After the Collapse: Herman Melville’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

AFTER THE COLLAPSE: HERMAN MELVILLE’S AND FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE’S EXISTENTIALISM

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This dissertation compares the works of Herman Melville and Friedrich Nietzsche. Melville and Nietzsche articulate similar arguments about the collapse of Christian metaphysics as a traditional philosophical system. Both authors recognize the moral, intellectual, and spiritual void this collapse revealed, and they craft similar texts that illustrate humanity’s emotional turmoil facing the abyss. In addition to these scenes of upheaval, Melville and Nietzsche promote the importance of the individual’s will to overcome the possible fall into psychological nihilism resulting from recognizing the emptiness of traditional religion’s teachings. Melville’s and Nietzsche’s striving against complete despair in the wake of this collapse demonstrates their “metaphysical nihilism,” an attitude that Mark Anderson, one of the first scholars to develop a comparative analysis of Melville and Nietzsche, identifies as a common viewpoint threading Melville’s literature and Nietzsche’s philosophy. This form of nihilism, while not without pain and anguish, embraces an existence that has been liberated from Christianity’s constraints. That is, the end of Christian metaphysics does not render existence meaningless; rather, to recognize the system’s collapse allows the individual to create and perform new meanings about life and reaffirms an existence that has been liberated from metaphysical influence.
Each chapter analyzes Melville’s and Nietzsche’s literature and philosophy as an existentialist response to the collapse of Christian metaphysics. Chapter one examines Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar belief that the interpretation of language could not provide a stable and unified meaning about existence, a direct challenge to the faith in the logocentric tradition promoted by Christian metaphysics. Chapter two addresses Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar skepticism about scientific advancement that purported to be a replacement for Christianity’s teachings. Rejecting both religious tradition and science as stable systems of knowledge, Melville and Nietzsche describe the actual world as a void. While they both share feelings of dread encountering this emptiness, they also express a bold attitude in their confrontation with the void. As part of their dauntless attitude facing the abyss, Melville and Nietzsche demonstrate a common will to overcome the despair and suffering encountering the void, and Chapter three analyzes Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar arguments about the role of the creative will to move humanity beyond nihilism.

By reading Melville’s and Nietzsche’s works with an existentialist lens, this dissertation extends Mark Anderson’s comparative study of the authors’ metaphysical nihilism, further situating Melville’s and Nietzsche’s literature and philosophy within the history of ideas. While identifying Nietzsche as an existentialist is not a controversial position, reading Melville’s literature as an illustration of existentialist philosophy creates a new interpretive lens to analyze the experimental forms that comprise his literary corpus. In addition, studying Melville’s work as a reflection of existentialism contributes to an emerging sub-field within Melville studies that analyzes Melville as a philosopher. Reading Melville as an existentialist provides not only an additional philosophical frame to study Melville’s literature but also adds a new voice to this philosophical movement that is often defined as a twentieth-century continental philosophy.
AFTER THE COLLAPSE: HERMAN MELVILLE’S AND FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE’S EXISTENTIALISM

BY

RYAN L. SMITH
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DEDICATION

For Jen:

For the ice cream cake and everything that has followed
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INTRODUCTION: AN UNEXPECTED PAIRING

When Herman Melville died on September 28, 1891, Friedrich Nietzsche had been silent for nearly two years. Nietzsche’s silence was a result of a long-term illness, but before losing his capacity to speak and write, he produced a burst of compositions, one final act of his creative will before falling into a lasting silence. It was during this time of intense creative output when Nietzsche further explored the implications of his notorious claim: “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” (120). This terse statement, first articulated with the publication of *The Gay Science* in 1882, marked the start of Nietzsche’s extended revolt against Christian metaphysics. For Nietzsche, this system of thought, serving as the foundation of Western knowledge and morality for centuries, no longer offered a viable philosophical framework to understand existence. Without this system, Nietzsche recognized that an intellectual and spiritual abyss had emerged, but he sought new possibilities for living in a world without God.

Across the Atlantic, Herman Melville experienced a similar descent into silence; however, unlike Nietzsche’s physical collapse into muteness, Melville’s literary quieting stemmed from his drift into literary obscurity. The famed author of adventure stories like *Typee* and *Omoo* was a forgotten poet at the end of his life, years of criticism and rejection driving Melville into the shadows of America’s literary memory. Despite this fall from public recognition, Melville never stopped writing. He continued his experimentation with verse in the last years of his life, self-publishing 25 copies each of *John Marr and Other Sailors with Some Sea-Pieces* and *Timoleon Etc.* Moreover, he reimagined one of the poems, “Billy in the Darbies,” into a work of prose, *Billy Budd, Sailor*, which remained unfinished at the time of his death.
These limited publications demonstrate Melville’s self-awareness that his texts no longer held the ears of his contemporary audience. In fact, one of Melville’s obituaries, appearing in *The Press*, describes his absence from the consciousness of American readers, stating that “Of late years Mr. Melville — probably because he had ceased his literary activity — has fallen into a literary decline, as the result of which his books are now little known. Probably, if the truth were known, even his own generation has long thought him dead, so quiet have been the later years of his life” (Leyda 836).

In retrospect, it is fitting that a shared silence united the final chapters of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s actual and artistic existence. Both writers devoted much of their literary and philosophical works to confronting the central problem of their age: the collapse of traditional Christian metaphysics as the central system of knowledge and morality of the West. This silence of the Christian God created tension that spooled across time, space, and language that would provide a remarkable transnational connection between an American novelist and German philosopher.

This dissertation argues that Herman Melville and Friedrich Nietzsche express a similar argument that the system of Christian theology had collapsed at the end of the nineteenth century, creating a moral, intellectual, and spiritual crisis that needed to be confronted and reconciled to avoid a fall into psychological nihilism. As philosopher Mark Anderson argues in “Melville and Nietzsche: Living the Death of God,” this recognition of the Christian God’s absence can be labeled as “metaphysical nihilism” (60-61). Despite living with this metaphysical nihilism, neither writer believes that the collapse of traditional Christian metaphysics engenders a meaningless existence. On the contrary, both Melville and Nietzsche see this void as both a
source of despair and rebirth for an individual’s existence. As part of the encounter with the void, Melville and Nietzsche engage in acts of “unlearning,” to borrow a phrase from Melville’s *Clarel*, the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual values Christian metaphysics teaches, promoting experimental forms and new interpretations about existence that move humanity beyond the ruins of the fallen system.¹ Ultimately, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s diverse texts express a similar worldview that rejects the belief in a metaphysical system governing an individual’s existence. This attitude anticipates a philosophical label that would emerge in Europe during the early part of the twentieth century: existentialism. Identifying Friedrich Nietzsche as an early existentialist is not a controversial claim; however, analyzing Herman Melville’s literature within the tradition of existentialism, as this dissertation will argue, serves as a major intervention for Melville studies.

Admittedly, the pairing of Melville and Nietzsche might appear strained because of two factors. First, and perhaps most glaring, no evidence exists demonstrating either Melville or Nietzsche was familiar with the other’s work. This fact eliminates the possibility to examine any direct textual influence one author had on the other. Second, each writer’s respective field—Melville the literary artist and Nietzsche the radical philosopher—could create argumentative pitfalls. With respect to the first pitfall regarding a missing textual connection between Melville and Nietzsche, this dissertation’s argument would be easier to make if such a link could be established; however, if we examine Melville’s and Nietzsche’s respective texts operating beyond direct textual influence, we gain a rich understanding about these experimental thinkers who crafted similar existentialist philosophies as a response to the intellectual and spiritual

¹ Early in *Clarel*, the title character states, “But here unlearning, how to me / Opes the expanse of time’s vast sea!” (1.1.80-81). In other words, the loss or “unlearning” of old beliefs invites new meanings to be discovered.
disruptions of their time. Moreover, we can challenge the conventional belief that identifies existentialism as a twentieth-century continental philosophical movement.

This approach has been adopted in previous comparative studies. For example, Karl Jaspers, a twentieth-century existentialist, establishes an important argument when he compares the philosophies of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, two authors who, like Melville and Nietzsche, share no direct textual influence. This point does not deter Jaspers from performing a comparative analysis; in fact, he argues the missing influence makes the comparison more enlightening:

In the situation of philosophizing, as well as in the real life of men, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche appear as the expression of destinies, destinies which nobody noticed then, with the exception of some ephemeral and immediately forgotten presentiments, but which they themselves already comprehended. As to what this destiny really is, the question remains open even today. It is not answered by any comparison of the two thinkers, but it is clarified and made more urgent. This comparison is all the more important since there could have been no influence of one upon the other, and because their very differences make their common features so much more impressive. Their affinity is so compelling, from the whole course of their lives down to the individual details of their thought, that their nature seems to have been elicited by the necessities of the spiritual situation of their times. With them a shock occurred to Western philosophizing whose final meaning cannot yet be estimated. Common to both of them is a type of thought and humanity which was indissolubly connected with a moment of this epoch, and so understood by them. (189-190)

This passage offers an important framework for this dissertation since Melville and Nietzsche have a relationship similar to that of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. As Jaspers argues, when two thinkers share a convincing intellectual connection, we should not reject a comparative study simply because no record of textual influence exists. Indeed, the absence of textual connection allows for new insights about the “spiritual situation” of the time to be examined. Like Jaspers’s comparative approach, this dissertation studies Melville and Nietzsche as a pair reacting to the “spiritual situation” they encountered by the end of the nineteenth century. While this
dissertation adopts Jaspers’s framework with his comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, my reading of Melville and Nietzsche adds a notable distinction to Jaspers’s comparison. Whereas Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are grouped as continental philosophers, reading Melville in tandem with Nietzsche presents a shift not only in geography but also with genre. In other words, the “spiritual situation” that informed Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s philosophies is not exclusive to nineteenth-century European philosophers; similar existentialist attitudes bubble through the imaginative literature of one of America’s greatest literary artists. Of course, Melville’s protean literary works have encouraged critics to expand their methods beyond traditional literary studies. In fact, there has been a renewed interest in Melville studies that reads Melville within the philosophical tradition, revitalizing a critical interest that first emerged during the Melville Revival of the early twentieth century.

**Melville and Philosophy**

Some might argue comparing an American literary artist and German philosopher is too difficult because the writers’ respective genres are too distinct; however, it is not a great leap to read Melville’s literature through a philosophical lens. During the Melville Revival, critics examined the spiritual and philosophical tensions that consumed many of Melville’s works. For example, F.O. Matthiessen, writing in *American Renaissance*, recognizes the intellectual depth of Melville’s prose works, emphasizing Melville’s masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, as a prime example of Melville’s philosophical as well as artistic capabilities. Specifically, Matthiessen’s reading of Captain Ahab’s “ungodly” and “god-like” traits reflects “Melville’s sensitiveness to what was happening in his time. Anyone concerned with orthodoxy holds that spiritual decadence of the nineteenth century can be measured according to the alteration in the object of its belief from
God-Man to Man-God, and to the corresponding shift in emphasis from Incarnation to Deification” (446). This interpretation reflects not only Melville’s recognition of a complex and deeply troubling philosophical and spiritual problem but also his ability to express this crisis through his literary form. Matthiessen notes that the embodied contradictions of Ahab illustrate the change, or as Melville views it, the collapse, of spiritual beliefs during the nineteenth century. According to Matthiessen, Ahab’s corrupted body and soul illustrate the spiritual disruption Melville experienced. Likewise, Lawrance Thompson’s Melville’s Quarrel with God offers a rich analysis about Melville’s spiritual crisis influencing his prose and poetry. Thompson, analyzing Melville’s poem Clarel, argues that while the verse “ha[s] little value; as an illumination of Melville’s morbid preoccupation with somber theological concepts, it is painfully convincing. Once more, in Clarel, he assembles a wide variety of attitudes towards Christian doctrine — attitudes which run the gamut from devout belief to scornful negation. The pervading tone, throughout, is skeptical, even agnostic” (335). Matthiessen’s and Thompson’s arguments demonstrate the importance of philosophical and theological topics in Melville’s literature. Both scholars agree that Melville’s reaction to the spiritual upheaval he felt informed the development of two of his most substantial works, Moby-Dick and Clarel.

This early scholarship shows the long-held interest about Melville’s philosophical interests for Melville studies, but this sub-field has taken on new importance in recent years. In fact, Brian Yothers asserts in his introduction to Melville’s Mirrors that “the last seven years have seen resurgence in scholarship on these matters” (xii). As part of this recent revival in scholarship focused on Melville’s spiritual and philosophical themes, critics have positioned Melville’s literary works within a variety of different philosophical traditions, studying Melville
both as an artist and a philosopher. According to Yothers, this renewed interest with Melville and philosophy has engendered new critical frameworks to read Melville’s literature within the history of ideas. Two recent essay collections illustrate the diverse range of philosophical interpretations of Melville’s literature. However, each collection articulates a distinct method for reading Melville’s works as philosophy.

In one collection, entitled *Melville’s Philosophies*, editors Branka Arsić and K.L. Evans offer a series of essays that examine the diverse philosophical arguments Melville develops in his literary works. Arsić and Evans note that critics often praise Melville for his “bucking literary convention, his restless experimentation with genre, and the continuous reinvention of his style,” but they fail to recognize Melville’s artistry accomplishing an “unprecedented philosophical achievement” (2). In other words, traditional Melville scholarship has done little to study Melville’s literary experimentation as the performance of an emerging philosopher. It has failed to see that Melville’s disrupting of literary form serves as his method to debate, to struggle, to discover, and to articulate his own beliefs about philosophical truths. Arsić and Evans’s collection attempts “to re-envision our understanding of Melville’s philosophical achievement,” moving the analysis beyond traditional literary interpretations (3). To that end, the editors offer this commentary about their method:

Readers of this volume will thus discover that our contributors do not mine Melville’s literature for philosophically interesting generalities or use the occasion of Melville’s writing solely in order to enact the history of ideas. On the contrary, they try to hear the philosophical arguments themselves — often very strange and quite radical — that Melville never stopped articulating and reformulating. (3)

This critical approach produces a diverse selection of philosophical interpretations for almost all of Melville’s corpus, ranging from the widely studied *Moby-Dick* to one of his short stories.
living on the margins, “The Apple-Tree Table.” This collection demonstrates the value of identifying Melville as a philosopher, reading him not simply as a renegade literary artist but also as a complex thinker intent on exploring humanity’s deepest intellectual, spiritual, and moral concerns. Arsić and Evans’s final comment about Melville’s perpetual articulation and reformulation of his philosophies provides a space for future scholarship reading Melville within philosophy: his literary form. As Arsić and Evans state in their introduction, the form of Melville’s “strange and quite radical” philosophies underwent a series of transformations, a consistent experimenting with literary structures and expressions that enact his philosophical themes. The analysis of Melville’s form becomes a central focus for the essays found in Arsić and Evans’s collection, offering a clear method to “hear the philosophical arguments themselves.”

Yet Arsić and Evans’s emphasis on Melville’s own philosophies limits any significant reading of Melville’s philosophies within the history of ideas. True, it is too difficult for a single essay to cover both Melville’s own philosophical arguments and to situate them within a tradition, and Arsić and Evans are wise to limit the scope of their essay collection’s focus. Yet, I believe their framework misses an opportunity to study Melville in conjunction with philosophy. Indeed, locating a specific philosopher within an intellectual context provides a lens to clarify the philosopher’s methods, beliefs, and values as extensions, syntheses, or rejections of the philosophical space they inhabit. Philosophers are situated within the systems of knowledge preceding their work, and considering their position within that intellectual history provides an important critical tool that illuminates the development and meaning of their philosophies. For example, in one essay from Arsić and Evans’s book, Samuel Otter’s “Melville, Poetry, Prints,”
Otter describes an effect of “poetic ekphrasis” posited by critic Murray Krieger, who asserts that the technique “transform[s] progression into simultaneity, linear movement into circular repetitiveness, and flux into eternal recurrence” (245; emphasis added). Otter’s reading of Krieger establishes an important connection between Melville’s poetry and philosophy, yet the argument is fundamentally incomplete since Otter’s interpretation does not mention Nietzsche or the history of ideas in relation to the concept of “eternal recurrence.” Here, we see the limitation of reading Melville’s philosophies absent its intellectual lineage. It is difficult to read the phrase “eternal recurrence” and not see Nietzsche’s name looming near the term. Even though Otter’s purpose is not to compare Melville and Nietzsche, employing a Nietzschean philosophical concept without some commentary produces several questions. How is Melville’s concept of eternal recurrence similar to or different from Nietzsche’s? What other techniques and forms do Melville and Nietzsche employ to illustrate similar philosophies? Why do these writers employ common forms to challenge or subvert traditional philosophies and values? Arsić and Evans’s collection does not stress such questions, limiting the scope and significance of their method. It is true that determining Melville’s own philosophies is an important step in reexamining his literature as philosophy, but critics need to use an approach that reads Melville in dialogue within the tradition, providing a more complete understanding of the intellectual situation that influenced Melville’s literary and philosophical arguments.

In a departure from the approach in Arsić and Evans’s book, Corey McCall and Tom Nurmi’s Melville Among the Philosophers presents a collection of essays that emphasize Melville’s place within the philosophical tradition. These essays, written by both literary critics and philosophers, trace the genealogy of Melville’s philosophies, “examin[ing] various
philosophical contexts for Melville’s work and tak[ing] seriously Melville’s writings as philosophy […] this book] is ultimately an intervention across two disciplines—literary studies and philosophy— that charts new paths into the work of one of America’s most celebrated authors, a man who continues to enchant and challenge readers nearly two centuries after his birth” (viii). Contrary to Arsić and Evans’s collection, the essays gathered in *Melville Among the Philosophers* provide an interdisciplinary method linking Melville’s literature to specific philosophical movements. For example, several essays study Melville’s literature as a response to classical philosophers such as Plato, while others demonstrate Melville’s similarities to late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century theories such as William James’s pragmatism.

Reading Melville “among the philosophers” provides a concrete method to examine philosophical problems by seeing them enacted in imaginative literature. This concept is explored in one of the essays published in McCall and Nurmi’s collection entitled “‘In Voiceless Visagelessness’: The Disenchanted Landscape of *Clarel*.” In the article, Troy Jollimore argues that literature’s imaginative play clarifies abstract philosophical arguments, producing a critical benefit for merging philosophy with literary studies. In promoting this benefit, Jollimore suggests, “literature is useful not so much for the purpose of evaluating arguments for logical flaws as for helping us understand how an argument, or an abstract idea, might actually manifest itself in lived experience, what types of behaviors and character traits will likely be associated with certain beliefs, or what difference differing intellectual stances may actually make in the business of living a life” (3-4). In other words, Jollimore argues that synthesizing abstract philosophical arguments with the actions of literary characters is valuable for both readers of
philosophy and literature. Specifically, a character’s performance can illustrate the sometimes-nebulous concepts of philosophical theories.

In sum, then, the interdisciplinary approach articulated in Jollimore’s essay—and practiced throughout the essays collected in *Melville Among the Philosophers*—challenges the constrained method developed in Arsić and Evans’s collection. The lack of interdisciplinary dialogue presents an incomplete reading of Melville’s philosophical literature, leaving his arguments to be seen as “very strange and quite radical,” to use Arsić and Evans’s own words. I recognize the value in first identifying Melville’s philosophical arguments on their own merit. The essays in *Melville’s Philosophies* reimagine Melville as a philosopher who uses literary art to enact his philosophical arguments. However, without placing Melville in the history of ideas, we view his philosophies as distant, elusive, confusing. Jollimore argues, correctly, that literature can illuminate the complex arguments of philosophy as the mind interprets abstractions into imagined experiences, the imaginative play with philosophy clarifying the challenges and joys of existence. Between these emerging critical methods in *Melville’s Philosophies* and *Melville Among the Philosophers*, I find that McCall and Nurmi’s approach to place Melville among the history of ideas offers a more complete analysis of his philosophies. Despite the differences in enacting this tradition, it is important to note that Arsić and Evans’s and McCall and Nurmi’s respective books both emphasize the form of Melville’s literature, and the importance that form plays enacting his philosophies. Melville, like Nietzsche, avoids promoting a systematic philosophy developed upon systematic proofs and logic; instead, both writers develop experimental texts that plays with art and language to illustrate the ambiguities of existence. The same method has been applied to Nietzsche’s experimental philosophical texts as well. For
example, Robert Gooding-Williams, writing in his book *Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism*, applies literary concepts to analyze the arguments Nietzsche develops in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Gooding-Williams asserts that “*Zarathustra* is a fiction that confuses its readers by offering them multiple but disparate clues about what genre it belongs to” (21). This statement positions Nietzsche’s philosophical work to be read as a piece of literature, an experimental form that mixes and merges different literary genres. These concepts, traditionally applied to literary works, transform Nietzsche’s philosophy into literature where the text’s form and conventions illustrates the meaning, more so than logical proofs and systematic analysis. In seeing these recent approaches that synthesize literary and philosophical analysis, it is more reasonable to perform a comparative study of Melville and Nietzsche.

**Pairing Melville and Nietzsche: The Void, Despair, and Nihilism**

These recent essay collections demonstrate the wide range of both philosophies and philosophers that relate to Melville’s literature. But why pair Herman Melville, an American novelist, with a German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche? As much as Jaspers argues in his essay comparing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Melville and Nietzsche express similar visions and reactions to the nineteenth century’s “spiritual situation.” Specifically, they believe the link between the actual and metaphysical world has been severed; this worldview disrupts the conventional philosophical and religious system that governed Western thought and experience for centuries: Christianity.

First published in 1882, *The Gay Science* contains Nietzsche’s most well-known and controversial proclamation that embodies his belief about this collapse of traditional Christian teachings: “God is dead” (120). This infamous claim has served, unfortunately, as an
oversimplification of Nietzsche’s entire philosophy. Indeed, this blunt argument ostensibly reveals Nietzsche’s embrace of psychological nihilism. This line of thought suggests that concepts like morality and truth no longer have any meaning without the presence and influence of the Christian God, thus leaving humanity in a state of nihilistic despair. However, a more accurate reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy develops from the arguments that come after his proclamation that “God is dead.” In other words, the terse statement is not the end, but rather a moment of transformation, a moment of crisis reconstructed into a renewal of life that is no longer influenced by Christian metaphysics. Specifically, the madman states:

“God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? There was never a greater deed — and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!” Here the madman fell silent and looked at his listeners; they too were silent and looked at him disconcertedly. (120)

This passage performs an act of intellectual reconstruction, a shift from trauma to transformation. The opening three statements reveal the death of an established authority, the Christian God who ruled Western morality and thought, but perhaps most haunting, Nietzsche’s madman places the responsibility on humanity: we are the ones who dispatched the deity. The recognition of humanity’s role with the death of God creates a traumatic thought, a moment of despair where the madman immediately asks, “how can we console ourselves?” The question, while evoking a moment of helplessness, does not mark the end of all thought and inquiry for the madman as new questions surface, new thoughts develop, new forms emerge.
The next two questions suggest a psychological crisis of denial, an attempt to erase this action, a desire to ignore the collapse and reject our role in the end of this system. The madman appeals to another authority, asking, “who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves?” It is important to note the shift in thought between questions. The first question asks for a different authority to rescue humanity from its actions, and the second appeals to natural element, water, to help cleanse the actors of their responsibility for the deicide, a playful inversion of baptism. As the madman’s thoughts unfold through the questions, they perform acts of recognition and recovery. That is, facing the death of God does not result in the end of all meaning; instead, this passing of Christian metaphysics shifts the importance of living a meaningful life to experience in the actual world. Moreover, the madman continues this shift away from the metaphysical, the inverted baptism with water ironically washing away our reliance upon a divine authority, allowing individuals to create new earthly meanings. After this reconstructed baptism, the questions and commentary transition from one of reliance on old forms to one seeking creation of new forms, salvaging fragments from the collapsed system of knowledge. Indeed, the following two questions emphasize acts of creation, yet they are not completely divorced from history, but rather repurposed to fit the current situation where God is dead, and humanity faces the void where this metaphysical figure once stood. The madman wonders what “holy games will we have to invent” and “do we not ourselves have to become gods” to find meaning in an apparently meaningless world after the death of God (emphasis added). The phrases “to invent” and “to become” suggest acts of creation and transformation as the response to the collapse, but these ideas do not arrive from a blank slate. The reconstructions maintain some intellectual genealogy to the past system, the transformation a degree of
separation from old ideas and forms rather than a complete erasure from memory. The madman’s language, based not simply on creative acts, contain metaphysical concepts such as “holy” and “gods” as part of this reconstruction, demonstrating the connective tissue to the collapsed system of Christian metaphysics. That is, the old systems are not completely removed from collective memory; they still appear in the actual world even though their conventional meanings are hollow. The fallen concepts are, however, revitalized through a creative inversion, an act that allows humanity to discover new perspectives and possibilities about living life without Christian metaphysics.

The madman’s final statement reveals a shift in time and vision, a reference point in history but with a forward-looking glance, an anticipation of the possible. Indeed, the madman’s worldview transitions from one of despair and subjection to an elevated status of wisdom and empowerment. The madman no longer seeks consolation nor a higher power to absolve humanity’s actions; instead, he recognizes that “there never was a greater deed” than the end of Christian theology. This declaration is followed by silence, both with the speaker and the audience. This silence intensifies not only the absence of a Christian God but also the anticipation of the next utterance, the next step in degree to remove humanity from the void. In the section's conclusion, the madman admits that he has “'come too early,'” his message arriving before the public’s ears are ready to accept the idea of God’s death. This silence and recognition are not the end, however, as the madman enters different churches, asking “'What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?'” (120). The madman, at the end of this radical shift in thought and journey to the edge of despair, wanders through the architecture of
old systems, seeing the ruins not simply as devoid of meaning; instead, he views the buildings as part of a reconstructed vision, a reimagined idea of old forms.

The next section of *The Gay Science* juxtaposes the spiritual crisis of “The Madman” episode with a sense of recovery. Nietzsche emphasizes the newly-discovered wisdom with a one sentence aphorism: “Mystical explanations — Mystical explanations are considered deep; the truth is, they are not even shallow” (121). This shift from the wandering intellectual and spiritual inquiry of “The Madman” to a concentrated aphorism of “Mystical explanations” demonstrates Nietzsche’s desire to examine the tensions that exist between contrasting perspectives. The death of God described in “The Madman” marks a moment of spiritual and intellectual despair since the entire construct of Western morality and ideas no longer provides meaning for the masses. The madman’s mind roams across different stages of recognition and nihilism, but ultimately arrives at a greater vision of yesterday and tomorrow: a meaningful life is created in an existence liberated from the teachings of traditional religion. In “Mystical explanations,” the aphorism provides a direct expression of this narrow truth, turning a complex and crisis-inducing argument into a memorable phrase, one that rejects mysticism and metaphysical truths.

In his book *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Walter Kaufmann asserts that Nietzsche’s claim that God is dead serves as a type of treatment for the sick and ailing human condition. According to Kaufmann, “traditional morality seems to Nietzsche ineluctably moribund — a dying tree cannot be saved by grafting new fruit on it. We may recall his conception of the philosopher as a doctor — a surgeon [...]. Under the circumstances, one could humour the patient and let him die, or put hypocrisy and flattery aside, speak up on behalf of one’s diagnosis, and ‘apply the knife.’ In other words, Nietzsche believed that, to overcome
nihilism, we must first recognize it” (109-110). Kaufmann’s analysis demonstrates Nietzsche’s belief that a transformation of self and society first develops from a recognition of a sick system, or that “God is dead,” before one can seek new meanings about existence. In other words, we need to encounter the void where Christian metaphysics once stood, so humanity can seek new truths about living a meaningful life. In brief, Nietzsche’s understanding of nihilism, asserted by his proclamation that God is dead, illustrates the complex acts of identification and reconstruction this rejection of Christian metaphysics stimulates. Kaufmann’s apt analogy of the dying tree demonstrates the importance of revaluation when dealing with nihilism. Once the system is found to be sick or dying, the hope of restoring new fruit to the decaying branches creates feelings of emptiness and despair. The surgeon’s knife can save us by removing parts of the tree, freeing the individual from deceitful and dishonest values that we have inherited.

Nietzsche’s proclamation that “God is dead,” evoking images of a void and feelings of despair, also can be found throughout Melville’s literature. While Melville never articulates the idea with such directness, Melville’s prose and poetry present visions of emptiness and dread comparable to those in Nietzsche’s philosophy. For example, Melville’s Clarel, published in 1876, reveals the perpetual philosophical struggle with the question of nihilism, attempting to avoid despair one encounters with recognizing the void of a divine authority. The poem is structured as a series of dialogues between a diverse cast of characters, each embodying a distinct ideology about faith and doubt. Clarel, a young theology student who hopes to revitalize his faith, plays the role of a quiet observer. He overhears the philosophical and spiritual debates that occur as the group of travelers wander amongst the sacred grounds and ruins of the Holy Land. In the poem’s closing cantos, Melville shifts the text’s focus to Clarel’s recognition of a
divine absence. In the “The Valley of Decision,” Clarel encounters a group of Jews performing burial rites. Clarel discovers that the two bodies belong to Ruth, his love interest from earlier in the poem, and her mother, Agar. With this realization, Clarel exclaims:

All swims, and I but blackness see. —
How happed it? Speak!”
“The fever — grief:
’Twere hard to tell; was no relief.”
“And ye — your tribe — ’twas ye denied
Me access to this virgin’s side
In bitter trial: take my curse! —
O blind, blind, barren universe!
Now am I like a bough torn down,
And I must wither, cloud or sun! —
Had I been near, this had not been.
Do spirits look down upon this scene? —
The message? Some last word was left?”
“For thee? no, none; the life was reft
Sudden from Ruth; and Agar died
Babbling of gulls and oceans wide —
Out of her mind.”
“And here’s the furl
Of Nathan’s faith: then perish faith—
’Tis perjured! — Take me, take me, Death!
Where Ruth is gone, me thither whirl,
Where’er it be!” (4.30.86-106)

This dialogue, spoken in the hallowed grounds of the graveyard, conveys similar themes of nihilism that Nietzsche threads throughout the madman’s recognition of the death of God. Dashes fracture these utterances, visually and linguistically revealing the breaking of Clarel’s values and faith. Indeed, the dashes become more frantic after he observes the physical bodies of Ruth and Agar. They anticipate Clarel’s spiritual death, suggesting his broken belief in a metaphysical world. Arriving after the first dash, Clarel asks, “— art thou, God? — But ye —” (4.30.86-7). The structure of these phrases between the dashes illustrates Clarel’s moment of
spiritual breaking. The question evokes an existential crisis in the loss of God, the marked being verb “art” stressing God’s absent being as Clarel sees the burial of Ruth and Hagar. The following fragment heightens the collapse of Clarel’s spirituality, as Clarel can only muster a fractured utterance, one starting with a possible shift away from despair — “But” — before the idea is cut off by another dash, suggesting his silent acceptance of a lost divinity. Clarel’s silence anticipates a complete thought that reads like a Nietzschean aphorism: “All swims, and I but blackness see.” This final statement reveals Clarel’s recognition and acceptance of an absent God, a new truth that no metaphysical world exists — it is only “blackness” — despite “all [that] swims” around Clarel. Melville frames an important contrast between Clarel’s natural and metaphysical realities. The world of appearance still swims even as metaphysical truth collapses into an empty blackness. However, the actual world still embodies an active appearance even with a metaphysical essence having been lost. While this commentary is filled with despair and dread at the collapse, Clarel, even for a fleeting moment, sees the actual world filled with some type of vibrant action despite his faith being lost to a “blind, blind, barren Universe.”

Melville intensifies Clarel’s emptiness by emphasizing a point of silence. Clarel hopes that some delayed message from Ruth, “some last word” remains written for him, one final hope to bring him back from the void. The terse response — “For thee? no, none—” illustrates Clarel’s abandonment and increased despair. While this interaction focuses on a final act of communication between Clarel and Ruth, there is an implication that no metaphysical words of wisdom are available to comfort Clarel. Clarel’s quest for faith ends with death and despair in the place where spiritual belief was long ago born and once thrived. Clarel’s experience reveals
the end of Christianity’s system of morality and knowledge, the bricks and mortar of millennia
now reduced to rubble and ruin. By journey’s end, Clarel has nothing.

Despite this scene’s bleakness, it is important to note that Ruth’s death and Clarel’s
collapse do not mark the end of the poem. In the cantos following Ruth’s death, Clarel, like
Nietzsche’s madman from The Gay Science, finds himself in exile, as his earlier traveling
companions have all moved on, leaving Clarel to witness a reenactment of an Easter ritual
performed on Jerusalem’s streets. As Nietzsche’s madman wanders through the Christian
churches after his proclamation that God is dead, Clarel, too, has a chance to witness a sacred
place and ritual, one of the most important in Christian theology. In the poem’s penultimate
canto “Via Crucis,” Clarel observes the convergence of many faiths for this sacred ritual, the
speaker noting that “in varied forms of fate they wend — / Or man or animal, ‘tis one: / Cross-
bearers all, alike they tend / And follow, slowly follow on” (4.34.41-44). Clarel, however, “lag[s]
after,” witnessing the masses of faith-keepers “follow[ing]” tradition (4.34.44-45). Like
Nietzsche’s madman, Clarel has attained new wisdom, but at this point, he recognizes his
inability to affirm and share it with others; like the madman’s experience, a failure to
communicate emerges between the individual and the masses, a distance between those still
wedded to old systems and the individuals who, to use a Nietzschean concept, “overcome” them.
As he follows the train of believers, Clarel “murmurs” to himself, “‘They wire the world — far
under sea / They talk; but never comes to me / A message from beneath the stone’” (4.34.51-3).
Clarel’s final two lines of speech in the poem evokes a similar idea to Nietzsche’s madman who
acknowledges that “‘he has come too early’” (120). The madman asserts, “deeds need time, even
after they are done, to be seen and heard. This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest
of stars” (120). Clarel experiences this same feeling of delay, but it falls on the inability to receive truth from those still believing in the collapsed system of Christian metaphysics. The masses still talk, but Clarel does not receive the message. For Clarel, the message is dead, left buried beneath the stone, the sacred language of Christianity collapsed, incommunicable, leaving behind a world stripped of metaphysical truth. While this canto is not the end of the poem, it is the end of Clarel’s physical presence in the text, his exit anticipating the “Epilogue” that shifts in meter, tone, and perspective.²

In his essay, “Platonic and Nietzschean Themes of Transformation in Moby-Dick,” Mark Anderson devotes a section of the essay to the nihilism that threads through Clarel. According to Anderson, “Clarel ends without resolution [...] The work is so pervaded by doubt that this final intimation of heaven, or something like it, does not redeem the whole. The questions posed by Clarel concerning whether the decline of faith must lead to negation and doom anticipate the Nietzschean problem of the possibility of affirmation in the face of nihilism” (37). Anderson suggests that Clarel’s “Epilogue,” one that can be read with some “intimation of heaven,” obscures rather than clarifies a definitive resolution to the poem’s philosophical inquiry since the echoes of Christianity in the “Epilogue” contrast with the scenes filled with overwhelming doubt.

In short, Melville does not offer a concrete solution to the philosophical problems that Clarel

² In the “Historical and Critical Note” to Clarel, Bezanson analyzes Melville’s choice to employ iambic tetrameter with only minor “divergences” in several “short lyrics” and “the expanded five-beat line of the Epilogue” (569). Bezanson concedes that “one can dislike the cramping effect of endless octosyllabic lines inevitably linked one to the other, as a good share of the critics do. But there can be no question of appropriateness. It is an essential part of the poem that the verse form is constricting and bounded, that the basic movements are right, hard, constrained [...]. Only under high emotion (Celio at the Arch, Mortmain by Sodom, the narrator’s Epilogue) do the lines flow forward with a sustained sense of destination [...]. The tragedy of modern man, as Melville now viewed it, was one of constriction” (568-569). Melville’s experiment with this meter, while at times unsuccessful, provides him a method to reveal his existentialist vision about the “constricted” vision of the world in the wake of lost Christian metaphysics. In addition, he shifts the meter to highlight the contrast in both ideas and movement by altering the meter to a “five-beat” pattern in the Epilogue, revealing the narrator’s “higher insight.”
experiences, but rather the poem performs the act of transformation exhibited in Nietzsche’s philosophy. Indeed, the missing resolution of *Clarel’s* conclusion anticipates Nietzsche’s own beliefs about systems and philosophy. According to Kaufmann, “systems, says Nietzsche, are good insofar as they reveal the character of a great thinker — but this goodness is independent of the truth of the system [...]. No one system reveals the entire truth: at best, each organizes one point of view or perspective. We must consider many perspectives, and a philosopher should not imprison his thought in one system” (81). *Clarel’s* unresolved conclusion, then, suggests Melville’s rejection of creating a new system to replace the collapse of Christianity; rather, the openness and diverse thoughts expressed throughout the poem anticipate Nietzsche’s beliefs about avoiding an “imprison[ment]” of ideas, seeking, instead, a range of perspectives to be explored, questioned, performed, and reconstructed to create new possibilities about living a meaningful life.

Melville’s and Nietzsche’s passages reveal a similar vision of spiritual crisis at the end of the nineteenth century. Clarel and the madman not only recognize the absence of the Christian God but also experience similar feelings of despair. In other words, this loss of metaphysical influence creates emotions filled with dread and hopelessness, forcing these individuals to question the meaning of everything, opening the potential fall into psychological nihilism. This nihilism serves as the crux that unites Melville’s and Nietzsche’s visions of the “spiritual situation” that invites a comparative study of the two authors. Moreover, it is the specific type of nihilism they share that strengthens their connection. Indeed, the loss of Christian metaphysics is not the end of all meaning for Melville and Nietzsche; they strive to create new meaning for existence in the face of nihilism, reflecting a bold response to the void.
Metaphysical Nihilism

In the study of Melville’s literature among philosophers, Mark Anderson has emerged as one of the foremost scholars comparing Melville’s literature and Nietzsche’s philosophy. While other critics such as Yonghwa Lee have offered Nietzschean readings of Melville’s work, Anderson’s comparisons seek to identify common philosophical threads uniting the American novelist and German philosopher, allowing these distant writers to share a reciprocal interpretative space. A philosopher by trade, Anderson’s comparative study elevates the philosophical arguments performed by both authors at the expense of developing a detailed analysis of their literary craft. However, he does not simply take Nietzsche’s philosophy and blanket it over Melville’s literature, as Lee does in his study. Anderson situates Melville and Nietzsche on equal grounding, reading their texts as a shared philosophical response to the decline of Christian metaphysics. For example, his most recent book, *Moby-Dick as Philosophy*, analyzes Melville’s novel in “the context of the history of philosophy conceived as the rise and fall of a certain influential variety of Platonism, which rise and fall we may characterize in Nietzschean terms as the life and death of God; and I explore all this with reference to the different reactions, as exemplified particularly by Melville and Nietzsche, to the nihilism that looms on the horizon of these intellectual and spiritual revolutions” (iii). Throughout his studies, Anderson employs Plato as an intellectual nexus from which Melville’s and Nietzsche’s

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3 See Lee’s article “Saying Yes to Life, Even to Death: A Nietzschean Reading of Billy Budd’s Acceptance of Death.” Lee applies Nietzsche’s philosophy about “self-affirmation” to analyze Melville’s novella. Ultimately, Lee identifies Billy as a Nietzschean hero “endeavor[ing] to overcome pessimism […] Billy affirms rather than negates will to life even though he remains uncertain of finding the ultimate truth about life” (65). This approach, while enlightening, limits the transnational dialogue between Melville and Nietzsche that Anderson’s comparative method presents. Specifically, Lee employs Nietzschean philosophy as a critical frame to analyze *Billy Budd*, and while this frame presents a new interpretation of the text, there is little in the way of a comparison between Melville and Nietzsche as writers.
philosophies develop, an analytic framework that allows Melville and Nietzsche to be studied comparatively. Anderson’s critical approach provides a valuable method since it locates both authors within the history of ideas and creates space for Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts to dialogue with one another even though no direct textual influence between the authors exists.

When framing Plato as a source of influence, Anderson is careful to note Melville’s and Nietzsche’s mixed receptions of the Platonic tradition. For example, in his essay “Platonic and Nietzschean Themes of Transformation in Moby-Dick,” Anderson asserts that many of Moby-Dick’s themes are indebted to Plato’s Phaedo “though Melville would never have identified himself as a Platonist, he was nonetheless an admirer and enthusiastic student of Platonism” (31). Nietzsche, on the other hand, is more forceful in his criticism of Platonism. According to Anderson, “Nietzsche’s rejection of the Platonic-Christian tradition, and of metaphysics more broadly, is summed up in his notion that ‘God is dead.’ Melville never put the point so succinctly, but that he took seriously the possibility of a godless universe is clear from his work […]. Melville’s philosophy as expressed in Moby-Dick has been labelled ‘inverted Platonism,’ which strikes me as an appropriate expression, for we may read the novel as a work informed by Melville’s proto-Nietzschean intellectual inclinations, and Nietzsche once referred to his own philosophy as an expression of ‘inverted Platonism’” (32). Melville’s and Nietzsche’s “inverted Platonism” reflects a disruption of Platonic-Christian metaphysics, a philosophy elevating a metaphysical author that exists beyond the actual world. While Nietzsche is stronger with his rejection of this system, Melville’s skeptical mind acknowledges “the possibility of a godless universe.” Their inversion of Platonism, then, made them question all forms of knowledge and truth they had inherited, taking both writers to the brink of psychological nihilism. It is here, at
the precipice of the void, where Anderson identifies the central thread uniting Melville and Nietzsche. Their rigorous and skeptical minds force them to examine the implications of an absent divinity. On the surface, these examinations about a godless universe create the impression that Melville and Nietzsche are psychological nihilists, who believe that without divinity life and existence holds no value or meaning. However, Anderson argues that Melville and Nietzsche shared a more nuanced philosophy about the “possibility” of life without a metaphysical influence, a type of nihilism he refers to as “metaphysical nihilism.”

This phrase presents a range of interpretive challenges to navigate. First, defining metaphysics evokes a seemingly endless series of meanings and systems to consider. As I read metaphysics in relation to Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism, I see that phrase as embodying Nietzsche’s well-known aphorism, “God is dead.” More specifically, the God Nietzsche references belongs to the traditional hierarchical metaphysical system found in Christianity, the Absolute author inscribing meaning into the physical world.

Michel Harr, writing in *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, confirms this position about Nietzsche’s treatment of metaphysics, describing that Nietzsche’s use of the term as:

> The most “popular,” and least “technical,” definition of all: metaphysics is the belief in “another world,” in a world that is ideal and true, or in his own term, it is “Platonism.” In one sense he prolongs the Kantian critique of all cognition that claimed to reach beyond the realm of the phenomena, but naturally he rejects the reestablishment of faith in a transcendent world as a postulate of pure practical reason. The Kantian noumenon, or Idea, amounts for him to one of the last stages of the extinction of the Platonic sun. (ix)

Moreover, Harr argues that Nietzsche’s desire to move past “the extinction of the Platonic sun” would allow for a “[return] fully to the earth, reaffirming the uniqueness of the world as the Greeks had done before Plato and Socrates. But such reaffirmation is impossible or in vain without the extremely complex and elaborate critical approach that Nietzsche names *genealogy,*
and without a new thinking of the sensible world and the unfolding of appearances” (xi). To put it another way, for Nietzsche—and this dissertation—metaphysics represents both the belief and the privileging of another world beyond human experience. Nietzsche’s philosophy aims not only to disentangle existence from this ideal realm but also to reimagine the actual world no longer influenced by this faith in a metaphysical world. As Harr argues, Nietzsche seeks “a new thinking” about existence that embraces the possibilities of life without concern of a metaphysical reality. This is an important point to consider with Nietzsche’s, and Melville’s, nihilism. The word, of course, creates the impression that, with the collapse of traditional Christian metaphysics, the physical world is devoid of meaning. Without the influence of an ideal metaphysical world, humanity is lost and has no system to understand its role in the universe.

However, Melville and Nietzsche fight against a belief that existence is meaningless without a hierarchical metaphysical system. In “Melville and Nietzsche: Living the Death of God,” Anderson divides Nietzsche’s views on nihilism into two distinct forms: metaphysical nihilism and psychological nihilism. According to Anderson, “‘psychological nihilism’ is the condition of despair or depression resulting from the assumption that without metaphysical truth the world is valueless, and life is not worth living. Nietzsche approves of the first type of nihilism, metaphysical nihilism, and we may, I believe, fairly label him a nihilist in this sense of the word. Of the second type of nihilism, psychological nihilism, Nietzsche vehemently disapproves, and he struggled to resist it himself” (60-61). Harr confirms this point, arguing that “Nietzsche is alleged to have rung in the reign of the uniformity of all points of view, the triumph of the ‘total absence of meaning,’ and of ‘completed absurdity.’ Such an interpretation,
which is Heidegger’s, actually goes against the explicit meaning of Nietzsche’s analyses, since he intends to overcome nihilism by positing a new hierarchy” (54). While I disagree slightly with Harr’s point about Nietzsche’s desire “[to posit] a new hierarchy,” his point, in conjunction with Anderson’s argument, provides a crucial definition to understand Nietzsche’s nihilism. Nietzsche does not assert that the end of a traditional Christian metaphysical system created a world that existed in “‘total absence of meaning,’” leading to “despair or depression.” Nietzsche recognizes that individuals need to confront despair as part of this lost belief, seeing it as step towards creating, expressing, and experiencing new interpretations about life without metaphysical influence.

With respect to Melville’s treatment of nihilism, Anderson frames his analysis with a mixture of Melville’s biographical experiences and literary productions. Unlike Nietzsche, Melville does not develop a specific theory about types of nihilism. Instead, Anderson asserts that Melville’s literature reflects his own experiences with psychological and metaphysical nihilism. Indeed, Anderson surveys Melville’s travel journals of the 1850s that informed Melville’s epic poem, *Clarel*. For Anderson, these texts reveal Melville’s growing “disenchantment with the world” and increasing psychological nihilism (66). In fact, Anderson asserts that “no man for whom the Christian God is alive and well could have written *Clarel*” (68). However, Anderson argues that Melville, before experiencing years of failure and torment, was able to avoid falling into complete despair about the possibility of an absent Christian God.

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4 See Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, pp. 79-95 for his summary about Nietzsche’s hesitation about offering new systems to replace old paradigms that had collapsed. Kaufmann argues Nietzsche saw “systems [as] blinders [and] systems kep[t] one from questioning certain premises” (87). If any “system” could be defined, Kaufmann asserts Nietzsche’s emphasis on “the experiment” would be a close substitute for a completely developed system (87). Nietzsche’s experimentation “involves testing an answer by trying to live according to it,” affirming experience in material existence over the desire to find meaning on a metaphysical plane (89).
Specifically, Anderson believes that when Melville wrote *Moby-Dick*, he “did not, however, suffer from the absence of any God or gods; he did not regard the universal void as a ‘barrenness’” (69). Instead, Melville “confronted the world as a Nietzschean Ja-sager,” a yessayer affirming all parts of existence (69). In other words, Melville’s life and literature illustrate the psychological and metaphysical nihilism that Nietzsche examined in his philosophy. As he composed *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s disruption of Christian metaphysics suggests a playful and joyful critique, anticipating Nietzsche’s philosophy that “affirm[s] all parts of existence” after confronting the void. However, as Melville grew older and he disappeared into literary obscurity, his attitude fell towards the despair of psychological nihilism. For Anderson, it is the nihilism that runs through Melville’s life and Nietzsche’s philosophy that makes them strong candidates for a comparative philosophical study. Anderson’s analysis focuses largely on the theme of nihilism that runs through Melville’s personal experiences and his literature as the primary topics of his comparison with Nietzsche, leaving the analysis of Melville’s literary craft to the world of literary critics.

Literary critics who have identified Melville’s nihilism tend to focus on it as a motif that appears throughout Melville’s literature. For example, J.J. Boies, delivering a speech entitled “Existential Nihilism and Herman Melville,” argues that Melville’s nihilism helps “categorize Melville’s view of life [and] is the opposite side of the coin of transcendental idealism” (313). In addition, Joyce Carol Oates surveys Melville’s literature to attempt to reconcile *Billy Budd* with Melville’s “nay-saying” earlier works (117). Oates argues that the clear dualism that structured many of Melville’s earlier works seemingly disappears at the end of his career with *Billy Budd*, noting how Melville’s embrace of “negation” at the end of the book appeals to his late reading of
Schopenhauer and Buddhist texts. For Oates, this “drift towards nihilism, or Buddhism” does not suggest Melville’s swapping of one metaphysical system for another; rather, she insists that *Billy Budd* demonstrates a shift in Melville’s attitude about escaping this suspended state between competing visions of good and evil (129). That is, when one negates this old system of knowledge, new truths about existence can emerge.

It is important to note that despite this theme of nihilism running through Melville’s work that neither he nor Nietzsche abandoned the belief that some form of meaning or truth exists. To see the world as meaningless would lead to psychological nihilism, an attitude that both Melville and Nietzsche strive against. Instead, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s text reflect metaphysical nihilism that rejects the privileging of a hierarchical metaphysical realm over the material world. The challenge to the Platonic-Christian metaphysical system creates possibilities for new meanings and perspectives to emerge from the void. Indeed, in *Moby-Dick as Philosophy*, Anderson examines Ishmael’s, and by extension, Melville’s beliefs about knowledge and truth. Anderson asserts that “despite what I have called Ishmael’s relativistic tendencies, like Melville he is at some level an objectivist, which is to say that he regards truth as existing independently of the human mind. Beliefs, customs, and traditions depend on personal subjectivities, but objectivism has to do with the source of truth, not the source of humans’ beliefs about the truth” (13). Anderson qualifies this claim, asserting “that Ishmael and Melville were objectivists at some level” (14). This point allows Anderson to argue that “the epistemological position that exercised the most influence on their worldviews is not objectivism but skepticism. Skepticism, notoriously, may follow from an objectivist realism, for the fact – assuming that it is a fact – that
truth is ‘out there’ independently of our minds raises the question whether we can even make cognitive contact with it” (14).

In sum, then, Mark Anderson’s scholarship has provided a valuable steppingstone for a comparative analysis of Melville’s literature and Nietzsche’s philosophy. His careful reading of the authors’ metaphysical nihilism provides a philosophical framework to analyze their work. Of course, literary critics have also analyzed nihilism in Melville’s work, but Anderson’s philosophical background has created a new frame to examine this attitude by reading Melville within the history of ideas. Indeed, Anderson situates Melville and Nietzsche in the same philosophical space, comparing their responses to the death of the Platonic-Christian tradition they believe occurred during the nineteenth century. Employing Nietzsche’s nuanced definitions of nihilism, Anderson traces similar traits in Melville’s life and literature. While both writers drift towards the despair attached to psychological nihilism, Anderson believes Melville and Nietzsche sought new truths about life in the absence of Christian metaphysics. Melville and Nietzsche both believe that truth exists, but they seek perspectives that contrast with one another and previous ideas, pursuing new truths through the conflict. This creative attitude in pursuit of truth underlies the metaphysical nihilism that Melville and Nietzsche share. Both writers believe that individuals must first recognize the void where Christian metaphysics once stood. While facing the abyss stirs emotions and uncertainty, individuals can enact and reimagine new forms of knowledge from the ruins of collapsed systems.

Anderson’s scholarship has provided an important framework for studying Melville within a philosophical context. However, I do see some limitations with his method. For example, in his book, *Moby-Dick as Philosophy*, Anderson does not attempt to provide a detailed
analysis of Melville’s novel and its philosophical contributions; rather, his book focuses on Melville’s role as a type of philosopher, “a thinker-artist” in the tradition of Plato and Nietzsche. Anderson’s distinction is important since it constrains his reading of *Moby-Dick* to its philosophical “reflections” rather than an in-depth examination of how these philosophies manifest themselves in Melville’s crafting of the novel (ii). In other words, Anderson’s reading of these “reflections” contextualizes Melville’s novel within the history of ideas, but his arguments do not develop from a close reading of the Melville’s craft. Instead, his commentary surveys the history of philosophy as it appears throughout Melville’s novel.5

Anderson’s disinterest in comparing Melville’s and Nietzsche’s respective literary style and craft appears in another essay, “Melville and Nietzsche: Living the Death of God.” The following passage demonstrates a recognition of the differences between each writer’s style. But Anderson offers little commentary about the writers’ craft and their philosophical attitudes:

> Was Melville, then, an atheist or anti-Christian? It is hard to say. Probably he could not have said himself. Or, like many thoughtful individuals, he would have provided different answers at different times, or mutely refrained from answering altogether. But my point is less about Melville’s personal beliefs than about his insight into the spiritual condition of the West in his day. He understood that God is dead, and the only reason he did not formulate the fact in precisely these terms is that his literary proclivities ran more toward the labyrinthine than the aphoristic. (68)

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5 Anderson structures his book as an imitation of Melville’s novel: he includes the Etymology and Extracts sections before he reviews Chapters 1-135 and the Epilogue. While a clever way to examine Melville in relationship to Plato and Nietzsche, his survey of each chapter limits the possibility of deeper discussions that could link Melville’s philosophy and his literary craft. See pp. 60-65 for as an example of this limitation. In these pages, he analyzes Chapters 26 and 27 of *Moby-Dick*, both entitled “Knights and Squires.” His analysis of Chapter 26 develops Melville’s attitudes towards “democracy” and compares them to Plato’s and Nietzsche’s arguments about the same topic. In Chapter 27, Anderson references Stubb to examine the conflict between science and faith. However, he does not discuss Melville’s choice to title Chapters 26 and 27 with the same title. How does this literary choice that resets the novel’s development reflect Melville’s philosophies as they relate to either Plato or Nietzsche? Anderson does not address these types of questions in his study.
In this commentary, Anderson weaves Melville’s skeptical attitude with Nietzsche’s views that God is dead, but his point about their writing styles reads more as an afterthought rather than a developed point of study. Indeed, Anderson does not offer more analysis beyond contrasting Melville’s “labyrinthine” prose with Nietzsche’s “aphoristic” style. In fairness, Anderson’s purpose is to pair Melville and Nietzsche as thinker-artists who share similar philosophies about “the spiritual condition of the West” at the end of the nineteenth century. Their similar and different styles do not align with his central goal of comparing the authors, so it is understandable why he does not pursue this critical thread. Anderson’s choice to emphasize the “thinker” over the “artist” with his comparison, however, invites a new point to consider in comparing Melville and Nietzsche. Indeed, Nietzsche’s philosophies borrow and experiment with literary styles, such as his use of the novel’s form in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and adding poems and songs to works like *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. Of course, Melville’s literary art transformed over the course of his career, starting with adventure novels like *Typee*, experimenting with the novel form with *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence Man*, and ending as a poet of epics with *Clarel* and collections of short poems like *Timoleon*, *Etc*. While Anderson is correct to contrast Melville’s “labyrinthine” prose with Nietzsche’s “aphoristic” style, their crafts and styles as writers encourage another area to examine Melville and Nietzsche as both artists and philosophers.

Indeed, several lines of inquiry emerge from Anderson’s valuable comparative analysis of Melville and Nietzsche as similar “thinker-artists.” For example, Anderson’s studies often emphasize *Moby-Dick* and *Clarel*, which can be viewed as Melville’s most philosophical works that probe the deepest questions about spirituality, language, and truth. But where else might
Nietzschean ideas echo in Melville’s literature? Finally, pushing beyond a brief comparative statement about different stylistic “proclivities,” how do Melville’s and Nietzsche’s respective literary styles enact “the nihilism that looms on the horizon of these intellectual and spiritual revolutions,” as Anderson asks in his book? In other words, what similarities of style and form do Melville and Nietzsche employ to illustrate the intellectual and spiritual upheaval they experienced at the end of the nineteenth century? How do their experiments with aesthetics situate or anticipate other philosophical movements within the history of ideas?

**America’s First Existentialist**

To answer these questions, this dissertation extends Mark Anderson’s study of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism. Specifically, this dissertation will continue to explore where this type of nihilism appears in Melville’s and Nietzsche’s works, but it will offer a more detailed reading of their craft and artistry, adding more literary depth to the “philosophical reflections” Anderson offers in his studies. In addition, this dissertation further situates these similar “thinker-artists” within the history of ideas. Broadening Anderson’s approach that reads Melville’s and Nietzsche’s literature and philosophy as responses to Plato, this dissertation will offer additional intellectual nodes that locate Melville’s and Nietzsche’s literature and philosophy as more direct responses to the philosophical, scientific, and artistic ideas of the early nineteenth century. Finally, this dissertation will analyze Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar experimental expressions they employ in their respective texts. This final point invites critics to identify Melville and Nietzsche as antecedents to a twentieth-century philosophical movement: existentialism.
Identifying Melville and Nietzsche as existentialists is not without concerns, however. First, existentialism is typically viewed as a twentieth-century philosophical tradition, but critics such as William Barrett have traced existentialism’s roots back to the nineteenth century. In *Irrational Man*, Barrett draws a line between Nietzsche’s, as well as Soren Kierkegaard’s, philosophies to those of Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, German philosophers who are seen as early voices of twentieth-century existentialism. In comparing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Barrett argues that “ideas are not even the real subject matter of these philosophers […] their central subject is the unique experience of the single one, the individual, who chooses to place himself on trial before the gravest questions of his civilization. For both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche this gravest question is Christianity, though they were driven to opposite positions in regard to it” (13). Barrett’s comments illustrate two important points for this dissertation’s comparative study of Melville and Nietzsche as existentialists. As Barrett notes, Christianity creates “the gravest question” for nineteenth-century existentialists like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, a concern that informs most of Melville’s literature. In addition, even though Nietzsche and Kierkegaard develop “opposite positions” to this crisis with Christianity, their existentialism is united by shared emphasis on the individual’s “unique experience” in existence. This is important to note since existentialism does not offer a singular and fixed system to respond to the spiritual and intellectual crises the individual encounters. There are layers and shadings to different existentialist responses to the intellectual crises they encounter; indeed, we might say that there are many rooms in the house of existentialism. However, a common thread running through the tradition focuses on the individual who has been cast away from the
comforts of conventional knowledge and social connections. This image of the exiled individual serves as a unifying theme for existentialists like Melville and Nietzsche.

Connecting Nietzsche with existentialism is not a new claim, but offering a deep analysis of Melville’s place within the tradition has not been attempted. For example, in his book *Existential America*, George Cotkin surveys the history of existentialism as part of America’s intellectual development. Cotkin’s analysis largely focuses on the migration of European existentialism to America’s shores during the first half of the twentieth century, but he devotes his first chapter to tracing existentialist philosophy back to some of America’s earliest writers, including Melville. However, Cotkin limits his examination of Melville’s literary craft and its performance of existentialist themes because Cotkin is a cultural historian, not a literary critic. Despite the brief analysis of Melville’s work, Cotkin’s book positions Melville as an existentialist and suggests that Nietzsche would have been an intellectual companion for Melville. When surveying William James’s philosophy, Cotkin describes James’s desire to understand existence with “God as an ally,” but Cotkin notes that “in opting to have God and faith on his side, James sought to avoid the God-bereft world of Melville, or of his own contemporary, Fredrich Nietzsche” (21). Cotkin’s appeal to Nietzsche strengthens the juxtaposition between James’s belief that “God [was] an ally” and Melville’s vision of “the God-bereft world,” but remarkably, Cotkin does not provide any additional commentary about Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar vision of the world, a point that would make his reading of Melville as an existentialist even more convincing!

In the field of literary criticism, several critics have connected Melville’s literature with existentialism. For example, J.J. Boies’s speech “Existentialism Nihilism and Herman Melville”
offers the most direct survey that covers the existentialist themes running through Melville’s work. This valuable speech, however, is constrained by its genre. Boies’s panoramic review of existentialism and Melville’s literature establishes broad connections, but a speech format does not allow for in-depth analysis of key scenes or comparisons. Moreover, Boies, while referencing nineteenth-century authors like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, decides to make direct comparisons between Melville and twentieth-century existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, taking the twentieth-century philosophies and retroactively framing his analysis of Melville’s literature. While this approach is illuminating, Boies misses an opportunity to read Melville with a contemporary proto-existentialist like Nietzsche and to see Melville’s work as an anticipation of the movement. In addition, Stanley Brodwin has traced the “existentialist concepts” threaded throughout Clarel, offering one of the few pieces of criticism reading Melville’s literature as a reflection of existentialist philosophy (375). Of course, Brodwin limits this method of analysis only to Clarel, inviting scholars to ask whether “existentialist concepts” can be found in other parts of Melville’s corpus, an inquiry this dissertation pursues.

It becomes easier to identify Melville and Nietzsche as early existentialists if we do not confine the movement to geography and epoch—such as Europe during the first half of the twentieth century—but rather as a prevailing mood and a response to intellectual, cultural, social, political, and spiritual conditions that bubble up across borders and time. In Critique of Religion and Philosophy, Walter Kaufmann defines existentialism “not [as] a philosophy but a label for several different revolts against traditional philosophy: the so-called existentialists share a preoccupation with dread, death, despair, and dauntlessness” (19). In addition, Kaufmann, writing in his introduction to Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, extends the definition of
existentialism, stating that it “is not a school of thought nor reducible to any set of tenets” (11). However, Kaufmann generalizes existentialism as “the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life – that is the heart of existentialism” (12). In other words, despite the fuzziness surrounding the definition of existentialism, writers associated with the movement share a dissatisfaction with inherited systems of knowledge. These systems, according to existentialists, promote worldviews that are “remote from life.” In addition to this dissatisfaction, Kaufmann stresses the “revolt” against these traditions, illustrating the movement’s philosophical disruption to the foundations of traditional beliefs and knowledge.6

Beyond these attitudes, critics studying existentialism have examined the relationship between this philosophy and experimentation with artistic forms. For example, William Barrett describes the moods shared between twentieth-century existentialists and modern artists, noting their desire to challenge and unsettle conventional knowledge and aesthetic forms to create new meanings about existence. According to Barrett, both twentieth-century existentialists and modern artists try to sever previous connections with “Western tradition,” an act exiling these philosophers and artists and creating “the sense that everything is questionable, problematic” (64). As a result, many of the “themes” permeating existential philosophy and modern art reveal “the alienation and strangeness of man in his world; the contradictoriness, feebleness, and contingency of human existence” (64). Even though Barrett’s chapter surveys only twentieth-century existentialists and modern artists, his analysis suggests a similar spirit of rebellion that unites existentialism’s mood and the modern art’s disruptive aesthetic form, a similarity that this

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6 Twilight of the Idols, one of Nietzsche’s final books, includes an appropriate subtitle for this attitude: How to Philosophize with a Hammer.
dissertation argues Melville and Nietzsche performed during the nineteenth century. Likewise, Hazel Barnes develops an extensive argument synthesizing existentialism and literature in her book *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility*. Grouping Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus as “humanistic existentialists,” Barnes compares each writer’s distinct existentialist philosophies, but this book’s great achievement is the thorough analysis of each writers’ aesthetic theories and literary contributions (3). According to Barnes, “Humanistic existentialism […] claims that […] every man is free, but most men, fearing the consequences and responsibilities of freedom, refuse to acknowledge its presence in themselves and would deny it to others. So radical a shift in point of view can be effected only when accompanied by a reorientation of all human attitudes” (3). Moreover, Barnes identifies these writers’ embrace of “imaginative writing” to deliver their philosophies (4). This is an important point when linking existentialism with aesthetics. Indeed, one form of “revolt” against traditional philosophy would be to craft philosophical arguments through imaginative genres, as these three humanistic existentialists do. This point offers an intriguing line of inquiry to follow with respect to Melville and Nietzsche. Barnes’s argument, like Barrett’s in *Irrational Man*, demonstrates an overlap between existentialist philosophy and artistic performance. While a central point of this dissertation is to read Melville among the philosophers, it will also create a space to read Nietzsche among the literary artists. As Barnes demonstrates in her study of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus, these humanistic existentialists blur the line between philosophy and aesthetic, serving as a type of rebellion against the conventions of philosophy. Like these twentieth-century writers, Nietzsche enacts his philosophical arguments with imaginative forms such as poetry and an experimental novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Existentialism, then, strengthens the pairing of
this dissertation’s reading of Melville and Nietzsche. Not only does the movement allow us to read Melville’s literature as part of a philosophical mood, making him America’s first existentialist, but also invites a reexamination of Nietzsche’s artistic achievements.

Therefore, this dissertation will argue that Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism locates them as early existentialist philosophers. They reject the system of Christian metaphysics that places greater importance on an imagined world that exists beyond the plane of appearance. Melville and Nietzsche understand that this revolt against an established form of knowledge produces a void. Of course, the authors recognize that facing this abyss evokes feelings of distress and despair. Indeed, without established forms and systems of knowledge, the individual is cast out into an unfamiliar world. Moreover, the comfort and familiarity of the Christianity’s interpretive signs are lost. Now, the world becomes a series of performative masks and gestures, leaving individuals in a suspended state of uncertainty and anxiety. However, Melville and Nietzsche believe that humanity must experience these chaotic and conflicting emotions to transform despair into greater wisdom. For both writers, artistic expression offers humanity a space to confront, reconcile, and reimagine these moments into higher insights about existence that have been liberated from Christian metaphysics.

**Chapter Summaries**

Each chapter situates Melville and Nietzsche within the history of ideas, framing the chapter’s argument as a reaction to an intellectual node that both Melville and Nietzsche shared. This method allows for an analysis of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts within the history of ideas and illustrates their similar responses to their intellectual ancestors. With respect to text selections, I primarily cite texts that come from Melville’s and Nietzsche’s mid-to-late periods.
While I occasionally reference passages from their early writings, I rely more on the texts from their middle and late periods because it was during this similar period in each writer’s career when their metaphysical nihilism becomes a more pronounced theme; in addition, during this part of their respective careers, they both experience a similar decline in recognition from their contemporary audience, leading to despair and distress for both writers.

Chapter one begins with the Word. For centuries, the Word, or logocentrism, provided humanity with a fixed system to understand existence. Even at the start of the nineteenth century, writers such as American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson argue that metaphysical essence or spiritual reality influences humanity’s understanding of existence. Moreover, Emerson asserts that words borrow their meaning from this hidden essence. Emerson serves as a common intellectual ancestor for Melville and Nietzsche, and while they receive his writings with a mixture of criticism and appreciation, neither Melville nor Nietzsche could accept the faith that Emerson saw individuals having in the Word’s stability. Melville and Nietzsche develop their central challenge to the Word by illustrating the impossibility of interpreting a fixed and stable meaning from language. Even though Melville is not a trained philologist like Nietzsche, both authors examine the inconsistencies of language and its possible misunderstandings. For Melville and Nietzsche, this instability of interpretation opens a new line of inquiry: if language cannot offer stable meaning about natural objects, can sacred texts provide certain truths about our existence? Melville and Nietzsche pursue this question, often arriving at similar answers that the same inconsistencies with interpreting common language are found with holy writing, a conclusion striking against the authority granted to the Bible.
Ultimately, Melville and Nietzsche view these uncertainties and contradictions of the Bible’s teachings as the occasion for the collapse of belief in Christian metaphysics.

Next, Chapter two compares Melville’s and Nietzsche’s characterization of the actual world that no longer has a connection to a metaphysical reality. This chapter analyzes Melville’s and Nietzsche’s sympathetic responses to nineteenth-century scientific advancement, which reaffirms their worldviews that Christian metaphysics could no longer offer humanity a viable interpretation about existence. Of course, neither Melville nor Nietzsche are to be considered advocates for science as a replacement for Christianity’s teachings since the authors reject the idea of a fixed interpretation about existence promoted by any system of knowledge. To examine this complex relationship with science, the chapter first examines Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar reception of Charles Darwin, a name both Melville and Nietzsche employ as a representation of scientific advancement. While Melville and Nietzsche are skeptical of Darwin, they could not ignore his theories that further eroded the foundation of Christian metaphysics as an authoritative system of knowledge. Since neither traditional religious teachings nor science offered a stable system of philosophy to understand existence, Melville and Nietzsche consider the possibility that existence might be a silent abyss. The chapter compares Melville’s and Nietzsche’s reactions to encountering this void. While they both express feelings of despair confronting these fallen systems, Nietzsche generally exhibits a gleeful celebration that humanity has been liberated from traditional philosophy’s constraints, whereas Melville’s brooding about Christianity’s emptiness makes him drift to the edge of psychological nihilism. Despite these different responses, Melville and Nietzsche both understand that humanity needs to confront the void with an intrepid attitude to overcome a collapse into a meaningless existence.
Finally, Chapter three examines Melville’s and Nietzsche’s embrace of active creation to resist a fall into psychological nihilism. Indeed, it is “the Act,” to use the words of Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, an intellectual ancestor whom both Melville and Nietzsche revered for his artistic talents, that enables humanity to overcome the dread and despair felt after confronting the void. The chapter analyzes the theatricality that informs Melville’s and Nietzsche’s experimentation with their literature and philosophy. For example, both Melville and Nietzsche develop scenes that focus on the role of the mask. While the mask conceals Melville’s and Nietzsche’s criticisms and challenges against Christian metaphysics, it also underscores their existentialist attitudes that privileges interpretations of the actual world over seeking the hidden essence of things. A general attitude associated with existentialism is that existence precedes essence, but Melville and Nietzsche complicate this point by suggesting the possibility that lifting the external mask of things will reveal not its essential existence, but rather the expansive void. Such a belief could risk a fall into psychological nihilism, but Melville and Nietzsche resist this collapse by transforming the actual world into a series of aesthetic performances. For Melville and Nietzsche, the aesthetic engages an individual’s creative will to interpret and enact a meaningful life without the constraints of Christian metaphysics. It is the aesthetic performance, then, that allows humanity to overcome the descent into psychological nihilism and to attain a joyful wisdom of existence.
CHAPTER ONE: THE DEATH OF THE WORD

Introduction

One must admire Friedrich Nietzsche’s ability to upend centuries of the Western spiritual and intellectual tradition with a simple sentence: “God is dead.” The statement’s directness suggests a type of joyful arrogance in Nietzsche that he could be so disruptive with three simple words. Herman Melville, even though he never read Nietzsche’s statement, could sense God’s absence, but his mind and artistry would not allow for such joyful directness of expression. Instead, Melville’s examination about this divine loss twists and turns over the concerns and implications about an existence without metaphysical influence. Despite their different forms of expression and emotional responses, both authors recognize that the connection between the actual and divine world had dissolved, leaving humanity with the possibility that not only is this link to the metaphysical realm lost but also that the divine world might not even exist. In other words, Nietzsche, then, was an avowed metaphysical nihilist; as a practical matter, so too was Melville, even if his metaphysical nihilism was implied rather than stated.

This chapter argues that Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism developed from a common concern about language. Specifically, Melville and Nietzsche reject the belief that language can convey metaphysical truth with absolute certainty. Both writers identify the inherent instability with interpreting language and apply that point to destabilizing the authority granted to the Bible. In fact, Melville and Nietzsche often reimagine biblical images and passages to illustrate the inconsistencies of Christian metaphysics, the once fixed and dogmatic
system collapsing into a series of disparate and fragmented ideas. As a result, the inconsistencies of the Word reflect a silencing of the Christian God, an intellectual and spiritual crisis that would inform Melville’s and Nietzsche’s emerging existentialist philosophies.

**Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Linguistic Idealism**

Early in the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson sought a new vision for the United States, a country at the dawn of its first full century of existence. As part of his philosophy, Emerson advocates for a revitalized spirit for the young nation, and he believes that nature serves as the source for this spiritual restoration, a place where “we return to reason and faith” (29). Emerson articulates these views in *Nature*, an extended treatise about the relationship between the natural world and spiritual enlightenment. Emerson divides the text into eight sections, each one spiraling towards a “perfect sight” for humanity to recognize its shared spirit with nature (29).

“Language” is the fourth section, placed between chapters analyzing material concepts like “Nature” and “Commodity” and the concluding chapters that describe metaphysical ideas such as “Idealism” and “Spirit.” This choice reveals Emerson’s belief that language opens the door for individuals to transcend the actual world towards higher planes of existence. In other words, Emerson believes that traces of the metaphysical world are embedded in nature and language.¹ Specifically, he asserts that “nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a single, double, and threefold degree. Words are signs of natural facts. Particular natural facts are symbols of

¹ Nina Baym succinctly describes Emerson’s philosophy: “Human language is essentially God’s language, Emerson believes, translated into the medium of speech, both oral and written” (916). For Baym’s discussion on Emerson’s philosophy of language and its relationship to Melville’s fiction such as *Mardi, Moby-Dick, Pierre, The Piazza Tales,* and *The Confidence-Man*, see “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction,” pp. 916-921.
particular spiritual facts. Nature is the symbol of spirit” (35). Emerson suggests that words are embedded with spiritual residue, a metaphysical essence shaping the meaning of language. This argument rests upon Emerson’s claim that “every word which is used to express some moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance.

*Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*; *Spirit* primarily means *wind*” (35). Emerson extends this view with several analogies, arguing that “every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind […] An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch” (35). Emerson emphasizes the significance of metaphor as a conduit to divine wisdom. According to Emerson, these metaphors carry over a spiritual essence into these natural objects. F.O. Matthiessen describes Emerson’s theory of language as serving dual purposes. Specifically, Matthiessen asserts that Emerson “regard[s] language as the vehicle for concrete facts” while also functioning as a “symbol, the bridge that enabled man to pass from concrete appearance to spiritual reality” (32). In other words, Emerson’s theory rests upon belief in two distinct planes: the actual world and the metaphysical world. Moreover, he asserts that language’s varied uses can describe a natural object’s physical existence and hidden essence because of the power of metaphor and symbol.

Emerson extends this argument drawing a direct line that runs through language, Reason, and Spirit. Emphasizing the link between words and the divine, Emerson argues:

This universal soul, he calls Reason: it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men […] That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call spirit. Spirit is the creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language, as the FATHER. (36)

Emerson suggests the universality of this concept. It has been a part of humanity across time and space; across different eras, people have believed language is embedded with traces of divinity,
our words rooted with a metaphysical essence. Emerson’s theory of language follows the tradition synthesizing words and spirituality. Indeed, Emerson, without citing the Bible, employs metaphors that link his philosophy with Christian metaphysics, terms like “the Father” and “Spirit” echoing passages from the Old and New Testaments.\(^2\)

It is important to note that Emerson’s omission of biblical scripture reflects his own rejection of conventional Christian metaphysics. In *Transcendental Hermeneutics*, Richard Grusin analyzes Emerson’s resignation from the ministry because of “the higher criticism of the Bible, in its focus on factors such as authorship, date, place of origin, circumstances of composition, and historical credibility” (4). Grusin argues that Emerson’s interpretive method “liberate[d] [Emerson] from the historical and institutional authority of the Unitarian interpretation of Scripture” (4). According to Grusin, “The Lord’s Supper” sermon and “Divinity School Address” reflect Emerson’s challenge to traditional interpretations of scripture. However, even though he was freed from the governance of one system of knowledge, Emerson’s new philosophies still emphasize a belief in a spiritual reality existing beyond the material world. Indeed, his arguments stress language’s role as a mediator between existence and a metaphysical plane. While Emerson moved outside Unitarianism hermeneutics, his new philosophies of language maintain an underlying belief in idealistic metaphysics shared with Christianity. Emerson’s idealism, one emphasizing the belief that words represent spiritual facts, serves as a point of contention for Herman Melville and Friedrich Nietzsche. Melville and Nietzsche, both

\(^2\)“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (*King James Version*, Genesis 1:1). “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*King James Version*, John 1:1).
readers of Emerson, challenge this belief about language. Throughout their respective works, Melville and Nietzsche illustrate the impossibility of Emerson’s idealism, the messiness of words blocking a stable understanding of a metaphysical plane, if one exists at all. Melville and Nietzsche suggest that the fragmented meaning of scripture reveals a possibility that a spiritual reality may be non-existent, a direct challenge to the fixed and authoritative teachings of Christian metaphysics. Unlike Emerson’s desire to resuscitate a flawed idol, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s challenge to the Word undermines the stability of traditional Christian teachings.

Melville and Nietzsche reject the belief that language could provide a unifying point where the apparent and metaphysical planes could coexist. As Elisa New argues in “Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*,” Melville’s literature develops from the “most formidable intellectual and spiritual challenge of the early nineteenth

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3 In both his public and private writings, Melville expressed ambivalence towards Emerson’s philosophies, shifting between comments of censure and points of praise. In 1849, after attending one of Emerson’s lectures, Melville wrote to publisher Evert Duyckinck, “Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson’s rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in my own halter than swing in any other man’s swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow” (Leyda 292). In *The Confidence Man*, Melville parodied the worldviews espoused by Emerson and his disciple, Henry David Thoreau. According to Carl Van Vechten, “Let us remember Melville’s struggle for faith and the collapse of his career as we approach ‘The Confidence-Man’ [...]. Melville simply carried Brook Farm to the deck of a Mississippi steamboat [...]. Emerson is the confidence man, Emerson who preached being good, not doing good, behaviour rather than service” (421). Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, received Emerson’s writings in a generally more positive light. Indeed, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche identifies Emerson as one of the “masters of prose” of the nineteenth century (90). Recent scholarship has developed a clearer portrayal of the Emerson and Nietzsche relationship, examining the implications of influence shared between authors. For example, Irena Makarushka’s *Religious Imagination and Language in Emerson and Nietzsche* examines the religious and linguistic echoes linking Emerson and Nietzsche. David Mikics develops a more philosophical comparison in his book *The Romance of Individualism in Emerson and Nietzsche*. Mikics traces Nietzsche’s inheritance of Emerson’s philosophies, enacting the history of ideas as a framework, as he uses Stanley Cavell’s reading of Emerson and Jacques Lacan’s reading of Nietzsche to examine how the role of individuality and asceticism figured into each writer’s philosophy. Benedetta Zavatta’s *Individuality and Beyond* has examined Nietzsche’s reception of Emerson with a more critical eye, employing a “systematic” and “philological” approach to determine how influential Emerson was for Nietzsche (16). In Zavatta’s work, she interrogates Nietzsche’s notes and marginalia to develop a more nuanced reading of Nietzsche’s reception of Emerson. Nietzsche’s tension with Emerson’s idealism can be seen in a note responding to Emerson’s essay, “History.” Zavatta cites Emerson’s comment describing the “one mind common to all individual men” and Nietzsche’s note that responds “No! But it is an ideal” (189).
In other words, “disjointed Scripture” cannot offer a unified meaning about either the apparent world or a metaphysical plane. Melville sees metaphors as a central problem with language’s ability to convey fixed interpretations. Similarly, in his analysis of *Moby-Dick*, Doran Larsen argues that the novel illustrates “the central and centrally ambiguous problem of Western philosophy – the problem of analogy – as it plays itself out within the context of bourgeois Christian ideology” (19). Larsen, like New, asserts that Melville recognizes that language’s mutability disrupts the efficacy of metaphors and comparisons to deliver fixed truths about Christianity. This attitude serves as a critique of Emerson’s treatment of metaphor and logocentrism. Melville does not view metaphor as a bridge to spiritual enlightenment; rather, Larsen argues, it is an “ambiguous problem” that suggests a possibility that metaphysical truth not only remains elusive but also might be nothing but a silent void.

Likewise, Nietzsche expresses similar skepticism about the stability of the Word. In his book *Nietzsche: Psychologist, Philosopher, Antichrist*, Walter Kaufmann analyzes Nietzsche’s challenge to the idea that both a phenomenal and metaphysical world coexist. According to Kaufmann, “the doctrine of two lives and worlds is a symbol of a double standard. There is, as it were, one world to be known by reason and another to be believed by faith. There is, in Luther’s words, ‘the wisdom of our flesh’ and ‘the wisdom of the word of God.’ Nietzsche, like Hegel, denied any such dualism” (354-355). These double truths, one operating on the earthly plane and the other in the metaphysical plane, are an impossibility for Nietzsche. Kaufmann’s commentary

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4 New applies this historical point to her reading of *Moby-Dick*. She develops her argument by comparing Ishmael and Ahab as representatives of Hebraism and Hellenism, respectively, asserting that “Herman Melville is Hellenism’s severest American critic, and this greatest book [is] a sustained defense of the Hebraic ‘letter’” (282).
suggests that Nietzsche’s response developed from a concern with a “symbol[ic]” view of two worlds providing two forms of knowledge. Nietzsche finds this worldview problematic because it relies on acts of interpretation. According to Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche sees interpretation as “a highly personal and creative affair” (38). In other words, the word of God cannot provide a unified meaning about existence since the countless creative acts of interpreting the Word undermines its ability to maintain a fixed and authoritative metaphysical truth. Neither Melville nor Nietzsche accepts the argument that language can offer a stable path from the world of appearance to a spiritual reality. Critics like New and Larsen suggest that Melville believes that the complexity of metaphor and analogy muddies the ability to extract unified truth from scripture. Nietzsche, too, rejects the belief that language acts as a conduit for humanity to transcend the apparent world to spiritual truth.

As we consider these critics’ arguments, it becomes clear that both Melville and Nietzsche are skeptical that language could allow humanity to connect with a metaphysical plane, a core belief of Christian teachings. Moreover, they recognize that the challenge to interpret sacred language may also suggest the complete absence of a metaphysical realm. This controversial position reflects a tenet of Nietzsche’s philosophy, a point he asserts at the beginning of *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*: “Another form of recovery […] is to sound out idols […] and as regards to the sounding-out of idols, this time they are not idols of the age but *eternal* idols which are here touched with the hammer as with a tuning fork” (31-32). Nietzsche asserts that his philosophy performs simultaneous acts of destruction and recovery. Nietzsche’s “philosophiz[ing] with a hammer” shows his willful revolt against the traditional philosophy of Christian metaphysics, yet Nietzsche does not view this
method as a simple destructive act. To strike the idols with his hammer reveals their hollowness. Upon hearing their emptiness, the individual has a chance of “recovery” from the shallowness of the idol’s teachings. While Nietzsche’s striking of these traditions is direct and antagonistic, Melville’s brooding skepticism does not allow for such forceful hits against the tradition of Christian theology. He challenges the Word, recognizing that God may be absent, but his comfort and conviction about the death of God does not rise to Nietzsche’s intensity. To use the language of Nietzsche himself, Melville strikes the idols with a “tuning fork” whereas Nietzsche employs “the hammer.” Despite the different forcefulness of their strikes, both authors hear the hollow echo of Christian metaphysics, reflecting their common belief about the death of the Word.

Even though skepticism towards religion has an extended intellectual history, by the end of the nineteenth century, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s intense interrogation and challenge to the Word laid the foundation for future existentialist themes. Writing in Irrational Man, a seminal study of existentialism, William Barrett asserts that “the central fact of modern history in the West – by which we mean the long period from the end of the Middle Ages to the present – is unquestionably the decline of religion” (24). Barrett notes that this extended history of religious “decline” upended “the deepest strata of [humanity’s] total psychic life” because it “was the loss of a whole system of symbols, images, dogmas, and rites which had the psychological validity of

5 In Melville: His World and Work, Andrew Delbanco cites a journal entry by Nathaniel Hawthorne that “captures perfectly Melville’s uneasy suspension between faith and skepticism, a yearning that gave him the air of distractedness that some found trying” (253). In his journal, Hawthorne observes that Melville “will never rest until he gets a hold of definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we are sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential” (252-53).
immediate experience, and within which hitherto the whole psychic life of Western [humanity] had been safely contained” (24-25). Barrett’s argument suggests that the loss of sacred signs of communication disrupted the comfort individuals found in traditional religious teachings. The collapse of these sacred symbols and images reflects the death of the Word. While this realization would be catastrophic for most of humanity, this moment of isolation and upheaval serves as “one of the major stages in [humanity’s] psychic evolution—as Nietzsche, almost alone among nineteenth-century philosophers, was to see” (24). Barrett’s comments add a valuable historical point to contextualize Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism within the development of existentialism. That is, the dissolution of Christianity’s sacred signs undermines the system’s ability to offer stable meaning about existence. Of course, the Word embodies one of these sacred symbols that had framed humanity’s spiritual and intellectual worldviews for centuries. Humanity, unable to use this system to interpret their “immediate experience,” feels isolated and lost in an unfamiliar world.

Barrett argues that Nietzsche is one of the first nineteenth-century philosophers not only to recognize this collapse but also to view it as a moment for humanity’s “psychic evolution,” an opportunity to develop new insights about existence that has been liberated from Christian metaphysics. Both themes are associated with existentialism, and this chapter will argue that Nietzsche is not the only nineteenth-century philosopher to have this attitude. Herman Melville shares a similar vision about the decay of Christian metaphysics. Like Nietzsche, Melville’s early existentialist attitude develops from his belief that language’s ambiguity cannot reflect spiritual facts, as Emerson’s idealism and the Word suggests. Melville’s and Nietzsche’s
rejection of this type of idealism has an important implication: if we cannot hear spiritual facts, it is possible that divine truth might not even exist.

**Inconsistent Interpretations**

Melville and Nietzsche recognize the challenge to interpret a stable meaning from not only common words but also sacred texts. Language’s ambiguity leaves interpretations open or fragmented, limiting reason’s ability to extract a consistent meaning. This attitude, of course, challenges the idealism expressed in Emerson’s writings. Indeed, Emerson argues that “Reason,” “language,” “the spirit,” and “the FATHER” are part of a unified system (36). For Melville and Nietzsche, this clean synthesis between “Reason,” “language,” and the divine is an impossibility due to interpretive inconsistencies. These challenges undermine the stability of the Word, shaking the foundation of Christian metaphysics.

Melville and Nietzsche first illustrate this challenge by appealing to the field of philology. Nietzsche, a trained philologist, praises the field for providing an interpretive approach to navigate the messiness of texts. Specifically, in the preface to *Dawn*, Nietzsche argues that “philology itself is never so easily over and done with anything whatsoever; it teaches to read well, which means to read slowly, deeply, backward and forward with care and respect, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate fingers and eyes” (7). To read like a

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6 Appropriately, the history and definition of “philology” is open to different interpretations. Whereas Nietzsche defines philology as an act of “slow reading,” James Turner, writing in his book *Philology*, chronicles the historical development of the field. Turner notes that “the word philology in the nineteenth century covered three distinct modes of research: (1) textual philology (including classical and biblical studies, ‘oriental’ literatures such as those in Sanskrit and Arabic, and medieval and modern European writings); (2) theories of the origin and nature of language; and (3) comparative study of the structures and historical evolution of languages and language families” (x). Turner also emphasizes the importance of “history to be the key to unlocking the different mysteries [philologists] sought to solve” (x). According to Turner, “philologists understood history not only as comparative but also as genealogical. They aspired to find historical origins in a very specific sense of the term: to uncover lines of descent leading from an ancestral form through intermediate forms to a contemporary one” (x).
philologist does not guarantee a clear and consistent interpretation, however. In fact, Nietzsche’s opening statement establishes the point that philology is a system of thought that never truly ends. To practice philology, or slow reading, requires infinite patience and an understanding that the process will not deliver a fixed and satisfactory truth; in other words, to be a philologist is a Sisyphean task. However, despite the perpetual toil, the value of slow reading develops from an invitation to continue the process and form new interpretations. Rather than accepting the Word superficially, the philologist’s work never ends; they examine texts “backward and forward,” extracting possible interpretations from language’s ambiguity. Nietzsche’s treatment of philology illustrates his concern about drawing stable meaning from fuzzy interpretations, but he views this instability as a potential benefit to move past traditional forms of philosophy. Slow reading embraces different interpretive directions, and these new pathways strike against the logic of Christian metaphysics. Humanity cannot reason their way to higher insights through the Word as the tradition suggests. That is, existence is filled with contrasting perspectives and experiences, all of which need to be “read slowly [...] with doors left open.”

For Nietzsche, philology undermines acceptance of absolute meanings from the traditional systems of philosophy. Nietzsche expresses this concern in one of his early essays, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” where Nietzsche devotes parts of his argument to describe the problem with metaphors. Nietzsche argues, “it is this way with all of us concerning language: we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities” (1174). Nietzsche’s argument shows the gap of knowledge between existence and essence, and he asserts that division is a
result of language itself. Specifically, metaphors fail to “correspond” directly or accurately with the “original” essence of the thing they ostensibly describe. According to Nietzsche, our metaphors do not bubble up from the object’s hidden essence. Nietzsche asserts that this faith in language deludes humanity’s understanding about the “things themselves.” This line of reasoning challenges Emerson’s arguments about words serving as signs of natural facts. For Nietzsche, there is no correspondence between language and the natural objects humanity encounters and to believe that such an overlap exists deceives humanity’s understanding of the actual world.

Nietzsche then shifts his analysis of language to a larger philosophical inquiry about truth. According to Nietzsche, people have mistaken both language and truth to be certain and concrete concepts, arguing that:

A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (1174)

Nietzsche describes the traditional attitude about language that viewed words as “fixed, canonical, and binding” monuments to meaning. But Nietzsche disputes this viewpoint, describing truth as nothing more than a series of linguistic comparisons that are unstable and evolve over time. Maudemarie Clark, writing in her book *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, argues that “On Truth and Lies” reflects a young Nietzsche’s beliefs about language and truth. According to Clark, “Nietzsche calls our utterances ‘metaphors’ because they fail to ‘correspond to the original essences,’ that is, to things-in-themselves. To use language metaphorically, he seems to assume, is to say something that fails to correspond to the actual nature of an object, but
communicates nevertheless how that object appears given certain working of the human imagination” (78). Clark’s reading confirms Nietzsche’s recognition that language, and more specifically the metaphor, “fails to correspond” to the object’s essence that hides beneath its surface. Language portrays how the object appears, but there is a disconnect between the object’s appearance in the actual world and its buried metaphysical truth beyond humanity’s eyes and ears. It is important to note that Nietzsche’s arguments in “Truth and Lies” acknowledge the possibility of metaphysical essence. Indeed, a central point of the essay examines the disconnect between language and an “original enti[ty].” However, as he matured as a philosopher, Nietzsche would continue to examine this problem and move towards metaphysical nihilism. During the time of “Truth and Lies,” he argues more about the difficulty of discovering this hidden truth because of language’s inconsistencies rather than raise the possibility that there is no metaphysical essence.

Melville also appeals to philology to illustrate the challenges of interpreting language. In *Moby-Dick*’s opening fragment, “Etymology,” the section catalogues a series of descriptions and definitions about the novel’s central natural object: the whale. The first citations come from three distinct voices, a famous seventeenth-century travel writer and two nineteenth-century lexicographers: Richard Hakluyt, Noah Webster, and Charles Richardson, respectively. These initial entries illustrate Melville’s skepticism about language’s ability to convey a consistent meaning about a natural object:

“While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true.” *Hakluyt*

“WHALE. *** Sw. and Dan. hval. This animal is named from roundness or
rolling; for in Dan. *hvalt* is arched or vaulted.” *Webster’s Dictionary*

“WHALE. *** It is more immediately from the Dut. and Ger. *Wallen*; A.S. *Walw-ian*, to roll, to wallow.” *Richardson’s Dictionary* (xxxviii)

Read collectively, these passages reveal language’s inconsistency in defining a common natural object. Hakluyt’s commentary examines the relationship between the sound of utterances and the interpretation of the whale. His argument suggests that the truth of the whale is obscured when speakers omit the “H” sound when uttering the word whale. The loss of the smallest sound, “which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word,” creates an incomplete representation of the whale, the messiness of language masking the whale’s essence. While the content of Hakluyt’s passage describes this uncertainty, it is Melville’s own messy writing that enacts the passage’s claim. Indeed, Melville misspells Hakluyt’s last name, “Hackluyt,” adding an additional character and calling into question the source’s reliability. It is true that Melville was a notoriously poor speller, but within the context of the “Etymology” chapter, the inclusion of the “c” in Hakluyt’s name reinforces the idea of language’s mutability, the erroneous omission or addition of a single sound or letter veiling the object’s true essence.7

While Hakluyt’s commentary emphasizes the mutability of a spoken utterance and its effect on meaning, the next two entries demonstrate a philological conflict defining the whale in exact and consistent words as Melville includes two competing definitions of “whale” as

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7 In *Herman Melville: A Biography*, Hershel Parker describes Melville’s poor spelling as “bod[ing] ill” for weaning his students away from their own “idiosyncrasies of orthography” (120). Another biographical connection to misspelling derives from Melville’s own last name. Originally spelled “Melvill,” Herman’s older brother, Gansevoort, and his mother altered their surname shortly after the death of Melville’s father, Alan. According to Parker, the reason for the change is unknown, but he speculates that the alteration was made “for no reason other than that Gansevoort thought an extra letter afforded an aristocratic flourish” (67). I see this point as a biographical coincidence rather than Melville’s motivation for the intentional misspelling of “Hackluyt.”
presented by two rival lexicographers, Noah Webster and Charles Richardson. Despite the common word, the dictionaries deliver two conflicting etymologies. Webster’s definition suggests that the denotation of “Whale” develops from a comparison to its physical or active features. The Webster citation serves as a metaphorical translation that carries over the animal’s physical “roundness or rolling” into its linguistic meaning. Conversely, Richardson’s definition offers a different meaning and point of origin of the word. Richardson employs the infinitive verb, “to wallow,” as the definition of “Whale,” a noticeable contrast with Webster’s metaphor that uses the participle, “rolling.” To put it another way, Webster’s definition illustrates a connection between “whale” and animal’s active rolling through the waves. Richardson’s entry, however, suggests that “whale” develops from the whale’s passive nature. How can the same word be traced back to two different physical qualities of a natural object? These conflicting definitions, both in meaning and origin, extend the tension with language first established in the Hakluyt passage. Whereas Hakluyt’s citation emphasizes the importance of the smallest sound to deliver the truth about an object, the conflicting definitions between Webster and Richardson intensify the possibility that language’s messiness restricts the possibility of defining or discovering a natural object’s essence.

8 In an 1837 review, “A New Dictionary of the English Language by Charles Richardson,” The North American Review compared Richardson’s new dictionary with the dictionary developed by his American rival, Noah Webster. This review, one Melville would have been able to access, distinguishes Richardson’s technique for defining a word’s etymology “more systematically than [Webster]” (201). According to the review, Richardson “aimed to arrange his definitions and illustrations of words, as to give their history as nearly as possible in chronological order” (201). This historical tracing of words is a departure from Webster’s method. Webster believes that “the origin of many words is wholly lost, and that the origin of others is so obscure as to admit uncertainty” (198). As a result of this belief, Webster “had been long employed in the unwearied study and comparison of different languages, in order ascertain their affinities and the derivation of words” (197). Webster argues that his method creates “precise” meanings of words as the expansive range of examples would provide the word’s holistic meaning. The review challenges this assumption, specifically addressing Webster’s ten definitions of the word “can.” The article asks, “And yet what can be more inexact, loose, indefinite, and unlimited, than the senses he ascribes to the little word?” (199). In brief, these rival methods in tracing a word’s etymology would provide Melville with an example about language’s inconsistencies to name objects.
Like Nietzsche’s passage from “Truth and Lies,” Melville’s opening to *Moby-Dick* suggests a problem with metaphor. Of course, Melville’s imaginative literature is not as forceful in its criticism as Nietzsche’s essay, but it does illustrate the inherent messiness of metaphor, which in turn undermines the stability of the Word. In Melville’s passage, each of the excerpts suggest a type of comparison, all of which leave the meaning about the whale beyond humanity’s grasp. The Hakluyt passage playfully challenges synecdoche as a type of metaphor. Indeed, the passage argues that the “H” sound in the pronunciation of whale embodies the meaning of the entire word, the smallest part embedded with the essence or “signification” of the whole object. Melville intensifies the interpretative problem with comparison with his reference to Webster’s and Richardson’s dictionaries. The Webster citation anticipates Emerson’s arguments that the meaning of “words are signs of natural facts.” That is, Webster’s definition suggests that “whale” develops from its active “rolling,” just as Emerson argues that “spirit primarily means wind.” Webster’s and Emerson’s reasoning suggests the object’s hidden essence bubbles to the surface and informs the way humanity describes and understands it in the actual world. But Melville includes Webster’s linguistic rival, Charles Richardson, to challenge Webster’s comparative methodology and further mask the true meaning of the whale. Richardson’s definition of whale develops from a rigorous method, employing reason and a historical tracing to define the whale. This systematic approach produces a definition distinct from Webster’s. While not as metaphorical as the Hakluyt or Webster passages, the Richardson definition demonstrates Melville’s concern about the stability of inherited knowledge. To trace the historical lineage of words seems like it should be comfortable walk on a familiar path. The individual strolls in established footprints, reinforcing the system and tradition. These fixed footprints should limit
the possibilities for an individual to create new interpretations. Yet, these three entries, taken collectively, follow three distinct paths to the whale’s essence. All three passages suggest that the possibility language serves as a connection to object’s hidden truth if one applies a fixed method of reason to language. However, Melville, like Nietzsche, identifies the inconsistencies of metaphor as a restriction to discovering the whale’s hidden truth, if one exists at all. Indeed, Nietzsche argues that we only have metaphors, and those comparisons have no correspondence to the things themselves. While Melville’s literature is not nearly as direct, these three passages when read together illustrate a similar attitude. Hakluyt, Webster, and Richardson each attempt to offer a “fixed” or “binding,” to use Nietzsche’s language, linguistic method to know the meaning of the natural object. But when read together, the three citations reveal language’s inability to correspond the whale’s true essence. We are, in Nietzsche’s words, left with metaphors but no greater understanding of the natural object.

Melville extends this linguistic dilemma about metaphors and natural objects in one of the novel’s experimental chapters, “Cetology.” This chapter shifts from the novel’s narrative plot about the hunt for Moby Dick to Ishmael’s intellectual musings. In this chapter, Ishmael compiles a bibliography of attempts to portray the sperm whale, but he suggests these descriptions offer little interpretive value. According to Ishmael, “though of real knowledge there be little, yet of books there are plenty; and so in some small degree, with cetology, or the science of whales. Many are the men, small and great, old and new, landsmen and seamen, who have at large or in little, written of the whale” (146). As part of his survey of failed attempts, Ishmael references “The Authors of the Bible; Aristotle; Pliny; Aldrovandi,” among others, as writers who have attempted to describe the whale, but he states they have had little success, noting that
“as yet, however, the sperm whale, scientific or poetic, lives not complete in any literature. Far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life” (147).

Ishmael asserts that there is a lack of real knowledge about the sperm whale despite the abundance of published books written about the creature. He directs his first critique at “the Authors of the Bible,” although Melville’s phrase, “the Authors,” hedges any direct attack against the Bible’s primary metaphysical author, God. Yet Melville’s capitalization of “Authors” still invokes this divine presence among the many human authors of the Bible. Ishmael’s brief reference to these Authors undermines the authority of Christian metaphysics. Indeed, if these Authors, both divine and human, of the Bible presented an incomplete image of the sperm whale, how can we accept the idea that natural or spiritual facts offering any certainty can be found in our language? Next, Ishmael identifies founding intellectual figures associated with philosophy and science. Neither Aristotle nor Pliny nor Aldrovandi offer acceptable knowledge about the sperm whale despite their use of logic and reason. According to Ishmael, the divine word, reason, and poetry have failed to provide a stable understanding of the sperm whale, leaving the natural fact with an “unwritten life.” Underlying these critiques rests Ishmael’s—and Melville’s—skepticism with these established forms of knowledge.

Ishmael continues to challenge traditional systems when he describes his own classification method that, ironically, categorizes whales as books. In Ishmael’s system, he uses the “magnitude” of the whale to classify them “into three primary BOOKS (subdivisible into CHAPTERS)” (148). This choice emphasizes the bibliographic failures of earlier systems, but it also allows Ishmael the opportunity to concede the incomplete nature of his own system.

9 “All scripture is given by inspiration of God” (King James Version, 2 Timothy 3:16).
Specifically, Ishmael asserts, “I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty” (147). Melville identifies the fallacy in viewing a written text as a concrete monument to stable meaning. Ishmael acknowledges the limitations with his own system, stating that his “object here is simply to project the draught of a systemization of cetology. I am the architect, not the builder” (147). He refers to himself as the architect of the system, but does not assume the responsibility of the production, deferring the act of completing the project to a future audience. Ishmael recognizes the possibility that future interpretations will continue to add meaning and improve upon his original design, but he will have no part in that creation. Ishmael’s first attempt does not become established knowledge, but rather an open fragment, an incomplete document unable to establish stable meaning about natural objects. At the end of “Cetology,” Ishmael admits, “But I now leave my cetological system standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower [...]. This whole book is but a draught — nay, but the draught of a draught” (157). While this point could be read as a form of self-criticism about Moby-Dick itself, Ishmael’s comment about a “draught of a draught” suggests a consistent pursuit of creating new interpretations about the whale. Ishmael does not follow the fixed definitions about the whale that he inherited from scripture or philosophy. He sees the inconsistencies of language as a reason to question these systems’ fixed interpretations. Instead, Ishmael acknowledges that any system’s attempt, including his own, are left open and incomplete.

While these passages illustrate Melville’s and Nietzsche’s views about language’s inconsistencies, neither of them views these interpretive challenges as a reason to stop pursuing
meaning; instead, they both suggest that the loss of this traditional system can liberate humanity from the constraints of a singular interpretation about existence. According to Alexander Nehamas, this freedom from such limited interpretations is an essential part of Nietzsche’s philosophy. In Nehamas’s reading, Nietzsche believes Christian metaphysics constrains existence to “dogmatic views” (67). This singular interpretation stunts humanity’s ability to determine new meanings about life that are possible outside of this system. Moving beyond fixed interpretive systems, like Christian metaphysics, allows for “the constant possibility of […] readjustment, and also because [Nietzsche] believes that every view of the world makes possible and promotes a particular kind of life” (64-65). This “readjustment” of new interpretations is anathema to the dogmatic teachings of Christian metaphysics. As new possibilities emerge, the stability of the Word weakens. There is no longer one unified meaning about existence developing from a metaphysical essence; instead, individuals continue to create new interpretations outside of this fixed system of knowledge. According to Nehamas, there is value in the openness that emerges from incomplete or different interpretations:

New interpretations that we are not now capable of producing can come into being only through the production of other interpretations which we are in fact capable of producing. But the reason for looking for new interpretations is always that they will be better than the readings (or some of the readings) we have produced so far, and not simply the fact that they are new. (63)

In other words, when interpretations develop outside of confined systems, like Christian metaphysics, they offer “better […] readings” about existence. Also, Nehamas suggests that the value of new interpretations lies in their continued pursuit. He argues that “the reason for looking” is that new interpretations will continue to build upon the incomplete meanings produced in the past. In other words, the pursuit of new interpretations moves the individual
outside the constrained meaning produced by previous systems. These revitalized readings do not affirm the fixed truths of our intellectual ancestors; instead, they build upon the openness and incompleteness of previous interpretations, allowing new possible meanings to join the interpretive project.

While Nehamas’s arguments reflect his readings of Nietzsche’s philosophy, this same attitude about the openness of incomplete interpretations is found in *Moby-Dick*’s “Cetology” chapter. Indeed, Ishmael closes the chapter by comparing his classification system to the unfinished Cologne Cathedral, noting that his attempt is an undeveloped “draught.” On one level, this comment reflects Ishmael’s resignation that his book is left incomplete, but as Elisa New argues, it is the openness inherent in Ishmael’s method that engenders better possibilities than presenting a fixed meaning. New reads the conclusion of “Cetology” as Melville’s challenge to another writer who, like Emerson, he associates with idealism:

For Melville, a writer growing increasingly skeptical of Goethe and what he described to Hawthorne as Goethe’s “flummery,” the Cologne cathedral’s beauty lies in these very inconsistencies, in its unfinished character. And so the virtue of his own composition. Deeming Goethe’s idealized unity as defunct as the unitary creation of Genesis, obsolete as the original plan for the Cologne cathedral, Melville offers a kind of knowledge eternally open to the revisions of posterity: a draft, subject to effacement or revitalization by the accretion of history. (298)

New’s commentary reflects Melville’s Nietzschean attitudes about idealism and language. First, Melville’s rejection of “idealized unity,” even if directed towards Goethe in this example, also applies to Emerson’s idealized vision of language expressed in *Nature*.\(^\text{10}\) Indeed, Emerson’s arguments suggest that language is a point of unification between the material and the metaphysical. Melville, like Nietzsche, disagrees with this premise since language engenders too

\(^\text{10}\) See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for a more detailed explanation about Melville’s reception of Goethe.
many contrasting interpretations to serve as a bridge to an object’s hidden metaphysical essence, if one exists at all. Melville also shares Nietzsche’s privileging of recursive interpretations. Melville seeks “a kind of knowledge eternally open to revisions of posterity,” an argument asserted by New, and Nietzsche would appreciate this desire for revisions since these new interpretations would allow for “readjustment[s]” of conventional ideas, a point Nehamas stresses in his reading of Nietzsche. In other words, language’s ambiguities produce both pitfalls and pathways. These linguistic inconsistencies reveal the flaw in seeing language as a point of unification between material existence and spiritual reality. While this attitude towards language is problematic for those who believe in Christian metaphysics, Melville and Nietzsche see these linguistic inconsistencies as a source to reimagine new truths about existence without the influence of Christianity.

Melville’s and Nietzsche’s skepticism about the Word is an important point to consider within the context of existentialism. In his introduction to *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Walter Kaufmann asserts that existentialism is “a timeless sensibility,” and the philosophy develops from “a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life” (12). For Melville and Nietzsche, Christian metaphysics and the Word serves as a “traditional philosophy” that promotes a fixed meaning about humanity’s place in the apparent world. God, the divine author, has inscribed all meaning about existence, and humanity can discover this essence through language and reason. A central problem for Melville and Nietzsche, echoing Kaufmann’s description, is the distance Christian metaphysics has from actual experience. To illustrate this “remote[ness] from life,” Melville and Nietzsche focus their criticism on the ambiguity of interpretation. Nietzsche frames the world as a text, one open to
competing interpretations that exist outside of the dogmatic teachings that Christian metaphysics enforces. Similarly, Melville, while not a trained philologist like Nietzsche, sees interpretation’s ambiguity as both a problem to critique and a source of redemption. That is, Melville values the openness that is offered through uncertain meanings we draw from interpreting language. Melville also rejects such inflexible meanings that are promoted from a unified vision of the apparent and metaphysic world. Anticipating Kaufmann’s arguments about existentialism, Melville and Nietzsche challenge the Word as a form of “traditional philosophy” that is “remote from life.” Both writers extend their initial skepticism and embrace these inconsistent interpretations to challenge the system of Christian metaphysics, sounding out the idol with a tuning fork and hammer.

**Sounding Out Sacred Language**

As their careers progressed, Melville and Nietzsche would intensify their challenge to the Word. Specifically, they apply their skepticism about language’s certainty to the interpretation of sacred language; however, each writer approaches this challenge to Christian metaphysics with different intensities. Borrowing Nietzsche’s image from the opening of *Twilight of the Idols*, Melville generally sounds out his questions and the implications with a tuning fork; Nietzsche, on the other hand, bludgeons the system with a hammer. At times, both writers playfully mock the stability of sacred texts, but as they attempt to reconcile the implications of a lost metaphysical system, Melville and Nietzsche differ in their responses. For Nietzsche, the intensity of the strikes grows stronger, reflecting his urgency to smash the foundation of Christian metaphysics. Melville’s texts, while not without powerful blows against the system, evoke an ambivalence towards the collapse of the Word. Melville certainly revolts against
Christian metaphysics, but his perpetual brooding limits his ability to attack the systems with as much glee as Nietzsche’s writings illustrate.

In his later works, Nietzsche develops a more hostile tone directed at the teachings of Christianity. For example, his early essay “Truth and Lies” rejects the “fixed” and “binding” meaning of old metaphors, but he still accepts the idea of a metaphysical essence. As Clark asserts in her essay, Nietzsche’s concern for the distance between words and an object’s essence reflects his recognition of some type of metaphysical plane. Roughly a decade after “Truth and Lies,” Nietzsche published *Dawn*. At this point in his career, Nietzsche still recognizes the possibility of God, but he playfully mocks God’s linguistic struggles to express divine wisdom:

> An omniscient and omnipotent God who doesn’t bother to make his intentions understood by the very creatures He has created – is this supposed to be a God of goodness? [...] But perhaps he is a God of goodness after all – and he was merely unable to express himself more clearly! Did he perhaps lack the intelligence for it? Or the eloquence? (65)

This mockery of God’s “[in]eloquence” is a direct challenge to Christian metaphysics, but Nietzsche has not yet arrived at his terse proclamation that “God is dead.” In *Dawn*, Nietzsche’s hammer strikes against the clarity of the divine word, not the absence of the divine author. Nietzsche’s revolt against the system develops from God’s failure “to make his intentions understood,” an argument suggesting that a spiritual reality exists but is unable to communicate with material existence. Nietzsche, however, does not appear angry about God’s inability to communicate clearly; in fact, the final rhetorical questions suggest a delightful attitude towards the idea an uncommunicative God. Framing these attacks about God’s “lack of intelligence” and “eloquence” softens the hostility, but more importantly, they enact the very argument Nietzsche’s passage demonstrates. That is, he knows that his challenge to God’s authority will
remain unanswered, further emphasizing his point about a divine author’s failure to communicate.

In the final stage of his career, Nietzsche extends his argument about God’s inability to communicate to the next logical point: the complete absence of God and spiritual reality. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche returns to the problem of “concepts” that he addressed in “Truth and Lies,” but he now defines God as an empty concept. Like his earlier challenge from *Dawn*, his criticism of this empty concept stems from rhetorical failures. According to Nietzsche, “No one is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives [...]. He is not the result of a special design, a will, a purpose [...]. We invented the concept ‘purpose’: in reality purpose is lacking [...]. The concept ‘God’ has hitherto been the greatest objection to existence [...]. We deny God, in denying God, we deny accountability” (65). This example illustrates the shift in Nietzsche’s philosophy and the source of his ire. On the one hand, this passage still reflects Nietzsche’s concern about language’s inconsistencies. He employs language associated with composition such as “design,” “purpose,” and “invented” to illustrate the inability of language to deliver stable meaning. But on the other hand, Nietzsche’s anger is directed at the hollow “concept [of] ‘God.’” Nietzsche now sees the acknowledgement of God as “the greatest objection to existence.” In other words, the dogmatic belief in metaphysics and spiritual realities corrupts an individual’s ability to examine and embrace the vast uncertainties and perspectives of material existence. Christian metaphysics reduces life to a fixed view that our existence is part of God’s “special design.” These comments reflect Nietzsche’s emerging existentialism. That is, Nietzsche’s commentary not only undermines the traditional philosophy of Christian
metaphysics but also privileges humanity’s existence freed from this system’s constraints. While this passage does not specifically address the “existence precedes essence” debate of twentieth-century existentialism, Nietzsche’s arguments anticipate this core tenet of the philosophy (Barrett 102). That is, Nietzsche’s “den[ial] of God” allows humanity the freedom and openness to create its own truth about existence. As William Barrett argues, “[humanity] does not have a fixed essence that is handed to him ready-made; rather, he makes his own nature out of his freedom and the historical conditions in which he is placed” (102). Nietzsche’s reason to “deny God” and “deny accountability” expresses this attitude of existentialism. To reject the concept of “a fixed essence,” humanity is empowered to create meaning that reflects its current existence.

Melville applies similar critiques about sacred concepts, but his tone is less hostile than Nietzsche’s. Indeed, in Nina Baym’s essay “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction,” she “reason[s] that, given Melville’s Emerson-derived notion of language as proceeding from a divine Author or Namer, the loss of belief in an Absolute entailed the loss not only of truth in the universe but also of coherence and meaning in language” (910). While I do not go as far as Baym’s suggestion about Melville’s complete dismissal “of coherence and meaning in language,” I do agree with her general point that Melville rejects the supposed link between words and divinity. Melville’s sounding out of Emerson’s idealism offers him a way to challenge a traditional philosophy that Melville views as distant from an individual’s existence. Baym is right to identify Melville’s skepticism about the “belief in an Absolute” and “the coherence” of language, but Melville does not drift into psychological nihilism by accepting an absent “truth in the universe.” In fact, Melville sees these linguistic ambiguities as an invitation to create new possibilities about living a meaningful life outside the constraints of Christian metaphysics.
After establishing his early concerns about language’s inconsistencies in “Etymology” and “Cetology,” later in the novel, Melville connects this problem to interpreting sacred language and encourages a willful act of creation in other passages of the novel. In “The Prairie,” Ishmael illustrates his frustration developing a complete understanding of the whale by interpreting the bumps and lines of the whale’s forehead. Ishmael opens the chapter recognizing that very little work has been done “to scan the lines of [the whale’s] face (370). On the surface, Ishmael turns this comment into a critique of “Physiognomist[s]” and “Phrenologist[s],” but the opening phrase suggests the difficulty of interpreting this material object. That is, the idea of scanning lines, while applied to the natural lines and wrinkles present on the whale’s brow, applies equally to the same struggles to interpret the lines of a written text. The conclusion references two prominent names in the field of language and translation, Jean-Francois Champollion and Sir William Jones. Ishmael struggles with the difficulty to interpret meaning from the whale’s brow, stating:

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? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can. (380)

The opening reference to Champollion recalls his work translating “the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics” of Egypt. In addition, the “wrinkled granite” image evokes the idea of the whale’s brow serving as a page, a graying canvas of wrinkles and lines left open to be read and “scann[ed]” as Ishmael describes in the chapter’s opening paragraphs. It is the allusion to Champollion’s work with “hieroglyphics,” or “holy writing,” that transforms the whale into a divine text, a natural object inscribed with spiritual essence, waiting to be interpreted. This
transformation of the whale into “holy writing” allows Melville to extend his criticism about the inconsistencies of interpretation, but he has re-directed his focus towards sacred language.

Melville’s reference to Sir William Jones further develops his concern about interpreting sacred texts. According to Ishmael, Jones, another famous translator “who read in thirty languages,” lacks the ability to “read the simplest peasant’s face in its profounder and more subtle meanings.” Ishmael critiques Jones’s interpretive skills as they relate to understanding material existence. That is, despite Jones’s extensive knowledge of languages, he fails to comprehend the “subtle meanings” he encounters in the “face[s]” of other people. This assessment of Jones is reminiscent of Kaufmann’s description about existentialism. As Kaufmann argues, existentialism rejects “traditional philosophy” because it is “too academic” and “remote from life.” Melville acknowledges Jones’s academic training in thirty languages, but that impressive learning provides little value to Jones who cannot extract “more subtle meanings” of a fellow living being. In other words, Jones’s devotion to traditional philosophy has distanced him from interpreting everyday existence.

This reference to Jones reveals another subtle sounding out of the idol that links reason, language, and spiritual reality. Robert A. Ferguson traces the varying intellectual influence of Sir William Jones for the early American Republic in his essay, “The Emulation of Sir William Jones.” Ferguson asserts that “Jones’s nexus between law and literature was particularly attractive to such American writers as Bryant, Irving, Longfellow, and Charles Brockden Brown” (25). However, Ferguson notes that “as the Republic changed and the nature of authorship shifted in the American Renaissance, the power of Jones’s reputation faded rapidly” (26). Ferguson concludes the essay describing this passage from “The Prairie,” arguing that by
1851 “[Jones] was little more than one of many obscure references in *Moby-Dick.*” Moreover, Ferguson reads Melville’s reference to Jones as an indication of an intellectual shift that had occurred. Specifically, when reading Ishmael’s imperative to read the “Jovian brow of the whale,” Ferguson argues that “much of Jones’s reputation in the early Republic rested on the contrary belief that even this ‘wrinkled hieroglyphic’ could be read by energetic men using the tool of universal reason” (26). Ferguson’s commentary provides an important point about Melville’s revolt against a traditional philosophy that he believed was too far removed from existence. Indeed, by the time of *Moby-Dick*, Melville had seen the inherent flaw embedded with the belief that “universal reason” could be used to extract stable meaning from a text, especially a natural object covered in wrinkled hieroglyphics. These criticisms against Jones and “universal reason” serve as Melville’s sounding-out of the Word with his tuning fork. Unlike Nietzsche’s blunt attacks, Melville employs a more subtle critique of traditional philosophy, questioning the talents of an intellectual relic from the Republic’s early history. His language is not as sarcastic as Nietzsche’s comments about God’s inability to communicate clearly; instead, Melville critiques this conventional belief with his tuning fork, tapping the idol and hearing its hollowness.

Ishmael concludes the chapter by returning to the problem of interpreting sacred language, wondering “how may [he] hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow?” Like the passage’s opening, Ishmael describes the whale’s forehead as a sacred language, “the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics” now taking the form of “the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow.” Ishmael’s application of Chaldee to the sperm whale places a biblical dialect onto this natural object. Of course, Ishmael’s question suggests an inability to interpret the
meaning of either the sacred language or the natural object. Ishmael acknowledges, ironically, that he is “unlettered,” but the passage’s central point is that no person, whether an academic like Jones or the illiterate Ishmael, can extract meaning about this natural object through interpreting sacred language. Ishmael puts the same challenge to the narrative audience, stating, “I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.” Despite Ishmael’s frustrations with interpreting these divine words, this final imperative suggests a desire to continue adding new interpretations about the whale. This command echoes Ishmael’s concluding claim from “Cetology,” a point that both recognizes the incomplete nature of the project while still maintaining the will to seek new interpretations.

I need to emphasize that Melville and Nietzsche, despite their differing tones, do not see their strikes against the traditional philosophy of Christian metaphysics as the end to all meaning about existence. As these passages illustrate, they challenge the idea that a unified or fixed meaning about life can be extracted from divine texts. This recognition, of course, engenders tremendous intellectual and spiritual upheaval for humanity, but Melville and Nietzsche view that tension as the motivation to continue pursuing new interpretations outside the constraints of this philosophy. This pursuit of new meaning in the face of collapse reflects an attitude associated with existentialism. As George Cotkin argues in Existential America, “to be existential is to recognize, in the face of all these somber truths clutched close to our own sense of being, that we must act. Despite the dread and anguish that accompany the shocking recognition of our freedom, that threaten to stall us in our tracks […] We must create the world anew” (3). Cotkin’s definition about existentialism can be seen in these passages by Melville and Nietzsche. Indeed, both writers understand that their challenges to the Word disrupts the
comforts that are “clutched close to our own sense of being.” As existentialists, they recognize that the loss of these intellectual comforts might paralyze those who maintain faith in the Word. However, despite the “dread and anguish” humanity might feel initially in response to these fallen ideals, Melville and Nietzsche embrace the possibility of diverse knowledge and interpretations that do not exist within the constraints of Christian theology. As Cotkin suggests, underlying this dread is a need and urgency to develop new meanings about existence without Christian metaphysics. As Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts illustrate, the inconsistency of interpretation, paradoxically, undermines the faith in the World while at the same time offers humanity with possibilities to live a life of their own creation, freed from the fixed teachings of Christianity.

Subverting the Bible

As Melville’s literary career faltered after the publication of Moby-Dick, his attitude towards Christian metaphysics became bleaker. Whereas Moby-Dick illustrates a more playful inquiry into the inconsistencies of sacred language, Melville’s later texts perform more direct strikes against the authority of the Bible. Indeed, works such as The Confidence-Man His Masquerade and Clarel contain scenes where Melville’s characters deliberately challenge and revise the Bible’s sacred passages, further destabilizing the fixed meaning of Christian metaphysics. For example, this last work of extended fiction published during his lifetime employs the shape-shifting confidence man to test the faith and authority of Christian theology. The novel, then, forces the narrative audience to track the radical and unstable shifting of both this main character and the sacred word.
The opening chapter follows the first identity of the confidence man, a mute who walks aboard a riverboat, the *Fidele*. Upon his arrival, he walks by a group of passengers, who are reviewing a wanted poster of “a mysterious imposter, supposed to have recently arrived from the East” (9). This opening scene frames the novel upon an act of reading, and like “Cetology” and “the Prairie” from *Moby-Dick*, Melville emphasizes the inconsistencies and uncertainties of interpreting text. The central character of the wanted poster is “a mysterious imposter,” whose core identity remains elusive. Moreover, his past and current whereabouts remain unknown, as he is “supposed” to have arrived from “the East,” suggesting a possible point of origin, but with little certainty.

The poster itself is comprised with feelings of fragmentary and uncertain information, and Melville extends these images through the mute’s actions with composition to demonstrate language’s ambiguity. Indeed, the mute stands next to the “placard, when, producing a small slate and tracing some words upon it, he held it up before him on a level with the placard, so that they who read on might read the other” (10-11). Here, the mute challenges the original text, the act of adding and “tracing” some words upon it upending the original meaning. The slate’s position “on level with the placard” challenges the authority of the original text. The two texts rest side by side, a blurring of old and new, original and copy. With no definitive text to see as an authority, the mute effectively undermines the belief that written text can offer a fixed and stable meaning.

As the scene develops, the mute extends this interpretive disruption by rewriting a biblical passage from 1 Corinthians 13: “the words were these: — ‘Charity thinketh no evil’”

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11 Melville’s naming of the boat as “faithful” anticipates the novel’s central problem where the confidence man challenges the faith of the steamer’s passengers.
After his final change to the inscription, the narrator notes that “the word charity, as originally traced, remained throughout uneffaced, not unlike the left-hand numeral of a printed date, otherwise left for convenience in blank” (12). This comment reflects a challenge to the stability of the Bible’s meaning. While the word “Charity” remains constant, the mute’s consistent revisions of the predicate highlight the range of interpretations the word suggests. At the end of the chapter, Melville continues to play with biblical imagery. The mute, after his exercise in altering biblical passages, sits close to “the foot of the ladder there leading to a deck above, up and down which ladder some of the boatmen, in discharge of their duties, were occasionally going” (13). The mute, however, neither ascends nor descends the ladder. Instead, he is “gradually overtaken by slumber” and “lay[s] motionless” next to the ladder. The narrator compares the mute’s body to “some sugar-snow” that covers the landscape. While the narrator notes “the white placidity” of this image, it is not with a sense of unexpected discomfort. Indeed, the narrator’s closing line suggests this peaceful snowscape would “startle” an observer upon first witnessing it. The image of the ladder and frozen confidence man plays with the story of Jacob’s ladder. Unlike the biblical tale, the Mute has no prophetic dream of ascending the ladder; he is frozen next to it, so still, in fact, that he evokes the emptiness of a winter landscape.

Melville describes the confidence man—the character who has already tested the faith of biblical authority—with images that have importance within existentialism. First, the confidence

12 The editors of the Norton Critical Edition of the King James Version note that “Charity” could be interpreted in several ways. According to the note, “Charity: Gk. Often translated ‘love.’ It has the broadest semantic range of the several Greek words meaning ‘love’: it can be used of God’s love for humanity or, as here, of one person’s selfless love for another” (364).

13 “And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it” (King James Version, Genesis 28.11-13).
man does not ascend the ladder, an action restricting his movements to a horizontal plane. Moreover, as he drifts to sleep, the comparison of the confidence man’s stillness to that of “some sugar-snow” landscape evokes an ambiguous image. While the narrator acknowledges this “white placidity” of the setting, the whiteness also suggests an expansive nothingness. These two images—horizontal movement and nothingness—illustrate existentialist themes responding to the loss of religious beliefs. As Barrett argues in *Irrational Man*, existentialists explore the implications of a world where “the ladder is gone by which we would climb to a higher reality” and “the movement of the spirit is no longer vertical but only horizontal” (49). In addition, Barrett asserts that this broken connection “to a higher reality” produces several problems that existentialists strive to reconcile:

This philosophy embodies the self-questioning of the time, seeking to reorient itself to its own historical destiny. Indeed, the whole problematic of Existentialism unfolds from this historical situation. Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat. (36)

By the end of Chapter 1 of *The Confidence Man*, Melville establishes his title character with these existentialist images and themes. Specifically, the confidence man’s movements are limited to the horizontal plane. Unlike Jacob’s dream about the ladder, the confidence man remains static on the deck, even though a supposed path upward to a higher reality is next to him. In addition, Melville characterizes the confidence man with an image evoking the idea of nothingness. That is, Melville’s comparison of the confidence man to “some sugar-snow” suggests an emptiness since the adjective emphasizes a double whiteness that covers the character. In sum, then, the confidence man functions as a device to undermine traditional faith in scriptural authority and to enact Melville’s burgeoning existentialist philosophy. The confidence man has already erased
and revised biblical text, but Melville concludes this chapter associating this disruptive character with nothingness adjacent to a biblical image. These ideas reflect an existentialist attitude since Melville not only questions the fixed meaning of the Bible’s text but also suggests the possibility that, as Barrett argues, “the ladder is gone by which we would climb to a higher reality.”

Melville’s characterization of the confidence man anticipates the novel’s structural development as well. Writing in “The Confidence-Man’s Masquerade,” Hershel Parker notes, “modern critics have identified most of the biblical fragments which inform many of the conversations on the Fidele,” such as the novel’s introduction (301). Parker argues that this pattern of employing “biblical fragments” allows Melville to present a “distinction between otherworldly morality (represented by the Sermon on the Mount) and the morality of this world (represented by the barber’s ‘No Trust’ sign) […] Each occurrence summons or almost summons to mind the other world of the Bible where other standards of behavior and possibilities for behavior may prevail. The reader is reminded particularly of the contrast between ‘this world’ and the world ‘which is to come’” (302). These “fragments” illustrate Melville’s belief that no unified and fixed meaning could be interpreted from the Bible. Specifically, the confidence man’s actions reject this contrast between material existence and a metaphysical “world ‘which is to come.’” In other words, The Confidence Man’s treatment of Melville’s metaphysical nihilism. For Melville, the inconsistency of biblical authority undermines Christian metaphysic’s ability to offer a unified vision about its moral codes.

Melville sees this disjointed relationship between the morality of the actual world and the morality of the metaphysical plane as a reason for the remoteness of Christian metaphysics. Its teachings are too distant and inconsistent to help humanity understand their experiences in the
apparent world. In short, Melville uses the confidence man’s actions to erode faith in the Bible’s authority as a source of meaning for human existence.

Nietzsche, of course, has no difficulty in disrupting the Bible’s authority. For example, Nietzsche introduces Section 45 of *The Anti-Christ* with a derisive comment about “what these petty people have taken into their heads, what they *have put into the mouth of* their Master” (171). These “petty people” are Christians who follow the dogmatic teachings of Christian scripture. Nietzsche catalogues several biblical passages, and he responds with terse, sardonic comments that undermine the text’s moral teachings. Specifically, Nietzsche cites the book of Matthew, writing “‘But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.’ (Matthew vi, 15)—Very compromising for the said ‘Father’…” (172). Nietzsche performs this act of biblical citation and sarcastic refutation with several passages, leading into the introduction of Section 46 where he asks “– *What follows from all this?* That one does well to put gloves on when reading the New Testament. The proximity of so much uncleanness almost forces one to do so” (173). Like Melville’s confidence man’s act of erasing and revising the Bible’s text, Nietzsche’s caustic interpretations weaken the Bible’s purported authority over morality and existence.

Melville’s confidence man is more subtle in the sounding out of this idol when compared to Nietzsche’s sarcastic responses; however, these actions reveal the authors’ similar tension with the belief about metaphysical morals governing material existence. Indeed, as Nietzsche argues, there is too much “uncleanness” in the process of extracting these morals from the Bible, a point Melville emphasizes by his playing with biblical passages in *The Confidence Man*. While Melville is more subtle in his biblical attacks in *The Confidence Man*, Nietzsche’s
irreverent attitude reflects his combative rhetorical style. Duncan Large, writing in his essay “Nietzsche’s Use of Biblical Language,” asserts that Nietzsche’s use of direct citations and paraphrase serves as parody. Specifically, Large argues that “behind such wordplay, however effective its humor, there is nevertheless a serious intent, namely, to unmask ‘what is really going on’ behind the biblical formulation” (96). In this passage from The Anti-Christ, Nietzsche’s wordplay demonstrates a hostile and mocking attitude towards the authority of the Bible’s teachings. His response to the passage’s message drips with sarcasm as he attacks the rigidness of the divine author’s unwillingness to compromise. Moreover, Nietzsche mocks the idea of the divine Father himself, framing’s the term with quotes to demonstrate the concept’s artifice. While Nietzsche’s criticism is more overt than Melville’s, this passage from the Anti-Christ enacts the same purpose as the confidence man’s playing with scripture in the novel’s first chapter: challenging the Bible’s authority. These passages undermine the strength and consistency of the divine truths that the sacred text purports to teach. The confidence man rewrites a passage that emphasizes “Charity,” a word evoking several interpretations. This choice demonstrates the inconsistent interpretations that both Melville and Nietzsche identify as a flaw with Christian metaphysics. Moreover, the ease with which the confidence man erases and rewrites these sacred passages erodes the faith in the Bible’s fixed and absolute teachings. With a sleight of hand, the confidence man can remove and alter its language, alluding to the text’s original idea, but changing it just enough to create uncertainty about which version truthfully reflects the scripture’s moral teachings. Likewise, Nietzsche’s direct response to a biblical

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14 In “The Confidence Man’s Masquerade,” Parker notes that the novel “is written in a shifty, deceptive style appropriate to a once popular adventure writer who, not permitted to write frankly, had perforce become a literary sleight-of-hand man” (297).
passage demonstrates one possible way to interpret the text, an interpretation, of course, that runs counter to tradition. Even though Nietzsche’s comment is more caustic than Melville’s, it shares a playful attitude towards the Bible’s authority that the confidence man performs throughout the novel. This playful revolt against the Word, then, reveals Melville’s and Nietzsche’s desire to sound out the hollowness of Christianity’s teachings. As existentialists, they recognize that new interpretations cannot be created if humanity maintains its faith in the teachings of a hollow system. To move beyond these teachings, Melville and Nietzsche believe that the system’s flaws must first be exposed.

Like Nietzsche’s critiques of the New Testament, Melville concludes The Confidence Man with similar challenges to this part of the Bible. In the final chapters, the confidence man negotiates a deal with the Fidele’s barber. As part of their agreement, the confidence man requires the barber not to make any spoken reference to the Bible. Describing a previous conversation with a patron, the barber initiates the following dialogue:

“Because I recalled what the son of Sirach says in the True Book: ‘An enemy speaketh sweetly with his lips;’ and so I did what the son of Sirach advises in such cases: ‘I believed not his many words.’”

“What, barber, do you say that such cynical sort of things are in the True Brook, by which of course you mean the Bible?”

“Yes, and plenty more to the same effect. Read the Book of Proverbs.”

“That’s strange, now, barber; for I never happen to have met with those passages you cite. Before I go to bed this night, I’ll inspect the Bible I saw on the cabin-table, to-day. But mind, you mustn’t quote the True Book that way to people coming in here; it would be impliedly a violation of the contract. But you don’t know how glad I feel that you have for one while signed off all that sort of thing” (235).

The barber’s opening line, a citation from the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus, questions the value of spoken language. The barber emphasizes an inherent deception of spoken words.

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15 Melville playfully crafts the barber’s citation of Ecclesiasticus to give the impression that the citations present this causal relationship in the same passage. However, the opening citation comes Ecclesiasticus 12:16: “An enemy
Sirach’s words warning about those who “speaketh sweetly with his lips.” Moreover, the barber encourages the confidence man to understand that the Bible, the “True Book,” offers more guidance by in the Book of Proverbs. The confidence man challenges the existence of these passages, stating that he is unaware of these examples from the Bible, a simple comment that ignores the Bible’s wisdom. He reminds the barber not to “quote the True Book” to people entering the shop. This demand erases the presence of the Bible in both written and spoken form. Like the novel’s opening scene, the confidence man disrupts the stability of the sacred text. Whereas the early scenes reveal a playful rewriting of the scripture, the confidence man is now more forceful in his effacing the stability of the Word. Indeed, his contract with the barber restricts any spoken reference to the Bible’s text. And while this silencing of the scripture undermines its presence as a ubiquitous source of truth about existence, Melville also illustrates the barber’s superficial faith in the Word since the confidence man, with relative ease, employs a monetary contract to sever the barber’s connection to the Bible. In other words, the confidence man forces the barber to sell out his faith, devaluing the Bible’s teachings.

This interaction anticipates the confidence man’s final attack on the Bible, a challenge to the text’s trustworthiness and usefulness. Melville sets his conclusion to the novel in the gentleman’s cabin, a room filled with darkness except for one “solar lamp” hanging from the ceiling (239). Amongst this one lamp, “swung other lamps, barren planets, which had either gone out from exhaustion, or been extinguished by such occupants of berths as the light annoyed, or

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speaketh sweetly with his lips, but in his heart he imagineth how to throw thee into a pit: he will weep with his eyes, but if he find opportunity, he will not be satisfied with blood” (784). The second citation derives from Ecclesiasticus 13:11: “Affect not to be made equal unto him in talk, and believe not his many words: for with much communication will he tempt thee, and smiling upon thee will get out thy secrets” (784). This long interaction between the cosmopolitan and the barber develops around questioning the truthfulness of scripture, and Melville’s sleight of hand performs the very concerns the cosmopolitan and the barber debate throughout this dialogue, further challenging the textual authority of the Bible.
who wanted to sleep” (239). The contrast between light and dark establishes an ominous setting for the confidence man’s final challenge to sacred language. With only one lamp illuminating the room, the cabin room is consumed by darkness, emphasizing the growing doubts the confidence man has elicited from many of the Fidele’s passengers.

Before the confidence man enters the cabin, the narrator describes an old man reading the Bible underneath the solar lamps:

Keeping his lone vigils beneath his lone lamp, which lighted his book on the table, sat a clean, comely, old man, his head snowy as the marble, and a countenance like that which imagination ascribes to good Simeon, when, having at last beheld the Master of Faith, he blessed him and departed in peace. (239)

The old man’s pure and devotional appearance contrasts with his isolation and the surrounding darkness. Indeed, the old man sits alone, holding one of his “vigils beneath” the solitary solar lamp, the limited light shining upon his Bible. Moreover, the allusion to Simeon intensifies the old man’s connection to the sacred text. However, despite these images of light, the old man is blanketed by ominous shadows, the “extinguished” and “barren planets” of darkened lamps surrounding him, leaving him with only one waning light to interpret the sacred text. In addition, the old man’s snowy head echoes the sugar-snow landscape that is attached to the confidence man’s dream at the end of the first chapter, evoking the same ambiguous image of both peacefulness and blankness.

From these shadows the confidence man emerges, inviting the old man to discuss the Bible’s teachings. During their discussion, the confidence man acknowledges that “a disturbing doubt” has arisen in his mind after reading a passage from the Bible (242). The old man admits

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16 The confidence man recites the following passage: “With this communication he will tempt thee; he will smile upon thee, and speak thee fair, and say What wantest thou? If thou be for his profit he will use thee; he will make thee bare, and will not be sorry for it. Observe and take good heed. When thou hearest these things, awake in thy
that he is not familiar with the passage, and he asks the confidence man to identify the passage that causes him these doubts. The confidence man, “turning over the leaves, and pointing to the sentences one by one,” references passages from the “Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach.” (241). The old man joyfully labels these passages as part of the Apocrypha:

“Look,” turning the leaves forward and back, till all the Old Testament lay flat on one side, and all the New Testament flat on the other, while in his fingers he supported vertically the portion between, “look, sir, all this to the right is certain truth, and this to the left is certain truth, but all I hold in my hand here is apocrypha.” (241)

The old man’s comments reflect a Protestant’s reception of the Bible, and he instructs the confidence man to pay no attention to any part of the scripture that has “uncertain credit” (242). To support his faith in the text, the old man performs an act of textual criticism, dividing the Bible into clear sections and comparing the “certain truth” of some parts as distinct from the sections that create uncertainty. Like a field surgeon, the old man triages his wounded patient through a crude act of excision, hoping to heal the rest of the body through removing an infected wound.

While the old man appears satisfied in this Bible’s form, the confidence man suggests a liability with the book. Specifically, he argues that “when all is bound up together, it’s sometimes confusing. The uncanonical part should be bound distinct” (242). The confidence man’s point suggests the possibility that binding the Bible with both certain truths and uncertainties presents a corrupted message. According to the confidence man, this corruption of the Bible’s form challenges a reader to distinguish certainty from uncertainty, calling into question the validity and stability of its teachings.

Despite these initial challenges, the old man maintains his faith in the scripture. However, later in the discussion, the confidence man returns to the form of the public Bible that they are reading. He notes the worn cover and “faded remains” of an inscription; then, he draws the old man’s attention to these details, stating, “‘Look at this volume; on the outside, battered as any old valise in the baggage-room; and inside, white and virgin as the hearts of lilies in bud’” (248). In response, the old man acknowledges the text’s appearance with “sad[ness]” (248). The confidence man acknowledges the ambiguity that clean pages of the public Bible suggest:

All much like this—old without, and new within. True, this aptly typifies that internal freshness, the best mark of truth, however ancient; but then, it speaks not so well as could be wished for the good book’s esteem in the minds of the traveling public. (249)

In making this comment, the confidence man further tests the old man’s faith in the Bible, emphasizing how little use the “traveling public” finds in its teachings. Of course, the confidence plays upon the inconsistency of the color of white. On the one hand, the clean, white pages signify “the best mark of truth”; however, the confidence man ends his point on a similar interpretation of the clean pages: they are unread. Even though the old man maintains his faith in the scripture throughout this exchange, the confidence man’s interrogation of the Bible’s appearance and form forces the old man to express moments of questioning and “sad[ness].”

Through this interaction, the confidence man illustrates the Bible’s inconsistencies, using the Bible’s outward appearances to undermine the text’s hidden essence. That is, the confidence man suggests that a text filled with both uncertainties and certain truths is an object where one cannot distinguish truth from lie. Like the mixing of different paint colors, the mixing of certainty and uncertainty produces a new color unlike either of the individual elements. Moreover, the confidence man challenges the usefulness of the Bible by extending his inquiry into the
ambiguity of the book’s appearance. While he acknowledges the significance of the pure white pages as a sign of a divine truth, the color, in the actual world, suggests that the Bible’s messages are not being read by the traveling public aboard the Fidele. In short, the confidence man demonstrates the Bible’s divine truths remain too remote for humanity.

Likewise, Nietzsche’s distrust of the Bible develops from the contrast between the Old and New Testaments. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche opens section 52 praising the Old Testament, asserting that “in the Jewish ‘Old Testament,’ the book of divine justice, there are human beings, things, and speeches in so grand a style that Greek and Indian literature have nothing to compare with it” (65). After praising this text, Nietzsche acknowledges that “(like our educated people of today, including the Christians of ‘educated’ Christianity) [a “tame” individual] has no cause for amazement or sorrow among these ruins” (65). Nietzsche praises the humanistic qualities of this sacred text, distinguishing its portrayal of “human beings” as “so grand” that no other text can compare to it. Yet Nietzsche laments the distance his “‘educated’” contemporaries have with Old Testament. For Nietzsche, the New Testament’s attachment to the Old Testament corrupts the entire Bible. Nietzsche emphasizes this point describing the New Testament in unflattering terms:

Perhaps he will find the New Testament, the book of grace, still rather more after his heart (it contains a lot of the real, tender, musty true-believer and small-soul smell). To have glued this New Testament, a kind of rococo of taste in every respect, to the Old Testament to make one book, as the “Bible,” as “the book par excellence”—that is perhaps the greatest audacity and “sin against the spirit” that literary Europe has on its conscience. (66)

Nietzsche’s juxtaposition of the Old and New Testament offers a similar critique of Christian metaphysics that Melville presents in The Confidence Man. Both writers reject the belief that the Bible can offer a unified truth about humanity’s existence. Melville’s critique subtly jabs at this
system. He uses the performance of the confidence man to destabilize the unity of the Bible, presenting scripture as fragments that are subject to close interrogation and questioning. Like Nietzsche’s critiques of the “‘educated’ Christians,” the confidence man illustrates the weakness of faith practiced by the Fidele’s passengers. His tests and disruptions of the passengers’ trust in the Bible highlight the possibility that the scripture offers a superficial and hollow interpretation about existence, truths that, to use Nietzsche’s terminology, evoke a “small-soul smell.” These arguments are buried underneath the novel’s elusive language and actions, a style that allows Melville to use his tuning fork to criticize the Bible and those who practice its teachings with a superficial faith. Nietzsche, conversely, directly strikes the Bible—the New Testament, specifically—with his hammer. His parenthetical comments about the New Testament evoke an image of a decaying life form, the rot enveloping its surface. Like the old man’s attempt to cut out the uncertain parts of the Bible in The Confidence Man, Nietzsche presents the inverse image, attacking the idea that a “musty” book was “glued” to the Old Testament, and the New Testament’s corruption of the Old Testament cannot be excised. For Nietzsche, the New Testament infects the entire Bible and leaves the sacred text unable to offer a unified source of meaning about existence. In sum, then, Melville and Nietzsche develop their subversion of the Bible by illustrating the text’s interpretive problems. Their critiques derive from the inconsistencies found within the sacred text and the way Christians practice the Bible’s teachings.

The Death of the Word

As their careers progressed, Melville and Nietzsche would continue to examine the implications about the death of Christian metaphysics. Nietzsche, of course, forcefully declares
this point with the statement, “God is dead,” but Melville never reaches Nietzsche’s conviction and celebration of this realization. However, in the later stages of his career, Melville’s playful subversion of Christianity transforms into a nihilistic outlook about the death of the World.

Almost twenty years after writing *The Confidence Man*, Melville published *Clarel*, his epic poem describing a young man’s journey through the holy land. The poem is filled with despair and disenchantment, revealing Melville’s drift towards psychological nihilism. Writing in “Platonic and Nietzschean Themes of Transformation in *Moby-Dick,*” Mark Anderson reads *Clarel* as a text that “provides Melville the opportunity to explore his own unsettled moods and thoughts about life, the universe, man and God. The resulting tone of the whole work is bleak” (36). According to Anderson, Melville’s travels to the holy land in the late 1850s engendered “frustration and a pervasive pessimism bordering on nihilism” (35). This “pessimism” about Christian metaphysics is a departure from Melville’s earlier challenges to the Word that are present in *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*. Whereas these earlier works playfully illustrate the flaws of the system, by the time of *Clarel*, Melville’s despair seeps into the poem’s constrained verse, the text dripping with feelings of dread and hopelessness. For example, in “The Inscription,” Melville describes images of sacred writing on natural objects, but unlike his earlier novels, *Clarel’s* language suggests a despondency at the loss of sacred symbols. In this canto, Clarel and his fellow travelers attempt to read an image of a slanted cross and a poem that has been inscribed into the face of a rock. The poem, believed to be “‘mystical,’” reads:

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Emblazoned bleak in austral skies —
A heaven remote, whose starry swarm
Like Science lights but cannot warm —
Translated Cross, hast thou withdrawn,
Dim paling too at every dawn,
With symbols vain once counted wise,
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And gods declined to heraldries? (II.31.50-56)

The obscure poem transforms the stone, a natural object, into a text to be interpreted. Moreover, like the lines of the sperm whale’s brow, this stone contains sacred symbols, but the speaker’s tone is more somber due to the “withdrawn” religious symbol, the “Translated Cross.” The once strong and sacred symbol is now relegated to be viewed as common “heraldries” rather than a sign conveying a metaphysical truth. Anderson argues that this poem demonstrates the “lamentation on the death of God by way of reflection on the constellation of the Southern Cross, which he fears is now a vain symbol no longer indicative of deity” (36). Anderson’s analysis underscores the development of Melville’s skepticism of the stable meaning interpreted from sacred language and symbols. This passage serves as one of the many examples where Clarel faces the possibility of the actual world without God, reflecting a more pessimistic attitude than Melville exhibits in his earlier novels. It is important to note that Melville’s recognition of these lost sacred symbols reflects his emerging existentialist attitude. Indeed, as Barrett argues in *Irrational Man*, this “system of symbols” offers humanity constraints and comfort to understand their existence (25). When these symbols lose their sacred meaning, as this passage from *Clarel* suggests, humanity’s connection to a spiritual reality is broken. According to Barrett, this system’s collapse evokes “feelings of homelessness” for humanity since their framework for understanding existence no longer functions (25). Barrett’s point offers a new perspective on Clarel’s physical and spiritual wanderings he experiences throughout the poem. While he does travel through the holy land with a band of pilgrims, he is generally isolated, observing the desolate landscape and intellectual debates on the periphery. Clarel finds himself stranded between belief and doubt, revealing his spiritual homelessness because of these lost symbols.
While many of the themes and attitudes of existentialism can be seen in Melville’s texts preceding *Clarel*, it is this poem where he illustrates his most nihilistic view about Christian metaphysics. Like some of Melville’s other existentialist characters, Clarel experiences “feelings of homelessness” as he wanders the stony ruins of the holy land. He desires a spiritual revival by observing and experiencing the sacred sights and symbols of Christianity, but as “The Inscription” suggests, these sacred images fail to communicate a spiritual truth, leaving Clarel stranded in a cruel and desolate world stripped of metaphysical symbols. While Melville never issues an explicit proclamation that “God is dead,” *Clarel* represents the closest illustration to this idea that Melville offers.

Like this passage from *Clarel*, Nietzsche also examines the loss of sacred symbols, but unlike Melville, he critiques the flaws of Christian hermeneutics, suggesting the methodology corrupted the ability to create meaning from these sacred images and signs. In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche directs his criticism to the actions of the priests, their position as a divine interpreter proving to be the source of a decaying theology. Nietzsche argues that “the concept of God falsified; the concept of morality falsified” as he challenges the priests’ act of interpretation, specifically through an act of “translation” (148). Even though Melville does not assign blame to a specific agent’s interpretations or translation like Nietzsche does, Melville’s passage from *Clarel* suggests a similar concern with a translated sacred image. That is, Melville asks the “Translated Cross” if it as “has withdrawn,” a question, while not as harsh as Nietzsche’s argument that the concept has been “falsified,” suggesting the possibility that this holy sign has lost its meaning. This concern with translation extends both writers’ criticism about the belief that a trace of a metaphysical truth can be carried over into the language.
Writing in his essay “Killing God, Liberating the ‘Subject,’” Michael Lackey confirms Nietzsche’s criticism directed at the priests’ lies about God and scripture. According to Lackey, “Nietzsche feels justified in saying that the priest knows that there is no God, no metaphysics, no absolute truth. The Platonic Idea, the Christian soul, the Kantian thing in itself – these are all lies which pretend to be more real and more true than innocent lies” (742). Lackey’s reading illustrates Nietzsche’s recognition that the spiritual language, as translated and interpreted from the Bible, are simply “lies” that, in turn, reveal the collapse of the metaphysical concept itself, whether it be “The Platonic Idea, the Christian soul, the Kantian thing in itself.” In short, Nietzsche’s criticism illustrates the death of the Word. Nietzsche asserts that priests’ corrupted translations of these once sacred images have left them meaningless for actual existence.

Nietzsche extends these critiques of flawed Christian hermeneutics to the history of Christianity itself. In the *Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche chronicles his list of complaints about the corruption of Christian theology. One of Nietzsche’s most direct strikes against this system develops from interpretations of and teachings about Jesus’s crucifixion. Nietzsche attacks the falsification of Christianity’s history and its relationship to humanity:

> The church subsequently falsified even the history of mankind into the pre-history of Christianity […] The type of redeemer, the doctrine, the practice, the death, the meaning of the death, even the sequel to the death – nothing was left untouched, nothing was left bearing even the remotest resemblance to reality. Paul simply shifted the centre of gravity of that entire existence *beyond* this existence – in the *lie* of the “resurrected” Jesus. In fact he could make no use at all of the redeemer’s life – he needed the death on the Cross and something in addition…. (167)

This passage extends Nietzsche’s earlier critique about the priests’ nefarious acts of interpretation, but now focuses his anger against Paul. For Nietzsche, the dogmatic teachings about Jesus’s death corrupt the entire system of Christian metaphysics. Nietzsche argues that the
system, led by Paul, transforms the meaning of Jesus’s death to something “beyond this existence.” According to Nietzsche, the falsification of death’s meaning reveals Christian metaphysic’s greatest flaw since it shifts the value and significance of life in the actual world to a metaphysical world. For Nietzsche, this shift devalues existence. While his criticisms of Christianity are always carried out with his hammer, this passage has even more force than his proclamation that “God is dead.” Later in the Anti-Christ, Nietzsche strikes against a central tenet of the system: Jesus’s death upon the Cross and faith in “the ‘resurrected’ Jesus.” This “lie” breaks the system, rendering it meaningless for existence in the apparent world. Nietzsche’s comments also suggest an existentialist attitude that, as Kaufmann argues, finds traditional philosophy “too remote” from life in the actual world. For existentialists like Nietzsche and Melville, there can be no meaning about life that originates from an essence that exists “beyond this existence.”

Melville’s treatment with the death of the Word is similar in his references to Christ figures, but unlike Nietzsche, Melville’s skepticism does not come in the form of forceful attacks. For example, Melville presents another example of sacred language’s failures in his short story, “Bartleby, The Scrivener.” Like his other works, Melville crafts scenes that illustrate language’s ambiguity, but characterizes the eponymous character with Christ-like traits. In the story, Bartleby is remote from his fellow workers since they fail to understand the meaning behind his oracular refrain, “I prefer not to.” As Sanford Pinsker argues, “Melville’s narrator discovers language only makes the haunting Bartleby more perplexing and less definable […] those walls of language which make human understanding possible” (17). Melville layers Bartleby’s character with biblical allusions, with some critics reading Bartleby as a Christ
In his essay “Bartleby: The Ascetic’s Advent,” H. Bruce Franklin employs Matthew 25 as a critical frame to examine the possibility of salvation for both the story’s narrator and Bartleby himself. According to Franklin, reading Bartleby in conjunction with Matthew 25 “suggests that Bartleby may not be merely the least of Christ’s brethren but may in fact be the Saviour himself” (178). If Franklin’s assertion about Bartleby’s association with Christ is correct, as I believe it is, then Bartleby’s enigmatic expression “I prefer not to” emphasizes the “remoteness” and failure of the Word. Indeed, as Leo Marx argues in his essay, “Melville’s Parable of the Walls,” Melville’s use of an elliptical style reflects the story’s content. According to Marx, “the quality of style is a perfect embodiment of the theme itself: concealed beneath the apparently meaningless if not mad behavior of Bartleby is a message of utmost significance to all men” (255). If we read Marx’s comment in conjunction with Franklin’s and Zlogar’s respective arguments, Bartleby’s enigmatic language suggests the failure of traditional Christian philosophy. The confusion derived from Bartleby’s words is not without meaning, as Marx argues in his essay, but no clear conclusions can be interpreted by the story’s narrator, leaving him and the narrative audience in a place of uncertainty. The narrator is left helpless: Bartleby’s words—words associated with divinity—arrive, but no audience can interpret them. This tension with the failure of spiritual language is emphasized at the story’s conclusion. After Bartleby’s passing, the Narrator delivers a rumor about Bartleby’s previous place of employment: the dead letter office. According to the Narrator:

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17 Richard Zlogar classifies “four distinct schools of thought” for interpreting the range of scholarship that makes up, as Dan McCall says, ‘The Bartleby Industry.’ Zlogar argues that the “fourth reading raises the possibility that Bartleby is Christ himself, who, as ‘the least of men,’ is denied the absolute charity that is required in strict adherence to Christian ethics” (506). Zlogar’s argument builds on this critical frame, reading Bartleby in conjunction with several biblical passages. See Zlogar pp. 507-513.
When I think over the rumour, hardly can I express the emotions which seize me. Dead letters! Does it sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness — can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cartload they are annually burnt. Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring: the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a banknote sent in swiftest charity: he whom it would relieve nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity! (58)

This passage illustrates the horrifying possibility that language fails to reach its intended audience; the words are lost to eternity. In the narrator’s summation, he suggests a direct link between language and a natural form, stating “Dead letters! Does it sound like dead men?” For the narrator, the death of the Word suggests the same feelings of a corpse. In addition, the physical destruction of the lost letter to the flames evokes an even stronger emotional response for the narrator, the failed writings and incomplete reception creating despair and hopelessness. Melville’s narrator shares a depressing revelation that concepts like “hope” are lost to humanity if they cannot be received. These dead letters, then, serve as another loss of sacred words, an image associated with existentialism. Indeed, the narrator’s final points are filled with anguish and despair as he confronts the death of Bartleby and the lost letter. At the story’s conclusion, the narrator is isolated and filled with dread since the comfort of these previous signs have passed away. Without these stable sacred ideas, he is left only to call out for “humanity,” a desolate cry from an isolated individual.

The death of sacred words extends into Melville’s final work of prose, *Billy Budd*. In the novella, Melville examines this problem through his characterization of Billy, the innocent sailor who dies for the sins of others. As in his crafting of a Christ-like Bartleby, Melville associates
Billy with biblical characters such as Adam and Jesus. Melville establishes these connections in an early dialogue shortly after Billy boards the *Bellipotent*. Once there, an officer inquires,

“Don’t know where you were born? Who was your father?”
“God knows, sir.” Struck by the straightforward simplicity of these replies, the officer next asked, “Do you know anything about your beginning?”
“No, sir. But I have heard that I was found in a pretty silk-lined basket hanging one morning from the knocker of a good man’s door in Bristol.” (110)

Like Bartleby, Melville characterizes Billy as distant from the rest of humanity. While Billy’s uncertain genealogy masks a part of his identity, his speech, like Bartleby’s, is arresting in its directness and “simplicity.” Indeed, the narrator notes that the officer is “struck” by Billy’s short replies. According to Gordon Teskey, Billy’s qualities echo biblical figures such as Adam and Jesus. Teskey notes that “Billy looks like Adam in the time of innocence, before the Fall” and that “in suffering death unjustly Billy becomes like Christ” (384). Moreover, Billy’s rumored origins of being “found in a pretty silk-lined basket” suggests a connection to Moses from Exodus, intensifying the link between Billy and the prophetic tradition of the Bible, transforming both his presence and speech into a sacred performance, a voice embedded with divine significance. Teskey reads the numerous religious references as Melville’s attempt to illustrate uncertainty about the Bible’s meaning, arguing that “Melville forces upon our attention biblical

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18 See pp. 383-385 in Teskey’s essay for a detailed comparison between Billy, Adam, and Jesus. This brief section serves as a small example of Teskey’s larger analysis that catalogues the many the biblical allusions Melville weaves into *Billy Budd*. For Teskey, the story’s core interpretative problem derives from Melville’s treatment of the scripture in his fictional tale. For example, Teskey’s analysis of Billy’s comparison to Christ elicits questions about not only how to view Billy and Jesus as similar but also how to interpret the clear differences. Teskey asks, “Are we to see Billy as being like Christ in a few ways but different from Christ in most of the ways that matter? Or are we to try to reconcile the imbalance by interpreting the text allegorically, so that the ways that matter will matter on the plane of a wholly unapparent but primary meaning? Such questions are more general than that of how to interpret *Billy Budd*: they go to the heart of the problem of the relation between literary and scriptural language” (385). Teskey’s argument highlights the interpretative problem of language that seamlessly weaves “literary and scriptural language.” While Teskey leaves the question open, I see this problem as another example of Melville destabilizing the sacred word. Like this chapter’s section on *The Confidence Man*, Melville’s merging between the literary and scripture undermines the authority of the sacred text.
allusions that leave us not only uncertain of his meaning but uncertain whether they have any meaning” (380).

Melville examines this uncertainty by attaching linguistic deficiencies to Billy’s character. For example, the narrator describes Billy as “illiterate; he could not read, but he could sing, and like the illiterate nightingale was sometimes the composer of his own song” (110). More importantly, Billy also suffers from a stutter, “a vocal defect” that reveals itself in the climactic moment of Claggart’s accusation that Billy is leading a mutiny (110). This defect plays a significant role in a pivotal scene when Billy’s failed articulation manifests itself in an act of physical violence. Specifically, after Claggart accuses Billy of mutiny, Billy’s words fail to express his innocence; as a result, Billy strikes Claggart dead because his own sacred words are unable to save him. This moment is both startling and confusing since the early characterization of Billy shows him to be an innocent individual who fits within the Bible’s prophetic tradition. But Melville undercuts these traits with Billy’s physical violence. This juxtaposition in Billy’s character calls into question the faith of this tradition. How can the innocent and prophetic Billy enact such violence? As Teskey argues in his essay, these biblical allusions and Melville’s subversion of them illustrates the uncertainty of these sacred ideas and images.

Billy’s linguistic failure and violent action anticipates the climactic scene where Billy’s sacred words again fail to save not only himself but also Captain Vere. Ironically, Billy delivers his final speech act with clarity, yet this last use of sacred speech does not commute his execution, an action that condemns Captain Vere to a hollow existence. In contrast with the Claggart scene, Melville emphasizes the clarity of Billy’s final words, down to the level of syllables:
At the penultimate moment, his words, his only ones, words wholly unobstructed in the utterance, were these: “God bless Captain Vere!” Syllables so unanticipated coming from one with ignominious hemp about his neck – a conventional felon’s benediction directed aft towards the quarters of honor. (163)

The clarity of Billy’s final speech act illustrates the ultimate failure of the Word. Indeed, Captain Vere receives Billy’s request as a delayed “echo,” and the narrator is unable to explain Vere’s vacant response, wondering if it is due to “either […] stoic self-control or a sort of momentary paralysis induced by emotional shock” (163). While the narrator is uncertain as to why Vere is frozen, Melville still implies a disconnect between the divine word and humanity’s ability to interpret or enact it.19 Indeed, Billy’s final utterance, despite its clear articulation, arrives in the form of an echo, an incomplete sound bouncing off Vere. Despite Billy’s appeal to God and Vere, Vere remains a statue, fixed in his role to carry out Billy’s sentence. While the narrator and audience are left uncertain as to the effect of Billy’s words on Vere, his inaction upon hearing the sacred language demonstrates the Word’s failure to exist in the actual world. Even a perfectly articulated “benediction” delivered by a voice aligned with biblical prophets cannot penetrate Vere’s determination, leading to Billy’s execution and the empty end of Vere’s life, who dies after an assault by the ship, Athée.20 Ultimately, Vere’s final words “Billy Budd, Billy Budd” reveal a haunted death, Billy’s absence looming over Vere’s consciousness to the end of his days, a man who is not saved by Billy’s benediction (168). Billy Budd, then, illustrates Melville’s final points about the death of the Word. Like his earlier works, Melville demonstrates the interpretative inconsistencies and failures of sacred images and symbols. But with Billy Budd,

19 Teskey suggests that Billy’s final words, “‘God Bless Captain Vere,’” vaguely recall Christ on the Cross asking God to forgive those who have crucified him, “for they know not what they do” (384).

20 Like his naming of the boat “faithful” in The Confidence Man, Melville’s naming of the boat “atheist” intensifies not only the physical but also spiritual death of Vere because of Billy’s failed benediction.
Melville continues to examine those who purport to be faithful to this corrupted system. He draws back on scenes from *The Confidence Man* where the shape-shifting title character perpetually exposes the weakness in faith in the Word. Melville emphasizes this point with the failure of Billy’s final utterance to redeem either himself from the execution or to save Vere from his rigid determination to maintain order. In other words, Melville’s final pages of prose enact the death of the Word, a point that undercuts Christian metaphysics.

Billy, like Bartleby, represents Christian metaphysics, a system that requires fixed and constrained meanings to be extracted from the Word. Melville, however, undercuts this system, making these characters appear isolated from others. It is possible that Melville isolates these Christ figures to elevate their connection to a spiritual reality, but we should consider Melville’s distancing of these characters in conjunction with Nietzsche and existentialism. As Nietzsche demonstrates in *The Anti-Christ*, Christian interpretations and teachings have corrupted the meaning of Jesus’s death. These meanings place value on a world beyond actual existence. As Nietzsche argues, these teachings privilege the death of the redeemer over his actual existence. Nietzsche asserts that this belief makes Christian metaphysics a corrosive philosophy since humanity is instructed to seek meaning “*beyond* this existence.” Like other existentialists, Nietzsche rejects the “lies” of this traditional philosophy that elevate a metaphysical world over the world of appearance. Similarly, Melville rejects the idea of humanity’s ascension to a spiritual reality by emphasizing horizontal movement. Gordon Teskey provides a detailed reading about the juxtaposition between “Billy’s ascension” and the ship’s “lateral rolling” (390). Specifically, Teskey views the contrasting movements of Billy’s spiritual elevation with the *Bellipotent*’s horizontal sailing as “a moment when a spiritual hope, the possibility of
transcendence, is raised, only to be negated by the physical truth” (391). According to Teskey, the Bellipotent’s fixed and determined “lateral” movement away from the point of Billy’s “spiritual transcendence” emphasizes Melville’s rejection of the idea that metaphysical truth can exist and have meaning in the actual world. The contrast between the “spiritual hope” embodied in Billy’s person and speech drifts beyond meaning in the phenomenal world. While Teskey does not use the term existentialism in his essay, it is important to view his point about “lateral rolling” in conjunction with the philosophy. Like the opening chapter in The Confidence Man, these texts emphasize lateral movement over the possibility of vertical ascension. True, Billy ascends after his death, but the boat continues its lateral movement away from this moment of transcendence, distancing itself from the metaphysical. That is, for the crew, and especially Captain Vere, of the Bellipotent, no spiritual ascension occurs; their movement is left to the horizontal experience in front of them, not above. As Barrett argues in Irrational man, existentialists recognize existence as belonging to a horizontal plane: there are no ladders to a spiritual realm. Without the possibility of spiritual ascension, the system of Christian metaphysics collapses. Melville, of course, never strikes a hammer against this system as forcefully as Nietzsche does. He recognizes its flaws and inconsistencies, but he could not dismantle the system with the precision of Nietzsche. Melville never reaches Nietzsche’s terse statement “God is dead,” but he does see the failures of the Word and the remoteness of this system from humanity’s existence. These images emphasizing the ship’s lateral rolling undermine a central point of Christian metaphysics that suggests an ascension to a spiritual reality. For Melville, as well as other existentialists like Nietzsche, human existence moves on
this horizontal plane. The search for meaning does not move vertically or beyond the experiences of the actual world.

Conclusion

Melville’s and Nietzsche’s rejection of traditional Christian metaphysics develops from their shared attitudes about the inconsistencies of interpreting language. The Word requires a faith in language as a bridge to metaphysical truth. Ralph Waldo Emerson reflects this idealist attitude in *Nature*, arguing that certain words describe natural facts, which are metaphors for spiritual facts. For Melville and Nietzsche, language’s ambiguity engenders too many contrasting interpretations to offer such stable meaning not only about existence but also any potential spiritual reality. Nietzsche, a trained philologist, takes issue with the traditional uses of certain metaphors, arguing that a long history of usage hollows out their meaning. Or to put it another way, the recursive use of metaphor produces the fixed meaning for existence, a meaning that privileges a spiritual reality beyond the actual world. As Nietzsche’s career progressed, he applies this attitude to attacking Christianity, deriding the system’s promotion of fixed and dogmatic interpretations that elevates the metaphysical over the actual.

Melville’s critiques of the system are not as direct as Nietzsche’s, but he sees similar fissures in the foundation of Christian metaphysics. Melville is not a trained philologist like Nietzsche, but he recognizes the inherent messiness and uncertainties of interpretation, a point that undermines the entire system of Christian metaphysics. Like Nietzsche, as Melville’s career progressed, he applies his concerns about the inconsistencies of language to the teachings of Christianity. He destabilizes the Bible’s teachings, as Nietzsche does, by reimagining biblical passages, illustrating the sacred text’s instability to promote fixed meanings about existence.
While Melville’s skepticism about the traditional teachings of Christian metaphysics runs through most of his works, his more subtle rejection of the system reveals Melville’s temperament where he can “neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief,” as his literary mentor Hawthorne once wrote about him. Nietzsche does not suffer from such suspension of belief; he smashes the idol of Christian metaphysics with his hammer, trying to liberate humanity from the fixed meanings of its teachings.

Despite their different temperaments, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts demonstrate their rejection of formal Christianity. They hear the hollowness of the Word, and both writers see existence as one comprised of diverse interpretations. Melville and Nietzsche understand that no system, and especially Christian metaphysics, can offer a stable and comfortable meaning for humanity’s experience in the world of appearance. This similar challenge to the Word illustrates an important existentialist attitude: meaning does not exist above or beyond the world in front of humanity; there is no vertical movement towards a spiritual reality. As existentialists, both Melville and Nietzsche see the collapse of this metaphysical system as a moment of intellectual and spiritual upheaval, but also a possibility of a philosophic evolution. Of course, this evolution is not without feelings of dread and despair. Melville and Nietzsche understand humanity’s reckoning with a difficult truth: material existence might be nothing more than a silent blankness. In other words, Melville and Nietzsche recognize that without the sacred signs of Christian metaphysics, humanity might encounter the void.
CHAPTER TWO: CONFRONTING THE VOID

Introduction

On May 17, 2021, Darwin’s Arch collapsed into the Pacific Ocean. As a result of natural erosion, the rock formation’s top section broke away from its supporting pillars, the water below blanketing the wreckage, erasing it from sight. Renamed the “Pillars of Evolution,” two stone columns remain, acting as fragmented monuments to the fallen structure. Now, a cavernous gap isolates each column as a distinct pole, only the water beneath them serving as a point of connection. Originally named after Charles Darwin, the stone monument memorialized his trip to the Galapagos Islands in the 1830s as part of the expedition aboard the HMS Beagle. During this voyage, Darwin observed the unique landscapes and wildlife of this distant land, and he would take these notes to develop the third volume of Voyages of the Adventure and Beagle, published in 1839. This book elevated Darwin’s reputation as a scientific authority and served as the foundation for his theory of natural selection, which he fully articulated in On the Origin of Species in 1859.

Darwin’s Species shows one of the many scientific developments of the nineteenth century that “had cast doubt on the deep and long-held assumption that the goal and function of the natural sciences was to unfold and illuminate the glory of God’s creation, and that the progress of science would continue to harmonize with religious accounts.” With respect to

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1 In the essay “In Voiceless Visagelessness,” Troy Jollimore provides a brief, but informative, historical review of the scientific developments during the nineteenth century that created a gap between faith and science. Jollimore notes that Melville “inhabited [this] era in which much of modern science” had engendered growing skepticism about divine creation. See pp. 6-10.
Darwin’s theory of natural selection, his argument “reinforced religious skepticism in other ways, in particular undermining the hierarchical metaphysical system that had structured the dominant way of conceptualizing the cosmos, the so-called Great Chain of Being.”\(^2\) While I do not suggest Darwin is the primary cause of Melville’s or Nietzsche’s skepticism about this “Great Chain of Being,” Darwin’s theories offer both writers additional support for their arguments about the collapse hierarchical metaphysical system.\(^3\) For Melville and Nietzsche, the loss of this system serves as an important step in humanity’s intellectual growth. Of course, to acknowledge the emptiness of traditional signs and symbols stirs emotional and spiritual turmoil, but Melville and Nietzsche believe that this tension can create new meaning about existence.

This chapter argues that the scientific advancements made in the nineteenth century reaffirmed Melville’s and Nietzsche’s position that the hierarchical metaphysical system of Christianity had dissolved. Without this system’s teachings, Melville and Nietzsche realize that everything humanity once knew about existence now appears as a void. This void engenders similar despair and anguish for both writers; however, whereas Nietzsche’s texts generally reveal a celebratory attitude about the collapse, Melville broods over the loss of Christian metaphysics, his mind entangled with images of dread and death. Despite their different responses to the collapse, both writers believe that this encounter with the void is a necessary step to liberate the individual from the constraints of fixed systems.

\(^2\) Ibid, 7.

\(^3\) This point needs to be emphasized with Melville. Melville’s religious skepticism is threaded throughout *Moby-Dick*, his novel appearing eight years before Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. However, as critics like Jollimore note, Melville’s religious skepticism grew more intense in the decades after Darwin’s theory of natural selection became more widely known, but Melville’s skepticism about Christianity predates Darwin’s scientific theory.
Before examining Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar characterization and differing responses to the void, the chapter outlines each author’s reception of science as a system of knowledge. Even though science further erodes the foundations of Christian metaphysics, Melville and Nietzsche do not become advocates for science to be a substitute for Christianity. Like Christian metaphysics, science promotes a fixed interpretation that ignores the diverse elements of the actual world. As existentialists, Melville and Nietzsche reject any system promoting fixed meanings about existence. They believe these systems undermine the individual’s ability to create and live a meaningful life because their teachings privilege a world that purportedly governs all meaning. Of course, Melville and Nietzsche understand that the loss of these systems creates personal and spiritual turmoil, but they recognize that individuals must confront the void to liberate themselves from the constraints of these hierarchical systems of knowledge. This dauntless attitude in the face of despair reveals another central trait of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s existentialism. For existentialists, the rejection of conventional systems of knowledge, whether it be the teachings of Christianity or scientific reasoning, does not render existence meaningless; such a belief would risk a fall into psychological nihilism, an attitude Melville and Nietzsche resist. Humanity cannot ignore these systems’ collapses, however. In fact, Melville and Nietzsche believe that individuals must confront the emptiness of their previous ideals to overcome this possible descent into psychological nihilism. To illustrate this attitude, both authors employ water as a symbol for this bold confrontation with the void. While this encounter is not without feelings of dread and despair, Melville and Nietzsche see the abyss as a pathway towards discovering possibilities about life freed from the fixed interpretations of Christian metaphysics.
Charles Darwin and Scientific Advancement

For Melville and Nietzsche, Darwin’s name represents the scientific advancement that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century. Scientific developments, such as Darwin’s theory of natural selection, further erode the stability of Christian metaphysics. Without the comforts and familiarity of this system, humanity finds itself lost and isolated in the apparent world. In *Irrational Man*, William Barrett describes the effect of scientific discoveries on religion’s waning influence:

Science stripped nature of its human forms and presented man with a universe that was neutral, alien, in its vastness and force, to his human purposes. Religion, before this phase set in, had been a structure that encompassed man’s life, providing him with a system of images and symbols by which he could express his own aspirations toward psychic wholeness. With the loss of this containing framework man became not only a dispossessed but a fragmentary being. (35)

While Barrett’s comments reflect his reading of existentialism during his “modern period,” the 1950s, these same feelings can be applied to Melville’s and Nietzsche’s existentialist attitudes that emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century. Melville and Nietzsche share a common view about the instability of religious “images and symbols” that Christian metaphysics

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4 Melville, for example, references Darwin’s *Beagle* in the “Extracts” section of *Moby-Dick*. Late in Melville’s career, Darwin’s name assumes greater importance. For example, in *Clarel*, Melville often juxtaposes Darwin’s name with images associated with religion, including the poem’s “Epilogue.” In addition, in his essay “Earth Islands: Darwin and Melville in the Galapagos,” William Howarth presents a thoughtful comparison between Darwin’s and Melville’s respective trips to the Galapagos Islands. Howarth asserts that “Melville argued that the visible world is only a surface, like the sea; one must dive deep to see its shapes and shadows, to learn if a larger design shapes them. Darwin agreed with that method; he examined surface forms to infer their hidden causes, as in his study of coral reefs, yet he reached different conclusions because his views were scientific while Melville’s were religious” (106). Of course, underlying Melville’s “conclusions” is the possibility that there is no divine order underneath the “visible word.” With respect to Nietzsche, RJ Hollingdale, writing his biography about Nietzsche, argues that Nietzsche accepts Darwin’s theories of evolution, but with a slight reservation: “But, as God had been the meaning of the universe, so man had been the meaning of the earth. Now God and man, as hitherto understood, no longer existed. The universe and the earth were without meaning […] Nietzsche considered that evolution presented a correct picture of the world, but that it was a disastrous picture. His philosophy was an attempt to produce a new world-picture which took Darwinism into the account but was not nullified by it” (73).
provided. At first, Melville and Nietzsche develop this metaphysical nihilism due to inconsistent interpretations of the Word, and their rejection of Christian metaphysics would be strengthened by these scientific advancements. What was once a philosophical concern transforms into an actual confrontation with a natural world that “science [had] stripped of its human forms.” And, as Barrett argues about the twentieth-century existentialists, this new world reflects a void for humanity (35). With the safety and constraints of Christian metaphysics reduced to nothing more than fragments, humanity faces a strange and distant actual world, leaving individuals orphaned to confront an existence that has no connection to a spiritual reality. These feelings of dread and despair are central themes of existentialist philosophy, and Melville and Nietzsche express this anguish in response to the collapse of Christian metaphysics. Even though both writers would eventually move beyond these bleak emotions, their respective texts show the intellectual and emotional upheaval both writers felt in the wake of this collapse.

Although the scientific advancements of the nineteenth century such as Darwin’s theory of natural selection reaffirm Melville’s and Nietzsche’s belief about the collapse of Christian theology, it is important to note that neither Melville nor Nietzsche should be considered advocates for science since they also view science as its own dogmatic system that rests upon faith in a hierarchical metaphysical system.

Nietzsche, for example, argues that scientific interpretations are too rigid to offer any value to living a meaningful life. In Book Five of The Gay Science, he questions if “we really want to demote existence in this way to an exercise in arithmetic and an indoor diversion for mathematicians” (238). In addition, Nietzsche asserts that these “‘scientific’ interpretation[s] of the world […] might still be one of the stupidest of all possible interpretations of the world, i.e.
one of those most lacking significance” (238-39). While Nietzsche does not make a direct comparison to Christian metaphysics, his criticism of science reveals a similar rejection of a system that reduces existence to a fixed or deterministic interpretation. With his typical scorn, he mocks the idea of “demot[ing] existence” to a series of scientific and mathematical problems. For Nietzsche, both Christianity and science present humanity with a singular interpretation of the world. Specifically, these systems suggest that individuals are governed by an outside force, restricting the individual’s ability to enact their will and create a meaningful existence. These deterministic systems, then, reduce life to a “mechanistic” existence, which, for Nietzsche, is a “meaningless world” (239).

In Section 344 of The Gay Science, Nietzsche argues that this “mechanistic” system cannot be a replacement for Christian theology since both systems require faith in a metaphysical truth. According to Nietzsche, this reliance on metaphysics makes scientific interpretation just as unstable as those truths promoted by Christian metaphysics:

No doubt, those who are untruthful in that audacious and ultimate sense which faith in science presupposes thereby affirm another world than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as they affirm this “other world”, must they not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, our world? [...] But you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine. (201)

In this passage, Nietzsche establishes the common intellectual genealogy of both science and Christianity, suggesting that their interpretations for existence spring from the same belief in a realm of knowledge beyond the world of appearance. Specifically, both Christianity and science suggest that the truths they present are “divine.” Indeed, Nietzsche argues that science and religion not only “affirm another world” but also privilege this world over existence. Nietzsche
condemns any system that undermines humanity’s experience in “our world” in favor of an idealized version of truth that hides outside of existence. According to Nietzsche, privileging this metaphysical plane diminishes humanity’s existence since the Christianity’s teachings and science suggest that a metaphysical truth holds more value than an individual’s own experience. Nietzsche stresses this point when he acknowledges “that it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests.” Nietzsche’s point emphasizes that both Christianity and science have promoted this genealogy of intellectual errors that elevates the metaphysical over the actual. Nietzsche posits that if science, a method to determine meaning and truth about the physical realm, contains residue of a meaningless concept, then any meaning about existence developed through science holds little to no value. Moreover, he is apprehensive about the possibility of an empty form of knowledge bleeding into the material world. Nietzsche asserts that all forms of knowledge developed through “science” are blanketed by the belief “that God is truth.” This axiom is problematic for Nietzsche since he asserts that “divine truth” is nothing more than “error, blindness, [a] lie.” In sum, this passage establishes Nietzsche’s concern about “affirm[ing] another world” because if humanity accepts a false faith in “divine truth,” then humanity dismisses the value and meaning of earthly knowledge and existence. Moreover, Nietzsche asserts that neither Christianity nor scientific reasoning should be viewed as the best way to determine how to live life. According to Nietzsche, these systems promote a faith in metaphysical truth that Nietzsche believes diminishes and darkens humanity’s existence.

Despite Nietzsche’s skepticism about science, Darwin’s theories help confirm Nietzsche’s worldview about the collapse of Christian metaphysics. The collapse of this belief
forces Nietzsche to redefine truth and existence in the natural world. Nietzsche expresses this desire in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over that eternal basic text of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, hardened in the discipline of science, he stands before the rest of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, “you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!” (161)

The passage illustrates Nietzsche’s striving to return humanity’s existence back to the natural world: “to translate man back into nature.” This point suggests that metaphysical faith has separated humanity from appreciating their existence in the actual world. The continued belief in a divine truth beyond existence has isolated humanity from the actual world. We have been told that truth is divine and belongs to the metaphysical world, an argument that degrades existence. In addition, it is important to note that despite the rejection of Christianity and science, Nietzsche still believes that truth exists in the world, even if it has been blanketed by metaphysical distortions. For Nietzsche, “*homo natura*” serves as an “eternal basic text,” a source of truth that has been “scrawled and painted over” by centuries of metaphysical teachings. These markings portray a false sense of importance about humanity’s place in existence. Nietzsche asserts that faith in metaphysical truths makes people believe that they live an elevated existence compared to the rest of the natural world. Nietzsche’s philosophy seeks a path to untangle this distorted worldview from humanity’s perceptions, rescuing meaning about existence from distorted metaphysical teachings.

Melville also illustrates a concern about the way science leans on a “Platonic faith,” as Nietzsche describes. In *Clarel*, Derwent, an Anglican minister, recognizes that “Not unknown/
That even in Physics much late lore/ But drudges after Plato’s theme” (II.21.18-19). Derwent’s comment suggests that the modern discoveries in Physics are guided by a Platonic desire to assert its truth as divine. As the Physicist runs the experiments, they strip the layers of existence away, mechanistically discarding parts of the actual world in search for a hidden essence. While science relies on their own interpretive system distinct from that of Christian metaphysics, Melville and Nietzsche see little difference in their interpretive outcomes. Both Christianity and science believe their respective methods can reveal the hidden truths of the actual world and elevate those truths discoveries as “the answer[s] to the final philosophical questions” (Hillway 411). In other words, Melville, like Nietzsche, fears any system that promotes to answer all the questions and uncertainties about existence, as both religious teachings and science purport to do. Melville and Nietzsche recognize that these systems are using the inherited knowledge of a “Platonic faith” that these metaphysical answers are divine, a faith that elevates essence over existence. For Melville and Nietzsche, this metaphysical faith makes both Christian metaphysics and science too remote from humanity’s existence.

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville illustrates science’s remoteness through a humorous description of a naturalist’s scientific rendering of the whale. Specifically, Ishmael argues that “the scientific Frederick Cuvier” created a wildly inaccurate illustration in his “Natural History of Whales, in which he gives what he calls a picture of the sperm whale” (288). Ishmael mocks Cuvier’s portrait before positing why this scientific interpretation fails:

In a word, Frederick Cuvier’s Sperm Whale is not a Sperm Whale, but a squash. Of

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5 See Tyrus Hillway’s “Melville as Critic of Science” for a discussion about Melville’s hostilities towards science. While Hillway lists several reasons for Melville’s attitude, he argues that Melville was “appalled by [science’s] eagerness to capture the minds of men and its pretended ability to answer the final philosophical questions” (411).
course, he never had the benefit of a whaling voyage (such men seldom have), but whence he derived that picture, who can tell? Perhaps he got it as his scientific predecessor in the same field, Desmarest. (288)

Ishmael ridicules Cuvier’s scientific rendering of the natural object, and he provides two reasons for this failed interpretation. First, Cuvier lacks experience observing the whales with his own eyes. He relies only on other scientific interpretations and the tool of reason to portray his vision of the Sperm Whale. As a result, Cuvier’s image of this grand whale more accurately reflects the image of a New England gourd. Moreover, Ishmael dismisses Cuvier’s image because of its reliance on the inheritance of familiar scientific knowledge. He questions whether Cuvier is not simply accepting the interpretation of the Sperm Whale from “his scientific predecessor, Desmarest.” What value does Cuvier’s portrait of the whale provide if it simply traces a previous scientific interpretation? This approach reflects Ishmael’s belief in “the misguidedness of the whole line of inquiry” that naturalists and scientists employ (Evans 106). For Ishmael, this “misguidedness” develops from Cuvier’s practice of regurgitating the ideas of his intellectual ancestor. Cuvier, with his depiction of the sperm whale as a squash, reflects Melville’s criticism about the naturalist’s desires to maintain knowledge they had inherited. Cuvier’s illustration fails because he does not venture beyond the safety of his intellectual tradition. In sum, Ishmael suggests that simply carrying over a fixed interpretation makes science’s visions about existence more remote for humanity.

Later in his career, Melville’s attitude toward the relationship between science and religion became more despondent and uncertain. Specifically, in Clarel, Melville’s speaker demonstrates his distrust of both systems. In “The High Desert,” the speaker presents criticisms about religion’s intrusion into scientific inquiry:
Science and Faith, can these unite?
Or is that priestly instinct right
(Right as regards conserving still
The Church’s reign) whose strenuous will
Made Galileo pale recite
The Penitential Psalms in vest
Of sackcloth; which to-day would blight
Those potent solvents late expressed
In laboratories of the West? (III.5.64-72)

At first, the opening question suggests a division between these two systems; however, as the speaker unfolds his thoughts, he reveals an irony that both “Science and Faith” are united in their failures to offer stable interpretations about the apparent world. In this section, the speaker derides “the priestly instinct” to preserve the traditional interpretations entrenched in “The Church’s reign.” These actions are so forceful and dogmatic that they forced Galileo to repent his scientific theories that went against Catholic dogma. The final lines question the validity of this action, wondering if such stringent enforcement of the Church’s doctrine would undermine recent scientific discoveries made “In laboratories of the West.” The speaker asks if this severe enforcement has not led to the end of Christian metaphysics, asking “is faith dead now, / A petrification? Grant it so, / Then what’s in store? What shapeless birth? / Reveal the doom reserved for Earth? / How far may seas retiring go?” (III.5.79-83) The narrator’s uncertain tone illustrates the dread and anguish of the lost system of Christian metaphysics. While he does not rise to the level of Nietzsche’s statement that “God is dead,” the speaker stands at the precipice of faith and the abyss. Indeed, the world transforms into a void, a “shapeless birth” from which humanity develops. All the comforts of traditional religion are gone, and the speaker is left alone, isolated in this new world.
While this passage shows Melville’s criticism about religion’s enforcement of its dogma, Melville also challenges the role of scientific advancement as a replacement for Christian metaphysics. At the end of the canto, the speaker asks:

In one result whereto we tend  
Shall Science disappoint the hope,  
Yea, to confound us in the end,  
New doors to superstition ope?  
As years, as years and annals grow,  
And action and reaction vie,  
How waves on waves forever die;  
Does all more enigmatic show? (III.5.155-163)

This passage shows that scientific advancement, despite its disruption to Christian metaphysics, cannot serve as the new system of knowledge that governs existence. While still framed as an uncertainty, the speaker offers a possibility that the embrace of science will “disappoint” those who have faith in that system. The text suggests that science may continue “to confound us in the end,” which might engender new “superstitions” or metaphysical truths to emerge. This possibility is unsatisfactory for the speaker since this recursive back and forth between science and “superstitions” leaves humanity without a stable meaning even though the systems purport to offer certain truths about existence. The final question suggests the acknowledgement that “action and reaction” between these two systems does little to provide meaning about material existence. Indeed, life remains “enigmatic” despite faith in either system’s constrained interpretations or teachings. These passages from Clarel reflect a Nietzschean skepticism about faith in religion and science. Like Nietzsche’s arguments from The Gay Science, Melville’s speaker illustrates the problem substituting one flawed idol for another. Melville’s verse twists and turns over the problems that holding a rigorous faith in religion or science creates for humanity. He condemns the “priestly instinct” that not only disagrees with science but also seeks
to destroy those who advocate for it. But the speaker recognizes that science is bound to
“disappoint” those who see its conclusions as the source of existential truth. While Melville is
not as explicit as Nietzsche, his poem enacts Nietzsche’s criticism directed at “metaphysical
faith” shared by religion and science that “truth is divine.” For Melville and Nietzsche, this
attitude elevates metaphysics at the expense of humanity’s experience in the actual world, a
belief that Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism rejects.

This challenge of traditional systems of knowledge, whether it be Christian metaphysics
or scientific reasoning, is a central attitude of existentialism. With respect to the system of
science, Hazel Barnes, writing in *An Existentialist Ethics*, argues that existentialists recognize the
limitation of science:

> It is the contention of phenomenologists and existentialists alike that even if we could
> know that the latest scientific field theory was the final and absolutely accurate
> interpretation of the Universe, the scientific world would still not be the world that
> anybody lives in. We may make use of it as the stuff of our projects, but it remains only
> part of the furniture of the life-world in which we truly reside. The life-world is the world
> as it appears to each one of us with its “horizon of meanings,” its values, its organization
> in relation to ourselves as vantage point and center of reference. In the life-world, objects
> are not portions of matter but instruments and possibilities. (65)

Barnes’s commentary reflects an important point to consider in reading Melville’s and
Nietzsche’s responses to science: as existentialists, neither Melville nor Nietzsche can be seen as
advocates for science. As their passages from *Moby-Dick* and *The Gay Science* demonstrate,
Melville and Nietzsche view the fixed meanings of scientific interpretations in a similar light as
the dogmatic teachings of Christian metaphysics. Science, like Christianity, is a system too far
removed from human experience since it reflects a mechanistic view of life.

However, Melville and Nietzsche do not entirely discount science’s new theories about
the universe. As their respective careers developed and the discoveries of science advanced
during the second half of the nineteenth century, Melville and Nietzsche generally came to accept these advancements. In *Clarel*, the gleeful dismissal of science found in *Moby-Dick* has been replaced by a despondent acceptance of science’s role in understanding the natural world. As Brian Yothers argues in *Sacred Uncertainty*, “perhaps the single biggest change in the religious world and in Melville’s own religious outlook during the writing of *Clarel* was the emergence of Charles Darwin’s model of evolution by means of natural selection as the most elegant and coherent explanation for the development of the species in the natural world, including the human species” (186). Of course, Melville does not allow science to supplant Christian metaphysics as the primary system to understand the natural world. Indeed, as Barnes’s passage suggests, science acts as an “instrument” to assist—not to govern—humanity’s understanding of the “life-world.”

Nietzsche uses Darwin’s theories in a similar light. He, like Melville, rejects replacing the fallen system of Christian metaphysics with only scientific reasoning. As his passage from *The Gay Science* suggests, a purely scientific understanding of the world strips existence of “significance”; however, Nietzsche’s passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* illustrates Nietzsche’s use of science to further undermine faith in Christian metaphysics. For Nietzsche, the individual “hardened by the discipline of science” can block out the false visions and alluring sounds of Christian teachings. As R.J. Hollingdale argues, “Nietzsche accepted the fundamental implication of Darwin’s hypothesis, namely that mankind had evolved in a purely naturalistic way through chance and accident […]. Natural selection was for Nietzsche essentially evolution freed from every metaphysical implication” (72-73).  

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6 For an extended study on Nietzsche’s reception of Darwin, see John Richardson’s *Nietzsche’s New Darwinism*. In his study, Richardson examines Nietzsche’s theory of the will to power in relationship to Darwin’s theory of natural
framework to develop a philosophy that returns the pursuit of truth and meaning to experience in the actual world. Indeed, as Barnes argues, the “scientific world” is not the “life-world.” In sum, then, as existentialists Melville and Nietzsche reject systems of knowledge that promote a world beyond actual existence. Whether it be Christianity’s or science’s teachings, this faith in a world outside the actual world diminishes an individual’s existence. Of course, Melville and Nietzsche recognize that the rejection of these systems upends an individual’s conventional understanding of the world. Without any system to provide comforts and constraints, the individual faces a terrifying realization that they are a stranger in the actual world.

**Anxiety and the Void**

Without the comfort of the Christian symbols or scientific conclusions, the natural world transforms into a distant and haunting landscape, an expansive void. An individual feels dread and despair encountering this new world; they are paralyzed in the face of shapeless forms that they perceive—without the assistance of either religion or science—for the first time. Melville illustrates the terrors of this paralysis in the opening sketches of *The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles*, a novella Melville published as part of *The Piazza Tales* in 1856. Inspired by his experiences working aboard the *Aschunet* during the 1840s, Melville presents the Galapagos Islands as a paralyzed hellscape, a place lost to time and unable to change. Using the pseudonym Salvator R. Tarnmoor as his narrative voice, Melville’s first sketch presents the islands as a collection of “extinct volcanoes” that “in [their] desolateness” makes them incomparable to “any...
spot on earth” (156-57). Moreover, the islands’ location intensifies the barren landscape.

Tarnmoor reveals his anxieties of this haunted space in a detailed exposition:

But the special curse, as one may call it, of the Encantadas – that which exalts them in desolation above Idumea and the Pole – is that to them change never comes – neither the change of seasons nor of sorrows. Cut by the Equator, they know not autumn, and they know not the spring; while already reduced to the lees of fire, ruin itself can work little more upon them. The showers refresh the deserts, but in these isles rain never falls. (157)

In this portrayal, the landscape is “curse[d]” because of its paralyzed state. To put it another way, this landscape exists in a point of suspension, a frozen stasis. The reason, according to the narrator, is that the islands are “cut by the equator,” situated on the horizontal axis splitting the northern and southern hemispheres. At this point of suspension, the islands can neither experience more “ruin” nor restoration since “rain never falls” in this location. Tarnmoor’s narration describes an actual world as a paralyzed wasteland. This image of a frozen paralysis reflects Melville’s anxieties about the collapse of Christian metaphysics. To put it another way, with the loss of Christianity’s interpretive signs and images, the once familiar natural world appears distant and desolate to humanity’s eyes. Without the comforts of the traditional religion’s teachings, despair consumes humanity’s existence because the possibility of experiencing a connection to an idealized metaphysical plane is not just elusive, but more likely, broken. As a result, individuals can no longer ascend to a spiritual reality; all that remains is a void, offering no source of physical, emotional, or spiritual development.

In the second sketch of The Encantadas, Melville attaches these anxieties of the paralyzed physical landscape to one of the few living creatures he observes on the islands: the Galapagos tortoise. In his early descriptions, the narrator appears haunted by this natural object’s form, labeling the reptile as an “antediluvian-looking tortoise” and asserting that “[the tortoises]
seemed hardly of earth” (162). Melville employs biblical language to characterize the tortoise, but the usage does more to distance the understanding of the natural object than make it a source of transcendent truth. That is, the tortoise’s appearance is so unfamiliar and unnatural that it “seem[s] hardly of the seed of earth.” While these phrases do evoke images associated with a metaphysical reality, Melville hedges his language to undermine the possibility of seeing the tortoise as a reflection of spiritual reality. Indeed, the qualifiers “antediluvian-looking” and “seem[s] hardly” do not make the tortoise a stable source of metaphysical meaning. These phrases appeal to metaphysical concepts, but the language resists absolute classification. That is, the instability of these images and symbols no longer has the strength to define the natural object. Ironically, these metaphysical descriptions create more unease than comfort for Tarnmoor as he tries to reconcile his understanding about this natural object.

Moreover, the tortoise is comprised of other contrasting and uncertain images that obscure its meaning; it is a riddle composed of fragmented “ciphers” difficult to interpret (163). Specifically, the tortoise’s shell has “dark and melancholy” shapes, but it “still possesses a bright side: its calipee or breastplate being sometimes of a faint yellowish or golden tinge” (162). Even though an individual can alter their perception of the animal, it still is one that cannot be defined as either entirely “black” or “bright.” Or, as Tarnmoor states, “enjoy the bright, keep it turned up

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7 Incidentally, in Chapter 17 of The Voyage of the Beagle, Darwin describes the tortoise as an “antediluvian” animal like Melville does in this passage (N. pag). I do not mean to suggest that Melville’s use of “antediluvian” to describe the Galapagos tortoise is a direct response to Darwin’s 1839 text. Jay Leyda’s The Melville Log documents Melville’s purchase of “Darwin’s Voyage [of H.M.S. Beagle]” on April 10, 1847 (240), and Melville cites a passage from the text in Moby-Dick’s “Extracts:” “On one occasion I saw two of these monsters (whales) probably male and female, slowly swimming, one after the other, within less than a stone’s throw of the hose” (Terra Del Fuego), “over which the beech tree extended its branches” (l). Even though I do not view the same descriptor of the tortoise as direct textual influence, the repeated diction suggests a common emotional and intellectual response to the tortoise’s unique and distant natural form.
perpetually if you can, but be honest and don’t deny the black” (162). The tortoise’s form reflects Melville’s vision of the apparent world without Christian metaphysics. As a result of the fallen Christian images and symbols, Tarnmoor is ambivalent about the tortoise’s form. Whereas the previous system might offer a fixed interpretation about this object, Melville suggests that humanity needs to open its perceptions to a world without these teachings. Natural objects appear as a series of contrasting elements, and humanity must recognize these conflicting details to create new meaning outside the collapsed system of Christian metaphysics. Melville rejects an approach that may try to ignore one of these elements, perhaps dismissing “the black” of the animal in favor of its “bright” character. To read existence in this fashion present only a partial meaning about these natural objects. This point illustrates a central attitude of existentialism that at one point acknowledges the despair of living in an unfamiliar world no longer connected to a spiritual reality while at the same time resisting the pull into psychological nihilism. These passages reflect the horrifying vision of the natural world stripped of metaphysical influence. The landscape is a nightmare, existing in perpetual paralysis. Moreover, the one living form on the islands, the tortoise, appears distant and unnatural compared to any previous interpretations about nature. Taken together, Tarnmoor exhibits the anxieties and discomfort of the unfamiliar appearance of this natural world. However, this passage is not filled with complete despair. Tarnmoor recognizes that the natural form of the tortoise contains both “bright” and “black” elements, and like larger existence, we can celebrate the “bright” but cannot “deny the black.” While the darkness is most apparent on the surface of the tortoise, Melville, through Tarnmoor’s narration, still recognizes that the tortoise has a “bright” breastplate, suggesting that light and truth still belong to existence. Like other existentialists, Melville recognizes that existence is
comprised of conflicting objects and perceptions, and humanity must attempt to reconcile these points to find the “bright” parts of existence without ignoring the other dark elements that evoke feelings of despair and alienation. Moreover, the tortoise’s form also reveals an existentialist attitude about the relationship between essence and existence. It can be argued that the “golden tinge” of the tortoise’s breastplate reflects its true essence that is hidden beneath its outward appearance. If humanity can simply peel back the outward mask of “ciphers” and “riddles,” the “golden” and “bright” truth of the object will appear. Melville is unsatisfied with this type of interpretation because it ignores the object’s actual appearance and existence. Individuals cannot parse the parts of existence they dislike in favor of an idealized essence. To do so would, as Nietzsche argues in *The Gay Science,* “affirm another world” beyond an individual’s existence. As an existentialist, Melville challenges the privileging of essence before existence. To live a meaningful life beyond the constraints of Christian metaphysics, individuals must confront the darkest parts of existence while resisting the fall into complete despair and nihilism.

Whereas Melville’s *The Encantadas* reveals the dread and anxieties of a world without Christian metaphysics, Nietzsche, of course, generally embraces this new world with an intrepid spirit; however, Nietzsche, at times, does evoke some of the same anxieties about the implications of a collapsed metaphysical system. For example, in the chapter “How the ‘Real World’ at last Became Myth” from *The Twilight of the Idols,* Nietzsche tracks the evolution of philosophical definitions about “the real world” as expressed by writers such as Plato and Kant, definitions that Nietzsche believes to be “the history of an error” (50). Despite his celebratory tone about the end of Christian metaphysics, Nietzsche acknowledges the consequences for the actual world, stating:
We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? … But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!

(Mid-Day; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; zenith of mankind; incipit Zarathustra). (50)

This passage illustrates Nietzsche’s understanding that the collapse of “the real world,” a line of thought tracing back to Plato, engenders a momentary void where the old interpretations of the “apparent world” have also been “abolished.” Nietzsche acknowledges that rejection of the metaphysical “real” disrupts the individual’s existence in the actual world. Losing a spiritual and intellectual paradigm disrupts the ability to understand existence as humanity once did.

Nietzsche posits that the collapse of these familiar signs and symbols transforms the apparent world into a vast nothingness. Unlike other examples of Nietzsche’s philosophizing with a hammer, this example evokes some level of discomfort. The terse and punchy language remains, but the series of questions and ellipses suggests uncertainty, a momentary flash of despair at existing in a world where no stable or comfortable interpretive signs are present. While not as haunting as Melville’s characterization of the Galapagos Islands, both passages evoke feelings of dread facing an unfamiliar natural world. Melville’s horror stems from the natural world’s perpetual paralysis; it remains a static thing where time and space have no influence. In this type of world, humanity exists in a suspended state, imprisoned in the void. Nietzsche, on the other hand, wonders “what world is left,” a question revealing his uncertainty about existence without the possibility of a spiritual reality. The loss of both real and apparent world, then, suggests a confrontation with a void.

It is important to note that neither of these writers, despite the feelings of dread and uncertainty, fall into psychological nihilism. Even the tortoise’s “black” shell contains a “bright” underbelly. The presence of this “bright” element, despite its existence surrounded by darkness,
demonstrates Melville’s belief that a version of truth still exists, even without the presence of a
divine author. Nietzsche develops a similar line of reasoning in his passage from *Twilight of the
Idols*. He recognizes the despair and uncertainty deriving from the collapse of Christian
metaphysics and the implications for the actual world left without its teachings. The loss of both
worlds creates a brief encounter with the void, but Nietzsche argues that this encounter
engenders an opportunity for humanity to overcome their dread and nihilism. Nietzsche’s
parenthetical comment situates the moment at “Mid-Day; moment of the shortest shadow.” This
specific moment suggests an interesting overlap shared with Melville’s descriptions of the
Galapagos Islands in *The Encantadas*. That is, both passages characterize the void as a point of
suspension, an interregnum of uncertainty and crisis. Melville describes the landscape of the
islands in a similar state of paralysis, their form acting as a perpetual prison that inhibits
restoration and recovery. Like Melville’s characterization of the suspended islands, the time of
“Mid-day,” suggests a suspended moment between two defined times: morning and afternoon.
This is a frozen point at the peak of the hill when an individual is no longer ascending but has not
yet started to descend. These similar images of suspension illustrate Melville’s and Nietzsche’s
feelings of dread about the actual world. Without the assistance of Christian metaphysics, both
authors acknowledge the possibility of a paralyzed existence. Since the path that Christianity’s
signs and symbols no longer guide humanity, we are confronted with an expansive blank. While
new possibilities and pathways are present, Melville and Nietzsche recognize this transition
away from the comforts of Christianity still evokes a moment of crisis and dread. However,
despite this moment of paralysis and anxiety, Melville and Nietzsche maintain that this
confrontation with emptiness still offer moments of truth for humanity. For both Melville and
Nietzsche, encountering the void is not a descent into psychological nihilism; rather, recognizing this nothingness serves as the first step towards revitalizing existence beyond the conventions of traditional philosophy.

While neither Melville nor Nietzsche accept the idea that existence is meaningless without Christian metaphysics, they recognize the alienation individuals experience when they face the void. For example, in *Moby-Dick*, Melville introduces Ishmael as an exiled voice, both in name and action. Some of Ishmael’s first narrative details illustrate feelings of despair as he wanders the world. He describes the “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul” and his “involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses,” establishing early images of death and dread that thread the novel (3). Even though it is uncertain why Ishmael feels this despair at the novel’s start, in a later chapter, “The Counterpane,” he recalls a moment from his childhood that haunts his memory. Ishmael recalls this memory after seeing Queequeg’s tattooed arm draped over him. The tattoos, the hieroglyphical marks inked over Queequeg’s entire body, resemble the obscure markings of the quilt, and Ishmael struggles to distinguish Queequeg’s arm from the counterpane’s stitching. This moment forces Ishmael to recall a distant memory from childhood that he is uncertain “whether it was a reality or a dream” (28). The framing of the memory suggests images of isolation, anticipating Ishmael’s first confrontation with the void. Specifically, Ishmael is punished for disobeying his stepmother and sent to his room. While Ishmael provides no more comments about his stepmother, this detail emphasizes the distance and isolation Ishmael feels in the world. Indeed, while she is still his parent, her identification as his “stepmother” reveals the absence of Ishmael’s birth mother. Ishmael offers no reason for this loss; however, it does situate him in a world without the comforts of his birth mother and a direct
link to his genealogy. Moreover, Ishmael makes no reference to a father in this memory, emphasizing Ishmael’s identification as an orphan in the world.

This alienation is intensified when Ishmael is physically distanced, being sent to his room as punishment. He remains isolated for an indeterminate time, waking up to “a room wrapped in darkness [...]. Nothing was to be seen and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine” (29). Ishmael describes a mysterious “arm [that] hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside. For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken” (29). Ishmael’s repeated use of “seemed” emphasizes the epistemic confusion of this “supernatural” encounter since he cannot distinguish the metaphysical from the material world. The physical connection between the two worlds, the “nameless […] phantom” covering Ishmael’s hand, renders Ishmael paralyzed, suspended in a void between thought and action, “frozen with the most awful fears.” This encounter leaves Ishmael in a perpetual state of confusion, even years after the experience. At the end of his recollection, Ishmael admits that he “shudderingly remembered it all, and for days and weeks and months afterwards [he] lost [him]self in confounding attempts to explain the mystery” (29). This comment demonstrates Ishmael’s intellectual upheaval after his encounter with the void, reflecting an important trait of existentialism. Indeed, Ishmael’s encounter reveals a terrifying moment with nothingness. He is stupefied in the presence of the “nameless phantom” with whom he has physical contact. Ishmael acknowledges that this moment haunts his thoughts long after it occurred, and he struggles to understand the meaning of his encounter with the
phantom. To put it another way, the void paralyzes Ishmael’s psychic wholeness, “los[ing] [him]self” in a vicious cycle of uncertainty and dread. However, it is important to note that Ishmael does not let his many “attempts to explain the mystery” end with a conclusion that the experience was meaningless. In fact, Ishmael acknowledges that in the very act of composing the chapter—“to this very hour”—that he still “puzzles” over this encounter with the void (29).

Ishmael’s experience facing the abyss does not stop his striving to find an answer. His encounter with the void, then, engenders a perpetual intellectual wandering, and Ishmael seeks a meaningful interpretation about existence after his experience with the vast emptiness.

Similarly, in his most literary work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche situates the eponymous hero as a wanderer in a strange world. And like Ishmael, Zarathustra at times reveals apprehensions about the alienation and distance he feels in an unfamiliar world. In fact, Zarathustra’s first action of the book is his “[leaving] his home and the lake of his home” to live alone in the mountains (39). After a decade of isolation, Zarathustra decides to descend the mountain and teach humanity the meaning of the Overman, but his new teachings fail to reach to the ears of those who still maintain faith in conventional knowledge, an action that extends Zarathustra’s isolation. In one of the book’s most striking scenes, Zarathustra experiences an encounter with a shapeless entity, like Ishmael experiences in “The Counterpane.” The final chapter of Part Two, entitled “The Stillest Hour,” portrays Zarathustra in a state of crisis after an encounter with an apparition during a dream. Nietzsche structures this crisis the midway point of the book. This choice emphasizes the feeling of discomfort and paralysis embodied in the chapter’s title, “The Stillest Hour.” Like the images in Melville’s *The Encantadas* and Nietzsche’s own passage from *The Twilight of the Idols* about the “Mid-day,” the void paralyzes
humanity in a point of suspension, arresting an individual’s ability to make meaning since the fallen symbols of old systems no longer offer an interpretive framework. Like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, Zarathustra finds himself paralyzed after a mysterious encounter during a dreamy haze. Zarathustra uses this encounter to justify his reasoning for why he “must go into his solitude once again” (167). More striking, Zarathustra acknowledges feelings of distress and despair with this specific experience in “solitude,” stating that “this time the bear goes unhappily back into his cave!” (167). Zarathustra traces the source of his distress back to his existential crisis that is reminiscent of Ishmael’s encounter with the “phantom” in *Moby-Dick*. Indeed, Zarathustra’s moment of “terror” begins in a transitory moment of suspension between wakefulness and sleep:

Do you know the terror which assails him who is falling asleep?
   He is terrified down to his toes, because the ground seems to give way, and the dream begins.
   I tell you this in a parable. Yesterday, at the stillest hour, the ground seemed to give way: my dream began.
   The hand moved, the clock of my life held its breath – I had never heard such stillness about me: so that my heart was terrified. (167)

It is rare to see such feelings of despair in Nietzsche’s writings, but this “stillest hour” that is suspended between the actual world and a dream world is a moment of “terror” for Zarathustra. Like Ishmael, Zarathustra feels frozen as his sense of the actual world dissolves into a shapeless void, but Zarathustra recognizes his eventual drift into a dream whereas Ishmael remains in a suspended state of uncertainty. More important, however, is the common image of the void as a point of suspension. Both characters suggest an impossibility of movement when they encounter the abyss. Without the assistance of the Christianity’s images and symbols, humanity encounters a vast emptiness with no familiar paths to follow. This missing guidance, then, restricts movement, undermining a belief in a vertical transcendence towards a spiritual reality.
Moreover, humanity’s movement is restricted in the actual world. Individuals are frozen as they try to understand a new existence without the guardrails of traditional religion. It is as if humanity has been dropped at a crossroads, but it has no understanding of how to use its legs. Both Melville and Nietzsche emphasize this physical and emotional paralysis for their respective characters: Ishmael is frozen in terror as the “silent form” grips his hand; likewise, Zarathustra’s “clock of [his] life held its breath” as his connection to actual world pulls away beneath his feet.

Like Ishmael’s experience, Zarathustra has a direct encounter with a shapeless form that engenders uncertainty and discomfort. In Zarathustra’s experience, he dialogues with an unknown entity. Despite this shapeless form’s ability to speak, Zarathustra can offer few details about the form’s actual appearance, identifying it with the refrain, “then again something said to me voicelessly” (167). The paradoxical dialogue between this “something” and Zarathustra reflects the anguish and uncertainty he feels about his own identity and purpose in the actual world. In other words, all former certainties and comforts Zarathustra had known are lost to this encounter with the void. For example, in describing his recent failures to persuade humanity about the Overman, Zarathustra states:

“They mocked me when I found and walked my own way; and in truth my feet trembled then.

“And they spoke thus to me: You have forgotten the way, now you will also forget how to walk!”

Then again something said to me voicelessly: “Of what consequence is their mockery? You are one who has unlearned how to obey: now you shall command! […]

“This is the most unpardonable thing about you: You have the power and you will not rule.” (168)

This exchange reflects the chapter’s pattern of development: Zarathustra acknowledges some form of personal failure to which the formless something responds with comments that challenge Zarathustra. Indeed, in his encounter with this void, Zarathustra acknowledges contrasting
images and ideas to his previous interpretations. He admits his own fear learning to have “walked [his] own way,” which was compounded by the people’s dismissal of his new teachings. Ironically, this nothingness, while causing distress, offers possibilities of inspiring Zarathustra’s evolution to make a meaningful life outside traditional philosophy. Specifically, the mysterious something challenges Zarathustra to find strength in his failures, to see his “unlearn[ing] how to obey” as a steppingstone to “command” others about the Overman. Zarathustra responds to these contrasts and requests with a simple, “I will not,” leading to a sudden “laughing” that surrounds Zarathustra (169). This laughter overwhelms him, “[tearing his] body and rip[ping] open [his] heart” (169). This shapeless nothing “fle[es]” shortly after this moment, and Zarathustra “lay on the ground and the sweat poured from [his] limbs” (169). This moment, encountering the formless “something,” physically sickens Zarathustra. He feels himself torn asunder, a broken and fragmented individual walking on unstable ground. His only reprieve is to return to solitude, to exile himself as a response to his encounter with the void. Appropriately, these feelings of despair and anguish arrive at the book’s structural point of transition, a moment at the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end. In other words, this “Mid-day” section of the novel engenders a point of “psychic evolution” for Zarathustra. However, before such development can occur, Zarathustra needs to reconcile his fragmented self. Fittingly, Nietzsche entitles the first chapter of Part III as “The Wanderer,” emphasizing Zarathustra’s alienation. Nietzsche sets this chapter at “midnight,” evoking a similar point of suspension as “Mid-day” (173). In an extended interior monologue, Zarathustra defines himself as “a wanderer” who seeks to reconcile his “own Self and those parts of it that have long been abroad and scattered among all things and accidents” (173). These comments reveal
Zarathustra’s fragmented and isolated self after his encounter with the void. At this point, he still exists at a point of suspension, wandering alone at midnight, striving to make meaning of existence that has lost the comforts and certainty found in old forms of knowledge.

These moments of despair do not cause Zarathustra to see existence as meaningless. As the chapter develops, Zarathustra embraces his feeling of isolation and angst, realizing these moments of discomfort engender the psychic evolution to move beyond psychological nihilism. Zarathustra asserts that “a man of [his] sort does not avoid such an hour: the hour that says to him: ‘Only now do you tread your path of greatness! Summit and abyss – they are now united in one! ‘You are treading your path to greatness: now what was formerly your danger has become your ultimate refuge!’” (173) Zarathustra’s comments show the intrepid tone generally found in Nietzsche’s writings. Indeed, he states that he will embrace both the summit and abyss and any feelings of discomfort and uncertainty that develop from that encounter. Paradoxically, Nietzsche believes that these chaotic encounters with the peaks and valleys of existence serve as a safe harbor. That is, when individuals not only confront but also accept the hollowness of a conventional systems of knowledge, like Christian metaphysics, they can seek new meanings about existence, which saves them from living a life dictated by the empty teachings of Christianity. Moreover, Nietzsche’s synthesis of contrasts illustrates his desire to reimagine the interpretations and values by which humanity lives a meaningful existence. Without a fixed interpretive system to provide meaning, the actual world becomes an exhibition of new stimuli that necessitate revised names and evaluations. In unifying the peak and the pit in this passage, Nietzsche reinforces the point that old truths once believed to be the heights of existence may now be identified as the depths.
These passages from Melville and Nietzsche illustrate an important link between their nihilistic visions of a natural world stripped of metaphysical influence and their striving to make meaning in this new world, a central theme belonging to existentialism. As a philosopher, Nietzsche considers the implications of nihilism more directly than Melville does as a novelist. For example, in *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, Michel Harr describes Nietzsche’s attitude towards nihilism as a “critical condition” that evolves as “a sentiment first of gloom, then of terror, in the face of collapse of all meaning” (11). In addition, Harr argues that Nietzsche believed nihilism could be “overcome” through a process moving from “complete nihilism” into ‘consummated’ nihilism (or ‘ecstatic’ nihilism, that which precisely allows us to take leave [ek-stasis] of the difference), it is necessary that we pass from the mere observation of the dissolution to an active, affirmative dissolution. The new affirmation includes an act of destruction whereby all the relations issuing from the difference are destroyed” (14). While Harr does not reference these passages from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra’s experience from “The Stillest Hour” to “The Wanderer” enact this type of transformative nihilism. Zarathustra encounters the void, filled with “gloom” and “terror” as he questions everything he once knew. The horror of the encounter forces Zarathustra into exile, wandering the landscape in search of a new meaning about existence. Zarathustra, as Harr argues, moves past the “mere observation of the dissolution” of his old forms of knowledge. That is, when he encounters the dream-like void in “The Stillest Hour,” Zarathustra remains mostly passive, paralyzed in a state of fear. It is not until Zarathustra wanders the world that he “actively [affirms]” existence freed from the constraints of previous knowledge. He recovers the fragmented parts of himself and sees that his encounter with the void enacted a transformation of the self.
Likewise, Mark Anderson, writing in “Melville and Nietzsche: Living the Death of God,” echoes Harr’s arguments about Nietzsche’s views about nihilism and affirming existence. Anderson argues that “Nietzsche’s desire, often expressed, to be a Yes-sayer (Ja-sager) involves his striving to affirm every aspect and element of the world rather than nihilistically to deny or disparage anything or anyone” (61). Like Harr’s argument, Anderson’s comment demonstrates Nietzsche’s desire to “affirm” all parts of existence and to reject a worldview that sees the actual world as meaningless. However, this drive to privilege existence over essence necessitates an intellectual, emotional, or spiritual evolution, a recognition that fallen interpretive signs and symbols can no longer inform the way individuals create a meaningful life. Nietzsche recognizes that the fixed teachings of Christian metaphysics and science are entrenched in humanity’s interpretations about existence. To move beyond these old truths necessitates a disruptive and “destruct[ive],” to borrow Harr’s argument, psychic transformation. As the passages from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* demonstrate, Nietzsche understands the terrifying paralysis and uncertainty individuals experience when encountering the abyss. Without the familiar images and meanings associated with Christian metaphysics, humanity is left to question all aspects of existence, left suspended between familiar fragments and the darkness of the void. These passages, then, perform Nietzsche’s view about nihilism. Facing the abyss, where old truths once stood, engenders a disruptive intellectual, emotional, and spiritual experience for Zarathustra. While it physically and emotionally sickens him, he does not entangle himself in the weeds of despair; instead, this momentary point of paralysis and pain forces Zarathustra to affirm the contrasting and fragmented parts of existence. Or, to put it in the words of Melville’s Salvator Tarnmoor from *The Encantadas,* Nietzsche refuses to “deny the black” parts of existence; to ignore these
elements is to live in a state of paralyzed nihilism, a position that both Melville and Nietzsche reject.

In the context of existentialism, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s passages illustrate themes of instability and homelessness that reflects the philosophy’s response to an encounter with the void. In *Irrational Man*, William Barrett argues that existentialist attitudes emerge when a society recognizes it is “in a state of dissolution” (34). For Melville and Nietzsche, the erosion of Christian metaphysics serves as the ultimate societal disruption. Remarkably, both writers characterize this collapse of traditional religion by illustrating a void that suspends characters in the paralyzed state. Moreover, this paralysis engenders feelings of dread and despair since the previous comforts Christianity offered about the actual and metaphysical realm have meaning. Indeed, both Ishmael and Zarathustra describe their fear with their inability to distinguish the actual and the real. Moreover, their respective drifts into a dream-like state does not promote a vertical movement to higher wisdom; rather, they are “flattened” and paralyzed on a horizontal plane (Barrett 49). In addition, these encounters with nothingness do not cause feelings of unity and peacefulness, at least at first. Both Ishmael and Zarathustra are alienated as they face the nothingness. They exist in a state of “homelessness,” to use Barrett’s terminology, abandoned by the comforts and familiarity of the fallen signs of Christianity. According to Barrett, these realizations “are painful truths, but the most basic things are always learned with pain, since our inertia and complacent love of comfort prevent us from learning until they are forced upon us. It appears that man is willing to learn about himself only after some disaster; after war, economic crisis, and political upheaval have taught him how flimsy is that human world in which he thought himself so securely grounded” (34-35). Barrett’s commentary offers an important
framework for “the painful truths” that both Ishmael and Zarathustra experience. After facing the void, they realize the meanings promoted by Christian metaphysics are nothing more than shapeless blanks. The system provides “flimsy” interpretations about the actual world, and both Ishmael and Zarathustra reveal their terror when they are unable to discern the actual world from their dream-like trance. With the initial encounter, the void engenders these feelings of isolation and dread, but it is important to note that these disruptive experiences with anguish do not result in either character’s—or author’s—fall into psychological nihilism. Neither Melville nor Nietzsche believe that standing paralyzed at the precipice of nothingness is humanity’s terminus; rather, both writers suggest that facing the void is the first step towards identifying and reimagining all elements of existence. To use Barrett’s comments about existentialism, Melville and Nietzsche recognize that an individual’s “inertia” develops from the Christianity’s fixed and comfortable interpretations. Both writers see this system’s teachings as a form of paralysis, a moment of static illness that, if confronted and accepted, can lead to an affirmation of all parts of existence, both the “bright” and the “black,” as Melville describes in *The Encantadas*.

Of course, these passages illustrate the fine line between the despair of psychological nihilism and the “yes-saying” Nietzsche associates with metaphysical nihilism. Indeed, encountering the void might render the individual unable to break free from this terrifying nihilistic paralysis. And while Melville and Nietzsche believe that individuals can escape the void and move beyond its despair—a central theme of existentialism—they differ in their attitudes about the individual’s recovery and transformation from the void’s “painful truths.” Whereas the audience can see the relative quickness in Zarathustra’s shift from despair to dauntlessness, Melville’s texts suggest a greater struggle to move past the void and the collapsed
system of Christian metaphysics. That is, Ishmael’s joyful moments appear briefly in *Moby-Dick*, just as the revelation of the tortoise’s “bright” breastplate can be viewed only as a flash of insight that can be extracted from the dark elements of existence. Mark Anderson, however, argues “that Melville in his *Moby-Dick* period effortlessly achieved a state of ‘happiness…exhilaration…dawn’ as a result of God’s demise, a state, in short, of jubilant affirmation, which Nietzsche himself had constantly to strive to match, but also that Melville could not sustain this condition and eventually sank more deeply into psychological nihilism than Nietzsche ever did” (63).

While it is true that there are flashes of “jubilant affirmation” in *Moby-Dick*, they do not arrive “effortlessly” as Anderson’s comment suggests. Even in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael’s anxieties he first experiences in “The Counterpane” snag his progress towards his “jubilant affirmation” of life. In other words, before shifting to a Nietzschean “yes-saying” affirmation about existence, Ishmael—and Melville—find themselves wandering through darkness, negating the actual world, and finding their ability to affirm all parts of existence impeded. J.J. Boies asserts this position in his speech, “Existential Nihilism and Herman Melville.” According to Boies, Melville “was indeed the ‘disillusioned serious man’ of the existentialists—if you wish, the ‘nihilist,’ the man who—in an era when it was popular to be the smiling optimist—said ‘No’ to practically all aspects of the wretched existence into which he found himself thrown” (320). Boies’s commentary qualifies Anderson’s arguments about Melville’s metaphysical nihilism, offering a more reasonable framework for viewing Ishmael’s paralysis after encountering the void. Indeed, Melville’s worldview walks the tightrope between metaphysical and psychological nihilism, treading the line between affirming life or allowing the void to blanket existence in
meaningless. According to Boies, Melville struggles to disentangle from the void and the “wretched existence” he lives. And while Anderson is correct to see the flashes of Ishmael’s “yes-saying” in *Moby-Dick*, the novel also includes one of the most nihilistic passages in Melville’s corpus, illustrating Melville’s vision of a “wretched existence” that Boies describes in his speech.

Specifically, in “The Whiteness of the Whale,” Ishmael chronicles his reasons for fearing Moby Dick. Ishmael’s trepidation begins with his failure to offer concrete language to describe the whale. Specifically, Ishmael does not emphasize “the more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick,” such as his physical size or brute strength; rather, he worries about elements he cannot define:

> Vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overwhelmed all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught. (204)

This opening passage, while threaded with despair, also demonstrates Ishmael’s desire to overcome his dread about Moby Dick. For Ishmael, the central problem with the white whale develops from its appearance that is at one time a “vague, nameless horror” while at the same time a “mystical and well nigh ineffable” quality. He eventually identifies “the whiteness of the whale” as being the problem that “overpowered” all his other concerns. Anticipating the horrifying appearance of the Galapagos tortoise in *The Encantadas*, Moby Dick is an inscrutable natural form. The whale defies stable meaning since it is blanketed in whiteness, a color evoking a “nameless horror” and “mystical” quality at the exact same moment. While Ishmael extends this problem in later paragraphs, it is important to note that despite these contrasts and
uncertainty, Ishmael’s narration reflects a striving to create meaning from this monstrous nothingness. His need to “explain” the problem of whiteness, despite his confusion, suggests his urgency to move beyond the void, to avoid seeing experience as meaningless and “all these chapters [being] naught.” His desire to create meaning, however, is not as effortless as Anderson suggests. In fact, Ishmael struggles to reconcile the paradoxical color of whiteness and its effect on interpreting the natural world.

The terror of whiteness, according to Ishmael, derives from its ability to blanket and blur the forms belonging to the actual world. Chronicling several examples of whiteness appearing in nature, Ishmael reveals his ambivalence about these snow-covered forms. For example, in his discussion of “the White Steed of the prairies,” Ishmael first praises the animal as a “magnificent” and “noble horse” that “was the object of trembling reverence and awe” (207). However, at the same time, Ishmael recognizes that it is the horse’s whiteness that confuses its essence. Ishmael argues that “it was his spiritual whiteness chiefly, which so clothed him with divineness; and that this divineness had that in it which, though commanding worship, at the same time enforced a certain nameless terror” (207). In addition, Ishmael applies this interpretation to the names of bodies of water, asking, “why, irrespective of all latitudes and longitudes, does the name of the White Sea exert such a spectralness over the fancy, while that of the Yellow Sea lulls us with mortal thoughts of long lacquered mild afternoons on the waves, followed by the gaudiest and yet sleepiest sunsets?” (209)

In these first examples, Ishmael traces his fears about whiteness to its deceptive blanketing of natural forms. Ishmael’s description directly links white with a metaphysical reality, employing familiar signs associated with Christian metaphysics; however, the symbolism
of whiteness, while “commanding worship” and evoking awe, engenders feelings of dread and “terror.” It is not the natural forms themselves causing this distress but rather the whiteness blanketing these objects that most concerns Ishmael. If we consider Barrett’s arguments about existentialists and the collapse of the Christianity’s images and symbols, we can see Ishmael’s initial concerns with whiteness as a reflection of this existentialist attitude when he notes, “as we have seen, it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian’s Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind” (212). Ishmael recognizes the inherent tension of whiteness as a formless source of meaning, an element that serves not only as a representation of “spiritual things” but also emphasizes humanity’s deepest terrors. The color white, once an “image” to help people “express” shared desires for “wholeness,” has lost this fixed interpretation. Ishmael’s descriptions suggest the remnants of this interpretive system, as whiteness reminds people of its “divineness” and “awe,” but without the fixed meaning of traditional religion, the symbol engenders feeling of terror and “spectralness over the fancy.” This ghostly pall covering the imagination emphasizes the remoteness the individual feels. Images that once provided comfort are now ghastly ruins. The death of old interpretive signs distances humanity from the actual world; as Barrett argues about the existentialists, they feel “homeless” and exist in a state of wandering. Ishmael’s commentary, then, underscores this existentialist attitude since he understands that Christian symbols, like whiteness, can no longer offer fixed meanings promising a pathway towards a spiritual reality.

Without these fixed meanings, Ishmael acknowledges that the “indefiniteness” of whiteness
now encourages an abundance of interpretive possibilities. Reflecting upon his anxieties, Ishmael wonders:

Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (212)

In this passage, Ishmael qualifies his worries about natural objects, emphasizing the “visible absence” that blankets existence as the source of his terror. The idea of “absence,” of course, suggests a nihilistic attitude, but Ishmael’s concern develops from the blankness covering the actual world. To put it another way, Ishmael does not view the natural forms of existence as meaningless; instead, the emptiness of the metaphysical veil encourages an abundance of readings that confuses humanity’s understanding of the actual world, creating “a colorless, all-color” kind of nihilism. This flood of interpretations overwhelms the senses and demonstrates the emptiness of Christianity’s dogmatic teachings. He notes that the “colorless, all-color […] atheism” of whiteness forces humanity into a state of alienation, “shrink[ing]” away from the comforts of familiar symbols and knowledge. This act of retreat evokes the frozen terror and paralysis of Ishmael’s, as well as Zarathustra’s, encounter with the void. As Ishmael considers the implications of metaphysical emptiness, he is suspended in fear, unable to progress forward. This new form of “atheism” traps Ishmael in “a wretched existence” of emptiness and abundance. Despite these dreadful feelings, it is important to note the flash of hopeful possibility Ishmael acknowledges in this illustration of the void. Specifically, Ishmael juxtaposes the phrase “dumb blankness” with “full of meaning” in his characterization of the white abyss. The emptiness of Christianity’s signs and symbols transforms the world into a terrifying silence, yet Ishmael quickly shifts this dreadful emptiness to the possibility of seeing this “blankness” as
“full of meaning.” In other words, without the fixed interpretations of Christian metaphysics, the world becomes a blank canvas, waiting to be filled with symbols and signs that reflect a diverse existence freed from Christianity’s teachings. Even though this idea is enveloped with nihilistic imagery, it reveals Ishmael’s—and Melville’s—belief that the collapse of this system does not render all of existence as meaningless.

Of course, this hopeful moment flows back to Ishmael’s concerns about the “colorless, all-color of atheism” that blankets existence. That is, Ishmael questions whether the natural world has any meaning if it is shrouded in whiteness. Ishmael presents a haunting image of a deceptive natural world, one where individuals cannot decipher truth from falsehood:

And when we consider that other theory of natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues – every stately or lovely emblazoning – the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all of these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like a 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 palsied universe lies before us a leper. (212)

For Ishmael, his greatest fear about whiteness is the masking of natural forms with its deceptive color. Ishmael’s concerns develop from anxieties about both scientific and spiritual interpretations about light. He describes the “principle of light” as “remain[ing] white or colorless in itself,” and he acknowledges that whiteness is the symbol of spirituality and serves

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7 Khalil Husni offers a detailed survey of the many interpretations of “The Whiteness of the Whale” spanning the years 1851 to 1970. Husni’s final citation, taken from a source comparing Melville and Conrad, reads Moby Dick, blanketed in whiteness, as a “symbol for Melville’s nihilistic conception of the natural world” (221). This article does not make a specific connection to the idea of metaphysical nihilism, but this citation supports the argument that “The Whiteness of the Whale” reflects Melville’s recognition that the material world was possibly nothing more than an empty void.
as the foundation for “all other earthly hues.” However, Ishmael argues that this symbol is nothing but a “subtile deceit,” a distortion of the actual world. This point reveals some of Ishmael’s most nihilistic visions in the entire novel and illustrates Melville’s difficulty moving beyond the confrontation with the void. After describing beautiful and tranquil images of nature, Ishmael asserts those calming forms have no “inherent substance,” and that their meaning is “only laid on from without.” In other words, Ishmael posits that this veiled nothingness not only makes it impossible to discover the essence of natural forms but also that those forms might not have an essence or “inherent substance” at all. This despair is amplified when he realizes that Nature, once believed to be a source of divine inspiration, “absolutely paints like a harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel house within.” To put it another way, whiteness distorts the natural world, luring humanity into false comforts. Ishmael underscores this point by suggesting that all existence is nothing but a mask covering a dark, nihilistic truth: no essence exists; there is nothing but “the charnel house within.” Reducing essence and existence to a house of death situates Ishmael at the precipice of psychological nihilism, his ruminations revealing his bleak assessment that the only essence inside natural forms is death. Such a comment does not, as Anderson argues in his reading of *Moby-Dick*, demonstrate Melville’s easy shift away from psychological nihilism to a joyful affirmation of existence. As this passage shows, Ishmael’s encounter with the void leaves him brewing in states of despair and obsessing over death. For Melville, the loss of Christian metaphysics transforms the “universe” into a sick and “palsied” state, a static and unchanging world, decaying as the skin of “a leper.” In his reading of this chapter, Paul Brodtkorb Jr., writing in *Ishmael’s White World*, argues that Ishmael’s treatise on whiteness reflects the attitude that “all existence is secretly sickened” (119).
Brodkorb Jr.’s argument demonstrates an important point about Melville’s nihilism during the composition of *Moby-Dick*. Since whiteness is ubiquitous, “all existence” is decaying, infected by the vast abyss blanketing the universe. This veil masks the emptiness and death within all natural objects, a worldview revealing complete despair about existence. The extended treatise on whiteness reveals Melville’s difficulty moving past the loss of Christian metaphysics. Indeed, this “lost faith” is a key trait of metaphysical nihilism, but Ishmael—and Melville—become trapped within the void’s emptiness and instability (Anderson 68). To view the “universe” as sick and “palsied” does not reflect an easy transformation from a worldview built upon images of death and despair to an affirmation of all parts of existence. Indeed, this is a “wretched existence,” as Boies states, that Melville cannot “effortlessly” liberate himself, as Anderson argues in his essay.

These intellectual anxieties illustrate Melville’s emerging existentialist attitudes. As Barrett argues in *Irrational Man*, “alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat. One can scarcely subordinate these problems logically one to another; each participates in all the others, and they all circulate around a common center” (36). Reading Barrett’s commentary about this abundance of anxieties connected to existentialism, we can view Melville’s examination of whiteness as an early expression of this existentialist theme. That is, since whiteness is the synthesis of all colors, Ishmael cannot reason or interpret meaning from any object cloaked in white. Of course, this passage shows that all parts of actual existence are veiled in whiteness, disrupting the ability to “subordinate these problems logically one to
another.” This list of problems is filled with ideas of absence, fragments, and “the threat of Nothingness,” yet an individual mind, confronted with such a dreadful abundance of emptiness, cannot isolate one idea from the next, leaving an individual intellectually paralyzed since “each [idea of emptiness] participates in all the others.” In short, Melville’s examination of this “colorless, all-color of atheism” illustrates the same anxieties Barrett identifies in existentialism.

Nietzsche, of course, describes similar feelings of “the solitary and unsheltered condition” of facing the void in the passages from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. But his meditations about the void do not reach the depths of Melville’s “The Whiteness of the Whale.” Where “the threat of Nothingness” drags Ishmael—and Melville—to the darkest points of despair, Nietzsche, while expressing similar feelings of dread, demonstrates a quicker embrace of the actual world without Christian metaphysics. For example, in one of the final passages of Book Five in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche entitles the section “We Who are Homeless.” Book Five, written after *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and grafted onto the first four books of *The Gay Science*, reflects Nietzsche’s more mature philosophy about the actual world after the collapse of Christian metaphysics. Indeed, Nietzsche’s commentary from “We Who are Homeless” expands upon the implications of his proclamation made earlier in Book Three: “God is dead.” In other words, whereas Book Three simply marks the end of the system, Book Five allows Nietzsche to present his arguments about embracing the collapse, encouraging humanity to seek new meaning beyond the ruins of Christian theology. Nietzsche acknowledges that this embrace will isolate those select individuals who leave behind old forms of knowledge:

> Among Europeans today there is no lack of those who have a right to call themselves homeless in a distinctive and honourable sense: it is to them in particular that I commend my secret wisdom and *gaya scienza* […]. We children of the future – how could we be at home in this today! We are unfavourably disposed towards all ideals that might make one
feel at home in this fragile, broken time of transition; as for its “realities,” we don’t believe they are lasting. The ice that still supports people today has already grown very thin; the wind that brings a thaw is blowing; we ourselves, we homeless ones, are something that breaks up the ice and other all too thin “realities” [...]. As such, we have also outgrown Christianity and are averse to it. (241-43)

If we compare this passage with the examples from *Moby-Dick*, we see Nietzsche’s bolder attitude confronting the void. It is true that this passage recognizes the feelings of alienation and “homelessness” that thread through Melville’s literature, illustrating a central existentialist theme about humanity’s alienation after losing the comforts found in traditional philosophy. Ishmael’s brooding about whiteness reveals a vision of the actual world into a horrifying and distant landscape, where familiar symbols of meaning are the source of uncertainty and terror. Conversely, Nietzsche embraces his feeling of homelessness, describing it as a “distinctive” and “honourable” trait. It is at this point of isolation where Nietzsche can teach his “secret wisdom and *gaya scienza,*” the joyful affirmation of life.

Moreover, Nietzsche’s language reflects his active engagement in the dissolution of Christian metaphysics. He recognizes the “broken time of transition” in which humanity exists, echoing the paralytic state both Ishmael and Zarathustra experience as they encounter the void. But at this stage of Nietzsche’s philosophy, he not only welcomes the “ice [...] thaw[ing]” below his feet but also views the “homeless ones” as the agents who will assist in the breaking of these “thin ‘realities.’” It is important to note Nietzsche’s active engagement with the breaking of old forms in this passage, a noticeable shift from the scenes from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Now, after his experiences with the void, he has emerged from the paralytic and sickened feelings with an intrepid spirit. Nietzsche is no longer a passive witness of the collapse like he was when he observes that “God is dead” in Book Three of *The Gay Science*. Now, he sees himself as having
“outgrown” Christian metaphysics, and that his position as a “homeless one” living outside the fallen ruins of Christianity fuels his desire to seek new meaning about all elements of existence. Ishmael’s commentary also suggests feelings of homelessness, although the celebratory tone of Nietzsche’s writings is absent. Further, Ishmael, both in name and action, reflects the exilic wanderer, travelling the strange world alone in a state of despair. While Melville does celebrate the momentary flashes of the “bright,” he does not “deny the black” that he sees in the actual world. Melville’s extensive concerns about whiteness illustrates a worldview standing at the edge between metaphysical and psychological nihilism. Yet, Melville does not allow the terrors of whiteness to stunt his exploration of this world. He illustrates, like Nietzsche, a consistent desire to “explain [him]self” or “else all these chapters might be naught.” Despite these feelings of alienation and despair stemming from their encounters with the void, both writers strive to find and create new meaning from the vast and unfamiliar actual world that no longer has a connection to a metaphysical reality. In other words, they face the abyss with a dauntless attitude.

**Dauntlessness and the Void**

Even though existentialist texts are filled with bleak images of death, anguish, and isolation, existentialists still exhibit a willingness and desire to confront these difficult truths about existence, to create meaning from the nothingness they encounter, to affirm all parts of existence, both the “bright” and the “black,” as Melville writes in *The Encantadas*. Of course, Melville and Nietzsche illustrate similar anxieties and fears about their encounters with the void. Nietzsche accepts existence without Christian metaphysics with more eagerness than Melville, but both writers exhibit a shared dauntless spirit to see the abyss not as the end of all meaning for
the actual world. Melville and Nietzsche create similar scenes that transform the terrifying emptiness of the void into a place of refuge. Both writers employ the image of the indefinite, formless shape of water to illustrate their belief that new meaning can be discovered when freeing oneself from the constraints of old knowledge. This boldness in the face of nothingness serves as a common thread running through existentialism. As Cotkin argues in *Existential America*, “to be existential is to recognize, in the face of all these somber truths clutched close to our own sense of being, that we must act” (3). For both writers, the sea, even though it is a vast emptiness, is a place where the individual can act, creating new truths about existence without a connection to spiritual reality.

While Nietzsche never physically ventured out to the south seas like Melville did, his mind imagines the vastness of open waters as a place of discovery. In *Dawn*, he develops an episode entitled “In the Great Silence.” To open, Nietzsche draws the reader to the water:

> Here is the sea, here we can forget the city. To be sure, you can still hear the bells sounding the Angelus just now – it is that somber and foolish, yet sweet sound at the crossroads of day and night – but only for one moment more! Now all is silent! The sea lies before one pale and shimmering; it cannot speak. The sky plays its eternal mute evening game of red, yellow, and green colors; it cannot speak. The small crags and ribbons of rock descending into the sea as if to find the most solitary spot, none of them can speak. This prodigious muteness that suddenly overcomes us is beautiful and terrifying, it swells the heart. – Oh, the hypocrisy of this mute beauty! How much good it could speak, and how much evil too, if it so wanted! Its bound tongue and expression of long-suffering happiness are a ruse used to ridicule your sympathy – So be it! (219)

The opening line illustrates the value of the sea, Nietzsche defining it as a fluid and indefinite space that allows memories of a confined city to drift away. Nietzsche acknowledges that upon the initial separation of the city’s comforts, the sounds of ringing bells will serve as a fleeting connection to familiar comforts. However, the bells stop eventually, situating the individual in silence. Nothing can speak, and Nietzsche recognizes this tension of the physical world
appearing to be a void. In addition, these silent natural forms are now nothing more than contrasting ideas merged, a borderless void of confusion. Of course, the individual experiences emotional turmoil, and Nietzsche describes this ambivalence as a “beautiful and terrifying” experience. However, it is important to note that Nietzsche resists a fall into despair. Indeed, even describing the silence of nature and the accompanying deception, Nietzsche affirms the collapse of old beliefs, stating, “So be it.” The phrase evokes the dauntless attitude embodied in existentialism since the terse statement suggests Nietzsche’s embracing of the void. Yes, humanity in the wake of major upheaval—the death of God and loss of Christian metaphysics—finds itself lost in a state of wandering, questioning existence in the face of a great nothingness. However, as Nietzsche’s statement shows, the search for an affirmation of existence needs to embrace the void with a bold spirit.

After *Dawn*, Nietzsche continued to identify the water as a space that not only reflected a void but also encouraged individuals to re-evaluate existence. In Book Three of *The Gay Science*, in the episode immediately preceding “The Madman” section where Nietzsche proclaims the death of God, he declares:

> We have forsaken the land and gone to sea! We have destroyed the bridge behind us – more so, we have demolished the land behind us! Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean, it is true, it does not always roar, and at times it lies there like silk and gold and dreams of goodness. But there will be hours when you realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that has felt free and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Woe, when homesickness for the land overcomes you, as if there had been more freedom there – and there is no more “land”!

(119)

Nietzsche’s departure from land to water reveals the ocean to be a mixture not only of concentrated sensory perceptions but also of vast indefiniteness, a borderless blank overwhelming the mind. While the ocean can “roar” at times, it also appears to a place of
comfort filled with “silk and gold and dreams of goodness.” Nietzsche stresses this seamless merging of opposites to reinforce his rejection of dogmatic metaphysical systems. In Nietzsche’s illustration of the ocean, it is a fluid mixture of rage and goodness, terror and beauty. The ocean imagery reflects Nietzsche’s existentialism in response to the mechanistic worldview promoted by science. Nietzsche embraces the disparate and contrasting appearances that comprise existence, a direct challenge to the belief that a singular hidden essence that governs the meaning of a natural object. With respect to science, Nietzsche sees the system as a mechanistic reductionism of the natural object. It seeks to break the world of appearances into fixed and concrete truths, casting aside other parts of the object in preference for its hidden essence. For Nietzsche, the water symbolizes the shifting and merging of contrasts. How can one strip the essence of water to only see its beauty away from its terror? Nietzsche’s philosophy argues that type of mechanistic reduction is an impossibility, and one must embrace the world as one filled with contrasting images as opposed to seeking a fixed essence, as both Christianity and science promote.

Nietzsche’s next sentence shifts the description of the ocean from concrete perceptions to one of nameless and limitless concerns. Indeed, the infinite is a point where both endless possibilities of discovery exist, but at the same time, there is a chance that the borderless expanse is nothing more than indefinite emptiness. Nietzsche emphasizes this possibility when he describes the “poor bird” determined to be “free” from the “walls of [that] cage.” The final sentence reflects the anxieties facing the endless horizon of the ocean, since Nietzsche acknowledges the bird’s “homesickness for the land.” This homesickness, of course, extends the existentialist theme of homelessness and isolation. Indeed, the bird’s illness stems from its
separation from the comforts of a familiar world. The bird’s desire to return to the safety of home, however, is a deception. The bird does not realize this deceit until it has wandered out to sea and faced the void, the abundance of water erasing both the empirical observation of land as well as its mental concept. Nietzsche’s final clause “and there is no more ‘land’!” emphasizes the loss in both physical and conceptual meaning of the land. Marked with quotes, the word “‘land’” becomes an empty sign or symbol to understand existence. However, Nietzsche does not believe that experiencing the void serves as the end, as a fall into psychological nihilism. Instead, he demonstrates that this dauntless encounter with the expansive form of water, a reflection of nothingness, serves as the gateway for new truths about existence. That is, the safety and comforts of the land does not allow the individual to be free, to see the diverse possibilities about all parts of existence. Only in experiencing the vastness of the sea, away from the land, can individuals overcome this homesickness.

Nietzsche’s characterization of the ocean as a source of discovery echoes similar images Melville crafts throughout *Moby-Dick*. In “Loomings,” Ishmael describes the power of water to draw people to “the extremist limit of the land” (4). The “magic” of the ocean seduces these “landsmen,” people “tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks,” to leave the comfort and safety of land, but upon reaching the border between land and water, between known and unknown, the “landsmen” stop, “get[ting] just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in” (4). Like Nietzsche’s description of the ocean from *The Gay Science*, Melville contrasts knowledge attained from the land from that experience lived on the water. Indeed, life of land traps the individual in a static position of knowledge, locked in a cage like Nietzsche’s
bird who flies from the land. Both writers emphasize the lure of water, viewing the expansive
and borderless waterscape as a source to dive deep and attain higher wisdom.

While they both recognize the limitations of the land, Melville and Nietzsche do not
ignore the intellectual tension and despair that accompanies the lost faith in traditional
philosophy. As Nietzsche suggests, upon leaving experience on the land, individuals realize the
“awesome” power of the “infinit[e].” This moment surrounded by the shapeless water leads to
the collapse in previously held concepts, leaving those among the waters in a point of
suspension, lost in an abyss of uncertainty. Melville suggests similar benefits and tensions with
journeying away from the concrete fixture of the land to the formless surface of the water.

Specifically, Ishmael inquires:

> Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical
vibration, when first told you and your ship were now out of the sight of land? Why did
the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make
him the own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the
meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild
image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we
ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life;
and this is the key to it all. (5)

Like Nietzsche’s characterization of the awesome and infinite sea, Ishmael describes the
“mystical vibration” individuals experience upon being “out of sight of land.” Ishmael includes
imagery and symbols reflective of metaphysics, acknowledging the deification of the water
performed by the ancient cultures of the “old Persians,” “Greeks,” and Romans. Of course, these
references, while appealing to ancient metaphysics, undermine the singular interpretations
offered by Christian theology. Indeed, these references appeal to Eastern as well as polytheistic
traditions, parts of existence outside the dogmatic interpretations of Christian metaphysics.

Moreover, they position these different systems in contrast with one another, forcing individuals
to reconcile these parts of existence. And while Ishmael is unable to answer his own questions, he strives to find the answer, asserting that the importance of water across time and culture “is not without meaning.” Like Nietzsche’s passage from *Dawn*, Melville describes a momentary sensation of wisdom that emerges from the discomfort of being surrounded by the water. Writing in “Passion, Reverie, Disaster, Joy,” Edward F. Mooney asserts that “Melville embraces the shifting ways of the sea, and the ways of men who sail it, and of the momentary, shifting, episodic truths” (48). While Mooney’s comment emphasizes Melville’s attitude “of the sea,” his argument about the seas can be applied to Nietzsche’s passage from *Dawn*. That is, the sea, while an image of vast emptiness, is the environment where these episodic truths exist. While both authors acknowledge feelings of discomfort with the void, they both assert that diverse, fleeting “truths” still exist even when the comforts of traditional philosophy’s signs and images are no longer perceived. Moreover, as Mooney argues, these shifting, episodic truths are as fluid as the water itself. As existentialists, Melville and Nietzsche are skeptical about the fixed and static interpretations about existence; instead, they welcome the diverse and mutable episodic truths that comprise existence. While these evolving meanings are not without moments of despair and angst, an individual’s ability to confront and reconcile these conflicting and contrasting parts of existence engenders revitalizes their connection to the actual world. No longer is their existence consumed by Christianity’s fixed interpretation that elevates metaphysical reality over life in the actual world. The natural form of the water, then, reflects both the momentary discomfort and visions of truth that humanity experiences confronting the void. Despite these initial discomforts, these passages demonstrate a revitalization of the actual
world that has been separated from mechanistic and rigid systems of knowledge like Christianity and science.

In *Ishmael’s White World*, Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. confirms this reading about Melville’s attitude about the water and the land. According to Brodtkorb, Jr., Ishmael believes that “land life tends toward the stable and the certain. Earth is the domain of the familiar […]. In a contrary mood, however, the familiar seems aggressively boring […] the *forms* of earth are confining” (18). In other words, the land’s comfort develops from its “*predictability* of forms,” yet this “familiarity” also creates an existential prison, a set of bars inhibiting the striving for new meaning. But Brodtkorb, Jr. asserts that Melville, through Ishmael, does not view the formlessness of water as a singular point of salvation. The shapeless, layered waterscape contains opposites existing at the exact same moment. Brodtkorb, Jr. asserts that “if one leaves earth for water, one must accept the interlinked terrors and wonders of water creatures and water thoughts: their aggressive strangeness as well as their passive strangeness” (24). Brodtkorb Jr.’s analysis, while focused on Ishmael’s differing attitudes about land and water, also emphasizes Nietzsche’s ambivalent beliefs about journeying into the limitless waves of water. Indeed, Nietzsche’s passage from *The Gay Science* illustrates the “interlinked terrors and wonders of […] water thoughts” as the individual sets out to sea, emphasizing the “awesome” power of the endless horizon of the waterscape. There is excitement in departing from the land, escaping from the “*predictability* of forms” embodied in the static ground. While the water can offer a reprieve from the confinement of “predictability,” the “wonders” of the “shapeless” water inspire the mind towards new wisdom. However, at the exact same moment, the “strangeness” embedded in the “shapeless” form stirs anxiety, an emotional and intellectual unrest bordering on despair, or
psychological nihilism. As both Melville and Nietzsche recognize the collapse of Christian metaphysics, each writer addresses the possibility of descending into despair. Indeed, the water, according to Ishmael, is where the “ungraspable phantom of life” continually floats just beyond reach, leaving those who sail amongst the formless void of the seas open to being lost, left with nothing but the vast emptiness. Melville’s and Nietzsche’s attitudes about the water reflect an important theme of existentialism. In American Existentialism, George Cotkin asserts that “despair and dauntlessness battle in Melville’s pages, not to define truth but to glimpse some inkling of possibility” (17). Like Nietzsche, Melville sees the loss of Christian metaphysics as a tremendous upheaval for “the deepest strata of man’s psychic life,” a point asserted by Barrett in his discussion of Nietzsche’s existentialist philosophy. As these passages demonstrate, Melville and Nietzsche find themselves “battl[ing]” with the “despair” and “dauntlessness” as they leave the comforts of the land behind. Unlike other encounters with the void, the sea, while itself an expansive nothingness that evokes uncertainty and despair, also allows for freedom and progress. The void no longer paralyzes Melville or Nietzsche; rather, the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual upheaval sparks their desire to seek and reconcile the diverse interpretations about their own existence and live a meaningful life outside the teachings of Christian metaphysics.

Melville illustrates this intrepid “battle” between “despair and dauntlessness” with his characterization of Bulkington. Even though Bulkington appears briefly, his bold spirit leaves a great impression on Ishmael. Ishmael, reflecting upon the tension between the land and the water, recalls Bulkington’s encounters with the vast ocean:

Know ye, now, Bulkington? Glimpses do you seem to see of that mortally intolerable truth: that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort to the soul to keep open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore? But as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth,
shoreless, indefinite as God – so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!” (116-117)

This glorification of Bulkington reveals Melville’s dauntless attitude confronting the void. Melville positions Bulkington at a point of suspension, echoing an image he associates with the void. Bulkington’s “soul” is caught between the “highest truth” found in “landlessness” and the compulsion forced by “heaven and earth” to “conspire” the soul back to the “treacherous, slavish shore.” This pulling back towards land adds another complexity to Melville’s attitude about Christian metaphysic’s constraints. Indeed, “heaven and earth” are paired agents, clawing the dauntless Bulkington back towards the fixed and comfortable knowledge associated with traditional philosophy. Ishmael praises Bulkington’s will to move beyond the comforts found in the fixed systems of “heaven and earth.”

In *Sacred Uncertainty*, Brian Yothers reads this passage from “The Lee Shore” as “a manifesto of sorts for the treatment of religious difference […] [that] argue[s] as it does for the need to escape from the comforts of inherited certainties” (74). While Yothers’s argument offers a detailed examination of Melville’s reception of a wide range of religious texts, there is an interesting parallel to Anderson’s commentary with respect to Melville’s metaphysical nihilism. In Anderson’s reading of “The Lee Shore,” he argues that “to seek or state the truth is not to strive for correspondence or reference but rather to look into the abyss without fear of the abyss glaring back. Melville seems to have learned these things, or to have been set on his way to learning them, as a young sailor at sea encountering a plurality of exotic worldviews and developing a facility for inhabiting multiple perspectives. He saw through Christianity while seeing into native paganism in person, through the direct experience of roaming around the Pacific Islands” (65). Like Yothers’s argument about “religious difference,” Anderson asserts
that Melville’s “plurality of exotic worldviews” engendered an ability to recognize and embody “multiple perspectives.” Yothers describes this concept as “‘religious difference,’ […] denot[ing] the intellectual, ethical, and spiritual issues raised by contact among various religious traditions, inside and outside of the Christian religious traditions that shaped Melville’s upbringing” (5). In short, despite two different conclusions, both Yothers and Anderson read this section of *Moby-Dick* as one that recognized a confrontation with the abyss as an experience that can inform diverse interpretations about all elements of existence. This “sacred uncertainty,” taking the form of the indefinite sea, serves as the location for new meaning to be found in the actual world that no longer is influenced by Christian metaphysics. Without this system, individuals are left to face the emptiness of their previous knowledge and reconcile the disruptive emotions that they experience. Like Bulkington, humanity feels pulled back to the safety and comfort of traditional philosophy, but as an existentialist, Melville understands that the open sea offers a path towards affirming existence without the guidance of Christianity’s fixed images and symbols. Pain and despair are present, but individuals who, like Bulkington, will themselves into the “howling infinite” create higher insights about their own existence, away from the restricted and distant meanings presented by Christian metaphysics.8

Melville’s use of water imagery also serves as a criticism against science. Indeed, the water reflects Melville’s belief that existence is comprised of episodic truths; these truths, of course, are constantly in motion, ebbing and flowing as the waves cresting upon the shore. In

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8 In “The Advocate” chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael concludes his extended praise honoring whaling with the brief statement: “for a whale-ship was my Yale college and my Harvard” (122). While this statement comes through Ishmael, it, of course, stems from Melville’s own experience on a whaling cruiser instead of an educational experience at university. See Chapters 10-12 in Hershel Parker’s *Herman Melville*, Vol. 1 for Melville’s experience whaling. Ishmael’s statement and Melville’s own experience echo Kaufmann’s statement about “traditional philosophy” or “system” appearing as “remote from life,” a tension that Melville, as well as Nietzsche, explored in their texts.
Melville’s characterization of science, the system exhibits “over-confidence” in the certainty of their methods and findings (Hillway 411). Melville associates this type of rigid confidence with the static nature of the land. In *Moby-Dick*, of course, Melville juxtaposes the land and water in the novel’s opening pages, but in *Clarel*, he makes a direct link between the fixed attitude of science and the land. Specifically, Melville develops the character of Margoth as geologist. His dialogue strikes against the faith of characters like Derwent and Rolfe, and his ideas appear as immovable as the stones and mountains of the landscape. In one of his first exchanges with the pilgrims he elevates science over religion, arguing that “‘the plain—the vale—Lot’s sea—/ It needs we scientists remand/ Back from old theologic myth/ To geologic hammers’” (II.21.47-50). This comment illustrates Margoth’s desire to use science as a cudgel against ancient myths and theology. While Nietzsche would certainly approve of Margoth’s hammering the idol of Christianity, neither he nor Melville would accept Margoth’s belief that science is the replacement for a collapsed system of knowledge.

Margoth expresses this certainty in scientific progress as he describes his wish to modernize holy sites:

> Then mentions Salem: “Stale is she!
> Lay flat the wall, let in the air,
> That folk no more may sicken there!
> Wake up the dead; and let there be
> Rails, wires, from Olivet to the sea,
> With station Gethsemane.” (II.21.89-94)

Margoth’s comments reflect the urge not only to level sacred sites but also to replace with modern scientific and technological advancement. Margoth’s character reflects the type of faith in scientific advancement to remove old superstitions, but his brute over-confidence in science is as dogmatic and constrained as Christianity’s teachings. Melville associates this dogmatic
attitude with the land to reflect the comforts this knowledge purports to provide. However, as Melville and Nietzsche illustrate with their land and water imagery, the land provides false comforts about existence. While it is safe and stable, it keeps humanity paralyzed in their pursuit of new possibilities about creating a meaningful life. The paths on the land are already laid; to seek new truths, one must flee these comforts for the ebb and flow of the water.

To illustrate the liberation from fixed knowledge of the land to the expansive possibilities of the water, Melville and Nietzsche appeal to poetry within their prose. For example, in the appendix of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche includes several poems, one of which is entitled “Toward New Seas.” Nietzsche offers the path forward not only in locality—the sea—but also with his expression—poetry:

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Out there – thus I will; so doing
trust myself now and my grip.
Open lies the sea, its bluing
Swallows my Genoese ship.

All things now are new and beaming,
Space and time their noon decree –:
Only your eye – monstrous, gleaming
Stares at me, infinity! (258)
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This poem, both in content and form, illustrates Nietzsche’s path forward, a point of liberation from the old beliefs that a metaphysical realm existed and had influence on the actual world. It is on the water’s limitlessness and landlessness that allows individuals to “will” themselves in the affirmation of all parts of existence. This action requires a destruction of old systems of philosophy, as the expansive water “swallows” the old habits of safety and security. After this collapse, “all things now are new and beaming”; a new point of wisdom and meaning can be found. This experience is not without difficulty, despair, and isolation since the only other entity
Nietzsche acknowledges is the “eye” of “infinity;” however, Nietzsche’s facing the “infinity,” the limitless void, emboldens his attitude, reflecting the spirit of existentialism. It is only “out there” on the expansive surface of the water can Nietzsche “will” his way towards new understanding about existence.

Melville also uses the poetic form of song to juxtapose the comforts of the land with the uncertainties of the water. At the end of “Extracts,” Melville contrasts two songs about the whale, a song for the land and a song for water:

“So be cheery, my lads, let your hearts never fail,
While the bold harpooneer is striking the whale!”

_Nantucket Song._

“Oh, the rare old Whale, mid storm and gale
In his ocean home will be
A giant in might, where might is right,
And King of the boundless sea.”

_Whale Song._

The contrast in content, of course, highlights the falsehood embodied in the safe and comfortable knowledge of the land. The song of the water, however, reflects the deeper wisdom about existence that cannot be learned from the certainty of old systems of knowledge. Indeed, the “Whale Song” identifies the whale as the “King of the boundless sea,” the central figure of the indefinite and expansive ocean. This solemn truth of “Whale Song” contrasts with the gleeful attitude of “the bold harpooneer […] striking the whale.” Indeed, the song of the water presents the actual world as one where individuals lack “might.” They are left facing an irrational and careless actual world, one that is governed by brute force. The dauntless individual like Bulkington—or Melville himself—faces this cold and indifferent world, recognizing their smallness in contrast to the indefiniteness in front of them. For the existentialists, it is at this
moment of confrontation, when an individual steps free of the comfort and constraints of the land, that new interpretations about all parts of existence become possible.

**Conclusion**

This chapter argues that scientific advancement during the nineteenth century reaffirmed Melville’s and Nietzsche’s beliefs that Christian metaphysics no longer offered stable meaning about existence. Specifically, Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection buttresses Melville’s and Nietzsche’s collapsed faith in the system of Christian metaphysics. Of course, Melville and Nietzsche are not scientific advocates. As existentialists, both writers reject systems that purport to offer fixed and stable meanings about existence. So, while Darwin’s theories solidify their lost faith in Christian metaphysics, Melville and Nietzsche are also critical of the idea that scientific reasoning could be a system to fill the void where Christianity’s sacred signs and symbols once stood.

Without these systems, Melville and Nietzsche recognize that the actual world is a strange and distant place. The comforts of familiar symbols and images are gone, replaced by a vast nothingness. This void engenders feelings of alienation and dread that consume Melville’s and Nietzsche’s writings. Upon their initial encounters with the void, they situate their characters in a paralyzed state, suspended between two worlds and unable to discern what is existence and what is a dream. Even though both writers express similar feelings of despair, Melville and Nietzsche differ in their respective escapes from the void. For Nietzsche, his experience with the abyss causes distress, but his desire to move beyond the collapse of Christian metaphysics is stronger than Melville’s. In passages from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche strives to create new meaning in the wake of the collapse. He is not bogged down in
sadness, lamenting the loss of the system or the immediate implications for the actual world; instead, he is eager to find new truths and interpretations freed from the constraints of old systems of knowledge. Melville, on the other hand, exhibits a brooding response to the void; he cannot escape the consequences of his lost faith with the same eagerness as Nietzsche. While Melville demonstrates brief moments of joyful affirmation of existence, they are typically buried underneath bleak and dark tones.

Despite their recognition of the turmoil and anguish encountering the void, Melville and Nietzsche exhibit a drive to seek new interpretations about the actual world that no longer is influenced by Christian metaphysics. Both writers occasionally drift close to the possibility that this new world is meaningless, but they share a bold response to this possible nothingness. As existentialists, they reject the idea that existence is meaningless. Their respective encounters with the void reveal that existence is comprised of contrasting and conflicting possibilities. Moreover, both writers believe humanity needs to confront these disparate possibilities to affirm all parts of existence. When we confront the void, we say “yes” to existence. Both writers embrace this dauntless attitude by crafting similar scenes embracing flights towards the water. Shapeless and infinite, the water reflects the void, but the open seas do not rest in a paralytic state. That is, individuals can still move, discover, and create as they remove themselves from the safety and constraints of the land. And while many stop at the shoreline, Melville and Nietzsche encourage a bold escape from these comforts, seeing the expansive abyss not as a source of despair but rather as a disruptive force to break free from traditional forms of philosophy.
CHAPTER THREE: THEATRICALITY AND THE CREATIVE WILL

Introduction

Even with the threads of metaphysical nihilism running through Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts, both authors resist falling into psychological nihilism, a perspective that finds no meaning or value in existence. To live a meaningful life, Melville and Nietzsche embrace the creative process to will themselves against this total despair. Indeed, as Nietzsche writes in Book Two of *The Gay Science*, “I approve of any form of scepticism to which I can reply, ‘Let’s try it!’ But I want to hear nothing about all the things and questions that don’t admit of experiment” (62). In other words, Nietzsche believes that a skeptical attitude provides little value if it does not encourage some act of creation or experiment. New truths do not emerge from simply piercing the idols with a skeptical eye or a caustic phrase; the individual must experiment with different artistic and philosophical outlooks to give meaning to a life freed from fixed and dogmatic conventions and beliefs. This Nietzschean attitude can be seen in Melville’s literature as his growing skepticism and hostilities towards Christianity inspired some of his experimental artistic choices.

This chapter argues that Melville and Nietzsche employ similar experimental narrative strategies that reflect parts of their existential philosophy. Specifically, Melville and Nietzsche borrow images from the dramatic genre to emphasize the performative quality of existence that individuals experience when freed from dogmatic Christian teachings. By infusing theatricality into their texts, both authors present a key existentialist theme that inverts the conventional belief
that “essence precedes existence” (Barrett 102). To put it another way, Melville and Nietzsche are skeptical of the idea that a hidden essence crafted by a divine author awaits discovery, if only we could lift the mask of appearance and existence. Moreover, their texts suggest the possibility that if humanity removes the mask that blankets natural objects, individuals will find only a silent and empty void and perhaps succumb to psychological nihilism. While the theatric metaphor of the mask illustrates the tension between essence and existence, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts also emphasize the creative power of theatric performances. In particular, the theatricality of their texts represents the active and transformative process that belongs to ephemeral experiences and creation. Melville and Nietzsche identify the encounters with performative masks as the source of meaning about existence. Existence is not a fixed and dogmatic manifestation of a hidden essence or divine author, as Christian metaphysics asserts. Like the theatric production, existence is a dynamic performance filled with transitory moments.¹ Though fleeting, these moments interpreting performative signs engage individuals with their own existence, returning meaning to the actual world that has been freed from metaphysical influence.

¹ In Jonas Barish’s The Antitheatrical Prejudice, he surveys the extensive critical history attacking the theatrical tradition. He reasons that one of the reasons for the “prejudice” against theater results from the genre’s emphasis on “movement” and “variety,” traits that are an affront to a more traditional society. Specifically, Barish argues that the criticism “belongs, however, to a conservative ethical emphasis in which the key terms are those of order, stability, constancy, and integrity, as against a more existentialist emphasis that prizes growth, process, exploration, flexibility, variety, and versatility as a response. In one case we seem to have an ideal of stasis, in the other an idea of movement, in one case an ideal of rectitude, in the other an ideal of plentitude” (117). Barish does not pursue the “existentialist emphasis” of theater beyond this comparison, but in fairness, that is not the purpose of his study. Barish’s comments do, however, suggest a link between an existentialist ethos and theatrical experiences, a point this chapter analyzes in Melville’s and Nietzsche’s works.
Goethe and the Creative Will

In an early scene in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Faust, the eponymous character returns to his study accompanied by a black dog he encountered during a walk through the city streets. As Faust delivers lines describing the “love of God” and the “source” for life, the dog grows restless, “snarling” and “running” throughout Faust’s study (149-50). Faust, attempting to manage the dog’s behavior, laments his “frustration” with his lack of knowledge about the “source” for life and “turn[s] to the supernatural realm” to find “the light of revelation” (150). Seeking this “source” of knowledge, he attempts to translate the New Testament into his “beloved German” (151). The translating, however, challenges Faust, who struggles to select the appropriate word:

It says: “In the beginning was the Word.”
Already I am stopped. It seems absurd.
The Word does not deserve the highest prize,
I must translate it otherwise
If I am well inspired and not blind.
It says: In the beginning was the Mind.
Ponder that first line, wait and see,
Lest you should write too hastily.
Is mind the all-creating source?
It ought to say: In the beginning there was Force.
Yet something warns me as I grasp the pen,
That my translation must be changed again.
The spirit helps me. Now it is exact.
I write: In the beginning was the Act. (153)

During each revision, the translation of the Word progresses from internal thought to external performance. While Faust does not clarify the absurd[ity] of the Word, his question about the

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2 Later in the scene, the dog transforms into Mephistopheles, the demon with whom he bargains his soul.

3 I have cited the Walter Kaufmann translation of Faust since I heavily leaned on his scholarship about existentialism and Nietzsche for this dissertation. A brief survey of other translations, however, shows some minor variation with diction, but the shift from internal thought to external action remains the same. While all the translations I reviewed agree on “Word” as the initial term, Thomas Wayne’s translation, for example, substitutes
mind [as] the all-creating source suggests some apprehension at granting interior thought as the only source of meaning. Faust appears more satisfied when he alters Mind to Force, a revision that privileges an active creation of meaning over the hidden thought. The word Force, however, leaves Faust concerned; he acknowledges the spirit[’s] inspiration that informs his final revision to a word that connotes the importance of human agency to create meaning: “In the beginning was the Act.” This change softens the intensity of Force, a word that undermines the individual’s ability to will the creation of new meaning. To emphasize this point, Goethe structures this brief scene to reflect Faust’s performance from thought to action. Specifically, Faust is no longer entangled in his own thoughts, perseverating on his proper diction; instead, his speech enacts a performance: “I write.” In other words, Faust’s translation, twisting and turning through his mind, ends with an act of artistic creation. This transformation from Word to Act emerges from Faust’s experimentation with linguistic possibilities. Of course, the desire to experiment and transform his art, to find meaning among the possibilities, develops from moments of discomfort and tension. Indeed, Faust tries and fails several times before inking a word that embodies an active will to create. It is his final Act that elevates external performance over the hidden internal thought.

Like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Darwin, Goethe serves as an intellectual node that unites Herman Melville’s literature and Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy. While Melville

“Thought” for “Mind.” Wayne explains that his translation favors “the strictest linguistic fidelity and accuracy” over attempting to mimic Goethe’s original rhymed verse scheme (3). The most notable variation can be found in the final word of the sequence: “Act.” Different translations performed by Wayne, John R. Williams, and Charles E. Passage employ “Deed” in place of “Act.” While Wayne stresses his “linguistic fidelity,” these other translations seek to maintain their rhyme scheme. Williams and Passage, for example, rhyme “need” with “Deed” even though Williams develops an alternate rhyme scheme and Passage uses rhyming couplets. One other translation by Martin Greenberg ends the sequence with “Act,” but unlike Kaufmann’s translation, Greenberg’s translation does not adhere to a strict rhyme scheme.
and Nietzsche deride Goethe’s metaphysical theories, they express a common reverence for Goethe’s artistic talents. During his transformation from prose writer to poet, Melville read Goethe’s *Auto-Biography* and *Travels*, annotating passages where Goethe describes his artistic theories. According to James McIntosh, Melville’s reading of Goethe during the 1850s and 1860s encouraged him to “reconsider his approach to art and the artistic process” (399).

McIntosh asserts that Goethe taught Melville “to become a more austere, more classical writer” (399). McIntosh draws this conclusion from one of Melville’s journal entries in 1857, noting that Melville praised “Goethe’s success in imposing form on his own work” (399). 1857, of course, is the year Melville published *The Confidence-Man His Masquerade*, the experimental novel anticipating his own artistic transformation from a writer of prose to a poet. Indeed, Melville’s experiments with the novel’s conventions and his interest in poetry reveal his own desire to “[impose] form on his own work,” a trait he admired and borrowed from Goethe. According to McIntosh, the annotations demonstrate Melville’s “[respect for] Goethe as a spokesman for the dignity of art” (400). Likewise, Nietzsche expresses similar esteem for Goethe’s artistic talents, devoting an entire section of *The Twilight of the Idols* to praising Goethe’s skill at “creati[ng]...
himself” (114-115). In *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Walter Kaufmann stresses that Nietzsche “did not take his cue from *Faust*, as the popular misinterpretation of his philosophy would imply, but from the old Goethe […]. The greatest power was, to Nietzsche’s mind, the perfect self-control and creativity of the old Goethe” (54). If we consider this passage in relationship to McIntosh’s analysis of Melville’s reading of Goethe, we see that Melville and Nietzsche, despite their critiques of his metaphysics, valued and respected Goethe’s artistry. Remarkably, Melville and Nietzsche identify Goethe’s ability to constrain and harness his artistic skill as their primary reason for elevating Goethe’s value as an artist.

This link between “self-control and creativity” is a central concern for Nietzsche during the final act of his career. Indeed, in the years after 1885, the year he completed *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche expands his theories about the Overman, his theory describing the transformation of self that individuals experience after an encounter with the void. For Nietzsche, the Overman becomes the new identity for individuals who have learned to constrain their passions, to demonstrate a similar “self-control” that Nietzsche identified with Goethe. In the years after *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche would continue to advance his theory of the Overman both in new texts and by amendments of his earlier books with new prefaces and arguments, adding more mature context to elevate his youthful philosophy. As part of this reconstruction of earlier texts, Nietzsche added a preface, a fifth book, and an appendix of poems to the first edition of *The Gay Science*, which was originally published in 1882. It is in the preface to the second edition where Nietzsche articulates a more nuanced response to the collapse of Christian metaphysics then he had previously offered. Indeed, Nietzsche first proclaims the death of God in Book Three of *The Gay Science*, a bold claim that recognizes the void where Christian
metaphysics once stood. However, in the first edition, Nietzsche offers little examination about the implications of existence without this metaphysical system. However, the second edition’s preface and fifth book offer a more developed philosophy that helps individuals escape the void and create meaning in a world without Christian metaphysics. According to Nietzsche, this “gay science,” or joyful wisdom, is discovered when an individual recognizes and encounters the abyss. While Nietzsche acknowledges the dread and despair these experiences evoke, he emphasizes an individual’s will to overcome these feelings and to avoid the fall into psychological nihilism. Specifically, Nietzsche asserts that facing despair provides individuals an opportunity to transform themselves into a lighter, yet more complex, identity. Describing this joyful persona, Nietzsche states:

Finally, lest what is most important remain unsaid: from such abysses, from such severe illness, also from the illness of severe suspicion, one returns *newborn*, having shed one’s skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a more tender tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, joyful with a more dangerous second innocence, more childlike, and at the same time a hundred times subtler than one had ever been before. (7)

Nietzsche stresses the need for despair to attain joyful wisdom. Indeed, to face these voids, where fallen systems of knowledge once stood, provides the catalyst for an ontological and epistemological rebirth. According to Nietzsche, this encounter with nothingness initiates an intellectual transformation. It is important to note that Nietzsche’s language suggests that this revitalized intellect manifests as a performative action. It is through this sloughing off of a tattered exterior that the individual forms a more vibrant persona, one liberated to enact new truths about an existence that does not spring from a hidden metaphysical essence. In other words, the individual creates a “more ticklish and malicious” mask. He recognizes that an individual who is no longer bound to the dogmatic Christian teachings possesses a new-found
freedom to speak and act in disruptive ways. Indeed, these wicked performances no longer fear challenging the divine order of existence that Christian metaphysics promotes. From the perspective of those who still uphold this system, individuals who deploy such free will against this system are believed to be cruel. Nietzsche diffuses this harmful characterization by incorporating a jovial spirit within this malicious persona. In other words, Nietzsche understands that these reborn spirits will speak new truths that many will find wicked and harmful, but these performances are not to be seen as merely destructive acts against society’s ideals. To be malicious for the sake of being wicked reflects a nihilistic attitude that Nietzsche rejects, so he stresses the balance of a ticklish and life-affirming attitude as a central trait of these newborn individuals. For Nietzsche, this transformed being experiences life with more joyful sensory experience. These individuals create a refined understanding about the actual world, one that recognizes and reconciles contrasting elements of existence.

Because of these malicious and dangerous worldviews, Nietzsche argues that newborn selves require forms of expression that illustrate their disruptive ideas and distinguish themselves from those who still desire to maintain old systems of knowledge. Specifically, a new type of art must emerge for those who have attained a joyful wisdom:

How the theatrical cry of passion now hurts our ears; that whole romantic uproar and tumult of the senses that is loved by the educated mob together with its aspirations towards the sublime, the elevated, the distorted, how foreign it has become to our taste! No, if we convalescents still need art, it is another kind of art – a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a bright flame, blazes into an unclouded sky! Above all: an art for artists, only for artists! (8)

Nietzsche juxtaposes the ineffectiveness of old forms privileged by the educated mob with the exclusivity of a new art that is “divinely untroubled.” He seeks an artistic expression that is freed from a stale and flawed tradition, one that privileges a higher reality over the actual world. Of
course, this estrangement from conventional knowledge isolates these unique artists from their contemporaries. In this isolation, they are free to create performances that mock and deride social conventions and ideals. In other words, this artist assumes the role of a creative exile. Their experimental art creates a space that distances one audience while at the same time calls out to other artists who create these mocking and light forms. Specifically, these aesthetic disruptions distance the artists from the educated mob who want to maintain the safety and comfort of tradition; at the same time, these experimental and challenging forms serve as signals to other artists who have moved beyond social expectations and conventions.

Within the context of Nietzsche’s philosophy, these arguments, including his praise of Goethe’s artistic talents, reflect Nietzsche’s theory of the will to power. In Walter Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, he describes the will to power as “a creative force” (250). Kaufmann stresses the point that Nietzsche does not view the will to power as a singular act of transformation; instead, according to Kaufmann, “it is essentially a striving to transcend and perfect oneself” (248). In addition, Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche identifies “the powerful man [as] the creative man; but the creator is not likely to abide by previously established laws. A genuinely creative act contains its own norms, and every creation is a creation of new norms. The great artist does not stick to any established code; yet his work is not lawless but has structure and form” (250). Kaufmann describes the will to power not as a desire to assert control and force upon others; instead, Nietzsche’s theory stresses the connection between self-transformation and creative action. In Kaufmann’s reading, Nietzsche recognizes that the powerful individual will continue to recreate and reimagine the established conventions into new norms. This drive to continually reinvent the self and conventions is important to
consider in relation to Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism. For Nietzsche, the creative force behind the will to power serves as humanity’s path forward after it confronts the emptiness of the of Christian dogmatism. This void, of course, causes intellectual, spiritual, and emotional upheaval, which might cause individuals to see existence as meaningless since no connection to a metaphysical realm exists. Nietzsche, however, fights against such psychological nihilism with the will to power, his theory stressing the relationship between creative action and self-transformation. For Nietzsche, an encounter with the abyss is not the end of all meaning and truth about existence; it can, if the individual wills it, serve as the catalyst to attain a joyful wisdom.

We see this point in the passage from *The Gay Science* when the individual casts aside the worn skin in favor of a new exterior that engenders a greater sensitivity to interpreting existence. Moreover, the comparison of shedding skin evokes a perpetual process of transformation. Like the snake who continually replaces its broken skin, the creative individual must always seek ways to cast away previous appearances and reinvent the self. This constant act of reinvention illustrates Nietzsche’s rejection of psychological nihilism that sees an existence without Christian metaphysics as meaningless. As Kaufmann argues, Nietzsche’s will to power stresses the need to seek constant creation of new forms. As Nietzsche suggests in *The Gay Science*, there are multiple “abysses,” and individuals cannot allow for a singular or fixed response to these. To remain static or fixed to a certain perspective opens the possibility of an eventual collapse into psychological nihilism. To fight against the loss of all meaning, an individual must develop and enact fluid responses. There is no one, fixed method or system to interpret existence without Christian metaphysics. For Nietzsche, the aesthetic performance
reflects this malleable and creative action as part of the consistent striving to “perfect oneself” and fight against psychological nihilism.

As a literary artist, Melville never articulated a cohesive aesthetic theory as Nietzsche did. However, Melville’s own literary experimentation with prose and his transformation into a poet reflect the same attitude as Nietzsche’s arguments about the will to power from the preface to The Gay Science. Melville describes feelings of dread and despair in response to the collapse of Christian metaphysics that are similar to those expressed by as Nietzsche, yet Melville, too, exhibits the “creative force” that underlies Nietzsche’s will to power. Melville’s drive not only to create but also to reimagine his own identity as an artist anticipates Nietzsche’s arguments from The Gay Science. Melville, as well as several of his literary characters, continually transform their worn-out identities in favor of reimagined personae, striving to create new norms and values responding to an existence without Christian metaphysics. Melville’s and Nietzsche’s emphasis on mutable performances stresses an important theme of existentialism: that existence precedes essence. That is, the fleeting and ephemeral performances of natural objects in the actual world serve as the source of meaning for life without the fixed systems of Christian metaphysics. Throughout their texts, both Melville and Nietzsche craft similar scenes that present a theatrical worldview about existence to underscore this existentialist worldview.

The Mask

As part of existentialism’s tradition, the writers—and their characters—often find themselves distanced from the rest of society. Nietzsche, for example, introduces Zarathustra as an isolated figure who descends from the mountaintops to share his prophetic visions with the common people. In addition, Nietzsche’s madman from The Gay Science is the character who
proclaims that “God is dead,” a speech act that isolates the character from the community. With respect to Melville, Melville’s most famous narrative voice, Ishmael, commands the narrative audience to “call [him] Ishmael,” an imperative that masks a part of his identity and evokes a feeling of “loneliness” (3). In addition, Ishmael is not the only isolated character in the novel; as part of his cataloguing of the Pequod’s crew in Chapter 27, “Knights and Squires,” Ishmael notes that “they were nearly all Islanders in the Pequod, Isolatoes too, I call such, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but each Isolato living on a separate continent of his own” (131). Moreover, Melville situates several of his other central characters, such as Bartleby, Clarel, and Billy Budd, at emotional and intellectual distances from their peers. Despite their alienation, these characters strive to find meaning in an unfamiliar world. This search embodies the new art that Nietzsche privileges in his preface to the second edition of The Gay Science. To emphasize their desire for reimagined and revitalized forms of expression, Melville and Nietzsche borrow the image of the mask from the dramatic genre to symbolize the performative nature of existence without Christian metaphysics. This “divinely untroubled” worldview, to use the words from Nietzsche’s preface, undermines the teachings of Christian theology and the traditional belief in a unified essence underlying existence. In addition, both authors, recognizing the disruption inherent in their radical worldview, find comfort in their own narrative masks. Indeed, these

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6 See Thomas L. Dumm’s “Who Is Ishmael?” for a discussion about the name’s relationship to images of loneliness and anonymity. While Dumm does not employ the word “mask,” he does suggest that the usage of the name clouds any certainty associated with character, writing that “we may call him Ishmael, but that begs the question of who he is and who he has been. Thus Ishmael’s injunction to call him by that name may itself be understood as a demand or a plea that we help him evade the ghost of his former self” (400). Other critics have defined Ishmael’s persona using images of the theater. Walter R. McDonald, for example, defines the name as a “comic mask” and the early persona as “Ishmael the Innocent” to juxtapose the novel’s humor with its tragic and horrific conclusion (8). Charles Olson defines Ishmael’s role as that “of a chorus through whom Ahab’s tragedy is seen” (56). John Y. Young sees Ishmael’s character shifting theatrical roles, asserting that his performance shifts from “actor-narrator to stage manager” as the novel itself incorporates more dramatic conventions such as stage directions and soliloquies (97).
masks allow Melville and Nietzsche to perform a “mocking, light, fleeting” art that disrupts conventional philosophy and knowledge. In addition, the mask emphasizes the theatricality of their narratives and philosophy. Like a theatrical audience, individuals must engage with these transitory masked performances before other performative gestures emerge. Both authors believe that it is this engagement with the fluid, fleeting moments of existence that allows individuals to overcome the loss of Christian metaphysics and create new norms about living a meaningful life.

In the first edition of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche explains the importance of masks for artists. Specifically, Nietzsche argues that artists mask not only themselves but also the world of appearance, proclaiming, “We artists! We who conceal naturalness! […] We untiring wanderers, silent as death, on heights that we see not as heights but as our plains, as our safety” (70-71). According to Nietzsche, artists assume the role of wandering exiles because their creations disrupt and mask their audience’s perceptions of the familiar, an action distancing the artist from the rest of society. Moreover, Nietzsche suggests that this concealment applies to the artists themselves, the creation of a mask veiling their natural self as a source of comfort and safety. Indeed, these artists seek to create and to deliver new truths that undermine society’s traditions and conventions. Such challenges to established beliefs expose the artist to potential hostilities, so they employ the same creative force to develop a protective mask. Nietzsche acknowledges that these creative disruptions give the impression that these artists live in rarefied air, further separating themselves from society’s expectations. Nietzsche plays with this perspective, affirming that these artists work at great heights, but the isolation is not a cold and empty

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7 In Lawrance Thompson’s *Melville’s Quarrel with God*, he argues that Melville created artistic masks to shield him from the “heresy hunters” of his day (11).
existence; instead, they are safe to continue creating and performing disruptive wisdom to an audience who still maintains faith in conventional idols, like Christian metaphysics.

Late in his career, Nietzsche would describe the mask as an object that distinguishes individuals who have undergone a transformation of self and attained a joyful wisdom. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he opens Section 40 with a declaration that “whatever is profound loves masks” (50). Nietzsche clarifies the value of the mask for these “profound spirits,” arguing that “there are occurrences of such a delicate nature that one does well to cover them up with some rudeness to conceal them” (50). In other words, Nietzsche asserts that certain situations and messages necessitate the mask as a protective rhetorical tool since these arguments challenge the established order. Nietzsche’s comment also suggests the possibility of emotional unease and discomfort that these performances engender, specifically the feeling of shame. An artist who creates aesthetic performances that undermine conventional social practices risks being criticized for their flouting of traditions and conventions. These artists, exiled for their creations, can feel a type of shame at being cast aside for conveying their disparate beliefs and desire for new norms. Nietzsche, however, believes that “shame is inventive” and serves as a creative catalyst (50).

Nietzsche extends this commentary by linking shame, creativity, and methods of communication:

A man whose sense of shame has some profundity encounters his destinies and delicate decisions, too, on paths which few ever reach and of whose mere existence his closest intimates must not know: his mortal danger is concealed from their eyes, and so is his regained sureness of life. Such a concealed man who instinctively needs speech for silence and for burial in silence and who is inexhaustible in his evasion of communication, wants and sees to it that a mask of him roams in his place through the hearts and heads of his friends. (51)
Echoing his arguments from *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche situates the shameful artist as an intellectual exile, one distanced from the person’s closest social connections as well as the larger community. This is not a simple awkwardness at stating an unpopular opinion; instead, Nietzsche argues that this shame is so profound the artists recognize the performative quality of their own existence. It is an overwhelming moment when an individual recognizes the hollowness of their intellectual inheritance, and this radical understanding of existence further alienates these select artists from all social connections, whether intimate relationships or the larger community. This profound realization forces the artist to play multiple roles, including one that essentially enacts a familiar persona for those closest to them. This familiar mask only exists in “hearts and heads of his friends,” but this concealment allows the artist to continue creating and performing their art that disrupts conventional knowledge. This desire to create a mask to maintain old bonds reflects another point about the creative force that drives the will to power. As Kaufmann argues in *Nietzsche*, “what Nietzsche had in mind was not a repudiation of all existing rules”; instead, Nietzsche asserts that artists who have attained a joyful wisdom still perform their creative will that establishes new norms evolved from old existing rules and social bonds, even if their value has collapsed (251). This creative mask, then, develops from the creator’s attempt to reconcile an internal tension. On the one hand, these creators, having walked “on paths which few ever reach,” recognize their separation from existing norms that influenced their former self, including their self as defined by their closest relationships. On the other hand, these previous rules and relationships cannot be completely denied or erased from the individual’s memory and existence. The mask, then, allows these rarified artists to create an
identity that reflects both the remnants of their former persona and their reinvigorated self that strives to enact an affirmation of life that has been liberated from the constraints of tradition.

Within the existentialist tradition, the mask serves as a central image to emphasize the individual’s existence over essence. In his comparison between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, a twentieth-century existentialist, identifies the importance of the mask for these founding voices of the tradition. According to Jaspers, “For [Kierkegaard and Nietzsche] masks necessarily belong to the truth. Indirect communication becomes for them the sole way of communicating genuine truth; indirect communication, as expression, is appropriate to the ambiguity of genuine truth in temporal existence, in which process it must be grasped through sources in every Existentz” (192). With respect to Nietzsche’s passage from Beyond Good and Evil, Jaspers’s comments clarify the relationship between masks and the importance of evading absolutes and certainty. Indeed, the mask hides the performers’ true identities, serving as a type of indirect communication, but the mask, paradoxically, presents a form of “genuine truth” for an audience to interpret. Masks and performative gestures are not to be seen as superficial signs that hide an object’s true essence. For an existentialist, these creative performances are the only parts of existence that can be perceived and interpreted, so they become the primary source of meaning. Moreover, the mask presents an ambiguous and temporal interpretive experience. As Jaspers argues, these masks are appropriately elusive for the audience because they represent the way genuine truth must be grasped in the actual world without divine influence. Without the fixed and dogmatic teachings of Christian metaphysics, the actual world transforms into fragmented and fleeting performances to interpret. These moments are ambiguous, however,

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8 In his essay “The Theater in Modernist Thought,” Martin Puchner notes that Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s interest in the theater “bespeaks a new priority of masks over essence” (521).
because they appear momentarily and shift within and among different scenes and actions. David Kornhaber, writing in “The Philosopher, the Playwright, and the Actor,” argues that Nietzsche privileges “the moment of performance” in dramas because “it is in that moment that the theatre is able to at once invite us into its own new reality, and simultaneously represent that new reality to us from afar, to present what we might call experiences of embodiment alongside what Nietzsche calls images that lie ‘outside’ ourselves and can only be seen ‘with a contemplative eye’” (29). Indeed, the theatrical performance, according to Nietzsche, requires an active engagement with different sources of meaning, all of which appear momentarily before drifting out of existence. For Nietzsche, it is these fleeting moments of performative speech and actions that engage the audience to enact a new perspective not only about the actual world they interpret but their own active role in creating meaning about their own existence. Individuals no longer have the comforts of Christian metaphysics to frame their understanding about existence; rather, they must see all aspects of life as belonging to a performance. It is in these ephemeral moments where individuals can both observe and participate in the creation of meaning, mimicking the interpretive experience of a theatrical performance.

If we consider these arguments in relationship to Melville’s literature, we can see the theatricality of Melville’s literary art enacting similar existentialist themes and attitudes. Like Nietzsche’s philosophy, Melville crafts characters and scenes associated with masks and the theater in his novels. While Melville presents similar attitudes about the mask veiling the essence of people and objects, he does not embrace this ambiguity with as much fervor as Nietzsche does in The Gay Science or Beyond Good and Evil. In Moby-Dick, for example, Melville borrows several dramatic conventions for the novel, including stage directions, soliloquies, and one
chapter that is written in the format of a theatrical script. While critics have traced these theatrical allusions to Melville’s reading of Shakespeare during his time composing the novel, we can also see these dramatic borrowings as examples of Melville’s emerging existentialism.  

The juxtaposition between Ahab and Ishmael illustrates the novel’s central conflict about the search for truth. Both men identify the white whale as their intellectual salvation, but Ahab approaches his quest for knowledge with a singular and fixed method whereas Ishmael adopts a diverse and more fluid approach to create meaning about the whale. As part of the novel’s experimental design, Melville employs theatrical images and conventions to illustrate these competing philosophical methods embodied by Ahab and Ishmael, ultimately privileging Ishmael’s method that is fluid and uncertain. Melville’s introduction of Ahab’s rigid physical presence initiates this philosophical and dramatic conflict. Indeed, Ahab’s first physical appearance occurs in Chapter 28, “Ahab,” a title that anticipates Ahab as a singular and fixed figure. Upon his first observation, Ishmael notes that Ahab “seemed made of solid bronze, and [he was] shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini’s cast Perseus” (134). Ishmael’s initial description casts Ahab not only as a rigid presence but also as a figure who belongs to the Hellenic tradition. Fixed and frozen, Ahab presents himself as an ancient statue, unable to break the mould in which he is cast. Moreover, the allusion to Perseus functions on two levels. First, it links Ahab to a mythological figure who hunted sea monsters; in addition, the allusion to Perseus

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9 See pp. 33-73 in Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* for his detailed argument describing Shakespeare’s influence on Melville during his revision of the novel. Olson defines one influence Shakespeare had on Melville as “Shakespeare reflects Melville’s disillusion in the treacherous world” (44). Moreover, F.O. Matthiessen asserts that the use of “explicit stage-directions” and “Shakespearean soliloqu[ies] […] became Melville’s most effective means of expressing Ahab’s development, since, isolated in his pride and madness, he tended to voice his thoughts to himself alone” (415). Melville himself praised Shakespeare and his development of character in his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” arguing that “but it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality:—these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare” (375).
aligns Ahab’s character and quest as belonging to a classical Greek perspective. These character traits anticipate the novel’s central philosophical conflict between a rigid and fixed Ahabian worldview, and Ishmael’s intellectual approach that embraces a flexible and evolving approach to existence. Indeed, Ishmael extends his commentary of Ahab’s statuesque performance to his unwillingness to alter his perspective or engage with other viewpoints:

Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship’s ever-pitching prow. There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrenderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward direction of that glance. Not a word he spoke; not did his officers say aught to him; through by all their minutest gestures and expressions, they plainly showed the uneasy, if not painful, consciousness of being under a troubled master-eye. (135)

Ahab’s rigid composition leaves no room for a different perspective or the possibility of transformation. Ahab’s position is permanently etched like a name upon the gravestone. He is unwilling not only to alter his physical and intellectual glance, and there is no engagement with his fellow crew members. Ahab’s tyrannical master-eye is a philosophy that embodies a type of absolutism, where only Ahab’s bronze-casted ideas are accepted. No challenges are to be heard that could shake the foundation of Ahab’s philosophical quest.

Later, Ahab shares his philosophical outlook, and Melville employs theatrical conventions and images to heighten Ahab’s dramatic performance. In Chapter 36, “The Quarter-Deck,” Melville frames the chapter’s actions with the stage direction “(Enter Ahab: Then, all.)” (174). This theatric gesture elevates Ahab’s character to the role of the tragic hero, but he also

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10 See Elisa New’s “Bible Leaves! Bible Leaves! Hellenism and Hebraism in Melville’s Moby-Dick” for an extended comparison between Ahab’s and Ishmael’s respective methods of interpretation. In her reading, she associates Ahab’s philosophical approach as a representation of Hellenism and reads the novel as Melville’s rejection of that tradition. As a result, New argues that Melville is “Hellenism's severest nineteenth-century American critic and makes his greatest book a sustained defense of the ‘letter,’ not only anticipating but in certain ways setting the agenda for our own era's defrockers of the Logos” (282).
becomes a spectacle, his actions transforming the *Pequod* from a commercial whaling expedition to a philosophical drama. During Ahab’s extended performance describing his hatred of Moby Dick, he explains his distrust of masks and their effect on the actual world. Rebutting Starbuck’s comment about the madness of this pursuit, Ahab asserts,

> All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? (178)

Ahab’s arguments against the mask not only inform his quest to destroy Moby Dick but also allude to Platonic arguments about a veil that separates the actual world from the real world. Ahab believes that a hidden essence gives shape to the external appearance of a natural object. The outward mask, however, is an empty husk, and Ahab seeks the unknown but still reasoning thing that gives this mask its meaning. In other words, Ahab seeks a metaphysical truth beyond the world of appearance. Like the prisoners of Plato’s cave, Ahab feels constrained to a performative world of masks and dancing shadows. He evokes the Platonic desire to escape the cave of illusions and pasteboard masks that cover all of existence, but Ahab’s hatred for these inscrutable veils leads him to destructive ends. That is, Ahab seeks to destroy the mask rather than see it as the source of meaning about existence. It is not enough simply to escape the cave. Ahab, in other words, privileges essence over existence.

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11 In *Theatricality as Medium*, Samuel Weber argues that Western philosophy’s anxieties about the theater can be traced to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*. In his summation of Plato’s text, Weber states, “theater is thus, from the very beginnings of what, for convenience, we continue to call ‘Western’ thought, considered to be a place not just of dissimulation and delusion but, worse, self-dissimulation and self-delusion. It is a place of fixity and unfreedom, but also of fascination and desire. A prison, to be sure, but one that confines through assent and consensus rather than through constraint and oppression” (8).
After convincing his crew to pursue Moby Dick, Ahab retreats to his cabin, and he performs a soliloquy that reinforces his fixed and unalterable mindset. Chapter 37, “Sunset,” continues the pattern of using stage directions before Ahab delivers his dramatic monologue. Ahab’s commentary reinforces the physical rigidity Ishmael describes in “The Quarter-Deck.” Indeed, Ahab’s closing thoughts emphasize his singular and absolute quest to destroy the inscrutable masks that blanket existence:

Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents’ bed, unerringly I rush! Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle to the iron way! (183).

In both physical and linguistic detail, Ahab represents a fixed and immovable philosophy. Ahab rejects other viewpoints and possibilities; he will not be diverted from his singular quest to break through the walls of the actual world to discover hidden metaphysical truth that he believes exist beneath the masks. For Ahab, the inscrutable Moby Dick serves as the actual world’s greatest mask, and he believes that his destruction of the white whale would allow him to lift the veil and to attain metaphysical wisdom.

Of course, Nietzsche, as a metaphysical nihilist, would reject Ahab’s philosophy. While he shares Ahab’s attitude that masks blanket existence, Nietzsche does not see the mask as a nihilistic wall blocking an individual’s ability to live a meaningful life. In fact, Nietzsche embraces the mask, seeing it as the source for revealing “profound” truths about existence. In the context of Nietzsche’s theories about the will to power, Ahab’s character represents the individual unable to exercise constraint over their own passions. Ahab does not seek the creation of new norms, as Nietzsche’s philosophy advocates, but only the destruction of the “pasteboard masks,” that Ahab cannot comprehend, and he believes must be destroyed for the object’s true
essence to emerge. While Nietzsche does practice “philosophizing with a hammer,” a point Ahab expresses in this passage, Nietzsche does not believe such a singular destructive act alone would allow for a deeper truth or essence to be found. In Nietzsche’s philosophy, as well as in *Moby-Dick*, a meaningful existence derives from the creative will. Nietzsche illustrates this point in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* when the eponymous character describes his “art and aims” as one that seeks a creative synthesis of existence’s uncertainties:

I taught them [...] to compose into one and bring together what is fragment and riddle and dreadful chance in man – as poet, reader of riddles, and redeemer of chance, I taught them to create the future, and to redeem by creating – all that was past. (216)

Zarathustra’s comments serve as a contrast to Ahab’s philosophy built upon the destruction of old forms. Zarathustra acknowledges the fragments and riddles that blanket the actual world, a point that Ahab identifies in his argument about the pasteboard masks. Zarathustra, however, describes himself as a poet who instructs his followers not to leave the shattered ruins of old forms as a singular philosophical act. For Zarathustra, creation redeems existence. This belief shifts the pursuit of meaning away from removing or destroying the inscrutable masks or riddles that cover existence in the hopes of liberating an object’s hidden essence. To discover the meaning of a natural object, an individual must interpret and create meaning from its existential appearance. This framework challenges Ahab’s claim that “some unknown but still reasoning thing” gives form and meaning to the actual world. Existentialists, like Nietzsche and Melville, believe the individual’s creative actions are the source of a meaningful life. They reject the idea that a fixed metaphysical essence, crafted by a divine author, hides beneath the inscrutable layers of the actual world. Or, to put it in the words of William Barrett, “man exists and makes himself
to be what he is; his individual essence or nature comes to be out of his existence […]. Man does not have a fixed essence that is handed to him ready-made” (102).

To illustrate Ahab’s flawed philosophy, Melville crafts Ishmael’s philosophical pursuit as one more receptive to the uncertainties that belong to ephemeral experiences in the actual world. As Ishmael demonstrates, the fleeting mysteries and riddles of existence are not masks that need to be destroyed to discover a metaphysical truth; instead, Ishmael varies his philosophical methods and shifts his personae throughout the novel, emphasizing the transitory nature of meaning in the actual world. Indeed, Ishmael assumes multiple roles in the novel, including the narrative voice, biographer to Queequeg, advocate for the whaling industry, quasi-cetologist, witness to events occurring during whaling excursions, and even enacting the role of a text himself. Ishmael’s ability to shift personae illustrates his mutable and exhaustive philosophical method to examine the different historical, literary, scientific, and philosophical veils that blanket the novel’s central natural object: the whale. Ishmael’s philosophical approach, then, does not seek to remove or to destroy the mask to reveal the essence beneath the cover; instead, he examines a diverse set of masks that comprise existence, particularly as embodied in the whale. Ishmael is an active creator and reader. Unlike Ahab’s fixed absolutism, Ishmael’s philosophical pursuit enacts and embraces the transitory performances of existence.

Melville stresses the distinction between Ahab’s rigidity and Ishmael’s malleability in a dramatic sequence of chapters. Indeed, the most pronounced shift in performance occurs when Ishmael drifts backstage, relinquishing his presence as the novel’s singular narrative perspective

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and allowing different characters and perspectives to take center stage.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, Melville emphasizes the chapter’s theatricality by writing in the form of a dramatic script, disrupting the traditional prose narrative form established in the novel’s opening pages. To put it another way, the comforts and the familiarity of the novel have dissolved, and Ishmael’s departure as the narrative voice leaves only the diverse crewmembers’ performance and dialogue to interpret. In contrast to Ahab’s monologue in Chapter 37, Chapter 40 illustrates the ephemeral nature and diverse perspectives of existence. Ahab’s fixed and monomaniacal philosophy is juxtaposed with several fleeting and discordant speech acts. The audience does not have a singular viewpoint, such as Ahab’s soliloquy or Ishmael as the novel’s narrative voice, to guide them to meaning. Instead, they are left only with brief performances to interpret.

Melville, of course, suggests some tension with the loss of a singular guiding voice. Before focusing on the individual crew members’ perspectives, Melville opens the chapter with a collective performance of the harpooneers and sailors “singing in chorus” (187). The song closes with the lines, “So, be cheery, my lads! may your hearts never fail! / While the bold harpooneer is striking the whale!” (187). This couplet is a refrain of the “Nantucket Song” that first appears in the novel’s “Extracts” section. This song’s title suggests a connection to the stability of the land when juxtaposed with the title of the next poem: “Whale Song.” They find comfort in their enactment of stable knowledge acquired on the land, joyfully singing about the harpooneers skill striking and attacking the whale. However, this playful song contrasts with the looming terror the Pequod’s crew faces beyond their immediate existence. These performances reveal the crew’s

\textsuperscript{13} John Y. Young asserts that Ishmael’s performance shifts from “actor-narrator to stage manager” as the novel itself incorporates more dramatic conventions such as stage directions and soliloquies (97).
false comfort in traditional knowledge, and they represent Melville’s skeptical attitude about the ability of certain individuals to escape the constraints of traditional philosophy.

But some crew members can perceive the looming dangers the Pequod faces, identifying an existentialist truth from these various performances. In particular, the Old Manx Sailor serves as a crew member who, despite the diverse and discordant words and appearances that surround him, interprets a truth about his own existence:

TASHTEGO.
(Quietly smoking.)
That’s a white man; he calls that fun: humph! I save my sweat.

OLD MANX SAILOR.
I wonder whether those jolly lads bethink of what they are dancing over. I’ll dance over your grave I will […]. Well, well; belike the whole world’s one ball, as your scholars have it; and so ‘tis right to make one ball-room of it. Dance on, lad, you’re young; I was once.

3D NANTUCKET SAILOR.
Spell oh!—whew! this is worse than pulling after whales in a calm—give us a whiff, Tash. (189-190)

This example reflects the pattern of dialogue that develops throughout Chapter 40. Generally, each character has his time on the stage, stating a brief comment, before the next speaker performs. This exchange illustrates the fragmented pattern of dialogue in the chapter where the characters do not interact directly with each other, notwithstanding the Nantucket sailor’s request for a smell of Tashtego’s pipe. The dialogue exchanges, then, do not present a unified message; instead, they present a world of fragmented individuals and performances. This structure, of course, contrasts with Ahab’s monologue and fixed philosophy. Chapter 40 reflects the diverse and fluid appearances that blanket existence. Moreover, Melville does not allow a singular voice, like Ishmael, a space to interpret these characters’ thoughts and actions. The once unified vision
and form of the novel has dissolved. Ishmael has abandoned the narrative audience to witness and observe these diverse dramatic performances on their own, situating them in a similar position as the Old Manx Sailor and other crew members to create meaning without the assistance of his narrations. Readers, like the Old Manx Sailor, have only the theatrical performances to create meaning. These performances are diverse and disconnected at times, but fleeting moments of truth appear before the next series of performances begin.

In this exchange between Tashtego, the Old Manx Sailor, and the 3D Nantucket Sailor, each character observes the same performance of the crew members’ singing and dancing, yet their dialogue suggests diverse responses to this performative act. Of course, the inconsistencies of perspectives and performances create the possibility that this experience is all meaningless, nothing but fun and games, as most of the crew focuses on their own interpretations and experiences. However, Melville incorporates several flashes of recognition within the dialogue that suggest that existential truths and meaning are present within these performances. Indeed, the Old Manx Sailor’s comment demonstrates an understanding about this performative world. After observing the crew’s collective performance, he wonders if this group of sailors understands the severity of the situation they face; in addition, he recognizes a point about their mortality, eerily speculating that he “will dance over their grave[s].” While the Old Manx Sailor understands the looming threat of Moby Dick beyond his immediate perception, his commentary recognizes the performative nature of existence without metaphysical guidance. Indeed, the elder sailor recognizes that “the world’s one ball […] and so ‘tis right to make one ball-room of it.” Interpreting the performance of the sailors enables a shift in the Old Manx’s perspective: the world is nothing but a ball-room, a stage to perform and to create. This truth about existence,
however, appearing only for a moment before giving way to the next lines of dialogue. Neither Tashtego nor the 3D Nantucket Sailor respond to this truth about the performative nature of existence; they are both passive in their observations, focused only upon their own individual interpretations.

This experimental chapter, while confusing and discordant, illustrates Melville’s emerging existentialist philosophy. The chapter’s form shows a lack of unified truth among the crew members; as a result, a diverse range of interpretive possibilities exist. The fleeting and diverse performative attitudes reflect Melville’s vision about the actual world without Christian metaphysics: existence is made up of fragmented individuals, each performing their own meaning about the experience in front of them. Moreover, this new world alienates individuals from the comforts of old knowledge. Indeed, the Old Manx Sailor expresses new wisdom about the world operating as a ball-room, yet his comments do not enter the worldview of Tashtego or the 3D Nantucket Sailor. Despite this isolation, the Old Manx Sailor still expresses an existentialist truth about the performative meaning. He sees the world as a ball-room and encourages the sailors to continue their performative dance. Moreover, the Old Manx Sailor, experiencing these performances, realizes a truth about his own mortality, ominously noting that he was once young. This introspection about his own isolation and mortality reflects Barrett’s arguments about existentialism and the philosophy’s emphasis on the individual’s feeling lost in an unfamiliar world. Indeed, both the Old Manx Sailor and the rest of the Pequod have lost the comforts and stability of the land. Moreover, the dialogue exchanges situate him at a distance from the rest of the crew, further isolating him from any connection or type of stability. It is in this moment of isolation and confusion where the Old Manx Sailor recognizes the fleeting and
performative nature of existence and recognizes the fragility of his own mortality. These truths
do not cause the Old Manx Sailor’s collapse, however. In fact, he encourages the youthful crew
to continue their performative dancing. This point illustrates Melville’s privileging of the
eaesthetic experience to redeem an existence without Christian metaphysics. Specifically, The Old
Manx Sailor demonstrates a creative will to move past the dread looming over the Pequod. He
does not ignore or forget these dreadful feelings, but rather creates a new vision about his
situation, seeing his existence as a performer among other performers in the ball-room. Through
experiencing and embracing the performative masks of existence, the Old Manx Sailor reaches a
new-formed truth about his own life in the actual world.

This chapter serves as a philosophical challenge to Ahab’s authoritative and destructive
attitude towards the mask. Ahab’s philosophy not only rejects but also seeks the destruction of
the performative mask blanketing existence. Unlike the Old Manx Sailor, he sees the
performance as devoid of meaning and hiding the essence of all natural objects. Ahab believes
that destroying this mask will help him achieve wisdom, but Melville suggests that Ahab’s
unified and singular vision is a destructive philosophy, one built upon revenge rather than the
creation of new truths. Melville develops Chapter 40 as an experiment to undermine Ahab’s
philosophy; whereas Ahab’s worldview reflects a rigid and immutable vision about natural
objects, the diverse performances of Chapter 40 represent Melville’s vision about an actual world
where the possibility of determining a natural object’s unified essence remains beyond an
individual’s grasp. The crew members, even those lost in their ignorance, illustrate the
performative nature of the actual world without a fixed interpretive system, such as Christian
metaphysics, to guide humanity’s understanding about life in the actual world.
If we consider these points in conjunction with Nietzsche’s philosophy about the will to power, we can see Melville’s characterization of Ahab as an anticipation about a critique Nietzsche would issue about individuals with a corrupt will. Ahab reflects an individual who struggles to overcome the emotional and intellectual tumult after encountering the void. He cannot constrain his inner turmoil; as a result, his desire to transform into a “sage,” as Anderson argues, fails because his unbridled emotions and drive for revenge and destruction leaves no possibility to create new norms for existence, as Nietzsche advocates for in his will to power. Ahab lacks “the creative force” to will such a transformation and “perfect [him]self.” Instead, he is a corrupted body and soul, filled with a need for revenge. Ahab wants to destroy the masks, performances, and symbols that he cannot understand, driven by a ressentiment against the actual world that Nietzsche ascribes to metaphysicians. In the first essay of On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche defines ressentiment as contrast between “noble” and “slave” moralities, arguing that

The slave revolt in morality begins when ressentiment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the ressentiment of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is “outside,” “what is different,” what is “not itself”; and this No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye—this need to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of ressentiment: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction. (36-7)

It is difficult to read this explication of ressentiment and not hear Ahab screaming about “strik[ing] the sun if it insulted [him]” rippling through Nietzsche’s prose (178). Of course, Ahab’s singular focus is the hunting and destruction of the inscrutable white whale. Moby Dick serves as the “inscrutable” object that is different and outside of Ahab, and his ressentiment
drives his “imaginary revenge” to destroy the whale. In addition, Nietzsche’s commentary emphasizes a distinction between affirmation and negation as part of the creation of values. For those consumed by *ressentiment*, like Ahab, saying “No” to a “hostile external world” informs their worldviews, as Nietzsche argues, but these creative deeds are “reactions” rather than an act of the creative will that affirms a meaningful existence.

Conversely, Melville’s experimentation with the dramatic form in Chapter 40, while evoking feelings of skepticism and uncertainty about some of the crew’s intellectual performances, still privileges the diverse range of interpretive experiences over the need for a fixed and rigid system that Ahab’s character embodies. Melville stresses this point with his choice to have Ishmael retreat to the background during these theatrical chapters. The loss of Ishmael as the narrative voice reflects the dissolution of the comfort and stability of the novel’s conventions. With no guiding voice, the novel’s world transforms into one comprised of fleeting and diverse spoken performances with no one voice to dictate or guide the audience to a stable conclusion. Melville, as well as Nietzsche, see these dramatic images and gestures as a representation of the fragmented and diverse interpretations that comprise existence without Christian metaphysics. While uncertainties and inconsistencies abound in this type of world, it does not leave existence without meaning. In fact, Ishmael’s ability to transform and shift roles throughout the novel serves as a direct contrast to Ahab’s rigid and fixed character, creating the novel’s central conflict.

According to Dan Vogel, writing in “The Dramatic Chapters in Moby-Dick,” the purpose of the dramatic chapters is to elevate Ahab to the role of tragic hero and place him in direct conflict with other members of the crew. Specifically, Vogel argues that “Melville intended to
portray the battle of Ahab against types of mankind—the hero vs. lesser men” (241). As part of Ahab’s elevation as the hero, Vogel notes that “the device of Ishmael as narrator is completely abrogated in these thirteen chapters […]. For the sake of staging his conflict of characters, Melville was willing to disregard his narrative point of view” (241). In Vogel’s reading of Chapter 40’s theatrical presentation, the chapter’s structure “broaden[s] the gradations of mankind from [Starbuck and Stubb] to cover the entire crew” (243). In other words, each of the crew members serve as more focused examples of the Pequod’s first mates who have more direct conflicts with Ahab, a choice that heightens Ahab’s conflict with the actual world he inhabits and desires to transcend.

While I agree with Vogel’s argument about these dramatic chapters intensifying the conflict between Ahab and his crew, I challenge his conclusion that Ahab represents the hero and the rest of the crew, including Ishmael, are “lesser men.” Indeed, the novel’s central conflict positions the dueling philosophical methods of Ahab and Ishmael against one another, and Melville leaves Ishmael as the novel’s redemptive voice. Ahab’s singular and fixed philosophical goal is to destroy the pasteboard masks that cover the actual world. He sees the mask as prison walls whose razing would free the individual to discover the actual world’s hidden metaphysical truth. Ultimately, this philosophy causes not only his own demise but also the death of his entire crew, except Ishmael. It is true that the theatric form of these chapters heightens the dramatic conflict between Ahab and his crew, but Vogel does not examine the conflict between Ahab and Ishmael in his argument. He acknowledges Ishmael’s absence during these chapters and reads it as another device to elevate Ahab; however, Vogel does not interrogate Ishmael’s shift in role as one of Ahab’s conflicts against “lesser men.” Vogel concentrates his analysis on the direct
character conflicts between Ahab and the crew, omitting altogether the tension between Ahab’s
and Ishmael’s contrasting philosophical methods. In fairness to Vogel, his essay’s focus is only
the novel’s dramatic cycle of chapters where Ishmael’s role as narrative voice retreats to that of a
“stage manager,” as Edward Young argues.

While it is easy to ignore Ishmael because of his absence in these chapters, Ishmael’s
flexible roles, in fact, serves as the primary alternative to Ahab’s fixed absolutism. Ishmael does
not experience the same antagonistic encounters as Ahab and Starbuck, but Ishmael’s varied
intellectual pursuit of the whale reflects the novel’s central philosophical problem: are we
prisoners trying to break through the pasteboard masks to discover a fixed, hidden essence, or are
the ephemeral masks, veils, and appearances that blanket the actual world the source to create a
meaningful existence? Melville rejects the rigid philosophical outlook that Ahab embodies, a
primary reason from my seeing his work as existentialist. Ahab cannot move his soul off his
“fixed purpose,” and he is incapable of viewing his existence in the actual world as anything but
a prison, like Plato’s prisoners trapped in the cave. He has a singular focus to destroy existence’s
inscrutable mask and liberate its metaphysical essence. In Ahab’s corrupt philosophy, his
vengeful destruction of the white whale will allow him to discover the essence of the novel’s
primary metaphysical symbol. His pursuit, of course, ends with not only his death but also that of
the Pequod and her crew, leaving Ishmael as the redemptive voice of the novel. Ishmael
embraces the uncertainties and fleeting performances of existence, providing a direct contrast to
Ahab’s rigid absolutism. Melville, as an existentialist, sees the actual world as one filled with
varied and diverse masks, and like Nietzsche, he recognizes that these existential masks do not
develop from the natural object’s hidden metaphysical essence. These ephemeral riddles are not
prison walls blockading the possibility of a meaningful existence; instead, they provide sources, as Nietzsche would argue, for the individual’s creative will to engage with existence and create a meaningful life without the guidance of a hollow metaphysical system of knowledge.

**Indirect Communication**

The mask, of course, is a physical sign of elusive or indirect meaning. While there are those who, like Ahab, see this elusiveness as a prison wall blocking the individual’s understanding of an object’s hidden essence, Melville and Nietzsche identify the uncertainties and indirectness of the mask as the source of truth about existence rather than see it as a restriction. For Nietzsche, the mask and elusiveness serve as crucial elements to living a meaningful life without a fixed system of knowledge, such as Christian metaphysics, to guide humanity towards certain truths. In fact, as Karl Jaspers argues in his comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, these existentialists believe that “masks necessarily belong to the truth” (192). According to Jaspers, while both existentialists developed arguments about physical masks, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche also found the elusiveness of communication to be a type of mask, asserting that “indirect communication, as expression, is appropriate to the ambiguity of genuine truth in temporal existence” (192). In other words, Jaspers asserts that the ambiguities of existence extend beyond the physical masks that blanket the actual world. In fact, individuals can present words and expressions indirectly, creating another veil for the audience to encounter. And as Jaspers argues about existentialists like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, these physical masks and linguistic ambiguities reflect the way individuals determine “genuine truth in temporal existence.”
If we consider Jaspers’s argument that links the mask with “indirect communication, as expression” and Melville’s literature, we find an additional point that unites Melville’s and Nietzsche’s existentialism. As metaphysical nihilists, Melville and Nietzsche believe that the unified and comforting images of Christian metaphysics were nothing but hollow constructs and performances. While these images still belong to the actual world, they must be seen as masks that do not offer a unified vision about an actual and metaphysical world. Instead, they are only a part of a diverse series of performances that are interpreted. To illustrate the fleeting and transitory quality of these performances, Melville and Nietzsche craft elusive styles designed to highlight artifice and engage the audience in the interpretive experience. Specifically, Melville and Nietzsche develop styles that imitate qualities of the spoken word. This orality mimics the experience of watching a theatric performance. Indeed, as the performer delivers a line, the audience has only a temporary moment to hear and interpret it before another fleeting series of sounds and gestures appears.

Style—and more specifically, his own style—is one of Nietzsche’s common topics he examines throughout his philosophy. Indeed, in Ecce Homo, Nietzsche defines the traits of an effective style before humbly acknowledging that this style is found in “[his] Zarathustra” (265). Specifically, Nietzsche emphasizes the effects and importance of the sound and feel of language, arguing that “Good is any style that really communicates an inward state, that makes no mistakes about the signs, the tempo of the signs, the gestures” (265). These inward states are not a fixed essence; rather, they are the passions and tensions that allow for the creative will to engage with the ambiguities of existence’s performances. Nietzsche, with his typical boastful attitude, argues that “the art of the great rhythm, the great style of long periods to express a tremendous up and
down of sublime, of superhuman passion, was discovered only by me; with a dithyramb like the last one in the third part of Zarathustra” (265). Nietzsche’s praise of style reflects the importance of language’s prosody, privileging its performative quality as the source of meaning. Indeed, Nietzsche wonders if “there are ears” who can truly hear the sounds and ideas of Zarathustra (265). This emphasis on the spoken word appeals to the masks and indirect communication that Jaspers describes in his essay. Indeed, ambiguity can arise from the ephemeral performances of speech, but for existentialists, this elusive form of indirect communication enacts the way genuine truth about the actual world can be created. Jaspers’s commentary about indirect communication offers an important frame in reading Nietzsche’s meta-commentary about the prosodic features in his own style. Indeed, Nietzsche praises his own style due largely to the feel and sounds of its rhythm and tempo. These linguistic features, of course, are ephemeral, taking stage for a moment before disappearing for the next set of performative signs. Of course, the written word can create the rhythms and tempos that Nietzsche values; however, Nietzsche’s stressing of the ear privileges the fluid and ephemeral quality of an oral performance over the static and frozen quality of written word.

In his most literary work, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche crafts the text’s form and style that mimics and stresses orality. Indeed, the title itself, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, situates “spoke” before Zarathustra’s name, elevating the act of speech over the individual performing the act. Moreover, the title functions as a refrain throughout the poem, generally serving as the closing comment after an extended section. This rhythmical refrain helps provide a common thread that runs through the text’s fleeting discourses between Zarathustra and his different audiences. While these interactions contain ambiguity, the text invites its audience to end each
dialogue with the rhythmical clause focusing on the perpetual drive to continue speaking, to continue creating. Nietzsche extends this point to another structural feature of the text. Robert Gooding-Williams, for example, argues that “the plot of Zarathustra resembles a stammer, because it is structured by an analogous opposition […]. Zarathustra’s ‘textual’ stammering evinces a clash between Zarathustra’s intentions and personae whose words and actions portend the defeat of his intentions” (23). In other words, the book’s form imitates acts of verbal communication, but as Gooding-Williams notes, the structure reflects a stammer, a type of indirect communication. Indeed, Zarathustra encounters several conflicts delivering his message about the Overman as he struggles to match his words to his audience’s values. Or, as Gooding-Williams argues, Zarathustra struggles to create an appropriate persona to match his intentions. The central conflict of the text, then, develops from Zarathustra’s failed rhetorical performances and his recurring attempts to create a linguistic mask that appeals to his audience. It is important to note that Gooding-Williams employs the plural “personae” in his analysis of Zarathustra’s stammering since the word demonstrates the varied and shifting performances Zarathustra creates throughout the text. The altered identities reflect the perpetual creative force that underlies Nietzsche’s will to power. Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s prophet of the Overman, wills himself to transform his mask and language, striving to find a way to properly communicate his new norms for an audience who are resistant to moving past their faith and traditions. In other words, Zarathustra’s perpetual shifts in performance are designed to engage and to test his audience’s current values. His varied linguistic performances are not always successful, but Zarathustra’s consistent striving to create a persuasive persona for his audience reflects Nietzsche’s arguments about the creative will. Zarathustra does not collapse into psychological
nihilism when his performances are not successful. Zarathustra does not see his purpose and experience as meaningless, even as he is isolated because of the audience’s rejection of his ideas. It is dealing with these unwilling ears that engenders Zarathustra’s will to create and speak again. One of Zarathustra’s first personas is that of a grand orator, but his performance ultimately results in a communicative failure:

I love those who do not know how to live except their lives be a down-going, for they are those who are going across. I love the great despisers, for they are the great venerators and arrows of longing for the other bank. I love those who do not first seek beyond the stars for the reasons to go down and to be sacrifices: but who sacrifice themselves to the earth, that the earth may one day belong to the [Over]man. (44)

Despite the rhetorical flights through anaphora and pathos, the audience fails to hear Zarathustra’s message, leaving him with the disappointing conclusion that “they do not understand me, I am not the mouth for these ears” (45). However, Zarathustra makes another attempt, willing himself to try to convince the people about his vision of the Overman. He acknowledges the problems with his first mask and shifts his language to match the audience’s beliefs:

They have something of which they are proud. What is it called that makes them proud? They call it culture, it distinguishes them from the goatherds. Therefore they dislike hearing the world “contempt” spoken of them. So I shall speak to their pride. […] And Thus spoke Zarathustra to the people. (45)

Zarathustra’s introspection reflects his desire to create a new linguistic mask. Indeed, after acknowledging his first failed attempt, Zarathustra alters his performance to focus on the pride the people have for their culture and values. There is a noticeable shift in Zarathustra’s language, but he still employs indirect and elliptical images that fail to reach his audience’s ears. As one part of his extended soliloquy, Zarathustra states:
It is time for man to fix his goal. It is time for man to plant the seed of his highest hope. His soil is still rich enough for it. But this soil will one day be poor and weak; no longer will a high tree be able to grow from it. […] I tell you: one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: you still have chaos in you. (46)

This passage demonstrates a new mask for Zarathustra even though his intentions to teach the Overman remain the same. He drops the mask of grand orator and attempts to speak in language associated more with his audience, replacing his emotional repetition of “I love” with language focused on humanity’s time and hope. Moreover, this shift reflects Zarathustra’s focus on the audience’s pride. He limits his role as the subject of the performance in favor of elevating the audience’s values as the subject of his performance. However, Zarathustra’s language still presents itself as a form of indirect expression since he employs a poeticism that is elusive for his audience to interpret. For an audience still influenced by traditional philosophy, Zarathustra’s comments about “chaos […] giving birth to a dancing star” sound discordant and absurd. Indeed, after hearing his new delivery, “all the people laughed and shouted” at Zarathustra’s performance, leaving him to repeat the statement, “they do not understand me: I am not the mouth for these ears” (47).

This opening scene establishes the stammering pattern of the text that Gooding-Williams describes. That is, Zarathustra’s attempts to persuade his audience have a jarring start-stop pattern, where Zarathustra’s language, poetic and oracular, fails to reach the minds or hearts of his intended audience. He then retreats to reconstruct a new persona before starting the process again. These shifting personae and performances serve as a type of indirect communication that reflects the ambiguities of existence, a point Jaspers argues in his essay comparing Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Indeed, Zarathustra’s heightened oral performances leave most of the audience members either in a state of discomfort or anger at the uncertainty the performance engenders.
Yet, for the existentialist, they view the ambiguities of masks and indirect communication as a reflection of the actual world’s truth. There is no hidden essence or a metaphysical system to guide humanity to a truth beyond the riddles humanity encounters. The individual must draw closer to existence’s uncertainties, those ephemeral moments that flash across the eyes and ears. Nietzsche repeats this start-stop pattern throughout the book. These cycles reflect the will to create and perform even as Zarathustra encounters these communicative walls and failure to reach the ears of his audience. It is through failed performances that Zarathustra must reimagine another persona, to create a new mask and perform again. This creative will protects Zarathustra from despair. While he experiences isolation and dread, he continues to create new personae and expressions, willing himself to create in the face of a silent and hostile audience.

Despite the tension between the stammering and revised performances, Zarathustra attains a greater wisdom about his own language and existence. He reflects upon the importance of the sounds of his speech, stating that “one has to speak with thunder and heavenly fireworks to feeble and dormant senses. But the voice of beauty speaks softly: it steals into only the most awakened souls” (117). The first sentence appears to privilege a bombastic style to enliven an audience dulled by dormant senses. Zarathustra’s first attempt employs rhetorical fireworks since his use of anaphora stresses the highly emotional refrain “I love” to start every clause. However, after his audience mocks his first performance, he attempts to soften his language and focuses more on his audience’s pride and values. Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, recognizes the importance of constraining these emotions, transforming his intense passions into gentle expressions that can appeal to his audience. In the second sentence, Nietzsche contrasts the loud and disruptive phrases with an appeal to beauty. The beauty of the hushed voice allows a speaker
to deliver a message that glides into the souls of select audience members. For Zarathustra, a bombastic performance filled with “thunder and heavenly fireworks” jolts the dormant senses, but it does little to reach the minds and hearts of an individual. Ironically, it is the indirectness of whispers and hushed tones that draws the audience closer to genuine truths about existence.

If we consider these passages from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in conjunction with Jaspers’s arguments about masks and indirect communication, we can see Nietzsche favors a theatrical performance to deliver his profound teachings of the Overman. There is no unified way to express such a genuine truth to return meaning to actual existence, so Zarathustra must act as a player upon the stage, assuming many personae who shifts and varies his performance with the hope of delivering his genuine truth about the Overman. Of course, as Gooding-Williams argues, a tension exists between Zarathustra’s “intentions” and “personae,” creating the “stammering” effect of the book. However, this stammer reinforces Nietzsche’s link between the fleeting and elusive quality of oral performance and the creation of meaning without the fixed interpretations of Christian metaphysics. That is, Zarathustra’s constant verbal breaks and resets enact the type of indirect communication that reflects, according to Jaspers, a genuine truth about existence.

Nietzsche, as an existentialist, Christianity’s teachings that stresses the belief in a divine author who inscribes all objects in the actual world with a fixed essence. The Word fails to convey stable truths, and Zarathustra’s stammering reflects the ambiguities of the actual world. Zarathustra’s consistent resetting of his utterances present the audience with brief acts of creation that remain just beyond the reach of certain interpretation. In other words, the ambiguity of Zarathustra’s oral performances mimics the same diverse uncertainties that individuals encounter and interpret in the actual world where no divine or metaphysical truths exist.
There is an erratic quality to these experiences, and as Lesley Chamberlin argues in *Nietzsche in Turin*, Nietzsche’s style is designed to illustrate the similar elusiveness that is found in both life and language:

> Life for Nietzsche was the language he used to invent it, a language which was always musical and pictorial. Life itself was invented shape. The books, so close to that life, have an improvised feel; they are asymmetrical, discontinuous, tightly concentric without an obvious centre. They are the product of a fierce mind and a divergent personality. They stand to be read for their flashing insights, sudden illuminations, patterns and fleeting pleasures. (7)

It is important to note that Chamberlin’s descriptions reflect attitudes associated with existentialism. First, Chamberlin argues that the style and form of Nietzsche’s books have an improvised feel, his craft reflecting both a staged performance and the experience of an individual distanced from the comforts of familiar knowledge. Specifically, Chamberlin asserts that Nietzsche’s books are filled with disjointed structures, lacking “an obvious centre.” These descriptions echo Barrett’s argument about how existentialists believe that the individual is “thrust out” into an unfamiliar world after they encounter the void. The world no longer holds a unified or fixed set of stable images and signs. Like an actor without a script, the individual “improvise[s]” meaning from the emptiness that exists in front of them, and they are left only with their ability to interpret and respond to their surroundings. For Nietzsche, these acts of interpretation and creation serve as humanity’s path to escape the void or the collapse into psychological nihilism. Without Christian metaphysics to provide a fixed and certain meaning about existence, individuals assume the role of both actors and audience, “improvis[ing]” their performance as it unfolds. For Nietzsche, this active engagement with interpretation and creation allows individuals to experience “flashing insights, sudden illuminations, patterns and fleeting pleasures,” as Chamberlin argues. Importantly, Chamberlin’s commentary suggests Nietzsche’s
appreciation of the aesthetic experience. These creative performances inspire joyful “insights” about life. While the performances are artificial and transitory, Nietzsche rejects the idea that their performative quality reduces the actual world to a meaningless game. To see existence as a simple game undermines a central point of Nietzsche’s will to power that encourages humanity to “perfect oneself” through their creative will. Nietzsche views a world without Christian metaphysics as a series of masks and performative gestures, each appearing momentarily before a new act unfolds. Of course, these performances are not without interpretive challenges and uncertainty since they are ephemeral, as are the actor’s breaths and gestures from the stage. This theatricality reflects the flashes of genuine truth that appear briefly before another set of performances and signs appear. But these fleeting truths are not fixed and unified. Nietzsche’s skepticism of systems rejects any sense of a permanence, since everyone’s encounter and interpretation of the ephemeral sign will vary. Chamberlin confirms this point later in her argument, asserting that Nietzsche sees the “world as essentially illusory, and he had to find a way of seeing that state of affairs positively. He did it by viewing life as a form of art, built upon wilful deceptions and incorporating transient meanings” (34). In other words, Nietzsche recognizes the numerous masks that blanket actual existence, yet he embraces these wilful deceptions and transient meanings as artistic performances. These transitory performative moments reflect the actual world without a divine or metaphysical author; they are not meaningless acts, but rather serve as the individual’s path to escape the void through creative interpretation and expression. In addition, these wilful deceptions reflect the type of indirect communication that Jaspers describes in his essay about Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. It is through the engagement with artifice that genuine truth about existence can be heard, even if for a
moment. Since there is no divine author or hidden essence to determine a fixed meaning to any natural object, the actual world transforms into a series of temporary artistic performances, a series of mutable signs, masks, and gestures; these performances are not without meaning, but those who hope to find one fixed essence or answer risk the fall into psychological nihilism since Nietzsche, a metaphysical nihilist, rejects that any type of certain systematic meaning can be found in the actual world.

Like Nietzsche, Melville employs an indirect style of communication in his final work of prose fiction published during his lifetime, *The Confidence Man His Masquerade*. The novel, of course, emphasizes the role of shifting masks, but Melville also crafts language that mimics the transitory qualities of oral speech like Nietzsche’s passages in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, imitating the elusiveness of the spoken word that evokes a type of indirect communication. Elizabeth S. Foster, one of the first critics to perform a detailed analysis about Melville’s revisions for the novel, argues that “the style that Melville invented or evolved for the expository parts of this novel desiderates understatement, underemphasis, litotes, and complexity that looks like simplicity” (260-61). Foster asserts that Melville’s revisions consistently moved in the direction of these strategies, describing them as the narrator’s “hushing of the voice” (261). In addition, Foster generalizes the novel’s style as “hinting and whispering,” Melville’s written text mimicking the sounds of the spoken word. (262). Like Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, Melville appeals to the transitory quality of the spoken word, illustrating a type of indirect communication associated with truth in the actual world. Jaspers argues that existentialists associate the temporal and fleeting nature of indirect communication in the actual world that has no metaphysical essence. Truth is not lost, however. In fact, the existentialist sees these indirect performances as a
reflection of genuine truth about existence’s ambiguities. Melville enacts the type of indirect communication that existentialists, like Jaspers and Nietzsche, associate with the ambiguities of existence with the narrator’s hushed voice.

For example, the narrator’s whispering voice describes an interaction between one of the passengers, a merchant, and the confidence man masquerading as a disabled African American beggar named Black Guinea. The merchant, who had been observing Black Guinea’s performance begging for money, offers him a coin, providing the charity Black Guinea had been seeking. Despite the simplicity of the merchant’s action, the narrative voice buries the scene’s description beneath wordiness and negations, stating that “done in despite of the general sentiment, the good deed of the merchant was not, perhaps, without its unwelcome return from the crowd, since that good deed seemed somehow to convey to them a sort of reproach” (25). The main clause employs several negations that mask the narration’s clarity. First, the merchant’s “good deed” is identified with something that it “was not.” This construction forces a reader to interpret the “good deed” from a perspective of absence of meaning. While this structure certainly discounts one possible meaning, it also floods the reader’s mind with other possibilities at the same time. Moreover, the narrator qualifies this negation by including “perhaps,” a quick acknowledgement that the previous description might not provide a certain meaning about the narrative’s actions. This series of negated terms continues when the narrator links “the good deed” with the crowd’s response, describing it as “without its unwelcome return.” This string of negated verbs, prepositions, and adjectives complicates the reader’s interpretive process since the words show possibilities over certainty. That is, the negations shade the story as a silhouetted image: we see the forms and outlines, but the finer, concrete
detail remains beyond our sight. To put it in the terms of existentialism, the essence remains hidden behind a series of masked appearances—and even leads one to question if there is any essence behind the mask.

In addition, the narrator complicates the main clause’s masked appearance with a subordinating clause including hedge words and vague descriptors. Specifically, the phrase “seemed somehow” creates an uncertain interpretation about the other passenger’s understanding of the “good deed.” The linking verb “seem[s]” suggests the possibility that the passenger’s misread the merchant’s action. The inclusion of “somehow” allows the narrator to offer a quick note of commentary, almost questioning how an audience could potentially misunderstand the merchant’s “good deed.” Moreover, the narrator hedges the passenger’s reading of the moment, describing it as “a sort of reproach.” This fuzziness adds an additional screen of uncertainty since both the players’ actions and the witnesses’ reception lack clear definition. Indeed, this brief action becomes a linguistic labyrinth to navigate and distances the reader from the narrative action. As Stanley Trachtenberg argues in “‘A Sensible Way to Play the Fool,’” Melville’s “detached narration […] functions to place the narrative on occasion as many as three removes from the author. As the distance increases, the true norm of the novel becomes harder to locate, credibility more uncertain” (43). Trachtenberg’s commentary about Melville’s detached narration echoes a similar argument from Chamberlin about the experimental form of Nietzsche’s philosophy. Indeed, Trachtenberg notes that this separation between the narrative voice and the reader creates an elusive and uncertain norm, or essence, of the novel. In Chamberlin’s reading of Nietzsche’s form, his books feel “improvised” and are “asymmetrical […] without an obvious centre.” Both Trachtenberg’s and Chamberlin’s respective arguments
demonstrate the function of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s style as a reflection of indirect communication. Their respective use of indirect language shifts the importance away from the hidden essence towards the interpretative experience with the mask itself, emphasizing an existentialist attitude that existence precedes essence. Indeed, the authors’ eclectic styles mask their respective “centre[s],” to borrow Chamberlin’s language, leave the audience only with the experimental and elusive styles to interpret. These indirect styles and disruption to norms leaves the audience with an uncertain meaning about the text, calling into question the idea that a hidden essence awaits discovery. For Melville and Nietzsche, these experimental styles reflect the uncertainties and ambiguities that mask all the actual world; however, they do not see these masks as walls blockading meaning but rather as the sources of interpretation to create a meaningful life.

Of course, the elusive narrative voice itself serves as one of the narrative masks of The Confidence Man. Indeed, the whispering and hushed voice of the narrator veils the novel’s action under an opaque prose style, but the narrator is not the only indirect and elusive part of the novel. Most clearly, the confidence man’s different personae cause confusion not only among the Fidele’s passengers but also the narrative’s audience. One mask seamlessly glides onto a new character, each new performance serving as a test of one’s certainty and confidence. In Lawrance Thompson’s Melville’s Quarrel with God, he views the elusiveness of both narrator and the

14 In Gustaaf Van Cromphout’s reading of The Confidence Man’s theatricality, he argues, “Critics have often commented upon the narrator’s unreliability, inconsistencies, equivocues, and general trickery at the reader’s expense—characteristics reflected in, among other things, a self-contradictory rhetoric and an indirect, involuted, self-referential, and sometimes “self-erasing” style. With such a narrator, the reader’s experience of the book’s epistemological problem becomes, not surprisingly, an experience of utter doubt concerning every character he or she encounters. This is all the more so since the narrator has no monopoly on the stylistic traits mentioned. Several or all of them are shared by quite a few of the characters, including some of the confidence-men, and this fact only contributes to the reader’s perplexity” (42).
confidence man as part of Melville’s “ingenious art” to cover his criticism directed towards the decaying state of Christianity’s teachings.\textsuperscript{15} Thompson argues that the novel enacts a type of “triple-talk” where the fuzziness surrounding the narrator’s words and the characters’ actions allows Melville to present his “anti-Christian” viewpoints (301). And while the narrator’s whispering narration enacts a part of these layered meanings, Thompson emphasizes the performance between the duplicitous confidence man and the \textit{Fidele}’s passengers that engenders Melville’s harshest criticism against those who maintain their faith in Christianity.

Thompson stresses the “triangulation” between the elusive narrator, tricky confidence man, and the foolish \textit{Fidele} passengers as the “epitome of the entire narrative,” this recursive performance enacting Melville’s criticism directed at those who maintain their faith in the shallowness of Christianity’s dogma (309). One of the first performances involves the confidence man’s role as Black Guinea, a disabled African American who sets out to collect charity from his fellow travelers. To collect money from the \textit{Fidele}’s passengers, Black Guinea performs like a circus attraction, where “he would pause, throwing back his head and opening his mouth like an elephant for tossed apples at a menagerie” (19). Most of the passengers engage with the performance of this “game of charity,” but one audience member, “after sundry sorry observations of the negro, began to croak out something about his deformity being a sham” (19). The narrator describes this skeptical passenger as a “limping, gimlet-eyed, sour-faced person—it may be some discharged custom-house officer, who, suddenly stripped of convenient means of

\textsuperscript{15} In Hershel Parker’s “The Confidence Man’s Masquerade,” he argues that “Not only is [the confidence man’s] object to procure a little money and to enter a few souls in his satanic transfer-book, it is to demonstrate in fair play that Christianity is not alive in America” (294). While Nina Baym focuses her analysis on Melville’s conflict with the form and expectations of fiction writing, she acknowledges that “insofar as Christianity figures in the work, it figures only as the most pervasive and powerful of fiction affecting occidental man” (921). In Melville’s \textit{Quarrel with God}, Lawrance Thompson asserts that the novel’s emphasis on charity shows “the kernel of that shallow Christian dogma which he had come to loathe” (298).
support, had concluded to be avenged on government and humanity by making himself miserable for life, either by hating or suspecting everything and everybody” (19). In Thompson’s reading, this cantankerous skeptic functions as “a mouthpiece for some of Melville’s own personal views” (306). This man with the wooden leg pierces the Black Guinea’s performance, seeing it as a disingenuous act and asserting that “he’s some white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy. He and his friends are all humbugs” (21).

Upon hearing these attacks on Black Guinea, a Methodist minister responds to the man with the wooden leg, imploring him to consider the importance of “‘charity’” when speaking with the beggar (22). As their debate continues, the Methodist asks, “‘he looks honest, don’t he?’” to which the man with the wooden leg responds, “‘Looks are one thing, and facts are another’” (22). This scene illustrates the novel’s “triple-talk,” to use Thompson’s language, that illustrates Melville’s challenges against Christian metaphysics: “the Representative of God, the deceived, and the not-deceived” (309). Whereas the Methodist perceives the “honesty” of the beggar’s character, the man with the wooden leg suggests that it is all an artificial performance, a scam to fleece money from the audience’s pockets. The dispute eventually ends with the wooden-legged man removing himself from the crowd, warning them about the “trust [in their] painted decoy” (23). At first, this resolution suggests a distinction between the two characters. The man with the wooden leg, defeated in his argument with the man of faith, retreats from the collection of passengers who maintain their faith in the Methodist and the value of charity. Indeed, as the man with the wooden leg departs, the Methodist offers the following diagnosis:

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16 Thompson suggests that since the character is supposed to have once worked at a custom-house and has an Ahabian wooden leg, this skeptical character would have served as an inside joke for “Hawthorne’s private enjoyment” (306).
“Spleen, much spleen, which is the rickety child of his evil heart of unbelief: it has made him mad. I suspect for one naturally reprobate. Oh, friends,” raising his arms as in the pulpit, “oh beloved, how are we admonished by the melancholy spectacle of this raver. Let us profit by the lesson; and is it not this: that if, next to mistrusting Providence, there be aught that man should pray against, it is against the mistrusting his fellow-man.” (24)

Left alone upon the stage, the Methodist performs as if he is delivering his Sunday sermon, condemning the spectacle they had all observed when the man with the wooden leg demonstrated his mistrust of Black Guinea. For the Methodist minister, the mistrust of a fellow-man is the gravest action next to mistrusting Providence. While this performance appears to elevate the Methodist minister’s moral position, Melville undermines it when the Methodist again encounters the confidence man still performing as Black Guinea. When Black Guinea asks the Methodist for money without the presence of the surly wooden-legged man, the once trusting minister now looks at the beggar with heightened skepticism. Faced with the beggar’s pleas for help, the Methodist’s attitude shifts from benevolence to suspicion:

Once more the negro wailed, and turning in despair from the last speaker, imploringly caught the Methodist by the skirt of his coat. But a change had come over that before impassioned intercessor. With an irresolute and troubled air, he eyed the suppliant; against whom, somehow, by what seemed instinctive influences, the distrusts first set on foot were now generally reviving, and if anything, with added severity. (25)

The Methodist’s change reveals his earlier actions defending the “honest[y]” of the beggar to be nothing more than a hollow mask itself. Earlier, the Methodist plays the part of an impassioned intercessor, rebuking the wooden-legged man’s mistrust of his fellow man. Of course, when it is the Methodist’s time to enact charity through actions instead of words, the morally righteous mask he once wore transforms into one projecting a severe distrust. The Methodist eventually leaves the beggar without charity, acting in the exact way of the skeptical wooden-legged man that the Methodist had previously condemned.
This scene, then, presents multiple masked performances, each creating the type of indirect communication that existentialists, like Jaspers and Nietzsche, associate with genuine truth about the ambiguities about existence. With the confidence man, his wearing of the mask, a form of indirect communication, allows for the Methodist’s hypocrisy to be enacted. The Methodist preaches the importance of charity and trusting other people, yet when the confidence man asks him to perform an act of charity, the Methodist’s actions do not match his words. Of course, the wooden-legged man’s skepticism proves accurate, but his skeptical comments are masked by the Methodist’s and narrative voice’s criticisms. In Thompson’s reading, this undermining of the wooden-legged man’s comments serves as a type of protective mask for Melville to criticize the true believers of Christianity. Since both the narrator and man of faith bury the man with the wooden leg with mockery, Melville’s genuine truth about the hollowness and hypocrisy of Christian metaphysics does not assume the scene’s spotlight, masked by the spectacles of Black Guinea and the Methodist. This first extended performance of the confidence man, the faithful, and the skeptical is important to emphasize in the context of existentialism. Even though Thompson’s central argument suggests that Melville is at war with a metaphysical entity, his arguments about Melville’s art and the protective mask illustrates another example about Melville’s existentialist philosophy. As Jaspers argues about Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, central nineteenth-century existentialists, those writers identify the ambiguities and uncertainties about existence with the mask and indirect communication. In this scene from The Confidence Man, Melville employs these same strategies to illustrate the novel’s central point about the emptiness of Christianity. Of course, Black Guinea serves as one of the confidence man’s many masks, and his performance as a beggar asking for charity engenders flashes of the genuine truth
to emerge. Specifically, the confidence man’s acting provokes the Methodist’s hypocritical attitude towards wooden-legged man to manifest for the audience to observe. The Methodist performs as the one with greater morality, appealing to Christian teachings as he attacks the skeptical man for distrusting the poor beggar. Yet, when the Methodist needs to enact his own charity for Black Guinea, his wears his own mask of skepticism, shifting his performance as seamlessly as the confidence man himself. Melville’s “ingenious art,” as Thompson describes it, obfuscates the narrative action and character’s performance, but these confusing layers of indirect “triple-talk” allow for Melville’s criticism about the hollowness of Christian metaphysics to be delivered from a protective distance and for an audience with the ears capable to hear the sign through the noise.

Even though the man with the wooden leg retreats into isolation in this first interaction with the confidence man, he returns later in the novel and once again offers a glimpse of Melville’s perspective. The wooden-legged man appears in a scene that serves as a partial repetition of his first encounter with Black Guinea and the Methodist, but these characters now assume new masks, the confidence man as the man in gray, the Methodist now a young clergyman. The scene appears to be a development of the first encounter with Black Guinea, where the young clergyman seeks another passenger to vouch for his character. Despite this “plot development,” the scene offers the same interplay between the confidence man, the man of faith, and the skeptic as the first encounter with Black Guinea. That is, as the man in gray and the clergyman discuss the credibility of Black Guinea’s person, the man with the wooden leg re-appears, and he reaffirms his position that Black Guinea is an imposter.
The confidence man seeks clarification from the man with the wooden leg, questioning the wooden-legged man’s confidence that Black Guinea was a performer:

“Tell me, sir, do you really think that a white could look the negro so? For one, I should call it pretty good acting.”
“Not much better than any other man acts.”
“How? Does all the world act? Am I, for instance, an actor? Is my reverend friend here, too, a performer?”
“Yes, don’t you both perform acts? To do, is to act; so all doers are actors.” (40)

Though brief, this exchange between the confidence man and the man with the wooden leg emphasizes an important connection between performance and meaning. In addition, the man with the wooden leg makes explicit the novel’s theatrical motifs and images that are central to the novel’s development.17 While the man with the wooden leg maintains his piercing Melvillian skepticism, his language shifts in identifying the performative act he observes. No longer are performances seen as belonging to an imposter and a decoy; instead, the performers in front of him are doers and actors. He maintains the ability to see the performers in front of him, but the pejorative labels have softened. To put it another way, the man with the wooden leg is no longer concerned with removing the mask and exposing the artifice of the decoys he identifies. His language suggests an acceptance that performance is everywhere, that every action is a type of performance in the actual world that only “the discerning eye” and trained ear can identify.

Shortly after this comment, the wooden-legged man again departs the scene to the derision and mockery of both the confidence man and the young clergyman, Melville’s genuine truth again shielded by the indirect communication of these performances.

17 Jennifer Greiman argues that the novel “demands to be read like a poem, united more by its patterns of language and repetitions of imagery”; in addition, she stresses The Confidence-Man is “peppered with theatrical metaphors” to emphasize an “essential theatricality” (174).
Even though this scene mirrors the encounter between the confidence man, the faithful, and the skeptical, a framework Thompson argues is the “epitome” of *The Confidence Man*, the shift in the man with the wooden leg’s language illustrates an important point about Melville’s attitude towards theatricality and performance. If the man with the wooden leg does express Melville’s perspective, as Thompson argues, the wooden-legged man’s inconsistent interactions with the confidence man demonstrates the ambiguities and uncertainties of interpreting performances, but he still determines a genuine truth, to use Jaspers’s language, about existence. In other words, the man with the wooden leg clearly identifies Black Guinea, the confidence man’s second mask, as an imposter and decoy, warning the rest of the passengers not to trust this specific performer. However, in this scene that mirrors those same events, the wooden-legged man, ironically, boasts that he exposed Black Guinea as an imposter to the very same imposter wearing a new mask!

On one level, this makes the man with the wooden leg appear foolish. How can he pierce one of the confidence man’s masks with relative ease in one scene while being unable to recognize the same imposter in the very next interaction? This foolishness, however, serves as a type of indirect communication that extends Melville’s protective authorial mask, as Thompson argues; however, this truth illustrates, if not the direct assault on Christianity that his earlier interaction with the Methodist minister evoked, a piercing view about the performative nature of existence. Specifically, the man with the wooden leg no longer identifies a single individual as a decoy or a performer. Now, after his encounters with multiple layers of artifice, he recognizes, in response to the confidence man’s question, all doers are actors. Like the Old Manx Sailor from *Moby-Dick*, the man with the wooden leg recognizes that existence is a fleeting series of
performances. Of course, these performances are not without problems. Their ephemeral appearances create ambiguity and an object’s essence remains elusive. But Melville’s concern with these theatrical chapters from *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence Man* is not so much removing the masks of the apparent world in the hopes of liberating a hidden metaphysical essence but rather exposing the performative nature of all parts of existence. In *The Confidence Man*, the man with the wooden leg’s piercing and discerning eye does not unmask the essence of Black Guinea or the man in gray. He sees the artifice of their character, describing them as decoys and actors, but he does not directly identify Black Guinea and the man in gray as the same confidence man. In other words, the man with wooden leg does not identify the confidence man’s true identity or essence. However, despite only interpreting these external masks of the confidence man and the performative actions of the Christian faithful, the skeptical man with the wooden leg creates meaning about existence through these encounters with artifice: “‘To do, is to act; so all doers are actors.’” In other words, “the Act,” as Goethe writes, is the source of genuine truth.

In his reading of *The Confidence Man*, Jonas Barish argues that “the stage strips off the layer of diffidence beneath which men cloak their true selves; it completes gestures that normally remain arrested. In so doing it actualizes life’s potential, revealing a truer reality than the one we daily witness” (314). While Barish does not focus his analysis on the philosophical implications of the text, it is important to emphasize his point about the stage’s role that “actualizes life’s potential” within the context of Melville and Nietzsche’s existentialism. For Melville and Nietzsche, with the collapse of Christian metaphysics, the world transforms into a series of ephemeral performances. Individuals and natural objects are blanketed in masks, and in a world
with no divine author, these artificial appearances are the only sources to interpret and create
meaning about existence. Indeed, as the man with the wooden leg asserts, everyone is an actor.
Although Barish’s comment suggests the possibility of an essence or “true self,” the wooden-
legged man’s inability to distinguish the confidence man’s identity between the Black Guinea
and the man in gray’s personae demonstrates the possibility that even if a fixed essence appears
underneath the fleeting masks, even the most skeptical eye cannot pierce the mask and discover
it. However, the novel suggests that in a world of artifice and deception, individuals can create
meaning that “actualize life’s potential.” Of course, this affirmation of life and existence requires
a consistent engagement with layers of masks, performances, and indirect communication,
experiences that can evoke uncertainty and ambiguity. However, as Jennifer Greiman argues,
The Confidence Man’s theatricality emphasizes a central theme of the novel that “one must pass
through distrust on one’s way to placing confidence, but more literally, distrust provides both the
space and the occasion for the performance of confidence, the surface on which confidence
enacts its play of genuine authenticity” (174). In other words, Melville, through his protective
mask of the man with the wooden leg, recognizes that individuals must not only see but engage
with acts of deception and distrust to create a meaningful life. In Nietzschean terms, it is the
encounter with these “wilful deceptions” that engenders the creative will and produce new norms
about an existence that is no longer constrained by the hollowness of Christian metaphysics as a
system of knowledge.

If we consider The Confidence-Man’s theatricality within the context of existentialism,
we can see the novel enacting central themes that belong to the tradition. First, the confidence
man’s character tests the traditional belief about the relationship between essence and existence.
Indeed, the multiple identities of the confidence man challenge the notion that a true essence exists beneath the mask. Like the actor upon the stage, the confidence man performs different shows and tests the confidence and trust of his audience. These tests, of course, are examples of artifice. Through the repeated tests and performances, the confidence man undermines the trust that the ship’s passengers have in their fixed beliefs. Moreover, the “whispering” narrative voice adds an additional mask to the confidence man’s elusiveness, enacting “indirect communication, [which] is appropriate to the ambiguity of genuine truth in temporal existence,” a point that Karl Jaspers argues in his reading of the existentialist philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. While Melville is not part of Jaspers’s discussion of existentialism, Melville’s appeals to masks and borrowing of dramatic forms align with Nietzsche’s texts. Indeed, the eclectic styles and forms in Melville’s literature and Nietzsche’s philosophy demonstrate similar existentialist attitudes about the “ambiguity of truth” in a world without the influence of Christian metaphysics.

This is important to note because Melville and Nietzsche, both recognizing the collapse of this system, still seek meaning in a world where interpreting a unified meaning remains beyond an individual’s grasp; in other words, they do not allow their metaphysical nihilism to become psychological nihilism. For Nietzsche, an existence without God turns the actual world into an aesthetic experience, a series of performative masks and gestures. Nietzsche adopts a style that represents these elusive performances, emphasizing the orality and “tempo” of his style. Moreover, Zarathustra’s character enacts a series of “personae” throughout the book, shifting his language and appearance in attempting to convince his audience about the Overman. Remarkably, *The Confidence Man*, written almost three decades before the publication of
Zarathustra, anticipates the German philosopher’s experimental philosophical text; that is, like the character of Zarathustra, the confidence man shifts his masks to reflect his understanding about the specific audience’s beliefs, using the artifice of the mask to test an audience that considers themselves faithful Christians. Moreover, both texts employ a series of indirect acts of communication, a strategy emphasizing an existentialist attitude about the fleeting ambiguities that comprise existence. Specifically, both texts, at times, imitate an oral performance, a choice that reflects the ephemeral encounter with the different masks and ambiguities that blanket existence. These moments appear briefly before a new set of gestures take the stage. Their experimental strategies, to use Nietzsche’s language from The Gay Science, reveals Melville’s and Nietzsche’s “more ticklish and malicious” art. While both Thus Spoke Zarathustra and The Confidence Man have their share of “ticklish” and playful moments, both texts illustrate Melville’s and Nietzsche’s “malicious” attitudes directed at Christian metaphysics. They see the hypocrisy of Christianity’s teachings and practice, and Melville and Nietzsche see these teachings as one mask among an infinite number of other performative gestures that individuals encounter in the actual world. Their experimental texts serve not only as a protective mask for the authors but also as a test for those with skeptical eyes and attuned ears who have moved beyond these fallen systems of knowledge. This embrace of the performance and theatricality creates an aesthetic experience that allows the individual to move, as Greiman argues, to move from “distrust” and “confidence.”

18 In Hazel Barnes’s book, Humanistic Existentialism, she compares the philosophies and styles developed by three twentieth-century existentialists – Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus – identifying this group as “humanistic existentialists.” Barnes states that the works of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus “are stylistically eclectic and interested in experimenting with new forms” (384). However, despite the experimental expressions, Barnes argues that “no one of them is ever willing to let form becloud the meaning. This does not mean that a clear statement of the message is attached to each work like a moral at the end of an Aesop fable. Like any worthwhile work of art, their books may legitimately allow several interpretations and may say to some readers more than what
and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism: how does one return confidence and authenticity to an actual world where the comforts of conventional images and symbols have proved to be nothing but masks and deceptions? As Greiman argues, theatricality reveals how one must pass through distrust to reach confidence. Of course, this type of transformation requires a creative will, an active engagement with artifice to create a genuine truth about life without the guidance of a divine author. In other words, Melville and Nietzsche place their faith in the aesthetic experience to avoid a collapse into psychological nihilism.

**Did Melville Ever Attain Joyful Wisdom?**

One wonders if Melville ever experienced the type of playful existentialism that Nietzsche displays with relative ease. In comparison to Melville, Nietzsche often appears more gleeful with his attacks against Christian metaphysics, celebrating the systems collapse as a transformative moment from the constraints of Christianity’s dogma. Even though Melville employs irony throughout his literature to showcase this system’s inconsistencies, he rarely, if ever, seems as joyful as Nietzsche does when undermining this system of knowledge.

However, a comparison between the conclusions of *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence Man* reveals a moment in Melville’s literature where he attains a joyful wisdom. Mark Anderson, in fact, argues that during his time composing *Moby-Dick*, Melville himself had experienced a type of Nietzschean transformation. Anderson argues that he “take[s] Ishmael’s self-presentation for Melville’s expression of the highest and boldest Yes-saying moment of his life” (38). Anderson

originally in the author’s mind. At no time, however, does one feel that one that one is in a dream world where it is impossible to tell symbol from reality – as happens so often, for example, in the stories of Kafka – or that one simply does not know what is going on – as with the late writing of Joyce” (384).
supports this position with an analysis about the novel’s epilogue, where we see Ishmael clinging to Queequeg’s coffin as a life-buoy. The coffin, of course, experiences multiple transformations before the audience sees it as Ishmael’s salvation. Indeed, the most significant transformation of the coffin is not the physical change from an object of death to an object of life, but rather its transformation into a sacred text. Indeed, before Queequeg fully recovers from his illness, he copies his hieroglyphical tattoos from his body onto the coffin’s surface. Ishmael acknowledges that he cannot interpret this writing, but he learns that the tattoos are “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth” (524).

In *Moby-Dick*’s Epilogue, Queequeg’s coffin reappears after Moby Dick destroys the *Pequod* and her crew, leaving Ishmael an orphan amongst the waves. Of course, there is irony in this sign of death serving as Ishmael’s source of life, but the final image of Ishmael clinging to these sacred but unreadable words anticipates his transformation in life, becoming a Nietzschean yes-sayer who affirms and seeks all possibilities of existence. Indeed, the Ishmael who narrates *Moby Dick* is not the downtrodden sailor with the “damp, drizzly November in [his] soul” (3). Nor is this the orphaned Ishmael who has just confronted the void and survived. Instead, it is a matured and retrospective Ishmael, an Ishmael who not only can admit that his attempts to know the whale are often failures but, in fact, embraces those uncertainties as the most meaningful parts of existence. It is the Ishmael who can enact different performative masks as he does throughout *Moby-Dick*, an action that illustrates the diverse perspectives and possibilities that belong to existence. More important, Ishmael attains joyful wisdom by performing as a narrative artist. He confronts and survives the void, but Ishmael’s affirmation of existence arrives through
his experimental retelling and intellectual wanderings that shape *Moby-Dick*. In short, his will to create redeems his existence.

In Anderson’s study, he notes that this moment of Nietzschean yes-saying was short lived for Melville. Indeed, after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, his literary career continued its steep decline. Six years after the publication, Melville published *The Confidence Man*. While the uses of masks, irony, and indirect communication appear as they do in *Moby-Dick*, a reader will have a challenging time seeing a comparable joyful affirmation of life in the conclusion of *The Confidence Man*. Comparing the respective conclusions further strengthens Anderson’s point about Melville’s yes-saying in *Moby-Dick* and clarifies *The Confidence Man*’s ambiguity.

The final chapter of *The Confidence Man* unfolds as an extended test of faith for an old man who demonstrates almost total devotion to the Bible’s teachings. The confidence man tries several attempts to disrupt the old man’s faith, but the old man remains true to the Bible. In one of their final dialogue exchanges, the confidence man looks at the public Bible in the reading room, noting that the cover looks worn and tired, but upon opening the book, the pages appear brand new, a glaring whiteness emanating from the text. The old man appears sad for a moment, acknowledging that these clean pages reveal the little reading or use of the public Bible. However, the old man reaffirms his faith in the Bible’s teachings, arguing “‘And yet, of all people, the traveling public most need to put trust in that guardianship which is made known in this book’” (249). The old man, despite the recognition in the public’s waning trust in the Bible, still maintains his faith in the protection that Christianity provides. Despite the numerous tests of the confidence man, the old man’s faith does not waver. He sees Christianity as his guide and protector to living a meaningful life, arguing:
“For, in all our wanderings through this vale, how pleasant, not less than obligatory, to feel that we need start at no wild alarms, provide for no wild perils; trusting in that Power which is alike able and willing to protect us when we cannot ourselves.” (249)

These comments affirm the old man’s faith in Christian metaphysics. The old man surrenders his own free will to a benevolent metaphysical Power. He suggests that he can glide through existence without concern because a metaphysical entity will protect him against any dangers he encounters.

After discussing the importance of security, the confidence man attempts to read another passage from the Bible to support his point, but he notes that the lamp “burn[s] dimly” (250). The old man exhibits a sudden shift in behavior, noting the time and how he must get to bed. However, the old man reveals he has forgotten an important item that he must retrieve before bed, “something for safety” (250). The confidence man, noting the old man’s confusion, responds, “‘Let me give a little guess, sir. Life-preserver?’” (250)

Upon looking for a life-preserver, the confidence man points to “a brown stool with a curved tin compartment underneath,” and the old man, amazed, accepts it, asking “‘Who would have thought it? that a life-preserver? That’s the very stool I was sitting on, ain’t it?’” (250) While the old man inspects the stool closely, marveling at its construction, the confidence man informs the old man that he “think[s] that in case of a wreck, barring sharp-pointed timbers, you could have confidence in that stool for a special providence” (250). The old man gleefully agrees, and one of the final portrayals of the old man, a man whose faith in the Bible never wavers, is of him holding a stool masquerading as a chamber pot. Of course, there are layers of mockery in this final image. On one level, the old man’s faith in a metaphysical “Power” to protect him on his travels is undermined in his desperate search for a physical life perserver.
While this hypocrisy is clear, it is the form of the life-buoy itself that emphasizes Melville’s shift in attitude from joyful wisdom in *Moby-Dick* towards psychological nihilism in *The Confidence Man*. Like Queequeg’s coffin, the old man’s life preserver has multiple functions, and the confidence man clearly assigns it metaphysical connection, noting that it is a “special providence” that they found it. While the irony attached to Queequeg’s coffin emphasizes Ishmael’s affirmation of life in the face of death, the ironic twist attached to the old man’s life preserver suggests something different: this life buoy of “special providence” is full of metaphorical excrement.

If we consider the conclusions of *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence Man*, we see a dramatic change in Melville’s attitude about the dissolution of Christian metaphysics. Even though his skepticism and challenges to Christianity serve as common thread with these novels, the conclusion of *Moby-Dick* anticipates that novel’s embrace of the uncertainties and possibilities of life. Ishmael clinging to an object of death, covered with mystical writing, initiates his transformation from brooding sailor to the wandering philosopher, willing to explore all possibilities and perspectives that life provides. He is as malleable as the waves. Conversely, the old man from *The Confidence Man* remains steadfast in his faith to Christianity, and Melville portrays this man of unwavering faith as the ultimate fool. Any possibility of transformation or redemption dissipates as fast as the confidence man “extinguish[es]” the lamps in the reading room, leaving the old man and narrative audience in the dark about the future events. With *Moby-Dick*, the reader knows Ishmael survives and is transformed. With *The Confidence Man*, the novel concludes with feelings of uncertainty and mockery, the old man clinging to a chamber pot as a source of comfort and safety. The juxtaposition between these two novels demonstrates
that Melville, although briefly, did attain a joyful affirmation of life during his time composing *Moby-Dick*. However, *The Confidence Man*’s shift in tone reveals an author drifting into a world of bitterness and despair. As his literary career continued a decline from which it would not recover in his lifetime, Melville’s final work of prose demonstrates a caustic attitude towards those who remain steadfast in their faith, unwilling to break away from the comforts of tradition and embrace the uncertainties of existence.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that Melville’s and Nietzsche’s appeal to theatricality reflects an existentialist philosophy that not only recognizes but also embraces the ambiguities of the actual world that does not hide a metaphysical essence. Indeed, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts play with the image of masks and craft elusive styles. According to Karl Jaspers, a twentieth-century existentialist philosopher, the mask and indirect communication are central themes of existentialism since they represent the ephemeral and ambiguous nature of truth in an actual world without fixed systems. Moreover, Melville’s and Nietzsche’s adoption of theatrical metaphors and motifs anticipates the work of twentieth-century humanistic existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. As Hazel Barnes argues in *Humanistic Existentialists*, these writers “present even their most abstract ideas in the form of novels and plays,” using the aesthetic experience to perform their existentialist philosophies (205). Barnes asserts that these writers also crafted “absurd literature,” an aesthetic form that illustrates the ephemeral and ambiguous moments of existence:

> Absurd literature is in truth creative, for its author, “valuing the pure flame of life itself,” wants to bring into the world more and more life. Since he cannot have unity, he seeks diversity. An absurd literature rejects illusion and the hope of ultimate meanings in
Barnes’s comments, while focused on the writings of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus, can be applied to Melville’s and Nietzsche’s experimental borrowings of the dramatic genre. While Melville’s and Nietzsche’s works do not reach the level of the absurd of found in Barnes’s three humanistic existentialists, their works from the nineteenth century provides fertile soil from which the absurd bloomed. Melville and Nietzsche understood that the possibility of unity and “ultimate meanings” is beyond humanity’s reach, if it exists at all; however, like twentieth-century existentialists, Melville and Nietzsche embrace the ambiguities of existence and try to “[see] how life as it is may be valuable.”

Of course, Nietzsche’s theory of the will to power and the Overman act as an intellectual antecedent to these arguments by Barnes’s triad of twentieth-century humanistic existentialists. Since Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God in the first edition of The Gay Science in 1882, he strove to create new meaning and norms about existence without Christian metaphysics. In his composition of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, he recognizes that suffering belongs to existence, especially the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual turmoil individuals experience when they encounter the abyss where Christian metaphysics once provided meaning. Nietzsche, through Zarathustra, encourages his audience to move beyond the suffering that belongs to existence, arguing that “All ‘It was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful chance — until the creative will says to it: ‘But I willed it thus!’ Until the creative will says to it: ‘But I will it thus! Thus shall I will it!’” (163). Zarathustra’s argument recognizes the void where Christian metaphysics once stood, describing it as “a fragment” and “a riddle.” Without this system, life becomes “a dreadful chance” where unity cannot be grasped or understood. Surrounded by “fragment[s],” the
individual can allow the suffering and emptiness to consume their existence, risking a collapse into bitterness and revenge, as Ahab experiences in *Moby-Dick*, or their “creative will” can face the abyss, transforming the emptiness and themselves into new meaning. In short, the “creative will” saves the individual from the collapse into psychological nihilism.

At the end of his life, Melville’s literary performances embodied this attitude from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Despite his decline into literary obscurity, Melville willed himself to create poems and prose until the end of his life, seeking to transform his identity as a literary artist, constraining his talents to practice the artistry and austerity that he appreciated in Goethe’s writing. Indeed, in *Timoleon Etc.*, a book of poems published roughly four months before his death, the poetry’s subject matter focuses largely on Melville’s appreciation for art. In the middle of this collection, Melville includes the aptly titled “Art” to illustrate the vibrant tension of “the creative will” that Nietzsche articulates in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

In placid hours well pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt – a wind to freeze;
Sad patience – joyous energies;
Humility – yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity – reverence. These must mate,
And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel – Art. (717)

19 Walter Bezanson suggests Melville’s embrace of austerity is indebted to Matthew Arnold’s poetry. In his reading of Melville’s marginalia next to Arnold’s sonnet, “Austerity of Poetry,” Bezanson argues that the annotated passage impels us to compare Arnold’s sense of where the tension lies in poetry with Melville’s. Arnold sets up the opposition between outer radiance and inner austerity; in his own poem ‘Art,’ which to be sure is about the creative process rather than the completed poem, Melville stresses only the internal tensions by which “unlike things must meet and mate” (385).
Melville’s poem develops around the central idea that “unlike things must meet and mate,”
stressing the point that existence is comprised of contrasting fragments that must be reconciled.
The opening lines illustrate a peaceful idealism, the place of “dream[s]/ of many a brace
unbodied scheme.” Melville transitions from this soft and “placid” world into one of forceful
contrasts. This shift reflects the urgency to make meaning from all parts of experience, both the
bright and the black, arguing that “But form to lend, pulsed life create./ What unlike things must
meet and mate.” Gone are the calming, unbroken thought of the “placid hours” where “dream[s]”
can portray “unbodied scheme[s].” Instead, the poem’s form assumes a more energetic and
forceful delivery. Melville employs caesuras, breaking the flow of the complete sentence in lines
one and two, and creates a more dynamic pace with the short burst of phrases in subsequent
lines. It is important to note the final two “unlike things” in Melville’s list and to associate them
with his proto-existentialist philosophy: “Audacity – reverence.” For Melville, artistic creation
requires a dauntless attitude. On the one hand, the artist must encounter, and to a certain extent,
accept ancient ideas and philosophy with respect; however, this acknowledgement and
“reverence” of old forms does not conclude the creative process. Only when the respectful
acknowledgement of old forms merges with an intrepid and experimental creative spirit does the
artist live with the freedom to create a meaningful life. This engaged and active will that
underlies “Art” echoes Zarathustra’s stressing of “the creative will.” Both texts enact this
perpetual struggle to confront the void and to create a response that affirms the wonder and joy
of existence.

Melville had every reason to fade into literary silence at the end of his life. His
experimental art and philosophy left many of his contemporaries confounded, turning Melville
into a literary exile. Despite these failures, he continued “to wrestle” with his own art—and self. Melville and Nietzsche suffered, but they willed themselves to experiment with their art and philosophy until they could no longer perform. While Melville and Nietzsche were largely ignored in the nineteenth century, the artists and philosophers of the twentieth century, facing new terrors of scientific advancement and uncertainty about the riddles of their own existence, would finally hear Melville’s and Nietzsche’s arguments. And it would be Albert Camus, one of the humanistic existentialists, who would see the absurdity of it all.
CONCLUSION: PRELUDE TO THE ABSURD

I first read Albert Camus’s *The Plague* when the COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed the world. As the virus surged, dread, despair, and death blanketed existence. We distanced ourselves from the outside world. We interacted with others at crudely measured six-foot distances or through the ghostly glow of Zoom screens. In the early days of the pandemic, I turned to Camus’s book, hoping to find some certainty and comfort in a time of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual upheaval. I found no reprieve. I was haunted by the silence.

My strongest memory of *The Plague* springs from the empty silence in response to a plea for divine help. As the plague rages across the town of Oran, the people create quarantine hospitals to stop the virus’s spread. Rieux, the town doctor, attends to one family’s son who has fallen ill and requires isolation. The quarantine has “very strict lines” that “insisted on having members of the family of a patient kept apart” (212). Despite their despondence about this “separation,” the family agrees to isolate their child. The quarantine, however, does not help the child recover; the hospital becomes a house of the dead. In the child’s final moments, Paneloux, a priest, and Rieux can do nothing but witness the child’s agonizing death:

Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth, fouled with the sordes of the plague and pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He sank on his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him say in a voice hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never ending wail:

“My God, spare this child!”

But the wail continued without cease and the other sufferers began to grow restless. The patient at the far end of the ward, whose little broken cries had gone on without break, now quickened their tempo so that they flowed together in one unbroken cry, while the others’ groans grew louder. A gust of sobs swept through the room, drowning Paneloux’s prayer […] But then, suddenly, the other sufferers fell silent. And now the
doctor grew aware that the child’s wail, after weakening more and more, had fluttered out into silence. (217)

Paneloux’s plea is answered not with metaphysical intervention, but rather with divine silence. God’s absence intensifies when the individual cry of the first child transforms into a chorus of pain. The abundance of suffering overwhelms Paneloux’s appeal to God, leaving this man of faith to face the possibility that divine authority may be nothing more than an abyss. Sadly, this child does not survive the plague, but his cries against the abyss resonate with Rieux, who notes that the child “‘put up a surprisingly long resistance’” to the virus (217).

When I first read this haunting scene, it revealed a terrifying image of humanity’s helplessness against a faceless terror, and I heard echoes of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism reverberate. At first, my thoughts returned to a series of elongated dashes in *Moby-Dick*. These dashes appear at a moment of spiritual crisis for Starbuck, a deeply religious man. In “The Musket,” Starbuck enters Ahab’s cabin, finding the *Pequod’s* captain asleep. A swinging lamp casts glimpses of light and shadows upon a musket, and Starbuck stands entranced by the weapon and the possibilities it offers.

This situation forces Starbuck to consider the morality of a choice where the lives of many are weighed against the existence of one corrupted soul. At first, Starbuck, “an honest, upright man,” ponders a “lawful way” to stop Ahab from his monomaniacal pursuit of Moby Dick, a pursuit that Starbuck understands will end in the *Pequod’s* complete destruction (558-9). He recognizes the impossibility of making Ahab a confined prisoner aboard the ship since the isolation would make Ahab “more hideous than a caged tiger” (559). When Starbuck realizes this point, his mind drifts towards another possibility, a choice that would condemn his soul for eternity. Starbuck considers:
“What, then, remains? The land is hundreds of leagues away, and locked Japan the nearest. I stand alone here upon an open sea, with two oceans and a whole continent between me and law. – Ay, aye, ‘tis so. – Is heaven a murderer when its lightning strikes a would-be murderer in his bed, tindering sheets and skin together? – And would I be a murderer, then, if” ——– and slowly, stealthily, and half sideways looking, he placed the loaded musket’s end against the door. (559)

Starbuck’s monologue situates him at a moment of intellectual and spiritual upheaval. Moreover, these descriptions show Starbuck in a common existentialist situation: he is alone in the world, facing the void of “an open sea” where the comforts of the land and “law” are nothing but distant ideals. His mind wanders across the possibilities of the moment, debating the morality of killing Ahab in his sleep would be murder if it were completed to protect the lives of the crew from certain death. The extended dash not only produces a pronounced silence but also intensifies Starbuck’s ominous performance placing “the loaded musket’s end against the door,” his action taking him to the precipice of spiritual and moral collapse.

Starbuck’s threatening move opens a new line of thought. He questions the potential consequences of his inaction, asking “if [he] wake [Ahab] not to death […] who can tell what unsounded deeps Starbuck’s body this day week may sink, with all the crew! Great God, where art thou? Shall I? shall I? ——–” (559-60). While the looming violence casts a dark shadow upon this scene, it is the profound silence in response to Starbuck’s metaphysical appeal that resonates. Embodied in the extended dash, the eternal silence smothers Starbuck’s hope for divine guidance. Starbuck is desperate for a divine author to script him an answer, but his pleas are unheard. This extended silence engenders a moment of crisis for Starbuck and leaves him lost and alone.

In the end, Starbuck must decide for himself. He is isolated, a stranger encountering the void. Indeed, at the decisive moment, Starbuck does not experience divine inspiration and
guidance: he is abandoned during his greatest spiritual crisis. Ultimately, Starbuck “place[s] the death-tube in its rack, and [leaves] the place,” a decision that eventually condemns the Pequod and her crew to apocalyptic destruction (560). Despite this horrifying outcome, it is important to emphasize Starbuck’s will in the face of the void. In God’s absence, Starbuck decides to let Ahab live, his action emerging after a direct confrontation with the abyss. At this crucial moment, Starbuck is an individual with nothing but his thoughts, his actions, and his will. Feelings of despair and images of death underlie this scene, yet Starbuck’s choice also reflects a boldness in his actions. That is, Melville juxtaposes Starbuck’s internal “wrestling” with his choices and the simple, direct action of “plac[ing]” the musket back on the wall (560). In confronting the void, Starbuck does not collapse into complete dread and despair; instead, he, despite the inner turmoil and chaos, makes his own decision, a choice based on his own will rather than by the guiding hand of a metaphysical entity. For a man of faith, this action reflects a bold departure from Starbuck’s previous system of knowledge, an ideal belief that a benevolent and omniscient God, the father, hears and cares for his children. Alone and abandoned, Starbuck resists his urge to murder Ahab, constraining his inner turmoil and passions to will his own existence.

Of course, this decision is not without consequences. Ahab lives to continue his pursuit of Moby Dick, a faceless terror symbolizing another form of the abyss. The chase ends with the complete destruction of the Pequod and her crew, leaving Ishmael as the sole survivor. In the “Epilogue,” Ishmael describes the pull of a “closing vortex” that nearly drags him to the water’s depths (625). As the “creamy pool” of water threatens to swallow him at its center, Queequeg’s coffin, engraved with writing, “burst[s]” from “the black bubble” at the vortex’s core, offering a lifebuoy for Ishmael (625). Eventually, another whaler, the Rachel, rescues the lost and isolated
Ishmael. In his final word of the novel, Ishmael identifies himself as an “orphan,” who, like Starbuck, is abandoned in an unfamiliar world after his encounter with the void. While these images present a bleak conclusion to the novel, it is important to note Melville’s experimental structure with *Moby-Dick*. That is, Melville shows the reader a more mature Ishmael in a chapter appearing roughly halfway through the narrative, revealing a more joyful Ishmael than the one we see drifting alone at the novel’s close. Specifically, “The Town-Ho Story” chapter experiments with layered narration and time, allowing Ishmael to perform a narrative that has “five different time periods that come into play in varying degrees.”¹ These layered “time periods” reveal Ishmael’s transformation from brooding sailor to joyful storyteller, demonstrating “the process of Ishmael’s education” he experiences throughout his lived experiences and intellectual inquiries he performs throughout *Moby-Dick*.² The Ishmael of “The Town-Ho Story” is a stark contrast to the one found in the novel’s “Epilogue.” How does this transformation happen? Like Starbuck’s experience with God’s silence, Ishmael faces the void, both in the form of the white whale and the vortex created by the *Pequod’s* collapse. These moments, however, leave neither Starbuck nor Ishmael in states of complete despair; instead, both embrace their own will to fight against the silent void. While Starbuck’s will manifests itself as the physical action returning the musket, Ishmael’s abundant narrative performances reflect his refusal to let the void’s silence overwhelm his existence. His encounter with silence engenders a prolific and tireless creative enterprise: the form of *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael’s narration

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¹ Philip J. Egan, “Time and Ishmael’s Character in ‘The Town-Ho’s Story’ of ‘Moby-Dick,’” p. 340. According to Egan, the varying time periods found in “The Town-Ho’s Story” illustrates the transformation of Ishmael’s character, arguing that “the crucial element here is time – time to brood, to research, to synthesize – between one’s first encounter with reality and one’s final vision of it” (338).

is an act of will. He recognizes the impossibility of its completion, but Ishmael strives to fill the empty blankness of white pages with text, the spilled ink offering new possibilities about existence after facing the abyss. By the time of his retelling of events in “The Town-Ho Story,” Ishmael has a more mature state of mind; “the damp, drizzly November in [his] soul” he acknowledges in the opening pages has long dissipated (3). In other words, both Starbuck’s and Ishmael’s encounter with the void enact Melville’s metaphysical nihilism. The absence of a metaphysical influence does not result in total collapse into nothingness; instead, these individuals use their will to confront this great silence. Their performance, whether a physical or linguistic action, fights against the descent into psychological nihilism. They do not respond to the emptiness with their own silence; they will themselves to act, to respond, to create.

Melville’s novel, remarkably, anticipates Nietzsche’s own experimental novel, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, that illustrates Nietzsche’s theories of the Overman and will to power. Nietzsche situates Zarathustra in experiences faced not only by Starbuck and Ishmael but also by the child in Camus’s *The Plague*. For example, Zarathustra, like the other characters, is exiled. Indeed, at the start of the novel, he lives alone in the “mountains” until he decides to return to society and share his teachings (39). Zarathustra first encounters an old man in the forest, who remembers Zarathustra but notes that “he has changed” (40). The old man asks Zarathustra, “the wanderer,” the reason for his return from exile:

“Yes, I recognize Zarathustra. His eyes are clear, and no disgust lurks about his mouth. Does he not go along like a dancer?

“How changed Zarathustra is! Zarathustra has become – a child, an awakened one: what do you want now with the sleepers?”

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3 See Chapter 6 in Walter Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* for commentary about Nietzsche’s development of the will to power. Kaufmann argues that “the will to power did not spring from Nietzsche’s head full grown. There is no point in his writings where it suddenly appears as a surprising inspiration, although no published work refers to it by name before its proclamation by Zarathustra” (179).
“You lived in solitude as in the sea, and the sea bore you. Alas, do you want to go ashore? Alas, do you want again to drag your body yourself?” (40)

These initial questions and descriptions not only foreshadow plot points of Thus Spoke Zarathustra but also establish a philosophical link to the passages from The Plague and Moby-Dick. In Thus Spoke Zarathustra, the old man’s inquiry identifies Zarathustra with several identities including a performative “dancer,” “an awakened child,” and an exiled individual living outside the conventional experiences of life “ashore” on firm ground. These early traits inform the remainder of Zarathustra’s “plot,” where the wanderer returns to society after a 10-year absence in solitude to teach the masses about the Overman, “the meaning of the earth,” according to Zarathustra (42).

Zarathustra’s early interactions with the townspeople highlight Zarathustra’s isolation from his audience. This audience either ignores or mocks his rhetorical performances since they maintain their faith in long-held idols. Indeed, as Zarathustra reflects on his first encounter with the townspeople, he states, “I want to teach men the meaning of their existence: which is the [Over]man, the lightning from the dark cloud man. But I am still distant from them, and my meaning does not speak to their minds. To men, I am still a cross between a fool and a corpse” (49). His experience, while not as bleak as the scenes from The Plague or Moby-Dick, still positions Zarathustra as an individual confronting an unreceptive and hostile silence. The gap between Zarathustra’s “meaning” and his audience’s “mind” creates an image of the individual screaming into the void. He speaks, but nobody listens.

Zarathustra does not take his initial failures in silence, however. He realizes that he needs a transformation not only with his delivery but also in his “spirit” (54). In “Of Three Metamorphoses,” Zarathustra defines three changes “the spirit” undergoes to become the
“[Over]man.” Of the three alterations, it is the third and final stage that evokes a similar metaphor employed by both the Melville and Camus passages. Specifically, Zarathustra emphasizes the last stage must be “the child [because it] is innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes. Yes, a sacred Yes is needed, my brothers, for the sport of creation: the spirit now wills its own will, the spirit sundered from the world now wins its own world” (55). Of course, in Zarathustra’s first encounter with the old man in the forest, the old man describes Zarathustra as “a child,” noting his changed appearance as an “awakened one.” For Nietzsche, speaking through Zarathustra, the child reflects two crucial traits that allow humanity to overcome fallen systems and “understand the meaning of their existence.” First, the forgotten constraints and limits of old systems inspire “a first motion,” a performative action, towards a life-affirming “Yes” about existence. In addition, embodied in this “sacred Yes” rests “the will.” For Nietzsche, once the child, or “spirit,” is “sundered” from previous forms of knowledge, it can “will” and “win its own world.” This realization comes to Zarathustra after his early experience speaking to an audience who will not hear his words, yet Zarathustra fights against the silence throughout the remainder of the novel. In fact, he acknowledges that “it is [his] favourite wickedness and art, that my silence has learned not to betray itself by silence” (194). In other words, Zarathustra has discovered that the silence he encounters, his encounter with the void, is not the end of all things but rather a beginning. He wills himself to continue speaking, to resist the silent nihilism that could arrive after facing the abyss.

Camus’s, Melville’s, and Nietzsche’s texts share common existentialist themes such as death, dread, and despair, but as critics like Walter Kaufmann and Hazel Barnes have argued
about the tradition, these themes are not exclusive to existentialists. While it is true that artists and philosophers from all point of time and different traditions have addressed these themes, the passages by Melville, Nietzsche, and Camus develop around a common image that distinguishes their texts and philosophies: the will in the face of the abyss. Indeed, Kaufmann asserts that along with isolation and anguish, existentialists also show a “dauntlessness” in response to the intellectual and spiritual upheaval they face. In these passages, we can see the characters’ creative actions as the manifestation of the “dauntlessness” of existentialist philosophy.

Moreover, these passages employ the image of an isolated child, an orphan, as the symbol that reflects an existentialist ethos. Camus’s child from *The Plague* is quarantined from his family, a symbolic orphan facing the abyss created by the plague. Paneloux’s desperate calls for God to intervene are met with a haunting divine silence. Likewise, Starbuck and Ishmael assume the role of orphans after their experiences with the void. Starbuck’s own calls for divine assistance go unanswered, leaving him a spiritual orphan. Ishmael, of course, ends his narration calling himself an orphan, floating alone on the endless waters with nothing but Queequeg’s coffin inscribed with mysterious writings. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra finds himself in a similar position as an orphan since he is identified as a “child” who is isolated and distanced from society. Among these

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4 In Walter Kaufmann’s *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, he notes that common existentialist topics such as despair and alienation are shared by different times and traditions. Kaufmann mocks “poor modern man,” asserting that “Godless existentialism is pictured as the philosophy our age: the modern poet is not offered the fine edifice of Thomism, as Dante was; he is confronted, we are told, by a bleak doctrine that proclaims that man is not at home in the world but thrown into it, that he has no divine father and is abandoned to a life of care, anxiety, and failure that will end in death, with nothing after that. Poor modern man! In fact, a disillusionment that used to be the prerogative of the few has become common property; and what exhilarated Socrates and Shakespeare, who were in a sense sufficient to themselves, is found depressing by men who lack the power to find meaning in themselves” (2). Similarly, in her book *Humanistic Existentialism*, Hazel Barnes admits that the three authors of her study, John-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, “are not the only one to work with the themes commonly associated with existentialism. Nor is the desire to ask and to answer once again the question, ‘What is Man?’ limited to existentialists” (3).

passages, it is only Zarathustra who explicitly comments upon the symbolic importance of the
child as the final transformative stage to become the “[Over]man.” For Zarathustra, the child’s
“forgetfulness” of the past liberates the will to create and “win its own world” that is not
constrained by Christian metaphysics.

To see Zarathustra’s child as an orphan not only draws a stronger link to the passages
from Camus and Melville but also illustrates an existentialist ethos among the texts. These
characters find themselves distanced from conventional knowledge and society, orphaned from
the safety and comfort of familiar images and symbols. To put it another way, these children face
the void alone: Camus’s child is quarantined from his family; Starbuck’s calls to his divine
Father are met with silence; Ishmael drifts aimlessly upon the endless waves; Zarathustra lives
alone in the mountains. Of course, the isolated wanderer is a common existentialist image, but
what distinguishes the orphans in these passages is their will to create in the face of emptiness
and metaphysical nihilism. It is Starbuck’s will that allows for Ahab’s survival; God does not
author that choice. Likewise, Ishmael’s expansive narrative performance throughout Moby-Dick
reflects his urgency to fill the metaphysical silence with an abundance of his creative will. The
shifts in genre and laborious examinations of the smallest detail emphasize Ishmael’s perpetual
striving to create new meaning about existence outside the limitations of Christian metaphysics.
He recognizes the fragments and failures of his work, but Ishmael understands that these trials
and experiments—“a draught – nay, but the draught of a draught”—are what humanity must
create to strive against a collapse into despair.6 Nietzsche’s Zarathustra shares this trait with
Ishmael. Indeed, throughout most of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, the eponymous character fails to

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6 Melville, Moby-Dick, p. 157.
convince his audience about the importance of the Overman. The ignorant masses serve as a void for Zarathustra, a vast emptiness he strives against by his varied creative performances. He never falls into complete despair after he encounters this abyss; he continues to speak, to create, to perform the book’s refrain, “Thus spoke Zarathustra,” serving as the perpetual speech act against the terrible silence. Finally, the child’s cries from *The Plague*, while haunting, reveal his creative will fighting against the void in his final moments. Indeed, Camus’s narration employs language associated with music, describing the quickening “tempo” of the child’s cries that is then joined by other voices filled with pain, a chorus of the will reaching its crescendo before falling into silence. While the child does not survive, Rieux praises his “long resistance” in the face of the encroaching darkness, his will to affirm life in direct confrontation with death. This scene from *The Plague*, however, does not inspire the images of a “self-propelling wheel” that Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts demonstrate. Orphaned, the child dies, and the man of faith, Paneloux, and the man of science, Rieux, can do nothing but watch. There are no answers for life’s most consequential questions that emerge at this time of upheaval: how could this happen to an innocent child? Why would God make this child suffer? Why is the world so cruel? These questions, of course, reflect existentialist themes, but for Camus, such inquiries assume that the world is rational and can be understood. According to Camus’s philosophy, that idea is simply absurd.\(^7\)

Camus’s philosophy reflects a retrospective intellectual node for Melville and Nietzsche, illustrating the trajectory of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s thought into the twentieth century.

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\(^7\) Camus, of course, rejected being identified as an existentialist. In an interview included *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, he asserts, “No, I am not an existentialist” (345). Despite Camus’s dismissal of the label, scholars of existentialism such as Hazel Barnes, William Barrett, and George Cotkin have noted that his work often explores existentialist themes.
Camus’s essay, “Herman Melville,” lauds Melville’s ability to develop myth from the actual world. Camus asserts that “in Melville, spiritual experience is balanced by expression and invention, and constantly finds flesh and blood in them. Like the great artists, Melville constructed his symbols out of concrete things, not from the material of dreams. The creators of myths partake of genius only insofar as he inscribes these myths in the denseness of reality and not in the fleeting clouds of the imagination” (292-93). In addition, William Duvall asserts that “For Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche was a most remarkable thinker, a man of lucidity and courage, a yes-sayer to freedom and creativity, the poet philosopher par excellence. Camus’ text provides evidence of a deep attachment to Nietzsche and testify to the fact that Nietzsche was one of his most significant mentors” (537). Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Camus’s philosophies, or any other existentialist’s, are influenced entirely by Melville’s or Nietzsche’s respective works. But Camus’s reception of Melville and Nietzsche helps situate their literature and philosophy as early examples of existentialism and one of this dissertation’s arguments that Melville is America’s first existentialist.8

Camus presents existentialist themes in his texts, but he articulates a worldview that moves existentialism a step beyond the ideas crafted by Melville and Nietzsche, a philosophy Camus defines as the “absurd” in The Myth of Sisyphus. Camus, like Melville and Nietzsche, sees no divine authority as a source of meaning about existence; however, whereas Melville and Nietzsche use this belief to return meaning back to the apparent world, Camus’s theory of the

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8 In George Cotkin’s intellectual history Existential America, he asserts that Melville is an early American existentialist, offering brief explanations of Moby-Dick and “Bartleby” as examples Melville’s recognition of “the existential abyss, the sense of the absurd, the longing for the meaning in a world abandoned by God, or a world in which God’s ways rarely seemed benign” (17). Moreover, Cotkin establishes a clear link between Melville and Camus, arguing that “in Melville, Camus recognized a kindred spirit” (17). Cotkin’s examination of Melville as an existentialist does not extend beyond this brief review, but in fairness to Cotkin, he is not a literary critic nor is Melville the central subject of his book.
absurd finds this world as indifferent to humanity’s pursuit of meaning. According to Camus, “this world itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world” (21). In other words, the world is not absurd; it simply exists. But the absurd emerges when humanity, filled with a desire to find and create meaning, attempts to apply its reason to a material world that “is not reasonable.”

Hazel Barnes, writing in *Humanistic Existentialism*, argues that Camus’s theory of the absurd originates from the recognition of divine absence, a recognition shared by Melville and Nietzsche. Specifically, Barnes asserts:

Camus, too, rejects any belief in a deity, not so much because such a faith would be irrational as because the traditional claim in God’s righteous omnipotence is utterly at variance with the fact of human suffering. Camus’ sense of man’s forlornness derives less from the lack of a personal God and more from the absence of any response to man’s questioning of the universe. Man desperately seeks a meaning in the world, a signifying relationship between himself and the rest of nature; what he finds is a nonrational indifferent environment which renders the very question absurd. (368)

The absurd, then, illustrates one possible extension of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism. Camus revolts against the conventional belief that a metaphysical system offers understanding about the apparent world. Moreover, he questions humanity’s longing to discover “a signifying relationship between himself and the rest of nature” since the world is “indifferent” to humanity’s quest to discover meaning. It is absurd to “seek a meaning in [a] world” that is nothing more than “a nonrational indifferent environment.” Camus’s theory of the absurd develops upon similar anxieties that Melville and Nietzsche experienced during the nineteenth century. Most important, none of these writers accepts the idea that the absence of metaphysical influence should produce humanity’s collapse into psychological nihilism. Remarkably, each
writer saw the aesthetic as a method to escape the void, to create meaning in an “indifferent” world.

After establishing his theory of the absurd, Camus concludes *The Myth of Sisyphus* with a chapter entitled, “Absurd Creation,” an extended commentary synthesizing philosophy and fiction. Throughout this section, Camus references Melville’s literature and Nietzsche’s philosophy to illustrate his concept of “absurd creation” (93). For Camus, the aesthetic helps individuals create a meaningful existence in the face of the absurd. In the chapter’s opening lines, he asserts that “all those lives maintained in the rarefied air of the absurd could not persevere without some profound and constant thought to infuse its strength into them” (93).

Humanity reaches this “rarefied air of the absurd” as it confronts the world with no metaphysical influence with feelings of “strength” and “persevere[nce].” According to Camus, the aesthetic provides humanity with this “profound and constant thought” to exist in an “indifferent” world. Specifically, Camus explains:

But the constant tension that keeps man face to face with the world, the ordered delirium that urges him to be receptive to everything leave him another fever. In this universe the work of art is then the sole chance of keeping his consciousness and of fixing its adventures […]. All existence for a man turned away from the eternal is but a vast mime under the mask of the absurd. Creation is the great mime. (94)

Camus’s vision of existence without “the eternal” resembles Melville’s and Nietzsche’s texts that emphasize the mask and performances. Like his nineteenth-century antecedents, Camus argues that appearances of the actual world are “mask[s],” but these veils do not hide the object’s fixed essence; instead, when the mask is removed, we see only a “vast mime,” a fleeting performance. In other words, Camus stresses the vital role the aesthetic plays with “keeping [humanity’s] consciousness” when facing an existence “turned away from the eternal.” Artistic creation
provides humanity “the sole chance” to push back against a fall into psychological nihilism. The performative nature of the aesthetic, “the great mime,” offers humanity a moment “to be receptive to everything,” seeing the possibilities in existence no longer constrained by a metaphysical tradition.

Throughout the chapter, Camus delineates different iterations and functions of the absurd creation, and he references both Melville and Nietzsche to illustrate his claims about the absurd and aesthetics. In fact, in the opening pages of the chapter, Camus cites Nietzsche to establish the relationship between aesthetics and living with the absurd: “One must live it or die of it. So it is with the absurd: it is a question of breathing with it, of recognizing its lessons and recovering their flesh. In this regard the absurd joy par excellence is creation. ‘Art and nothing but art,’ said Nietzsche; ‘we have art in order not to die of the truth’” (93). Later in the chapter, Camus praises Melville as a “philosophical novelist,” even going so far as to identify *Moby-Dick* as an example of an “absurd work” (101, 113).

Camus does not provide detailed commentary or synthesis of Melville and Nietzsche beyond these brief references. Despite the lack of extended analysis, Camus’s reliance on Melville and Nietzsche as examples about absurd creation demonstrates the novelist’s and philosopher’s shared intellectual influence on one of the most important existentialist authors of the twentieth century. Camus’s reception of Melville and Nietzsche, then, re-affirms this dissertation’s central argument that Melville can be viewed as America’s first existentialist. Admittedly, placing authors like Melville and Nietzsche, as well as Camus, under a defined label, such as existentialism, raises problems. Melville’s, Nietzsche’s, and Camus’s respective works are too expansive and diverse to defy attempts to confine them to a singular artistic theory.
or philosophical movement. Walter Kaufmann, for example, has stressed Nietzsche’s rejection of systems; to simply label Nietzsche an “existentialist” belies the vast range and depth of his philosophy.\(^9\) Nietzsche does not advance a coherent system of knowledge as much as he strikes his “tuning fork” against the idols of conventional thought. Melville’s literature, too, cuts against such clear generic boundaries. His evolution from adventure writer to philosophical poet reveals the depth of Melville’s authorial skill and intellectual interests, but his talent at weaving these disparate genres and philosophies together challenges a critic to locate Melville within a confined literary or philosophical category.

However, identifying Melville, Nietzsche, and Camus as existentialists becomes easier if we shift the movement’s definition beyond a mood that emerges at times of tremendous spiritual, intellectual, and cultural upheaval. Of course, this mood informs the development of many existentialist texts, but if critics adopt Hazel Barnes’s definition of “humanistic existentialism,” this dissertation’s reading of Melville as an existentialist takes on greater significance. In *Humanistic Existentialism*, Barnes admits that her grouping of John-Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir, and Camus “appears[s] somewhat arbitrary” since “they are not the only ones to work with the themes commonly associated with existentialism” (3). However, Barnes justifies this grouping because Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus not only “describe man’s anguish and despair” but also “provide an adequate philosophical and psychological analysis of these feelings and to suggest a solution which does not merely dismiss the protests as adolescent and mistaken” (3-4).

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\(^9\) See pp. 79-87 in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* for Kaufmann’s discussion about Nietzsche’s critique of systems and his desire to “experiment” and challenge conventional systems of knowledge. Nietzsche’s rejection of systems suggests that he, like Camus, would challenge any labels that would confine him to a particular intellectual school of thought.
It is important to emphasize the “humanistic existentialists” desire to find “a solution” to their existence filled with “anguish and despair.” Indeed, as Barnes and other scholars of existentialism argue, the moods and themes associated with existentialism are not restricted to a particular space or time. A key trait for Barnes’s group of authors—as well as Melville and Nietzsche, based on this dissertation’s argument—is their common striving for a possible “solution” for a meaningful existence without metaphysical explanation. Another point of distinction for this group of writers is their embrace of imaginative works to illustrate these possibilities. According to Barnes, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus write “philosophical treatises setting forth their ideas on [humanity’s]…metaphysical and psychological possibilities” and “imaginative writing” full of characters who “provide a comprehensive picture of contemporary man’s attempts to live significantly in a world in which he can find no God nor any over-all, more than human meaning” (4).

As this dissertation has argued, these characteristics can be applied to Herman Melville and Friedrich Nietzsche. During the second half of the nineteenth century, both writers recognize the collapse of Christian metaphysics. Of course, the loss of this tradition evokes feelings of “dread and anguish,” emotions, as Barnes argues, often associated with existentialists. But what distinguishes Melville and Nietzsche, like the twentieth-century “humanistic existentialists” of Barnes’s work, is Melville’s and Nietzsche’s will to strive for “a solution” in response to the emptiness where Christian metaphysics once stood. For both writers, artistic creation serves as a primary source to discover these “solutions” and examine the possibilities of living a life beyond metaphysics, to reconcile the abundant conflicts of existence and “to live significantly in a world
in which he can find no God,” attitudes that Barnes identifies as belonging to twentieth-century humanistic existentialists.

This dissertation has extended Anderson’s work by reading Melville’s and Nietzsche’s metaphysical nihilism within the history of existentialism. Adding Melville’s name to the tradition of existentialism offers new possibilities for future scholarship aligned with the approaches found in Melville’s Philosophies and Melville Among the Philosophers. First, enacting the history of ideas creates a critical context that allows for Melville to be read in conjunction with writers where no direct textual connection exists. In other words, critics no longer need to parse through faded inkblots to establish a critical exigence for a comparative study. Mark Anderson’s criticism, for example, does not rely on direct textual evidence between Melville and Nietzsche to develop a compelling argument that they exhibited a similar metaphysical nihilism. This dissertation employs the same methodology as Anderson but adds an additional context to compare Melville’s and Nietzsche’s similar philosophical arguments. Specifically, the inclusion of Melville’s and Nietzsche’s shared intellectual ancestors buttresses the comparative analysis of these authors, and future studies could continue to broaden the intellectual heritage that unites Melville and Nietzsche. For example, Melville and Nietzsche share other intellectual ancestors such as Immanuel Kant, Arnold Schopenhauer, and Thomas Carlyle. Do Melville and Nietzsche share similar receptions to these authors? How do their responses inform their emerging existentialist attitudes, or do their reactions anticipate other philosophical movements? Moreover, enacting the history of ideas opens comparative possibilities with Melville and other nineteenth-century writers associated with existentialism,
including the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard and Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky. A comparative study with Melville and these authors could offer new perspectives not only about Melville’s literature but also the different situations, contexts, and developments of nineteenth-century existentialism. How does Melville’s form of existentialism extend or challenge the forms of existentialism presented in Kierkegaard’s or Dostoevsky’s texts? How does the inclusion of an American novelist like Melville with these authors redefine prevailing understandings of existentialism?

In addition, reading Melville as an existentialist invites a link to another sub-field of Melville studies: the relationship between his poetry and visual aesthetics. As this dissertation argues, Melville’s, as well as Nietzsche’s, experimental styles develop as an extension of their existentialist philosophies. Artistic creation, according to humanistic existentialists, offers individuals a chance to discover ways “to live significantly” in a world without God. Of course, analyzing Melville’s aesthetics has a rich tradition in the field of Melville studies, but as Brian Yothers has argued, the early scholarship of this subfield has generally focused on Melville’s prose fiction. However, Yothers notes that the “discussion of Melville’s relation to the visual arts” is a rich sub-field for future Melville scholarship (56). Specifically, Yothers references Edgar Dryden’s *Monumental Melville* as an important contribution to this “discussion” because it examines the “explicit linkage of Melville’s turn to poetry with his turn to the visual arts as a metaphor for the literary production to which he aspired” (55).

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10 While Nietzsche never read Kierkegaard, he was familiar with Dostoevsky and praises the Russian writer in *Twilight of the Idols*, arguing that Dostoevsky was “the only psychologist […] from whom [Nietzsche] had anything to learn” (110).
Dryden asserts several claims that echo similar themes associated with existentialism and aesthetics, a topic this dissertation examined in Chapter three. For example, Dryden describes Melville’s poetic craft as his “explora[tion] [with] the possibility of poetry as a speaking painting, and in doing so is anticipating a modernist fascination with spatial form” (67). While Dryden’s reading focuses on literary modernists, it is important to note the shared sensibilities linking modern artists and existentialist philosophers. As William Barrett argues in *Irrational Man*, both modern artists and existentialists share an underlying attitude that is a “confession of spiritual poverty” (45). In addition, Barrett offers commentary that extends Dryden’s point regarding the “modernist[’]s fascination with spatial form.” Specifically, Barrett argues that modern artists created “flattened” forms “where the movement of the spirit is no longer vertical but only horizontal, the climatic elements of art are in general leveled out” (49). For Barrett, the “flattening” technique reflects the modern artist’s worldview that no higher metaphysical plane exists, a belief shared by existentialists. Indeed, as Barrett states:

> When mankind no longer lives spontaneously turned toward God of the supersensible world – when, to echo the words of Yeats, the ladder is gone by which we would climb to a higher reality – the artist too must stand face to face with a flat and inexplicable world. (49)

If we consider Dryden’s and Barrett’s commentary in relationship to this dissertation’s argument, an intriguing interpretive possibility for future Melville scholarship emerges. Indeed, Dryden’s work offers a detailed study examining the link between Melville’s poetic craft and its appeal to visual aesthetics. While Dryden’s study focuses largely on Melville’s poetic technique, future studies could examine the implications of these proto-modernist techniques through the lens of Melville as an existentialist. This dissertation has initiated this discussion, but more scholarship is needed. Chapter three, for example, examines Melville’s and Nietzsche’s imitation of
theatrical performance in their prose. Theater, of course, reflects another visual art form that could be included in Melville’s fascination with paintings, sculptures, and architecture. Future scholarship could examine Melville’s “proto-modernist” interest with space and the visual arts and its relationship to Melville’s existentialism. In what other poetry or experimental prose does Melville imitate the visual aspect of theater or other visual art forms? How does the “flattening of space,” to use Barrett’s comments about modern art and existentialism, manifest itself in Melville’s prose and poetry? How does Melville’s aesthetics fit within the history of ideas? Seeing Melville as an existentialist could provide new critical frame that could answer these questions and offer a bridge for two critical subfields experiencing renewed interest within Melville studies.

The intellectual nodes linking Melville and Nietzsche, both those who anticipated and followed their work, reveals an important point about existentialism as part of the history of ideas. Indeed, as Walter Kaufmann argued during the 1950s, the underpinnings of the philosophy -- dread, despair, death, and dauntlessness -- exist as a part of the human experience and should not be viewed as a philosophy limited to a certain point in history. No space, time, or philosophy can solely claim despair or death as its primary thematic concern. Instead, existentialism is a temperament where individuals realize “in the face of all these somber truths […] they must act.” Indeed, Melville and Nietzsche witnessed and experienced “these somber truths” during the second half of the nineteenth century, but they did not collapse into psychological nihilism.

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11 See Douglas Robillard’s *Melville and the Visual Arts: Ionian Form, Venetian Tint* for Melville’s use of ekphrasis to incorporate visual aesthetics in his prose. More recently, see Samuel Otter’s “How *Clarel* Works” for an analysis of Melville’s allusion to the Italian artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi in *Clarel*. In addition, Otter, along with Geoffrey Sanborn, edited *Melville and Aesthetics*, a collection of essays analyzing Melville’s appeal to visual aesthetics in his prose and poetry.

12 George Cotkin, *Existential America*, p. 3.
They willed themselves to “act,” to create new meanings about the possibilities of existence and to “give the void its colors,” a point Camus stresses in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (114). At the core of this brand of existentialism uniting writers like Melville and Nietzsche – and later Camus – is a humanism, as Barnes argues. These writers examine humanity’s choices, possibilities, and freedoms in the face of collapsing ideals and beliefs. Most importantly, they strive for a solution as a response to this disruption. Melville and Nietzsche never deny the despair that emerges after facing the abyss, but they believe in humanity’s will to overcome the fall into despair. They invite us, even today, not only to recognize our fallen traditions, but to reimagine new meanings from the collapse. Both Melville and Nietzsche force their readers to challenge their idols, their systems, their truths. They encourage us to create possibilities from the ruins. They but put humanity’s idols before us—strike them if you can.
WORKS CITED


