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Pip's Unmediated Vision: Toward a Gadamerian Hermeneutics in *Moby-Dick*

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Abstract

In Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the young black boy, Pip, poetically embodies Gadamer's notion of the meaning of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics promotes an encounter with a subject-matter in a way that changes one's life. Pip's experience in the ocean in chapter 93 of Melville's magnum opus is a hermeneutical event of such magnitude that it leads to his acquiring an oceanic identity, one that is aware of life as a three-dimensional reality. Having become acquainted with his radical finitude, Pip can then act as a complement to Ahab, who is caught in an angelic mindset. In this way, Pip mimetically displays how hermeneutical events change one's being in the world and one's connection with others, building a bridge to those who seem beyond reach. Moreover, his seemingly simple use of language enables him to capture the essence of the *Pequod's* crew's experiences, exposing them as subjective, private *Erlebnisse* rather than hermeneutical *Erfahrungen*.

Keywords: Melville, Gadamer, Pip, hermeneutics, Moby-Dick, poetic madness

> The imagination works sometimes in ways that the imagining
> mind can fail to fully understand.
> —Salman Rushdie, *Knife*

In a poem she probably penned in 1862, Emily Dickinson takes issue with the unexamined confidence we place in our everyday experiences:

> Much Madness is divinest Sense –
> To a discerning Eye –
> Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
> 'Tis the Majority
> In this, as all, prevail –
> Assent – and you are sane –
> Demur – you're straightway dangerous –
> And handled with a Chain –

Dickinson questions the commonplace understanding—an opinion that the "Majority" may hold—that madness and rationality are absolute, objective categories uncolored by biases. On the contrary, Dickinson maintains that what appears to be mad to an "[un]discerning Eye" is, in actuality, "divinest Sense." To express such a thought, however, renders one vulnerable to the "Chain" to which an obdurate "Majority" will confine one. Perhaps a reference to the barbaric treatment of the mentally ill in the nineteenth century, the poem can also be interpreted as a challenge that many poets before and after Dickinson have proffered: poetic knowledge is different than scientific knowledge. Dissecting reality to the smallest particle, seeking for experimental repeatability—this is akin to reducing poetic knowledge, and by extension the humanities, to a corpse, on which a medical examiner can then perform a postmortem autopsy. To avoid this, the poet must learn to dwell with the questions, to let the objects she encounters question her, to remain attuned to a different substratum of reality. In this way, the poet will find herself on the opposite side of the "Majority," or with the fool rather than the king, but making "divinest Sense." As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes in "Boundaries of Language," "The poets, especially, are the ones who make use of the flexibility of the linguistic gamut beyond rules, beyond conventions, and who yet know how to bring the unsaid to speak within the possibilities that language itself offers."[1] It is not that logic and science do not have a

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Boundaries of Language," trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt, *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt (London: Lexington Books, 2000): 9-17, 12-13.

place in human knowledge—they do, and Gadamer in no way opposes the sciences, which he considers valid modes of knowledge—but they are not the primary tools, so to speak, of the poet. The poet pushes "beyond rules" and "beyond conventions" for the sake of "the unsaid," which is part and parcel of language as a medium: it conceals and reveals, it says and unsays because of the finitude of human beings. At the same time, poets are able to render the linguistic soil hospitable to a subject-matter whose whole cannot be understood in its entirety, or all at once, because it is greater than we are.

Something akin to the phenomenon of poetic madness occurs in Heman Melville's *Moby-Dick* to the black boy Pip, whom the other shipmates easily dismiss throughout the journey. Pip's solitary experience in the water allows him to acquire a new oceanic identity that eventually translates into an intimate relationship with the captain of the *Pequod* himself, Ahab. In this way, Pip becomes the most important character in the novel in regard to his ability to change the mind of the mad Ahab. Pip's encounter with the depth of things—a kind of depth hermeneutics—frees him from the landsman's fantasies of omnipotence by revealing human finitude, the only possible cure to the angelism of Ahab. In other words, if Ahab insists on flying upward toward the heavens, Pip attempts to plunge him downward, back to earth, the proper place for humans. For, to borrow a phrase from Robert Frost's "Birches," Pip understands that "Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better."

In chapter 93, "The Castaway," Ishmael describes this "most significant event [that] befell the most insignificant of the Pequod's crew."[2] The "little negro Pippin by nick-name, Pip by abbreviation"[3] is thrown overboard during a whale hunt, with the harpooneers giving chase to the whale and leaving Pip behind "like a hurried traveller's trunk."[4] The event ensures that "the little negro went about the deck an idiot,"[5] and we witness the other mariners' poking fun at him in "The Doubloon." None other than Ahab, however, shelters young Pip in his cabin, yelling at the sailors, "Hands off from that holiness!"[6] What Pip experiences while alone in the ocean, then, puts him in touch with a being—that "miser-merman, Wisdom"[7]—that renders his language

[2] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Hershel Parker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018), 305.
[3] Ibid., 305.
[4] Ibid., 307.
[5] Ibid., 308.
[6] Ibid., 375.
[7] Ibid., 308.

incomprehensible to other members of the *Pequod* but that allows him to speak to the mad Ahab in a way "too curing to [his] malady."[8]

Pip's encounter reveals that a true hermeneutical event has the power to alter our innermost self. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer terms what Pip comes into contact with "radical finitude."[9] In a rebuttal of those who misunderstand Heidegger's *Dasein*, Gadamer maintains,

> Instead of holding on to the methodological significance of the existential analytic of Dasein, people treat Dasein's existential, historical temporality, determined by care and the movement towards death—i.e., radical finitude—as one among many possible ways of understanding existence, and they forget that *it is the mode of being of understanding itself which is here revealed as temporality*.[10]

While Gadamer makes these comments in the context of an encounter with an artwork, they are an appropriate summary of Pip's experience as well. For the immensity of the ocean "drowned the infinite of [Pip's] soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes."[11] In the aftermath of his experience of a subject-matter with depth—a kind of third dimension unbeknownst to Pip, the "infinite" of Pip's soul becomes properly oriented toward the finite. What remains, thus, is a posture of humility, which, in Pip's case Melville suggests is evident in Pip's new use of language. As Gadamer argues,

> *Being that can be understood is language*. The hermeneutical phenomenon here projects its own universality back onto the ontological constitution of what is understood, determining it in a universal sense as *language* and determining its own relation to beings as interpretation. Thus we speak not only of a language of art but also of a language of nature—in short, of any language that things have.[12]

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[8] Ibid., 383.
[9] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 125.
[10] Ibid., 125, emphasis added.
[11] Melville, 308.
[12] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 490.

Language is a necessary condition for the disclosure of the world. Unlike animals, who dwell in an environment that they cannot constitute linguistically, human beings have the capacity to take something *as* something, i.e., to relate meaningfully to things as they are within the linguistically-expressed space of intentionality. Put differently, human linguisticality elevates a mere environment into a meaningful world.[13] Because Pip comes back onboard the *Pequod* able to speak, albeit in an altered way, as we will see, the others render him an idiot, but not Ahab, who takes him under his wing, as it were. Pip then mimetically displays how hermeneutical events change one's being in the world and one's connection with others, building a bridge to those who seem beyond reach. In this way, his seemingly simple use of language enables him to capture the essence of the crew's experiences, exposing them as subjective, private *Erlebnisse* rather than hermeneutical *Erfahrungen*.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator Ishmael calls attention to our land-based prejudices, revealing that water—and by extension, hermeneutics—requires a fluid mindset that challenges the ossified beliefs that living only on land—or only viewing the subject-matter through one lens—inculcates. As the narrative unfolds, apostrophes to "landsman" or "landsmen" proliferate, culminating in Ishmael's arguably severest indictment in chapter 45, "The Affidavit": "So ignorant are most landsmen of some of the plainest and most palpable wonders of the world, that without some hints touching the plain facts [. . .] of the fishery, they might scout at Moby Dick as a monstrous fable, or still worse [. . .] a hideous and intolerable allegory."[14] The landsman's imagination is so restricted that he cannot fathom another way of life, i.e., the whaleman's. Traveling on the ocean demands a change in one's mental terrain, therefore, a letting go of what one thinks one knows in favor of the unknowable. As James Weldon Long puts it,

> Moving across the ocean facilitates [a radical perspectival shift] because the ocean's nature as an open space allows for freer movement. There people have the capacity to float between realms not clearly marked as one country's particular possession. For this reason, an oceanic perspective offers a way of challenging the fervent nationalism that flourished in the nineteenth-century United States.[15]

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[13] I would like to thank my anonymous reader for these sentences, which are based on his or her report.

[14] Melville, 164.

[15] James Weldon Long, "Plunging into the Atlantic: The oceanic order of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*," *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1 (March 2011): 69-91, 71.

Long chooses to focus on a historical issue, but his observation extends to any "fervent" viewpoints that a person may cherish. As such, one must divest of one's mentality that would see Moby-Dick only as a "monstrous fable" or "intolerable allegory" and adopt an oceanic mind that experiences the whale as a "grand god [who] revealed himself."[16] In Gadamer's terms, "Understanding, then, does not consist in a technical virtuosity of 'understanding' everything written. Rather, it is a genuine experience (Erfahrung)—i.e., an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth."[17] One must humbly submit to a reality that cannot be boiled down to once-and-for-all moral or philosophical maxims, a posture that easily weaponizes truth for its own purposes. Rather, because we can never reach the end of understanding, so to speak, an oceanic perspective ensures that one comes to any hermeneutical event willing to be challenged, open to seeing things from a new perspective. To experience Moby-Dick as a "grand god," then, is to assign to an aquatic mammal—and by extension to all the natural world and to every object outside of the self—a radical otherness that requires the relinquishment of the subject's desire for mastery of the object.

Despite Ishmael's insistence that the ocean acts as a corrective to the landsman's mindset, he acknowledges that it may be elusive even to fishermen, people who spend much of their life apart from the land—as elusive as the white whale itself. He observes, for instance, that "in calm weather, to swim in the open ocean is as easy to the practised swimmer as to ride in the spring-carriage ashore."[18] The ocean has many facets, and one can be easily fooled into thinking one knows it if one comes into contact with it only during serene weather. Swimming in such waters is not dangerous, in other words. Furthermore, most of the whalemen in *Moby-Dick* are by necessity confined to the surface of the ocean, evidenced in how Stubb and the rest discover signs of the presence of whales: "Suddenly bubbles seemed bursting beneath [Ishmael's] closed eyes; [. . .] But lazily undulating in the trough of the sea, and ever and anon tranquilly spouting his vapory jet, the whale looked like a portly burgher smoking his pipe of a warm afternoon."[19] The harpooneers must learn to read the surface of the water for signs of whales, not needing any knowledge or experience of depth to hunt for them. In the commercial world of the nineteenth-century fishery, one of Melville's intended targets of criticism, such expertise would be useless and arguably even counterproductive: money awaits those who catch the most fish the

[16] Melville, 393.
[17] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 504.
[18] Melville, 307.
[19] Ibid., 220.

fastest, not those with extensive know-how of oceanic profundity. But, as José Ortega y Gasset astutely comments, "Some men refuse to recognize the depth of something because they demand that the profound should manifest itself in the same way as the superficial. [. . .] [T]hey pay exclusive attention to the clarity peculiar to surfaces. They do not realize that to be hidden beneath the surface, merely appearing through it, throbbing underneath it is essential to depth."[20] Despite his *hamartia*, Ahab displays precisely Ortega's understanding that the deep hides a being whom those with merely surface knowledge—like Stubb—cannot comprehend. His quest for Moby-Dick, misguided as it may be (in part because it sinks the *Pequod* along with him), bespeaks Ahab's depth of soul and his desire for more than mere façade. Put differently, what ultimately motivates Ahab is a longing for a hermeneutical encounter that would jolt awake a language deadened by the concerns of mercantilism, capable of acting as a salve to his wounded body and of (re)populating the world with numinous presences.

It is this kind of a life-changing hermeneutical encounter that Pip undergoes in the ocean. Ishmael narrates,

> The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense.[21]

What Pip experiences is the antithesis of Stubb's surface knowledge: the "wondrous depths" reveal the "strange shapes" of the "primal world" where "God's foot" is on the "treadle of the loom" of Time, weaving an oceanic tapestry of meaning that, perhaps, is "as indifferent as his God."[22] He experiences Wisdom as a presence, a "merman," a Gadamerian transcendence-within-immanence that facilitates his witnessing the "coral insects" that "heaved the colossal orbs." Bainard Cowan argues that "Pip's vision is far from a beatific vision. [. . .] [A]ll temporal instruments of man, including language, are of no use to him. He has looked into the heart of the mysteries

[20] José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. Everly Rugg and Diego Marín (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1961), 62.
[21] Melville, 308.
[22] Ibid.

of nature and been 'converted,' although the conversion is a radical discontinuity that does not permit ordered reflection or interpretation to take place."[23] It is true that after this incident, Pip frequently refers to himself as "missing,"[24] indicating that his vision is not what Dante beholds at the end of *Paradiso*. However, it is not that Pip no longer has any use for language. It is precisely because he "spoke it" that they call him mad for they do not understand him.[25] In other words, Pip's language returns with him once back onboard the *Pequod*, albeit in symbolic form rather than in conversational form. His experience forces him to relate to language differently, to point out in compressed form truths that only someone touched by the "miser-merman, Wisdom" can do. As Jimmy Packham notes, "The consequences of Pip's return are to highlight the limitations of his shipmates' language, but also to perform language differently, offering a language that engages with the oceanic depths by positioning itself vertically."[26] In this way, Pip challenges the normal mechanisms by which interpretation occurs, which in the world of the *Pequod* are monological, primarily because the destiny of the crew is tied to Ahab's governance of the boat. His is the binding, authoritative word, and the other mariners cannot offer an alternative. Furthermore, as Ishmael comments on Stubb's leaving Pip in the ocean, "Hereby perhaps Stubb indirectly hinted, that though man loves his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence."[27] Many of the other sailors are dedicated to profit-making, a shallow pursuit that cannot engage dialogically with Ahab so as to bring about an attunement to the polyphonic register of human existence. On the other hand, Pip's "insanity," which is "heaven's

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[23] Bainard Cowan, *Exiled Waters:* Moby-Dick *and the Crisis of Allegory* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 158.

[24] Melville, 375.

[25] In a personal exchange, Cowan shared that the word "spoke" in the phrase "and spoke it" may also be a pun on a nautical synonym for "hailed" or "called to" or "tried to establish contact with." Whether we interpret Pip's life-changing experience as a transcendent experience (in which God or the gods have perhaps singled Pip out as the prophetic seer to be charged with knowing the transcendent good of nature and the tragic mistake Ahab is making by opposing it) or under the modern laws of mind (in which Pip has simply seen some heretofore unencountered sea life and, catalyzed by his traumatic marooning at sea, is robbed henceforth of ordinary discourse but gifted with a new channel of his imagination in which he tries repeatedly to come to terms with his vision), in both cases he is wounded in his conversational speech abilities. However, he acquires a capacity for symbolic speech that his crewmates do not have and that sets him up for a deep relationship with Ahab.

[26] Jimmy Packham, "Pip's Oceanic Voice: Speech and the Sea in *Moby-Dick*," *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 112, no. 3 (July 2017): 567-581, 577.

[27] Melville, 307.

sense''—a stunningly similar conclusion to Dickinson's poem—can find common ground with the monomaniacal Ahab.

Arguably the most significant part of Pip's ordeal—its loneliness—reveals the crucial aspect community plays in one's self-understanding, as well as one's understanding of the world. Ishmael poignantly reflects,

> But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell of it? Mark, how when sailors in a dead calm bathe in the open sea—mark how closely they hug their ship and only coast along her sides.[28]

The image of the sailors as they hover around their ship while swimming in the ocean emphasizes the need for a larger linguistic community where conversation can take place. The farther from the ship one ventures out, the greater the risk that something catastrophic will take place. Thus, the vast expanse of the ocean weighs heavily on young Pip, who has no one with whom to share his experience. As Gadamer writes, "Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding."[29] Since understanding only occurs in language, however, and since Pip's vision is one unmediated by language, happening before "his passive eyes," it triggers a madness that essentially renders him "an idiot"[30] to his shipmates. Language works properly only when shared in a dialectic of equality, serving as a reminder of one's limits, of one's need of others, of the necessity of dialogue to bring about understanding. Gadamer continues, "For language is by nature the language of conversation; it fully realizes itself only in the process of coming to an understanding. That is why it is not a mere means in that process."[31] Without this communal aspect, words become simply private utterances stripped of the possibility of fostering an encounter with truth or a meaning-making event. In short, such a scenario erases the public sphere of meaning, paralyzing the hermeneutical field by not harnessing the power of language.

Yet it is not clear that full community would ever have been open to Pip, whom we have already seen Ishmael describe as the "most insignificant of the Pequod's crew"; regardless of this isolation, however, Pip shows himself as someone cognizant of reality as more than a flat surface. By virtue of his dark skin, he is somewhat ostracized on the ship, despite the diversity of the crew members—much less so than

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[28] Ibid., 307.
[29] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 403.
[30] Melville, 308.
[31] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 463.

on land, to be sure, but still excluded. This is evident the first time we meet him in Chapter 40, "Midnight, Forecastle." As the sailors begin their revelry, one of them calls to him, "Pip! little Pip! hurrah with your tambourine!"[32] and "Go it, Pip! Bang it, bell-boy! Rig it, dig it, stig it, quig it, bell-boy! Make fire-flies; break the jinglers!"[33] Associated with music, Pip stands apart from others, providing entertainment but not fully participating in it. As the storm gathers force, all the sailors scatter, and Pip, alone on the deck, delivers his first monologue, ending with a prayer: "Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men that have no bowels to feel fear!"[34] Pip, it seems, has always been aware of depth. Because of his status as a social outcast, Pip is acutely sensitive to such categories as "the high" and "the low." And although he prays to a "white God," this deity nonetheless lives in "yon darkness" and is therefore inscrutable; the darkness, in the end, nullifies God's whiteness. Put differently, Pip's marginalized rank in society enables him to maintain a liminal outlook on life, an attunement to the paradoxical nature of reality—arguably also an allusion to Melville's own Transcendental bent. Furthermore, his wish for preservation from "men" with "no bowels" bespeaks an imagination that understands that the viscera give one the ability to withstand cataclysmic events. Louise Cowan, for example, links them to the ability to view tragedy: "As readers of novels, we lack the viscera for tragedy; we are all minds and sensibilities."[35] To be "all minds and sensibilities" points to removed and somewhat angelic personalities. Tragedy requires strong bowels for it plunges one into depth; confronted by the gods, the tragic hero must penetrate deep into the nature of reality without any comic alleviator. Fear, arguably one the most primal and strongest human emotions, root one to this material world, allowing for the unmasking of reality, a terrifying and dark reality at times—but a reality with depth. Even before his encounter with "Wisdom," then, Pip displays a remarkable insight into the nature of truth. To borrow a phrase from T.S. Eliot, "We are the hollow men" leads to "This is how the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper."[36] Men with insides rage against meaninglessness, ensuring that if the world must end, it will do so with a bang, not a whimper.

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[32] Melville, 139.
[33] Ibid., 140.
[34] Ibid., 144.
[35] Louise Cowan, "Introduction: The Tragic Abyss," *The Tragic Abyss*, ed. Glenn Arbery (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 2003): 1-19, 4.
[36] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1902-1962* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 1963), 79, 82.

Perhaps because of his marginalized status, the ocean can claim Pip as its own, taking his sanity (which could not reach Ahab anyway), but giving him a new relationship to language. In a conversation with Ahab, Pip says, "They tell me, sir, that Stubb did once desert poor little Pip, whose drowned bones now show white, for all the blackness of his living skin."[37] Pip comes to embody the paradox of the God to whom he prays earlier: his white bones are enclosed by black skin, just as darkness enfolds the white deity earlier. Furthermore, his use of "drowned bones" matches the exact words Ahab uses in an apostrophe to Moby-Dick: "Oh, thou dark Hindoo half of nature, who of drowned bones hast builded thy separate throne somewhere in the heart of these unverdured seas."[38] Pip becomes inextricably linked to the god of the deep. As such, he acquires a new mode of being in the world, one that Ahab himself notices: "Now, then, Pip, we'll talk this over. I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee! Some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into thee!"[39] His solitary encounter in the ocean renders him a source of knowledge to the troubled Ahab. As Donald Pease writes, "Pip, who both is and is not yet dead, opens a hole in [Ahab's] symbolic authority by embodying the excess plenitude that Ahab cannot rule."[40] Pip, in his oceanic identity, serves as a reminder that reality is not the monological tapestry that Ahab would weave. Put differently, Pip reveals that Ahab, in Gadamer's words, thinks "like Lucifer, like one who wants to prove his own divinity by the fact that the whole world has to obey him. In this case the world's being-in-itself is a limitation of the omnipotence of his imagination."[41] Ahab's *hamartia* lies partly in his suppression of other voices. He does not allow language to be a conversation, but forces it into binding others to his purpose, as he does in Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck." Pip, however, has been reconstituted in the image of the oceanic depth, becoming an "excess plenitude" that cannot be subsumed in Ahab's all-consuming narrative.

In a stunning move, the ocean impresses upon Pip his own finitude, which alone is able to recall Ahab to this world. Ishmael's phrase, "The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul,"[42] reveals a Gadamerian sensibility about hermeneutics: it is not open to an angelic being, which, as an unembodied entity, perceives directly via intuition. As Gadamer writes,

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[37] Melville, 383.
[38] Ibid., 360-61.
[39] Ibid., 380.
[40] Donald Pease, "Pip, 'Moby-Dick', Melville's Governmentality," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 327-42, 339.
[41] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 464.
[42] Melville, 308.

> Similarly, the universality of the hermeneutical experience would not be available to an infinite mind, for it develops out of itself all meaning, all noeton, and thinks all that can be thought in the perfect contemplation of itself. The God of Aristotle (as well as the Spirit of Hegel) has left 'philosophy,' this movement of finite existence, behind. None of the gods philosophizes, says Plato.[43]

The ocean throws Pip more vigorously into this life. The God to whom he prays earlier in the book is not in "yon darkness," but in the depth of this finite world. The ocean thus discloses the depth of this material world—its third dimension, as it were. In other words, God is transcendence-within-immanence, an eminently Gadamerian idea. Put differently, transcendence can never be reached except through the definite. William Lynch calls the definite the "generative finite" and explains,

> Whether we believe in [Christ] or not, He represents the ideal point at which the imagination can relax the strain of its double aspirations; if He is there, then at that point at least we can keep penetrating more and more deeply into the detail of Him, who is penetrating the detail of life as a way to life, and let the other side of the picture—the dream, the divine, the unlimited, the beauty—take care of itself.[44]

The "dream, the divine, the unlimited, the beauty" are all abstractions that, unless grounded in the material, finite world, can be easily misused toward nefarious ends. Pip, however, by glimpsing "wondrous depths," is plunged more deeply into bodily existence, succoring Ahab's soul with "wondrous philosophies." In this way, by diving into the material, he acquires the poetic imagination that has curative properties.

Before examining more closely Pip's relationship with Ahab, it is important to note one last thing about this incident: the title of the chapter. Gordon Mills draws attention to the fact that "shipwrecked" would have been more appropriate than "castaway."[45] He goes on to connect Melville's choice of words to a poem that the author may have read, but the text suggests at least two other possibilities. The first connects to Father Mapple's sermon back in chapter 9. In a paragraph replete with imprecations, the preacher concludes, "Yea, woe to him who, as the great Pilot Paul

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[43] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 502.
[44] William Lynch, *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 15.
[45] Gordon H. Mills, "The Castaway in 'Moby-Dick,'" *The University of Texas Studies in English*, vol. 29 (1950): 231-248.

has it, while preaching to others is himself a castaway!"[46] Ishmael corrects Father Mapple's severe outlook on life, which delineates sharply between the good and the wicked. In a reversal, it is now the castaway—the ultimate outsider—who, preaching in an unknown tongue to most men, is revealed as the ultimate insider, for Pip is the only member of the *Pequod* who can reach Ahab. Furthermore, the castaway, as we will see, would bind himself to Ahab, the ultimate outsider, for he does not want to give up on anyone. Unlike Mapple, who uses Jonah's story as a cautionary tale that suggests a demarcation between success in this life and eternal salvation in the afterlife, little Pip will not abandon Ahab to the grave even though Ahab is ultimately misguided. Put another way, Pip reveals Ahab's humanity to our eyes, even though Ahab may have more in common with Mapple than with anyone else in the novel. The second possibility relates to Ishmael himself. After finishing narrating Pip's near-drowning accident, Ishmael writes, "[I]n the sequel of the narrative, it will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself."[47] Ishmael identifies with the young black boy, and given his own name—or rather, the name that he asks someone (us? the Muses?) to call him—this connection enriches the meaning of the word "castaway." For his biblical namesake was an outcast himself, his mother, Hagar, driven into the desert by a jealous Sarah. There, she encounters God—the first person in Genesis to do so—who promises to take care of her and her son, who will also become a father of nations. By its huge, uninhabited expanse (at least at the surface level), the ocean has more in common with the desert than with land, and Ishmael chooses to associate himself with Pip. The link that he forges between himself and Pip, then, reveals that Pip, indeed, does receive a kind of revelation—not angelic, as we have seen, but a peering into the depths of the world. In this way, Pip's poetic madness acquires an oracular dimension. As Gadamer writes, "[T]he poet is a seer because he himself presents what is, was, and will be, and hence he himself attests to what he proclaims. It is true that poetic utterance has something ambiguous about it, like an oracle. But this is precisely where its hermeneutical truth lies."[48] Pip's seemingly enigmatic language intimates that reality is not as it seems. His oracular dimension holds the promise of a hermeneutical encounter that can change one's life. Because of his breadth, in other words, Pip can now reach those who seem to be beyond reason, beyond humanity, beyond help.

Pip's oceanic being, a balm to the soul of the beleaguered Ahab, acts as a reminder that if others seem beyond reach, it is because we have not found the right language with which to communicate with them. As F.O. Matthiessen puts it, "[T]here

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[46] Melville, 50.
[47] Ibid., 308.
[48] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 503.

would seem to have been small scope given to 'the humanities,' which Captain Peleg insisted were also to be found in Ahab. They rise to the surface in his relations with Pip."[49] No crew member experiences Ahab's "humanities,"[50] but Pip manages to remind Ahab of something he has lost, or perhaps like Pip himself, has never had: community. In Ahab's own words, "Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings."[51] Ahab suggests the most intimate of human relations between him and Pip. To be "woven of [his] heart-strings" suggests that Pip becomes Ahab's bosom friend, his second self, as Aristotle himself points out.[52] Pip shares this sentiment. When Ahab threatens to leave him behind as he continues hunting for Moby-Dick, Pip pitifully pleads, "No, no, no! ye have not a whole body, sir; do ye but use poor me for your one lost leg; only tread upon me, sir; I ask no more, so I remain a part of ye."[53] As Sharon Cameron comments on this dialogue,

> [T]he self needs to be completed in the way made possible by relationship in order to be at all [. . .]; and in Pip's plea that Ahab survive his multilation [*sic*] by treading on him, Melville literalizes the point. Pip will be what Ahab is not. Two will be one. The idealism of that union [. . .] will triumph over the malignancies of a severative world.[54]

Pip's plea transforms Ahab's earlier mention of "cords" that are "woven of [his] heart-strings" into an image of an umbilical cord, a kind of pre-birth unity between mother and child. Their union is so strong that one cannot speak of Ahab without thinking of Pip and vice versa. In other words, this incident embodies what Gadamer terms a "*hermeneutical conversation*,"[55] Pip's and Ahab's "mutual understanding"[56] of their relationship to each other in a way that can stand up to a "severative world," binding what their circumstances may dictate to them to rupture. Moreover, wholeness is

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[49] F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), 449.
[50] Melville, 74. Arguably Ishmael sees Ahab's "humanities" as well, but as one who narrates after the events, he is a special case. One is left to wonder how much of Ishmael's portrayal of Ahab is influenced by his contact with Pip.
[51] Ibid., 376.
[52] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1170b7.
[53] Melville, 383.
[54] Sharon Cameron, "Ahab and Pip: Those Are Pearls That Were His Eyes," *ELH*, vol. 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 573-93, 578.
[55] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 406.
[56] Ibid., 406.

communal, not simply individual, and Pip attempts to remind Ahab of his earlier remarks. Tragedy comes about because Ahab chooses to forego friendship in favor of his singular purpose.

Pip's influence has broader reverberations, affecting even how Ahab interacts with others, not just with him. Ahab blesses the captain of the Rachel, for instance, even though he refuses to help him find his lost son.[57] Once he decides to remain committed to his task of killing Moby-Dick, he tells Pip, "So: God for ever bless thee; and if it come to that,—God for ever save thee, let what will befall."[58] As Charles Olson notes, "Though Ahab continues to curse the gods for their 'inhumanities,' his tone," from the moment he recognizes Pip as "woven of [his] heart-strings," is "richer, quieter, less angry and strident. He even questions his former blasphemies, for a bottomed sadness grows in him as Pip lives in the cabin with him."[59] Pip, it seems, plants the seeds of another world in Ahab, seeds that, if watered, will sprout into a recognition that there is another course of action possible for him. There is no doubt that Pip uncovers cracks in Ahab's worldview, cracks that trouble Ahab, for he intuits that demands are now placed upon him to change his life. In turn, this hints that the matter—*die Sache*—between Ahab in Pip relates to the journey of the *Pequod* and the possibility of its return to land and safety. Such a change of course, though, would require the ultimate sacrifice of Ahab: acceptance of his finitude and humility in the face of a universe greater than he is. Ultimately, Ahab refuses this invitation that Pip extends to him, failing therefore to engage in proper interpretation. As Gadamer points out, "Like conversation, interpretation is a circle closed by the dialectic of question and answer."[60] Herein perhaps lies Ahab's most Luciferean proclivity: he closes himself off to the challenge that truth presents to humans, namely, that of a thorough examination of one's life that never results in transhistorical or ahistorical moral (or otherwise) axioms. For truth is more concerned with my reaction to it than on imposing what I think it says on those around me.

That interpretation is key to Pip's new poetic status is especially evident in Chapter 99, "The Doubloon," when his linguistic insight throws light on his shipmates' hermeneutics, or lack thereof, as an extension of their private worldview. As Ahab passes by the coin he had nailed to the mast of the ship, he stops to ponder its meaning since "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little

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[57] Melville, 382.
[58] Ibid., 383.
[59] Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael: A Study of Melville* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1947), 60.
[60] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 407.

worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher."[61] Others soon follow suit, offering their own interpretations of the signs inscribed on the doubloon, while Stubb eavesdrops and comments on everyone's comments. As Maurice S. Lee writes of this episode,

> Flask offers a literal reading of the coin that delimits its symbolic implications [. . .] Along these lines, Starbuck insists that the white whale is only a "dumb brute," resisting Ahab's transcendental idealism and suggesting that the safest interpretation of signs comes from a realist, empirical point of view. [. . .] Also—Flask's literalism notwithstanding—the doubloon shows how interpretations can proliferate until signs become so laden with subjective referents as to preclude any shared understanding.[62]

The crew members don't speak to each other, so much as *at* each other. This is the opposite of the hermeneutical conversation between Pip and Ahab. It is at this moment that Pip, with "that unearthly idiot face,"[63] shows up to read, saying only, "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look," upon which he is accused of studying "Murray's Grammar."[64] Three times Pip repeats the same grammatical line. For Michael West, Pip "practices grammatical rather than historical etymology. Instead of deriving meanings of words from something outside language, Pip emphasizes how meanings derive from the structure of language itself."[65] Samuel Otter argues that "Pip's words do not emphasize distinct perspectives but, instead, define perception as a shared, structurally linked activity."[66] Both West and Otter emphasize that the nature of reality is linguistic—or rather, we do not know reality outside of how we come to speak about it and understand it in language. Furthermore, understanding takes place in community, as Pip's use of multiple pronouns indicates.[67] This highlights an essentially Gadamerian notion:

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[61] Melville, 317.
[62] Maurice S. Lee, "The Language of *Moby-Dick*: 'Read It If You Can,'" *A Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Wyn Kelley (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006): 393-407, 402.
[63] Melville, 321.
[64] Ibid., 321.
[65] Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature* (Athens, GA: Ohio University Press, 2000), 328.
[66] Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 170.
[67] Packham underscores this communal aspect as well, but he grounds his inquiry in Saussure and Sartre, not Gadamer.

> It is not for nothing that the special problematic of understanding and the attempt to master it as an art—the concern of hermeneutics—belongs traditionally to the sphere of grammar and rhetoric. Language is the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement take place between two people.[68]

Pip's grammatical rejoinder draws attention to language itself, hinting not only that interpretation at its best takes place in concert with others, but also that one's experience must be broader than the private one that the mariners lead. Put differently, for interpretation not to devolve into private utterances that lead down subjective dead-ends, it must be undertaken in conversation with others, where one's own *Erlebnis* can be challenged and transformed into a meaning-making *Erfahrung*. As Nicholas Davey explains, for Gadamer "*Erlebnisse* understood as units of intense, immediate, personal feeling can only ever convey the psychological predicament of the reading subject. [. . .] By contrast, *Erfahrungen* are recursive not circular in nature. *Erfahrungen* are not grounded in the subject but in what transcends it, enabling it to encounter and be changed by what lies outside itself."[69] Stubb's commentary then is far from the experience Gadamer has in mind, for no one can countermand his interpretation. Furthermore, no one challenges anyone else's interpretation; no one dialogues with anyone in this scene. It is Pip's witty quip that exposes the crew as mired in "intense, immediate, personal feeling[s]," which by their nature cannot disrupt Ahab's monologic narrative. While not to the same dangerous extent as Ahab, most of the crew exhibit similarly monologic tendencies, revealing that hubris is widespread among them. And hubris cannot speak to hubris.

Despite the fact that Pip's oceanic existence challenges everyone onboard the *Pequod*, his shipmates, too, eventually reject him, trying to contain any damage that he may cause to their worldview. It is important to underscore, however, that out of everyone on the ship, Pip is the only one who nearly deters Ahab from his purpose. Pip's contact with oceanic depth allows him to acquire a new dimension of language, one that reminds those with ears to hear that to remain on the surface of things is to live a two-dimensional life. Furthermore, he poetically embodies Gadamer's notion of hermeneutics, i.e., a way to engage with a subject-matter in a way that changes one's life and consequently one's relationship to others. And even though Ahab hears Pip,

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[68] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 402.

[69] Nicholas Davey, "Lived Experience: Erlebnis *and* Erfahrung," *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016): 326-332, 328.

he is free to reject what he hears—and he does. But if Pip fails with (most of) those in the novel, however, he does not fail with the narrator, Ishmael, who preserves Pip's memory in his retelling of the story. I have already alluded a while back to Ishmael's connection with Pip via the word "castaway." And while there is no way decisively to prove this, I would like to suggest that we can read the narrator's decision to pick the name of another castaway—Ishmael—as his namesake as having been born from his encounter with Pip. Ishmael, therefore, shows us how to properly engage with an oceanic self. As he puts it in chapter 26, "Knights and Squires," in relation to Starbuck,

> But were the coming narrative to reveal, in any instance, the complete abasement of poor Starbuck's fortitude, scarce might I have the heart to write it; for it is a thing most sorrowful, nay shocking, to expose the fall of valor in the soul. Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have such mean and meagre faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes.[70]

Unlike Ahab, who chooses to reject Pip's message, Ishmael internalizes it to such an extent that it affects his narrative style. For his "costliest robes," among many other things, can be interpreted as the very stuff of poetry, namely, the vaulting and beautiful language he uses throughout. The novel itself, in this way, becomes a poem of epic proportions—a paean to the human being in all his splendor and his decadence. Put otherwise, if Pip changes Ishmael, the latter shows it in how he crafts the entire story. And consequently, Melville shows how the human heart can engage with castaways—all those whom society rejects for one reason or another—in such a way as to prevent the worst impulses from dictating how we lead our lives: we are to throw our "costliest robes" over our fellow human beings' weaknesses. Such an action inevitably raises many ethical questions, which of necessity we must ponder if we are to form a more perfect union. Melville would remind us, however, that if Ishmael can identify with the young black boy Pip in pre-Civil War America, then there is hope that a true hermeneutical encounter—which is always possible when we open our imagination to something greater than we are—will engender a desire for truth, dialogue, love, and forgiveness in us, mere mortals, too.

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[70] Melville, 97.