UNLIKELY as it sounds, a minister may have sparked Melville’s desire to write a book as wild and ambitious as Moby-Dick. In 1839, Unitarian Orville Dewey delivered the lecture “On Reading” to the Mechanics’ Library Association in New York City. Although Melville probably did not hear this lecture—he was studying engineering in Lansingburgh during the winter and spring of 1839 and sailing on the St. Lawrence from June on—he may well have read it later in pamphlet form, especially as he came to know Dewey personally. One of the leading Unitarian ministers in nineteenth-century America, Dewey served as pastor of the Church of the Messiah in New York City until 1848, when he retired to Sheffield, about thirty miles south of Pittsfield. He was also an old friend of Melville’s father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw, and the minister who in 1863 baptized the three youngest Melville children.

Some readers today may be incredulous that Melville would take seriously anything Dewey had to say, given how biographer Hershel Parker casts him as Melville’s foil, a “seemingly soulless” prig and “cold-hearted, mealy-mouthed pontificator” who inspired the author with smoldering annoyance. Melville, Parker claims, seethed with hidden indignation over Dewey’s equivocal response to the Fugitive Slave Law and satirized him with Falsgrave and Plotinus Plinlimmon in Pierre. Although there is no denying that Dewey shared the racist attitudes that were nearly reflexive for privileged whites, or that he was reluctant to oppose slavery, his published sermons and lectures...
suggest a man who was also, as Ann Douglas describes him, “artistic, gentle, and supremely literary.” Melville most likely did not agree with his politics, but he may well have read with interest a man whose writing conveys a spirit of open-minded inquiry and disinclination to open radicalism not unlike his own.

Assuming that Melville did not dismiss Dewey’s writing out of hand, especially before the Fugitive Slave Law controversy of 1850, we can consider the possibility that “On Reading” planted in Melville a “germinous seed” at least as fruitful as any dropped by Hawthorne. In this lecture Dewey acknowledged, as few ministers were willing to in 1850, that novels could refine the sentiments and even “minister to the truest and deepest wisdom of life.” Yet he also, like many conduct book authors, echoed conventional wisdom by asserting that the genre was unable to educate readers or cultivate their “vigor of mind.” To tell a story for its own sake was mere “child’s entertainment.” Not even the novels of Scott were above reproach, as they distorted historical facts and contained too little philosophical analysis. His solution was unusual, even eccentric—not to dismiss novels, but to imagine and describe a new breed of them. First, this new type of novel should include the *dramatis personae* and a précis of the plot upfront. By preempting readers’ desire to read for story alone, authors could unspool their fictions with edifying digressions, and the novel “might become a teacher of higher wisdom.” A novel in this vein would be a true cultural achievement: “it could pause, and give us reflection, philosophy, moral analysis, maxims of wisdom; passages, like those of Shakespeare, worthy of being committed to memory.”

With uncanny accuracy, *Moby-Dick* fulfills Dewey’s vision of a new, more intellectual novel in which plot takes a back seat to philosophy. The novel heavily foreshadows the *Pequod*’s fate, practically giving away the plot upfront through Ishmael’s premonitions, Mapple’s sermon, Elijah’s warnings, and, above all, the stories of aggressive sperm whales, including the one that stove the whale-ship *Essex*. Ishmael even says that the purpose of sharing the *Essex*’s story is to show that “the most marvelous event in this book” is “corroborated by plain facts of the present day.” One could hardly be clearer about where the story is going. Moreover, precisely as Dewey desired, *Moby-Dick* subordinates suspense-driven narrative to reflection, philosophy, moral analysis, maxims, and Shakespearean speeches. Whether one looks at the characters’ soliloquies or the “Cetology” chapters, “Sunset” or “The Blanket,” “The Honor and Glory of Whaling” or “The Doubloon,” *Moby-Dick* is far less concerned with plot than with the quest for meaning.

The correspondence between Dewey’s vision of the worthwhile novel of the future and the distinctive features of *Moby-Dick* may be coincidence. But it seems plausible that Melville came across Dewey’s pamphlet some-
time in the 1840s, probably after marrying Elizabeth Shaw in 1847, and that the provocative ideas of this prominent family friend made an impression as he transitioned from writing fictionalized autobiographies to novels. We have tended to assume that his desire to write cerebral, philosophical fiction sprang from some combination of native genius and intense, copious reading in the late 1840s, but Dewey’s lecture suggests that he may also have wanted to write strange books—that he felt “most moved to write”—because he had been inspired by a minister’s thought-provoking plea for a better, smarter novel. ⑧

Whether or not Melville was picking up Dewey’s gauntlet, he approached the challenge of becoming “a teacher of higher wisdom” more as a problem to explore than as a destiny to fulfill. One of the main ways he confronted this problem in Moby-Dick was to experiment with sermonic voice, an aspect of the work largely overlooked despite decades of scholarship on the novel’s relationship to religion. Years ago, Nathalia Wright pointed out that the greatest concentration of Biblical allusions and quotations in Melville’s work appears in Moby-Dick (if we except Clarel, whose Holy Land setting swells the number) and that this clustering corresponds with “the most ambitious expressions of Melville’s genius.” ⑨ One can say the same for Melville’s use of the sermon—that he engaged most intensely and creatively with preaching in Moby-Dick because it was there that his artistic and cultural ambitions loomed largest.

This chapter first discusses how Melville in his early work sought to rival preaching with his own democratic sermonic voice, then turns to Moby-Dick to examine how he used Ishmael to develop this voice, transforming it through Romantic irony and a morality more often derived from classical philosophy than from Christianity. This playful-serious voice is balanced against the earnest, iconic Mapple, and I trace how the Jonah sermon declares the novel’s equivalency to great preaching by staging parallels between preaching and authorship in a seeming homage to and competition with The Scarlet Letter. Through such sermonic moments, Melville showcased his writerly talent and argued that an intelligent, wide-ranging novel—one that excelled in “reflection, philosophy, moral analysis, [and] maxims of wisdom”—could offer better insights on the world than actual preaching.

Discovering a democratic sermonic voice

Melville grew up listening to the sermons of Reformed Dutch minister Jacob Brodhead (1782–1855), a native New Yorker who relocated from Philadelphia to Manhattan in his prime to become pastor of the Broome Street
Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, where he served from 1826 to 1837. Melville probably heard Brodhead’s preaching from 1826 to 1830, or ages 7 to 11, before Allan Melvill’s financial ruin forced the family to leave the city for Albany. Much has been made of this Calvinist element in Melville’s upbringing, virtually nothing of Brodhead’s skill as a preacher and the effect this experience may have had on Melville’s understanding of religious authority.

A tall man of dignified bearing, Brodhead was a popular preacher whose appointment immediately increased attendance and whose name soon became synonymous with the Broome Street church. His preaching drew crowds. For awhile, according to one contemporary, “the church was so thronged that it was impossible to get a pew or sitting without waiting for months.”10 Allan Melvill, who had sought out the preaching of Unitarian wunderkind Joseph Buckminster (1798–1825) before his marriage to Maria Gansevoort, may have attended Brodhead’s church for the respectability the affiliation gave him in the eyes of his haberdashery customers, but the widely admired sermons were no doubt also a draw.11 During Brodhead’s tenure, the church flourished with the city growing up alongside it. In the late twenties, when the Melvills attended, the congregation planted trees, put up a fence, paved the walkways with brick, replaced the front wooden steps with a stone portico, built a Sunday School gallery, set up an organ in the gallery, got insured for $10,000, and established a missionary society and an auxiliary to the American Tract Society.12 The church also forged a personal connection Melville would draw on decades later. His older brother Gansevoort became friends with John Romeyn Brodhead, Jacob Brodhead’s son, and when Melville needed help in 1847 securing the English copyright for *Omoo*, he prevailed upon John Brodhead, then the American secretary of legation in London, appealing to the “long-standing acquaintance between our families.”13

When Melville sat under Brodhead’s preaching during his formative years, listening, one imagines, from the newly constructed gallery for Sunday School students, he heard not only and perhaps not even primarily a student of Calvin, but a pulpit prince who exemplified the cultural dominance of Christianity and the clergy. Selected for commemoration in Sprague’s *Annals*, contemporaries praised Brodhead’s sermons as “well written, natural, and luminous in arrangement,” with a delivery marked by a “fine commanding voice, a deep tone of evangelical fervour, and an apparent utter self-obliviousness” that rendered his preaching “powerfully impressive.”14 Others acknowledged his fidelity to the Reformed Dutch church but lauded his ecumenicalism and described his preaching in terms widely used for effective preachers regardless of denomination: “There was a directness, a
solemnity, a tenderness in his utterances, evidently springing from a deep conviction of the importance of the truth which he delivered, and a corresponding experience of its power upon his own heart.” Many lauded his piety, dignity, ability to rouse pathos, and fine, clear, “sweet” voice that even the partially deaf could understand. When deeply moved while preaching, he wept and brought his hearers to tears as well. If such eulogies were somewhat generic, they also suggest how well Brodhead met the expectations of antebellum audiences.

After Allan Melvill’s financial failure and the family’s move to Albany, Melville entered the orbit of another powerful minister, John Ludlow, pastor of the First Dutch Reformed Church in Albany. Melville’s maternal grandmother was an active parishioner, and after Allan died, Ludlow became a family friend and advisor, visiting the Melville home almost daily. Ludlow was more bookish than Brodhead—he left Albany in 1853 to become a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania—yet also a well-respected, occasionally masterful preacher. Of his voice, a contemporary wrote, “its tone thundered through the largest edifice, commanding the most distant hearer, and often overpowering those who sat nearer to the pulpit.” At his funeral, Sprague praised him for having a “gigantic power both of voice and of logic” and described a time when he had moved his congregation to tears with a single emotion-choked line.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these firsthand experiences with powerful preachers, Melville never seems to have been at ease with ministerial authority. His first book, *Typee* (1846), expressed deep dissatisfaction with ministers as the spiritual guardians of humanity. As if the book were not shocking enough in its depiction of free-and-easy sexual relationships, Melville offended readers in Britain, where the book was first published, by blasting Christian missionaries in the South Seas as selfish hypocrites bringing ruin to an innocent people. His American publishers deemed these condemnations so potentially offensive that nearly all were expurgated. Indeed, the book begins with a minister’s metonymic defrocking and symbolic castration. An episode in the first chapter, excised from the American edition, jokes about how the Marquesan natives, having never seen a white woman before, stripped a missionary’s wife of her “sacred veil of calico” while trying to discern whether she was human or divine. The offended woman insisted that her husband abandon his missionary enterprise, thus divesting him of clerical and conjugal authority.

Much like Lippard, Melville in *Typee* presented himself as an exposé of ministerial evils—as a righteous preacher denouncing the false preachers. Condemning the enormities committed by Europeans in the South Seas
islands, he declared: “These things are seldom proclaimed at home; they happen at the very ends of the earth; they are done in a corner, and there are none to reveal them.”\textsuperscript{21} None, that is, except himself. Melville’s alter-ego Tommo indicts missionaries as the vanguard of the corrupting, unnecessary work of “civilization,” with its institutions of property, trade, and toil, and critiques the missionaries’ duplicitous, self-glorifying accounts of their impact on Polynesian life. Defending Polynesian society as harmonious, he lambastes the “remorseless cruelty” of whites, pointing to two outrages Melville would later dramatize: the “barbarity” long practiced in England of dismembering a criminal’s body and mounting the head on a pike (see \textit{Benito Cereno}), and the “horrors” inflicted by the supposedly enlightened practice of walling up prisoners in the midst of cities (see “Bartleby”).\textsuperscript{22} In the book’s most vehement denunciation of missionary work, and one of the longest passages excised from the British edition, Tommo mourns the Typee as an “Ill-fated people!” destined to ruin because faraway gentlemen in cravats and ladies in silk gowns think it would be a fine idea to minister to the Polynesians’ spiritual condition. Even as missionaries “announce the progress of Truth,” Christianity brings “disease, vice, and premature death.” Tommo spits: “What a subject for an eloquent Bible-meeting orator!”\textsuperscript{23} The book’s many indictments of missionaries are, in effect, a warm-up for the sermonic speech Melville would develop more fully later; they are the denunciatory half of prophetic sermonizing, condemning injustice but not, in the same breath, showing readers the way to redemption. The only solution was for the missionaries to go home, which Melville knew was not in the cards.

In the four books that appeared between \textit{Typee} and \textit{Moby-Dick}, Melville continued to censure the clergy’s alliance with political and social power while experimenting with a more full-fledged sermonic voice—one that was decisively democratic in that it claimed for an ordinary sailor-turned-writer the ability to speak with a moral authority superior to the clergy. One of the clearest examples of Melville’s pre-Ishmaelian, reformist sermonic voice comes in \textit{Redburn} (1849). Wandering the docks of Liverpool, Redburn first critiques the city’s floating chapels as doing little good, since most sailors often pass by yet never consider entering, then lauds those preachers who, standing on old casks, turn street corners and quays into temporary pulpits. He is impressed that many are robed Anglican priests, high-status clergy who have humbled themselves to reach “a motley crowd of seamen from all quarters of the globe, and women, and lumpers, and dock laborers of all sorts.” Claiming always to stop and listen to these sermons, he praises how the preachers hold an audience’s attention with plain speech, straightforward precepts, and addresses on “the two great vices to which sailors are most
addicted”—a prim elision. Then, as if inspired by these preachers, he breaks out in sermonic voice, implicitly claiming religious authority even for one as lowly as a former sailor: “Is not this as it ought to be? since the true calling of the reverend clergy is like their divine Master’s;—not to bring the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” He exhorts other clergy to go and do likewise:

Better to save one sinner from an obvious vice that is destroying him, than to indoctrinate ten thousand saints. And as from every corner, in Catholic towns, the shrines of Holy Mary and the Child Jesus perpetually remind the commonest wayfarer of his heaven; even so should Protestant pulpits be founded in the market-places, and at street corners, where the men of God might be heard by all of His children.24

Echoing Tommo in taking ministers to task for their indifference to human suffering, Redburn is more fully sermonic in that he supplements denunciation with proclamation, pointing the way to positive action.25 But the most interesting feature of Redburn’s sermon may be how it invokes supposedly anti-democratic Catholics to shame Protestants for their indifference to the common people: the ubiquity of Catholic statuary in European towns is a rebuke to those who sequester the Protestant symbol of Christian hope—the sermon—behind church walls. The passage can even be read as a call for “men of God” in the broadest sense, not the clergy alone, to take up the preacher’s role.

In White-Jacket Melville returned to the corruptions that attended the yoking of religious and political power. He wryly describes the ship’s chaplain, who, having drunk “at the mystic fountain of Plato,” preaches abstruse sermons that the sailors cannot understand and who has nary a word to say about shipboard sins like “drunkenness, fighting, flogging, and oppression.” The real problem is not the chaplain as an individual but the unholy union of church and state aboard a warship. Navy chaplains feel little inclination to denounce abuses of power when the officers sit “sword-belted” before them. Sailors are herded to service with shouts of “Go to prayers, d—n you!” without freedom to abstain, regardless of the Constitution’s establishment clause. And Christianity’s inherent pacifism cannot be preached when the chaplain takes for his pulpit a forty-two-pound gun and is paid a bounty for enemies killed. On these points Melville becomes sermonic, with biblically inflected rhetorical questions and a prophetic tone of righteous indignation. As in Redburn, he maintains that effective preaching depends on clerical humility and a fatherly attitude toward one’s congregation. The best warship preaching is when a moral captain acts the part of chaplain to his crew; the service
in one such case “seemed like family devotions, where the head of the house is foremost in confessing himself before his Maker.” Yet perhaps dissatisfied with a vision of preaching insufficiently democratic, Melville added a call to self-reliance: “But our own hearts are our best prayer-rooms, and the chaplains who can most help us are ourselves.”

Though seemingly laid to rest, the sermon would return in force in Moby-Dick.

**Sermonic voice in Moby-Dick**

*Moby-Dick* announces its likeness to a sermon on virtually the first page: the inaugural biblical text of “Extracts,” “And God created great whales” (Gen. 1:21), suggests an idea—the possibility of the whale as a divine agent—that Ishmael will ponder throughout the book. His own sermonizing takes flight in “Loomings,” where he guides us about Manhattan on a “dreamy Sabbath afternoon,” when the city’s ministers would have been preaching the afternoon sermon. Pointing to the idlers gazing seaward, he opens his discourse with rhetorical questions—“What do you see? [. . .] Are the green fields gone? What do they here?”—and concludes his tour with the sententious, “Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are wedded forever.” The motif of Ishmael-as-preacher recurs in subsequent shore chapters when he preaches a “purtty long sarmon” objecting to sleeping with a cannibal, harangues Queequeg during his “Ramadan,” and defends Queequeg as a member of “the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world,” to which Peleg responds that he’s “never heard a better sermon [. . .]—why Father Mapple himself couldn’t beat it.”

But Ishmael is a strange preacher compared with other sermonizers in antebellum fiction. In other novels, as in *Redburn*, sermonic voice typically appears in a few preachy lines—a burst of fervor shooting up through the steady stream of dialogue and narration. Ishmael, in contrast, can preach for one line or for several pages, and his sermons bleed into the surrounding text. Melville’s capacious, fluid stylistic repertoire means that Ishmael’s sermons often mingle with precepts, meditations, exclamations, invocations, and imitations of Carlyle, himself a borrower of sermonic style. Ishmael riffs and improvises on preaching, ignoring its supposed sacrality. To take the briefest of examples, he follows his meditation on the morbidness of tragic natures with “Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease.” Here sermonic voice is evident in the *vanitas* theme, the theological resonance of “mortal greatness,” the tone of certainty, and the direct address. But the line is too short and cynical; it straddles sermon and apho-
rism. Only occasionally does Ishmael launch his truths with the full colors of sermonic voice, yet these moments are some of the most striking and memorable passages in the book—for instance, the final paragraph of “The Lee Shore” (“But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth [. . . ]”); the end of “The Mast-Head” (“Heed it well, ye Pantheists!”); the end of “Brit” (“Consider the subtleness of the sea [. . . ]”); the end of “The Blanket” (“Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale!” [. . . ]”); and the end of “The Try-Works” (“Look not into the fire, O man! [. . . ]”).

Ishmael's sermons differ from those of other novelistic speakers not only in their resistance to being cordoned off from the surrounding text, but in their defining stylistic mode, that of Romantic irony. As Robert Milder explains, Romantic irony (or philosophical irony, or Socratic irony) characterizes the Ishmaeleian attitude toward the universe, self, and literary work. It is the sense that even though human perception and language are inadequate to a chaotic universe, one must nonetheless charge forth to participate in the ongoing creative process of the universe, reveling in fragmentary truths wittily expressed and the “self-generating play of mind upon phantasmagoric reality.” Works in this mode, as Anne Mellor explains, are often both “playful and serious”; the artist “simultaneously projects his ego or selfhood as a divine creator and also mocks, criticizes, or rejects his created fictions as limited and false.” Milder identifies Ishmael's Romantic irony as a breakthrough for Melville, the rekeying of existential doubt and philosophical despair in a playful register, a result, perhaps, of discussions about Friedrich Schlegel, Romantic irony's leading theorist, with the German-American scholar George J. Adler, or of reading Carlyle or Jean Paul Richter (both of whom had read Schlegel) or writers who had influenced Schlegel, such as Plato, Cervantes, Rabelais, Sterne, and Goethe. Regardless of its sources, the distinctive feature of Ishmaeleian Romantic irony, Milder proposes, is its “ontological dread,” the idea “that truth is unutterable for its darkness,” not only its multiplicity.

Romantic irony marks Ishmael's sermons both in their fascination with the frightening, uncontrollable realities lurking behind everyday appearances (Milder's “ontological dread”) and in their meditative, exploratory tone and provisional conclusions. Terror haunts his preaching, as when he exhorts readers not to look too long into the artificial fire, whose “redness makes all things look ghastly,” or cautions them against pushing off from the inner island of “peace and joy” into the “horrors of the half known life.” Even more consistently, his sermons are exploratory, playfully ruminating over ideas then concluding with heterodox counsel. Reflecting the book's commitment to experience as the basis of knowledge and wisdom—
“a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard”—Ishmael often works toward counterintuitive moral points. His first extended sermon, for example, takes the cenotaphs as the text of a sermon that begins, “O! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass [. . . ],” then wends its way through a catalog of cultural contradictions surrounding death, pauses on an aphorism (“But Faith, like a jackal feeds among the tombs”), and at last offers the sermon’s perennial consolation of immortality—with the blasphemous twist, “for stave my soul, Jove himself cannot.”34 A similar pattern of dynamic exploration culminating in heterodox morality marks many of the cetology chapters, such as “Brit,” “The Line,” “The Dart,” and “The Blanket.” Walter Bezanson has observed that these chapters retain something of the text-doctrine-application format of Puritan sermons, with the text being an aspect of the whale or whaling; the doctrine, a blend of information and meditation; and the application, the chosen topic’s relevance to the human condition.35 Yet these applications are offered only as possible truths. Not only does Ishmael’s notorious unreliability mean that his teachings will need to stand or fall on their own merits, but the action of Moby-Dick offers little guidance in determining the worth of his wisdom. For instance, although Ishmael praises the flight of the Catskill eagle in “The Try-Works,” who even when he dives within the gorge is still higher than the plain, the final chapter has Tashtego nailing the sea-hawk to the mast of the sinking ship, a seeming mockery of lone “eagles” like Ahab. A similar ambiguity impedes appropriation of the sermon at the end of “The Blanket,” where Ishmael praises a “strong individual vitality.” Queequeg exemplifies this virtue, with his “lofty bearing” that makes him seem like a man “who had never cringed and never had had a creditor,” and, in an even stronger verbal echo of “The Blanket,” upstanding Starbuck has an “interior vitality [. . . ] warranted to do well in all climates.”36 But of what use is Queequeg’s self-assurance or Starbuck’s vitality to anyone else on the ship? Under the circumstances, an ability to become angry at injustice and rouse oneself to heroic action would seem at least as virtuous as equanimity.

Although Ishmael’s sermons never cohere into a systematic worldview, they evidence two of Melville’s philosophical preoccupations during the late 1840s and early 1850s, Platonism and stoicism—rival philosophies symbolized in the image of the sperm whale’s head hanging on one side of the Pequod, the right whale’s head on the other. Ishmael takes the sperm whale for a Platonian, who is indifferent to death; the right whale for a Stoic, who faces death with “enormous practical resolution.”37 Melville associated Plato and the Stoics not only with two different, non-Christian ways of meeting death without despair, but also with opposing attitudes toward life. To
simplify, Platonians looked beyond matter to ideals such as the soul, while Stoics advocated the cultivation of inner constancy and virtue amidst life’s vicissitudes. In the sermonic moments cited above, Platonism appears in the affirmation of shadow as “true substance” in “The Chapel” and in the final declaration of “The Lee Shore,” “Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!” It is also implicit in the image of the Catskill eagle soaring and becoming “invisible in the sunny spaces,” a symbol of idealistic questing and the triumph of aspiration over achievement. Of course, Platonism also comes in for a drubbing at the end of “The Mast-Head,” when dreamers slip and regain their identity in horror.

More consistently, Ishmael’s sermons draw on stoicism, a predilection established back in “Loomings” when Ishmael assures us that making the transition from schoolmaster to sailor “requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it.” Melville had acquired Roger L’Estrange’s Seneca’s Morals, By Way of Abstract by the time he wrote Mardi, and in 1854 would give his younger brother Thomas his copy of L’Estrange, inscribing it, “My Dear Tom, This is a round-of-beef where all hands may cut & come again”—as much an endorsement as he would give any philosopher. The exhortation to equanimity at the end of “The Blanket” is classic Senecan teaching, as in, “A good man is happy within himself, and independent upon fortune.” So, too, is Ishmael’s counsel to Bulkington to front death heroically—“Bear thee grimly, demigod!” (though addressing Bulkington as a “demigod” strikes a more Platonic note). Seneca had praised “the brave man” who could “look Death in the Face, without trouble or surprise,” a philosophy he lived out in his own calm acceptance of Nero’s death order and endurance of being slowly bled to death. A trace of Seneca appears even in the book’s most “Platonic” passage—Ishmael’s declaration after contemplating the cenotaphs, “But somehow I grew merry again,” which echoes Seneca’s “It is no new thing to die, no new thing to mourn, and no new thing to be merry again.” In using sermonic form for stoic ideas, Ishmael does something unexpected, as a philosophy committed to emotional equanimity would hardly seem to lend itself to exclamation points or exhortations. Yet in assigning Ishmael stoic sermons, Melville may have found inspiration in Seneca’s maxims praising the value of sound advice, such as, “Good counsel is the most needful service that we can do to mankind; and if we give it to many, it will be sure to profit some.”

In the self-mocking spirit of Romantic irony, Ishmael concedes his probable ineffectiveness as a preacher. He ends “The Blanket” with an exclamation applicable to any of his exhortations: “But how easy and how hopeless to teach these fine things!” His lighthearted pessimism about his sermonizing
echoes the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), in which Hawthorne proposes a possible moral for his novel, then says that he does not “flatter himself with the slightest hope” that anyone will act on it. With this nonchalant, take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward preaching, Ishmael, like Hawthorne, bears affinity with liberal preachers who held listeners responsible for hearing their own usable truths. As a preacher, Ishmael shares the philosophy of Bellows’s declaration that truth finds “the argument that upholds it in the hearts of its hearers.” And it is fair to say Bellows’s approach to preaching may have had some influence on Melville’s own, given that Bellows was pastor of the large and well-to-do Church of the Divine Unity in Manhattan (later called All Souls), where the Melvilles rented a pew in February 1850.

When Ishmael’s sermons occur at the ends of chapters, as they often do, they turn the reading process itself into something like a religious ritual. To borrow Richard Cullen Rath’s term for textual elements that invite an aural reading, the white space that follows a chapter-ending sermonic passage functions as a “sonic cue” to silence and contemplation. Melville describes one such brief, silent, post-sermon moment in “The Two Temples”: “At length the benediction was pronounced over the mass of low-inclining foreheads; hushed silence, intense motionlessness followed for a moment, as if the congregation were one of buried, not of living men; when suddenly, miraculously, like the general raising at the Resurrection, the whole host came to their feet, amid a simultaneous roll.” The passage mocks the deathlike torpor sermons supposedly induce but also suggests that preaching might promote personal “resurrection,” or regeneration. Translating this ritual moment into the materiality of the printed book, the typographic pauses after Ishmael’s sermons create virtual silences that call readers to self-reflection.

**Rewriting the seamen’s bethel preacher**

The stage-like quality of the Whaleman’s Chapel establishes a parallel between Mapple and Melville as religious artists. We do not need Ishmael denying that Mapple dabbles in “mere tricks of the stage” to register the scene’s artifice—to see that the chapel is a theater; the marble cenotaphs, rope ladder, kitschy painting, and pulpit-prow, a set; the Jonah sermon, a play-within-a-play whose meaning redounds to the novel as a whole. Even the name of the church—Whaleman’s Chapel, rather than the usual Seamen’s Bethel or Mariners’ Church—underscores that we are in a symbolic space
with a dreamlike difference from the actual world. Moreover, Mapple is credited as the inspiration for several of the chapel’s unique features. The chapel’s architect has “acted upon the hint of Father Mapple” in giving the pulpit a side ladder instead of the usual stairs; the painting of the storm-beaten ship is an idea “borrowed from the chaplain’s former sea-farings”; and the paneled, prow-shaped pulpit reflects “the same sea-taste that had achieved the ladder and the picture.”

Mapple’s ingenuity anticipates that of Wemmick in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861), who daily retreats from his dreary job as Jaggers’s right-hand man to the house he has transformed into a miniature castle with moat, canon, turret, and flags. Both the house and the chapel literalize hoary metaphors—that a man’s home is his castle, that the Church is a ship—but they are also odes to creativity. Wemmick’s castle-home and Mapple’s ship-chapel represent the triumph of imagination: the castle-home over the workaday world, the ship-chapel over rote religiosity. The chapel’s idiosyncrasies are, like *Moby-Dick* itself, concrete arguments for the freedom to interpret traditional teachings through new media.

Melville also signaled Mapple’s author-likeness in his creative transformation of Mapple’s supposed original, Father Edward Taylor (1793–1871), minister of the Seamen’s Bethel in Boston from 1830 to 1871. A former sailor, Taylor was a popular and eloquent preacher with a knack for nautical metaphors. Whitman praised him as the “one essentially perfect orator,” he had ever heard; Emerson, as the “Shakespeare of the sailor and the poor.”

By the mid-1830s he was a tourist attraction for Boston visitors, including Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, Fredrika Bremer, Jenny Lind, and possibly in 1849, Melville. In basing Mapple on Taylor, Melville was far less concerned with painting a portrait of a Boston fixture, as so many others had done, than with highlighting the similarities between preaching and fiction-writing. Melville retained in Mapple aspects of Taylor that resonated with his own authorial ideals, such as the authoritative yet common-man demeanor and the vivid metaphors. “No man ever lived who more constantly talked in tropes,” one of Taylor’s contemporaries wrote, and Mapple captures this spirit at several turns—in comparing Jonah to a “vile burglar,” or in the “panther billow” that leaps over the bulwarks of Jonah’s ship.

Taylor also had a focus and self-assurance Melville would have admired: “His spirit is so possessed with this just idea of the importance of his work,” wrote Martineau, “that praise and even immediate sympathy are not necessary; though the last is, of course, pleasant to him.” She described how Taylor could enthrall even a small audience: when a miscommunication resulted in only twenty hearers attending a Christmas Day service, “never did Taylor preach more splendidly.” Although there is no record of Melville reading Martineau,
the situation in Chapter 9 of *Moby-Dick* is similar: Mapple, aloft in his “self-containing stronghold,” orates to a small, scattered, unresponsive audience just a few days before Christmas. The image of a preacher who did not fret over his popularity undoubtedly appealed to Melville, who declared to Hawthorne after the publication of *Moby Dick*, “[N]ot one man in five cycles, who is wise, will expect appreciative recognition from his fellows, or any one of them. Appreciation! Recognition! Is Jove appreciated?” Melville gave form to Melville’s fantasy of writing powerfully yet as if he were indifferent to public approval.

Even as Melville borrowed a great deal from Taylor, he changed key details to tighten the parallel between preaching and authorship. Taylor entered the pulpit without manuscript or notes, and his extemporaneous sermons bore all the marks of oral composition: repetition, prolixity, theological inconsistencies, and direct address. He filled his sermons with striking illustrations but “was not given to story-telling.” Mapple, in contrast, crafts a tight, coherent, linear narrative whose every word tells; it sounds like a written text. He also has a much more distant relationship with his audience than Taylor did with his. Contemporaries dwelled on the rapport Taylor had with his “Jacks”; Emerson, for instance, praised Taylor for “fusing all the rude hearts of his auditory with the heat of his own love.” A remembered sermon fragment captures the visceral connection Taylor reportedly had with his congregation. He is describing a violent tempest:

[N]ow my friends that our canvass is gone; not a spar left for a jury-mast, and the leak gaining upon us, what shall we do? Hark! Do you not hear the waters rushing in below? Do you not see her settle by the head? Do you not feel her tremble? [. . . ] one moment more fellow sailors, and this good ship of ours will sink into the deep; a moment more and we shall be struggling with the eternal waves; but we shall swim and struggle in vain; we must die, if there be no help at hand; and is there none? is there no way of escape? Save yourselves if you can.

At this exhortation, twenty arms in the church were thrown up as if to catch at a rope, and an old man clutched the pew rail as if his life depended on it. Taylor brought the message home by pointing to the lifeboat—Jesus Christ. Just as striking as the theological differences from Mapple, who does not mention Jesus, is the constant effort to engage listeners. Whereas Taylor encouraged his hearers to imagine themselves in the boat, to feel themselves sinking, Mapple conjures the storm as spectacle. The waves spring on Jonah, not the congregation, and the vortex that swallows him poses no danger to
Mapple’s listeners. The audience does not stir apart from a brief moment of “quick fear.” Such powerful preaching met by minimal response was not necessarily an indictment of the audience or of the preacher. As Edward T. Channing had remarked, “[I]t certainly argues a more spiritual and informed mind to listen silently to grave discourse, and to preach fervently without the slightest sound of favor from the audience.” However true to the practice of “spiritual and informed” congregations, the gap between Mapple’s passionate performance and his hearers’ enigmatic silence embodies Melville’s perception of himself as an author least appreciated when performing at his peak.

The originality of Mapple as an artistic creation is even more evident when we recognize how little his sermon resembles other preaching to sailors, despite the scholarly claim that it is a representative folk sermon. Mapple’s fast-paced sermon finds little precedent in the predictable language and halting narrative of, for instance, the Jonah sermons printed in *The Sailor’s Magazine and Naval Journal*, which pause after every verse or so to spell out theological and moral principles and use little maritime imagery. In fact, a series of articles in *The Sailor’s Magazine*, printed just as the movement to establish mariners’ churches was gaining momentum, cautioned landlubbing seminary graduates against trying to address sailors in their own lingo, since such language compromised the seriousness of the gospel and threatened to expose the new preachers’ ignorance. Mapple’s simple message of repentance is also a far cry from the evangelical emphasis on salvation through Christ typically heard in seamen’s bethels. An article on “Preaching to Seamen” in the March 1847 *Sailor’s Magazine* reminded ministers that their task was to present a plain gospel message and orthodox doctrines, including “the fall and depravity of man, the divinity, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—regeneration by the holy spirit, [. . . ] the eternal happiness of the righteous, and the everlasting punishment of the wicked.” Such traditional Christian teachings informed, for instance, Gardiner Spring’s *The Bethel Flag: A Series of Short Discourses to Seamen* (1848), which makes virtually no reference to the sea. When sermons to sailors departed from basic doctrines, they often inveighed against the usual vices—drinking, whoring, smoking, swearing, gambling, and Sabbath-breaking. More upbeat sermons reminded sailors they were missionaries to the world, responsible for setting good examples that would lead heathens and savages to Christ. Sailors occupied a unique position in the American religious landscape as both the object of evangelical missions at home and the bearers of “Christian” civilization to distant lands. The rhetoric of those who preached to them is fascinating in its own right, but these men were no Mapples.
Mapple’s sublime sermon

While most discussions of Mapple’s sermon endeavor to map the seemingly allegorical Jonah story onto the fortunes of the *Pequod*, I concentrate here on the sermon’s grandiloquent style, which is both difficult to miss and to make sense of. Many readers seem uncertain whether Melville meant to make fun of it or to revel in it. We can reconcile these two perspectives by recognizing the sermon as written in the mode of the Miltonic sublime. As Bryan Short explains in discussing the final passage of “The Castaway,” when Pip goes down to “wondrous depths,” the Miltonic sublime reaches back past the psychologized sublime of Kant and Coleridge to eighteenth-century conceptions of the sublime that, reading Milton through Longinus, connected it with destabilized allegory. This Miltonic, allusively allegorical sublime manifests itself in the confluence of certain aesthetic effects that the Romantics rejected as criteria for sublimity—namely, pathos, psychological complexity, vividness, and an ornate style. This mode had particular appeal for Melville because it highlighted the contingency, and sometimes humor, of human attempts to understand God and divine truths.

Like other instances of the Miltonic sublime, Mapple’s sermon is built on the fragmentation of allegory. On the surface, Mapple’s retelling of the Jonah story might seem to affirm a stable understanding of divine realities, as Mapple announces that the story has lessons for everyone as “sinful men” and for him “as a pilot of the living God.” But the sermon itself discards traditional Christian allegorizing about the book of Jonah. Mapple speaks not a word about Jonah’s time in the whale and disgorgement prefiguring Christ’s descent into hell and resurrection, or about how Jonah’s salvation might anticipate the listener’s own. Mapple also cuts several biblical references to God. Where the Book of Jonah reads, “But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea,” Mapple’s text personifies the sea itself: “But the sea rebels; he will not bear the wicked burden,” and “the indignant gale howls louder.” When the captain in Mapple’s sermon comes to wake Jonah, he shouts only, “What meanest thou, O sleeper! arise!” Gone is the command to “call upon thy God.” Nor does Mapple interrupt the narrative to offer theological commentary, unlike actual antebellum preachers, who tended to use biblical stories as racks to hang their theological clothes on. The sermon’s single instance of interjected moral commentary is secular, even cynical: “In this world, shipmates, sin that pays its way can travel freely, and without a passport; whereas Virtue, if a pauper, is stopped at all frontiers.” Most notably, the closing message of the first strand omits any reassurance of salvation. Mapple simply calls listeners to repent—“Sin not; but if you do, take heed
Playing Preacher in *Moby-Dick* to repent of it like Jonah.” As E. M. Forster wrote, “The sermon has nothing to do with Christianity. It asks for endurance or loyalty without hope of reward.” Mapple’s emphasis on grim endurance foreshadows Ishmael’s stoic sermons.

Mapple also departs from Christian allegorizing in the disjunction between the biblical version of Jonah’s mission and his interpretation of it. In the Bible, the Lord commands Jonah, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.” Mapple paraphrases: “and Jonah did the Almighty’s bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!” It is as if Mapple seeks with that bright, final exclamation to divert attention from his interpretive shell trick. Taking the divine command to preach against “wickedness” as a mandate to preach truth against falsehood secularizes the pilot-prophet’s mission; the new terms are not moral but ontological.

Mapple further exemplifies the Miltonic sublime by placing humanity at the center of concern, fleshing out the bare-bones biblical narrative with pathos verging on melodrama. “Miserable man!” Mapple cries of Jonah, before describing how the prophet prowls and skulks before boarding the ship to Tarshish and trembles under the other sailors’ scrutiny. On board, Jonah writhes in self-loathing below deck, then watches the storm in horror: “Terrors upon terrors run shouting through his soul.” The sailors who hear Jonah’s confession, “become more and more appalled, but still are pitiful.” Throughout, Mapple’s retelling of the Jonah story derives pathos from the proximity of death, reflecting the Romantic sense of death as “a source of the sublime, an awe-inspiring event that elevated human emotions to peak sensitivity.” Mapple reserves, though, the greatest measure of pathos for himself, as the sermon’s second strand rolls plaintively through the woes of pilot-prophets who do not speak the truth and jubilantly through the delights of those who do.

The psychological complexity Mapple attributes to the biblical characters further associates the sermon with the Miltonic sublime. Every character has inner conflict. On the run from God, Jonah cannot hide or silence his guilt. When the sailors pause to observe him, “in vain he tries to look all ease and confidence; in vain essays his wretched smile.” When he seeks passage on the ship, he speaks to the captain with “hollow voice” and, below deck, suffers agonies of conscience. The sailors, for their part, feel a mingled horror and pity that makes them hesitant to cast Jonah on the sea: “they not reluctantly lay hold” of him. Even the captain, a cipher in the Bible, ponders and deliberates. He tests Jonah by trebling the fare then, though discerning his guilt, lets him board: “Not a forger any way, he mutters.”
Finally, and perhaps most obviously, it is the sermon’s vividness and stylistic opulence that mark it as reaching for the Miltonic sublime. A bravura demonstration of amplificatio, or expansion of a simple statement, the sermon elaborates on the biblical text with a wealth of interpolated details: Jonah’s “slouched hat and guilty eye,” the missing key and swinging lamp in the state-room, the whale’s “yawning jaws,” Jonah’s feeling his punishment is just, and so forth.79 A few passages rise above the rest by combining diatyposis, or vivid representation, with other rhetorical features Longinus associated with the sublime. One dizzying artistic display describes Jonah’s torments of conscience:

Like one who after a night of drunken revelry hies to his bed still reeling, but with conscience yet pricking him, as the plungings of the Roman race-horse but so much the more strike his steel tags into him; as one who in that miserable plight still turns and turns in giddy anguish, praying God for annihilation until the fit be passed; and at last amid the whirl of woe he feels, a deep stupor steals over him, as over the man who bleeds to death, for conscience is the wound, and there’s naught to staunch it; so, after sore wrestlings in his berth, Jonah’s prodigy of ponderous misery drags him drowning down to sleep.80

The passage abounds in stylistic markers of the sublime: multiple metaphors, in the comparisons to the Roman race horse and bleeding man nested within the conceit of the remorseful drunk; hyperbaton, or the unusual arrangement of words, in the heaped similes and long-delayed subject; present tense for past events (“drags” instead of “dragged”); and periphrasis (“Jonah’s prodigy of ponderous misery”). Ornateness is evident in the oxymoronic “giddy anguish” and incessant alliteration (e.g., “revelry” and “reeling”; “strike” and “steel”; “whirl of woe”). Like the end of “The Castaway,” this paragraph represents the terrifying drama of approaching God. Pip must almost drown to see God; Jonah feels his own strong, painful connection to the divine when he violates his conscience.

The overarching effect of Mapple’s sublimity is to announce that Moby-Dick will aim to give readers an experience comparable to that of listening to great preaching.81 The sermon, in effect, prepares the way for the book’s many other sublime elements—Ahab’s hunt, Moby Dick, the sea, Ishmael’s quest for knowledge, the fellow-feeling of “A Squeeze of the Hand.” Yet given the lowly cultural status of fiction, Melville knew that proposing one’s novel as the moral and cultural equivalent of a religious experience was quixotic, and the ironies surrounding Mapple suggest that Melville mocked his own
desire to communicate forcefully to an enigmatic and often unresponsive reading public. Much about Mapple is bitterly funny. Queequeg wanders away mid-discourse, the congregation regards Mapple fearfully and files out silently after the sermon, and when Ishmael returns to the Spouter-Inn, he does not reject Mapple’s message but follows only too well the counsel, meant for the “anointed pilot-prophet” alone, to stand forth one’s own “inexorable self.” Heretically yet cogently he reasons out why he should worship Yojo with Queequeg. Such is the futility, Melville implies, of trying to impress and edify one’s audience; one cannot control the message received.

Melville’s apparent self-mockery infiltrates the language of Mapple’s sermon. Although the sublime is not usually associated with humor, the Miltonic sublime often includes a component of “exaggeration, at times to the point of self-parody.” Mapple’s soaring rhetoric partakes of this self-parodying exaggeration in the incessant repetition throughout Chapters 8 and 9 of the storm motif, a stock representation of the sublime from Longinus through Burke and beyond. Taken by itself, Mapple’s description of the storm that afflicts Jonah might be considered merely a sublime rendition of schematic biblical material, but this storm together with the profusion of storms in and around the sermon becomes parodic. The painting behind the pulpit shows a “terrible storm off a lee coast”; Mapple denounces those who seek “to pour oil onto the waters when God has brewed them into a gale”; sermon-listeners hear the “howling of the shrieking, slanting storm” outside the chapel; and Mapple himself seems storm-wracked, with his heaving chest, tossing arms like “the warring elements at work,” “thunders [rolling] away from off his swarthy brow,” and “the light leaping from his eye.” With this multiplication of storms ad absurdum, Melville seems to have lampooned himself for trying too hard.

If the peculiar dynamic at work here—a sublime yet ironized sermon that intimates authorial ambitions qualified by self-deprecation—seems familiar, it may be because Melville was influenced by, and also trying to one-up, Hawthorne’s representation of Dimmesdale’s Election Sermon. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Melville read The Scarlet Letter soon after he met Hawthorne in August 1850, just a few months after the book’s initial publication in March 1850 and about five months into the writing of Moby-Dick. In Melville’s panegyric on Hawthorne’s talent, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” written that August, Melville brings up Hawthorne’s most recent work only briefly: “I have thus far omitted all mention of his ‘Twice Told Tales,’ and ‘Scarlet Letter.’ Both are excellent; but full of such manifold, strange, and diffusive beauties, that time would all but fail me, to point the half of them out.” Unlike the detailed, energetic descriptions of the stories in Mosses,
Melville’s praise for *The Scarlet Letter* is diffuse and evasive. One senses he is fudging—that he has not read it yet or not read it carefully. Still, the actual reading was probably not long in coming, since from the summer of 1850 to the fall of 1851, he lived in Pittsfield, Hawthorne in nearby Lenox, and the two exchanged numerous visits. It is difficult to imagine that during this time Melville did not read Hawthorne’s newest, longest, most critically respected work of fiction—and the most acclaimed American literary work that year—or that he dedicated *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne, “In Token of My Admiration for His Genius,” without having read his only novel. Infusing this admiration was, of course, rivalry, and with Mapple’s spectacular sermon, Melville demonstrated his ability to create the sublimity Hawthorne had only described.

**Mapple’s authorial peroration**

The conclusion of Mapple’s sermon has long been considered a grace note of American letters, with Richard Chase calling it “perhaps the high point of American oratory” and Howard Vincent writing, “Delight is to him who reads Father Mapple’s peroration. English prose is nowhere superior.” More precisely, we might say that it continues and concentrates the Miltonic sublime that characterizes the sermon as a whole. Pathos surrounds the “pilot-prophet,” who is threatened with woes and tantalized with delights, and Mapple’s affect magnifies the emotional drama. Pivoting from the woes to the delights, he has “a deep joy in his eyes” and “crie[s] out with a heavenly enthusiasm.” Rhetorical devices associated with sublimity intensify the pathos: anaphora (the repetition of “Woe to him” and “Delight is to him”), vivid images (“pluck[ing] sin out from under the robes of Senators and Judges”), and *athroïsmos*, or the accumulation of words and phrases echoing the same idea. The peroration also invokes the language of verticality and elevation that Burke considered essential to the sublime, as in, “and higher the top of that delight, than the bottom of the woe is deep.” As elsewhere, one can interpret the excesses of the Miltonic sublime as self-parodic.

Mapple’s peroration indexes his authorial ambitions as he worked on *Moby-Dick*. In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” he had written, “[I]f you rightly look for it, you will almost always find that the author himself has somewhere furnished you with his own picture.” Mapple’s peroration is Melville’s self-portrait as post-Impressionist painting—bold, colorful, and slightly caricatured. Or we might see Melville as here acting on the maxim of *White-Jacket* that “the chaplains who can most help us are ourselves.” Mapple is Melville helping himself. The core principle of the peroration that the pilot-prophet
has an obligation to “tell the Truth” to a hostile world is, as Richard Brodhead has argued, the “prophetic” stance that Melville began to associate with authorship after he met Hawthorne in 1850. But rather than fixating on Melville as “prophetic,” we should recognize how he saw actual, living ministers as his main competitors in truth-telling. Writing to Hawthorne while revising *Moby-Dick*, he hinted at their parallel vocation: “Let any clergyman try to preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of church on his own pulpit bannister.” The darkly funny image of a minister being ridden on a rail (tar and feathers optional) suggests that Melville identified with how the public’s prejudices gagged and hampstrung preachers, discouraging them from speaking uncomfortable truths. The declaration in the same letter to Hawthorne that “Dollars damn me” implies that authorship is, ideally, something very like a sacred calling.

An excerpt from an antebellum sermon stylistically similar to Mapple’s peroration can illuminate how Melville transformed and secularized contemporary preaching in recasting it as authorial self-address. Presbyterian Thomas McAuley (1777–1862), one of the founders and first presidents of Union Theological Seminary in New York, delivered “The Faithful Preacher, and Wages of Unfaithfulness” in 1838 while pastor of the city’s Eighth Street Church. Melville may or may not have read McAuley’s sermon, but he certainly knew the line from the apostle Paul that McAuley elaborates—“woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!”:

So saith this envoy of heaven to a perishing world. “Wo is unto me if I preach not.” Wo is unto every minister of Jesus who does not, to the extent of his ability and opportunity, preach the word of reconciliation. Wo is unto every one who measures the amount of necessity laid upon him by blind precaution, or blinder prejudice, and not by the wants of the perishing, the worth of the soul, the will of the Father, the grace of the Sanctifier, and the love of the Saviour. Wo is unto us, my brethren, if we preach not up to the full measure of all our muscular and mental power, excited and invigorated by the energy of the Spirit of him who says, “as your day is so shall your strength be”—“lo! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

As this excerpt suggests, Mapple’s peroration mimics sermonic form while stripping the preacher’s—or pilot-prophet’s—mission of its Christian specificity. Mapple, too, uses a string of woes to develop Paul’s idea that a preacher labors under unique moral obligations and casts this labor as hearty masculine enterprise—McAuley calling for ministers to use their “muscular and
mental power,” Mapple proclaiming delight to “him whose strong arms yet support him.” Yet Mapple, unlike McAuley or other orthodox preachers, makes no mention of Jesus or the Holy Spirit and does not describe the preacher’s goal as saving the souls of the perishing. Rather, he is concerned with preserving the integrity of his own soul, which entails preaching Truth even, if necessary, at the expense of salvation, as well as destroying sin and upholding goodness and an undefined “Gospel duty.” Mapple also implies, as McAuley and other preachers typically did not, that the preacher’s mission involves challenging civil authorities.

Melville secularized preaching most radically in the sermon’s final lines:

And eternal delight and deliciousness will be his, who coming to lay him down, can say with his final breath—O Father!—chiefly known to me by Thy rod—mortal or immortal, here I die. I have striven to be Thine, more than to be this world’s, or mine own. Yet this is nothing; I leave eternity to Thee; for what is man that he should live out the lifetime of his God?

Though seemingly submissive to the divine will, these lines defy Christian teaching. “Mortal or immortal, here I die”? Where is the immortal soul, granted to all? The tone darkens with “I leave eternity to Thee,” which may mean that Mapple refrains from presuming upon God’s ability to confer an afterlife—or that he scornfully leaves an inscrutable deity to his private perpetuity. The final lines go so far as to hint at God’s death. “Mortal or immortal” modifies “Father” as easily as “I,” and to “live out” the lifetime of God can mean to outlive him. Indeed, the idea that the true prophet might kill God is hinted at earlier when the sailors suspect Jonah for a parricide. Mapple’s implicit rejection of Christian ideas of God at the very moment of seeming communion with him is echoed at the end of “The Castaway,” when Ishmael reflects that, like Pip gone overboard, one comes to “the celestial thought” and “feels then, uncompromised, indifferent as his God.”

Mapple’s veiled pronouncements on authorship are the dark, unspeakable obverse of the book’s more open declaration of authorial mission—Ishmael’s jubilant paean to the common person at the end of Chapter 26, the second “Knights and Squires” chapter. Instead of suggesting that authors must face a “boisterous mob,” as Mapple does, Ishmael declares himself a bard of the common person: “Thou shalt see [abounding dignity] shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself!” Instead of hinting that God is punitive and absent, Ishmael celebrates “His omnipresence, our divine equality!” and appeals for divine aid: “bear me out in it, O God!”
His speech echoes Unitarian William Ellery Channing’s advice to ministers at the end of “ Likeness to God,” a landmark liberal sermon in American history and one Melville may have known through his wife Elizabeth’s 1848 set of Channing’s complete works. Channing exhorted ministers to believe in the greatness of human nature, regardless of appearances. They were to look “beneath the perishing body, beneath the sweat of the laborer, beneath the rags and ignorance of the poor, beneath the vices of the sensual and selfish, and [discern] in the depths of the soul a divine principle, a ray of the Infinite Light, which may yet break forth and ‘shine as the sun’ in the kingdom of God.” Together, Mapple’s peroration and Ishmael’s reprise of Channing show Melville thinking dialectically about the parallel between authorship and preaching. On the one hand, the author is a solitary, fortressed, somber, truth-telling preacher who defies God and the public alike; on the other, a liberal optimist who, proclaiming the glory of God in humanity, stands for American ideals of democracy and divine order. If Melville found both models compelling, it is nonetheless significant that Mapple’s isolato defiance is the masked commentary on authorship and Ishmael’s exuberant goodwill, the flamboyant declaration of intent. No need to further alienate a potentially hostile audience.

**Mapple and Calvinism**

Seeing Mapple as one of Melville’s prime representations of authorship means moving beyond the longstanding notion that he is an unsympathetic Calvinist. T. Walter Herbert, one of the foremost explicators of Mapple’s supposed Calvinism, emphasizes Mapple’s dictum that obeying God means disobeying oneself, an idea he links to the Calvinistic belief in original sin, or the idea that all of humanity is sinful from birth— “In Adam’s Fall / We Sinned all.” However, a belief in the opposition between human will and God’s will was not limited to the orthodox. Precisely this point was at issue in Bellows’s 1847 sermon, “The Relation of Christianity to Human Nature,” which Melville may have read in pamphlet form. Bellows took for his text Romans 7:22–25, in which Paul laments the tension within him between the “law of God” and the “law of sin.” Bellows’s sermon paints a much more pessimistic picture of human nature than is typically associated with the period’s liberal Protestants. A leading light of nineteenth-century Unitarianism, Bellows nonetheless affirmed that in Christianity, “Man is pronounced alien from God”; that there is a “native proclivity to evil in man”; that “hereditary depravity” exists; and that the preacher must address a man “as a sinner, as
having a measure of corruption at heart, as having a false bias, as in need of a new birth.”

Although Bellows differed significantly from Calvinists in that he saw depravity as remediable in this life, his sermon shows how even liberal Protestants—in fact, the Melvilles’ own minister—could connect obeying God to disobeying oneself. Melville had sounded a great deal like Bellows when he wrote in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” that “in certain moods, no man can weigh this world, without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance.” Mapple’s sermon occupies this same theologically hazy territory of affirming “something, somehow like Original Sin.”

Mapple’s alleged “Calvinism” further crumbles when we see that one of the sermon’s most significant interpolations to the biblical story is a lengthy description of Jonah’s conscience. “Conscience” was associated in this period not with the orthodox, but with liberals, for whom it was a vital concept.

In the Bible, Jonah pays his fare, goes down into the ship, and takes a nap. In Mapple’s sermon, Jonah lies in his stifling cabin wracked by guilt. Watching the lamp, which hangs straight as the walls and floor tilt and twist, he sees an analogue to his soul: “Oh! so my conscience hangs in me! he groans, straight upward, so it burns; but the chambers of my soul are all in crookedness.” Mapple then describes how Jonah’s conscience tortures him, likening its pricks to the “steel tags” that drive deeper into the flanks of the Roman racehorse the more it plunges, and the stupor that overtakes him to that of a man who bleeds to death, “for conscience is the wound, and there’s naught to staunch it.”

Both the injurer and the injured, conscience registers the violation of moral law. Like the Quakers before them, nineteenth-century liberals saw conscience as a link between humans and God and thus as a moral authority able to trump the claims of traditional theology. Although the imperatives to disobey oneself and to heed one’s conscience might seem at odds, liberals reconciled them through a belief in the value of moral education to develop the conscience. Mapple, of course, does not pause in his story-driven sermon to work out this tension.

One might also argue that Mapple is a Calvinist because he asserts that Jonah appreciates God’s discipline—that he “feels that his dreadful punishment is just.” Herbert correlates this sentiment with Puritan divine Edward Reynolds’s notion that sinners should be willing “to justify him [God] that may condemn us, and be witnesses against ourselves.” While Mapple echoes this Puritan ideal, Jonah’s self-abasement does not point unambiguously to orthodox theology. The idea of interpreting one’s afflictions as the will of God and accepting them peacefully has classical roots as well. Seneca voiced such submission to divine decrees, lines Melville underlined in his
copy of L'Estrange: “in all the Difficulties and Crosses of my Life, this is my Consideration; Since it is God’s will, I do not only obey, but assent to it; Nor do I comply out of Necessity, but Inclination.” L'Estrange then asks, “[W]hat can be more pious and self-denying than this passage [. . .]?,” didactic commentary echoed in *Moby-Dick* when Mapple lauds Jonah for displaying “true and faithful repentance; not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment.” Seneca may not be grateful for his difficulties, but his assent to them is a gesture of humility and pious resignation much like that of Mapple's Jonah. Such parallels speak to the diverse intellectual and religious influences on Melville and the indavisability of typecasting his characters.

**A dream deferred**

It is impossible to forget that Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* in the shadow of the Fugitive Slave Law and his father-in-law's key role in enforcing it. After months of debate, Congress passed the law on September 18, 1850 as part of the Compromise of 1850 and, to the dismay of many Northerners, Judge Shaw upheld the law when the fugitive slave Thomas Sims came before his Boston court in April 1851. Despite the heightened antislavery passions surrounding this event, *Moby-Dick* does not condemn slavery outright. On this point Mapple is cryptic at best. Although his declaration that a preacher should kill, burn, and destroy all sin and “pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges” certainly seems to allude to defying the Fugitive Slave Law (and more specifically, Shaw), he himself does not do so. Nor does Ishmael pick up the baton. Although he has, as Rowland Sherrill puts it, “taken to heart” Mapple's exhortation to “preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood,” he is no abolitionist orator. Of course, one can always decide that the entirety of *Moby-Dick* is a veiled antislavery sermon condemning Calhoun and other proslavery Democrats who had hijacked the ship of state and were hurting it toward destruction. But why speak in code? It is frustrating that in an 1851 novel filled with preaching, no character condemns slavery outright.

Melville's disinclination to use his art to preach against slavery suggests a certain fatalism about the institution—a sense that abolitionist denunciations and the protests of unhappy African Americans could do little to change the status quo. As Andrew Delbanco has put it, the problem of slavery looked to many in 1850 “as intractable as conflict in the Middle East or AIDS in Africa seems today.” Such fatalism haunts the novel's two instances of African American preaching, moments when we might expect Melville to
betray an inkling of the cataclysm to come. When Ishmael stumbles into a “negro church” while hunting for an inn in New Bedford, all eyes turn to him, and he sees what seems “the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet” and a “black Angel of Doom [ . . . ] beating a book in a pulpit.” This lurid rhetoric reflects Ishmael’s pre-Queequeg paranoia about non-whites while hinting at retributive justice for white oppressors. There is a tacit logic at work in which the beating of black bodies leads to blacks beating the Bible, which threatens black violence against whites—a threat adumbrated when Ishmael comes under the congregation’s collective gaze. But what is the upshot of this experience? Nothing. Ishmael walks on, reflecting only, “Wretched entertainment at the sign of ‘The Trap’!” The “trap” refers most literally to the ash-box Ishmael stumbled over on his way in, which, coupled with the church’s “smoky light,” add up to the offensive joke that this black church is a hellish inversion of a white church. Even if the episode reflects only Ishmael’s racism and not Melville’s, it delimits the novel’s political scope. That is, in pausing early on at the black church, Melville opens up a metaphorical door on antislavery preaching, then shuts it, refusing to take his book in that direction. To do so would be “wretched entertainment” for his readers.

Melville reopens this door a crack with the novel’s other moment of African American preaching—Fleece’s sermon to the sharks, a scene that conveys an even bleaker perspective on slavery. A pastiche of Saint Anthony of Padua’s sermon to the fishes, Fleece’s sermon is, on the surface, a joke, played up through his dialect and constant swearing—the “dam noise,” “dam bellies,” “dam racket,” “by Gor!,” and so on. But his message is in earnest: “Now, look here, bred’ren, just try wonst to be cibil, a helping yourselves from dat whale. Don’t be tearin’ de blubber out of your neighbour’s mout, I say.” It is a plea for decency and compassion, though one soon acknowledged as futile: “No use goin’ on [ . . . ] dey don’t hear one word.” His irritation with the sharks represents legitimate black anger at white greed and racial injustice, which in 1851 Christian sermons seemed to have done nothing to ameliorate. But like the Angel of Doom’s sermon, Fleece’s comes to nothing. Missing the cultural subtext, Stubb approves of the discourse (“Well done, old Fleece!” [ . . . ] “that’s Christianity; go on”), and Fleece quits in exasperation. His benediction may be the novel’s most misanthropic line: “Cussed fellow-critters! Kick up de damndest row as ever you can; fill your dam’ bellies ’till dey bust—and den die.” And so his sermon becomes a curse.

Melville is so innovative and accomplished with the sermon form in *Moby-Dick* that it seems ungenerous to belabor the fact that he does not infuse the novel’s religious rhetoric with a call to political reform. With Ishmael’s philosophical, democratic sermonic voice and Mapple’s elaborately
rendered, sublime discourse on Jonah, Melville outshone his contemporaries in exploiting the sermon's rhetorical and artistic potential. His skilled reworkings of the sermon demystified preaching and argued for the moral authority of his own fictions, heterodox though they were. The antislavery message would have to wait until Benito Cereno—if one reads it as such. In the meantime, Stowe would take, as her premise for authorship, America's need for a mighty antislavery sermon.