Dick seems "to step in to take out of his [Steelkilt's] hands into its [Heaven's] own the damning thing he would have done" (257), and his act thus belies Ahab's interpretation of him as either the agent or principle of injustice, thereby introducing ambiguities which the "Pequod"'s captain would have been incapable of tolerating.

Ishmael's self-preserving delicacy deprives no one of the knowledge of his story, although it does influence his choice of metaphors. Protected for the moment from the white world which surrounds him, by the atmosphere of the Golden Inn, he is careful to approach the truth of his situation indirectly by choosing "distant Venice" for his "corrupt comparison." Indeed, he shows a remarkable ability to ignore sinister Lima altogether. He safely preaches heresy in a militantly Catholic city and blasphemously fulfills the empty boast made by every barroom storyteller, when, in the company of a priest, he places his hand on the Holy Book and swears to the truth of his narrative. Although he is telling a "wicked story," he seems "spotless as a lamb" (L, 142).

"The Town-Ho's Story," then, is a rehearsal of the later and longer book. By reproducing the story "as told at the Golden Inn," Ishmael once again calls attention to his fiction as fiction—this time directing the reader's attention to the osmotic relationship between two aesthetic bodies. Here, as in the novel as a whole, he affirms the central thesis of "Hawthorne and His Mosses": "the names of all fine authors are fictitious ones."

Ishmael's achievement in _Moby-Dick_ is the result of a victory of art over life. Finding the natural world a place which at first enchants, then confuses and terrifies, and recognizing that human constructs fail to explain or control it, he removes himself from both nature and society by retreating to a fanciful world of his own creation. Here his self-conscious ges-
tured distinguish his creative venture from the unconscious acts of god-making and society-making which characterize the "world of lies." His relationship to other people is that of a storyteller to his audience, in touch with them through his words but removed from their meaningless masquerade. From this position he is able to face and describe safely the truth which the world’s empty forms conceal.