

A Parody of Nature or the Nature of Parody:  
Melville as critic of Emerson and Darwin

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## I. *Introduction*

Whether in the body of whales, or the wastelands of Wall Street and the Galapagos, nature is an almost constant thematic thread in the works of Herman Melville. And while presented as complexly protean – being as elusive as a white whale or as omnipresent as the color of one’s own skin – nature provided a solid platform for discourse on nearly every social, political and philosophical issue of Melville’s time. While this not only puts Melville in step with the great nature writers of his time (and before), it marks his endeavor to be one of their great gadflies as well.

Though it may be an oversimplification, much of the nineteenth century discourse by nature writers such as Darwin and Emerson can be characterized as a collision between Romanticism and science. National and global expansion in Europe, and to a greater extent in the United States, gave rise to new discoveries and inventions that changed the way Americans and Europeans thought about themselves and their position in the natural world. In the literary context, these changes in perception led to a shift from an emotionally subjective and imaginative European Romanticism to a pragmatically scientific naturalism (Reynolds 220-221). Melville in this context can be found on the fault line of this shift. Finding both of these perceptions inherently flawed, he nevertheless saw them positively counter-balanced. As a result, some of Melville’s work melds the two. At times a Romantic,

Melville finds a regenerative and sublime quality in the ineffable and unexplainable elements of nature, refuting those who find conclusions in an empirical rationalism and science. But in contrast (at times even with himself), Melville can also be read as leaning toward a pragmatic and fiercely critical approach to the Romantic notion of nature, with its metaphysical foundations and its lack of physical evidence. These two perspectives present the dialogue prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century discussions of nature and, in ways that will be shown, in Melville's work as well. Both "The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles" and the "Masthead" chapter of *Moby Dick* can be read as polemics which support and discredit both side of this dialog. The nature of this dichotomy makes discussions on the subject of nature problematic when dealing with Melville in that he both supports and critically antagonizes two opposing views, often at the same time. Melville, in this sense, proves to be as elusive as his subject as he writes a paradoxical bridge between two opposing and irreconcilable ideas.

How, then, does Melville do this? I suggest that what makes Melville's nature interesting is the way parody is used in the short story the "Encantadas, or the Enchanted isles" and in "The Masthead" chapter of *Moby Dick* as a mode of discourse with other nature writers who hold these conflicting viewpoints. Within these texts Nature is discussed in the form of a parody of nature writers, in this case Emerson and Darwin. In these two pieces, parody becomes a form of two-way mirror that both reflects and critically examines one view of nature with

transcendental implications and another with a pragmatically scientific base. In other words, Melville's use of parody represents both a critical attack and a degree of identification and sympathy with that which is being parodied, the latter point being expressed more subtly through examples of Melville's intricate study of each parodied author (such as will be seen in Melville's letters), and, more obviously, in a comparison of Melville parodies (— for instance, Melville is a Darwinian in his “Masthead” critique of Emerson and an Emersonian Romantic in his attack on Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*).

While Melville scholarship regarding nature has ranged the spectrum from early readings of Melville as a Romantic and critic of science to the more contemporary and now popular eco-critical trend of reading Melville as an environmental conservationist, few look at just how Melville is so easily able to provide such vastly different readings of *his* nature. In spite of these critical trends, which have regularly attempted to plot Melville as either *for* or *against* one philosophy of nature or another, I believe that more can be found in an exploration of his techniques and modes of discourse on nature, such as parody, rather than trolling for his ideological point of view with regard to nature.

In order to better understand the *nature* of Melville's “nature,” this thesis will first examine the construction of nature in Melville's work. Then the primary focus of this paper will be directed toward exploring, in greater detail, the ways in which Melville uses parody as a mode of discourse, not only with other nature

writers, but with nature itself. In addition, it will be shown that parody, as used by Melville, presents the foundation of his own unique and original conception of nature.

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## II. *Mind the Gap: Melville and Nature*

Melville's nature can be understood as an exploration of the irreconcilable state of brokenness, or gap, in the relationship between man and nature and the ways that man attempts to close that gap by force. *Moby Dick* can be seen as the most vibrant of Melville's examples of this, given Ahab's voyage to right the wrong having been done to him by nature— personified by the whale. Captain Delano's inability and struggle to reconcile the facts concerning Benito Cereno and his ill-fated ship with his own perception of "racial nature," would also provide an example. These works express Melville's fascination with nature as found in those characters he writes about, those who see as the only possible way to fix that gap being, as Emily Dickinson puts it, "to insert the thing that caused it."

To fill a gap—  
 Insert the thing that caused it.  
 Block it up  
 With other and t'will yawn  
 The more;  
 You cannot solder an abyss  
 With air.

(Dickinson 546)

“Block it up” presents a chilling sentiment behind this statement similarly personified by those Melvillian characters who cannot simply leave the gap alone. In Melville’s two most vibrant nature works – texts in which nature is an explicit narrative theme – “The Encantadas” and *Moby Dick*, Melville similarly depicts both Romanticism and Science as human endeavors to fill the inherent gap between man and nature. Ironically, these texts also point out nature as being that which not only links but also divides Romanticism and Science as well. While the two share a unified purpose in filling a gap between man and nature they are inherently divided in their basic methods and vision, the foundations of which are human imagination and empirical data. In this sense, Dickinson’s poem is pertinent and very Ahab-like in tone. Ahab who exclaims in “The Sphinx” chapter of *Moby Dick*:

“O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies; not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind.”

(Melville 250)

Ahab presents a “linked analogy” that is also paradoxically irreconcilable. When Ahab finishes his soliloquy at the tale end of the “The Sphinx,” Melville provides

what could be considered not only a set piece for the novel but also the fulcrum of his notion of nature as well. This notion, like the voice of Dickinson's poem, is expressed in Ahab's line, which begins with a gap – "O Nature, and O soul of man!" (250). A gap is presented by Ahab as a fundamental fact in man's relationship with nature; it is the linguistic void of something "far beyond all utterance," and an interface with a(nother) world that man is unable to reconcile his soul to. "Speak, thou mighty head," says Ahab to severed cranium of a whale "and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, though has dived the deepest" (249). However, Ahab uses the very same point to support a *link* between the two "analogies" of Nature and Man (or rather the Romantically charged "soul of man"), fundamentally divided in their basic methods and vision, which are also linked by a unified purpose: survival, and specifically, reproduction. "Not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter," but rather propagates itself by an alignment with its inverse or opposite, thus having "its cunning duplicate in mind" (250).

At the core of Ahab's exchange is a human interaction with what is perceived as an intermediary between opposite worlds. Nature here is presented as a mystery to Ahab. The sphinx, in this case the whale's head, is an enigmatic link between Ahab's world and the uncharted abyss of the natural world. Both worlds present an inverse of each other, irreconcilable in that they consist of all that the other does not. Both hold the answer to the other's survival by providing that inverse; for instance, understanding the whale's world is as critical to Ahab's survival

as understanding Ahab's is to the whale. Both are linked by their efforts to close the gap between them and their opposites for the purpose controlling that relationship. This can be seen as analogous to the relationship of both Science and Romanticism to Nature, but also between Science and Romanticism as well.

As stated earlier, this irreconcilable gap or brokenness in many ways characterizes not only Melville's conception of nature but also his attitudes towards those like Ahab (and Dickinson's voice) who endeavor to fill the gaps and create a union between man and nature. For Melville, these are people such as Darwin and Emerson. As far as Melville is concerned, perhaps the only thing that links the Romantic Transcendentalism of Emerson and the pragmatic science of Darwin is their agreement on the existence of a gap inherent in the relationship between Man and Nature. From Ahab's statement, nature, it would seem, for Melville becomes an occasion for discourse on how we, as a species, Romantic or scientist (or both), process the gaps inherent in our relationship with nature — rather than a discourse on nature itself. To this end one could point out how Melville's texts frequently deal with the gaps, such as the blank spaces, mysteries and *ambiguities* (see Melville's perhaps second most ambitious novel, *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* [1852]) in which nature presents itself only peripherally (such as the whale's appearance at the end of the novel, despite its constant presence manifested in the actions of its characters), and place their greatest concerns on the individuals who cannot simply leave the gaps alone and must forcibly reconcile them. (However, it will be later

seen that this peripheral focus on the human reaction to nature does in fact also present Melville's complex conception of nature itself.)

Any thorough discussion therefore of Melville and nature is inevitably going to begin with, or at some point run into, the questions: *what do we do with the gaps inherent in a human relationship to nature?* and *with what do we fill these gaps?* After all, as Dickinson is quick to point out "you cannot solder an abyss with air." I suggest that Melville viewed Darwin and Emerson as individuals who could not simply leave the gaps alone, and that each attempted, with their respective ideologies, to forge a union between man and nature by blocking up the gap between them with Romance and science. A closer reading into examples of Melville's nature pieces, "The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles" and "The Masthead," will show that Romanticism and Science present perspectives on nature that Melville was both critical and skeptical of, while at the same time having a degree of sympathy and respect for them. In these two short pieces, the perspectives of Darwin and Emerson are in clear critical focus; however also present is Melville's vibrant mediation on his own nature in response. With Melville's usage of parody in these pieces, what looks like a basic form of criticism, in fact, also constitutes Melville's complex perspective on nature itself. We will see that while taking Emerson and Darwin's views on nature to task, Melville also takes steps of his own to fill the inherent gap between mankind and nature by "inserting

the thing that caused it,” something that he can only do by parody, which inserts “its cunning duplicate in mind” (Dickinson 546, Melville 250).

### III. *“The Masthead” and its critical circle: Melville’s passion and parody of Emerson*

The “Masthead” chapter of *Moby Dick* is an intensely critical parody of Emerson’s “Nature” and a highpoint (along with *The Confidence Man*) in Melville’s bittersweet engagement with Romanticism and America’s foremost Romantic. Despite frequent critiques of Emerson and his philosophy, Melville retains a respect and learned understanding of Emersonian transcendentalism. “Frankly, for the sake of argument, let us call him a fool,” wrote Melville in his famous 1849 letter to Evert Duyckink regarding the Sage of Concord, “—then had I rather be a fool than a wise man.” However, he adds coyly in the same letter, “I do not oscillate in Emerson’s rainbow” (Melville 534).

But what is the significance of *not oscillating* in Emerson’s rainbow when Emerson himself tells readers, in “Self Reliance” that “imitation is suicide”? In both this letter and in “The Masthead,” Melville clearly parodies Emerson’s “Nature.” Yet while the nature of parody is to debase the person parodied, it can — and in this case does — serve to imitate or reproduce that which is being parodied as well. Melville appears to want to do both, which makes his perspective on Emerson problematic. Melville seems to both imitate and resist Emerson and his philosophy.

This becomes an antagonistic expression that both follows and disregards Emerson's "imitation is suicide" advice by imitating Emerson for the sake of proving him wrong. Melville's parody of Emerson is personified, embodied, by the character of Ishmael. Ishmael, encircled and enveloped by his own transcendental relationship with nature, loses his awareness of the potential pitfall that such a relationship presents, only to catch himself just before falling, literally, from his elevated state atop the masthead. This near fall becomes a physical parody of transcendental relationships with nature gone awry. The root of this parody is a collision of the *metaphysics* of transcendentalist nature and the physics (or gravity) of a scientific or pragmatic nature. But in this collision there is more at work than a mere criticism. The language holds a conflicted skepticism as well as a deep understanding of an intimate relationship with nature— the same relationship Emerson proposes in his essay "Nature."

What makes Melville's antagonism toward Emerson and Transcendentalism problematic is that when one reads it closely cannot ignore the fact that Melville's skepticism is invariably conflicted. Of all of Melville's criticisms toward popular philosophies, religions or politics, none prove more elusive than those directed toward Transcendentalism, and specifically its champion, Emerson. Scholars often read Melville's works, primarily *Moby Dick*, as either sympathetic to — or fiercely in opposition to — Emerson. However, Melville's attitude is elusive in that he chooses parody as a critical means when dealing with Emerson in the

“Masthead” (and also in *The Confidence Man* [1857]). Nearly a century of criticism has been dedicated to pinpointing Melville’s Emersonian affinities. Some scholars, such as John Bryant, have even suggested that Melville is both for *and* against Emerson’s philosophy. In his article “Moby-Dick as Revolution,” Bryant examines Melville’s attraction *and* resistance to Transcendentalism. Bryant’s reading of Melville is a sort of Zen interpretation of *Moby-Dick*, in which transcendentalism’s peaceful *yīng* is counter-balanced by the harsh, chaotic *yāng* of the material world. The union of these two, as Bryant suggests, presents a conflicted state of human duality, seen throughout *Moby-Dick*. I would agree with Bryant’s conclusion that “Melville was not a card-carrying transcendentalist” (Bryant 68). And as Bryant is quick to point out, *Moby-Dick* does indeed portray a struggle to understand the promises of transcendental thought in contrast to its “abnegated opposite” (Bryant 68). With his assertion that Melville can be both *for* and *against* transcendental thought, Bryant stretches further than previous scholars like William Braswell or Barbara Glenn. Braswell, who examined Melville as a fierce and “uneducated” critic of Emerson, was later brushed aside as a curmudgeon by Glenn’s essay “Melville and the Sublime in Moby-Dick,” which argued that Melville is a closeted transcendentalist (Braswell 318, Glenn 165). However, despite Bryant’s breakthroughs, his article lacks an examination of the literary techniques – such as parody – Melville employs in his direct engagement with Emerson and nature. In doing so, Bryant thus neglects a potentially telling aspect of Melville’s

position on Transcendentalism. Examples of Melville's parody of Emerson in "The Masthead" chapter, as well as Emerson's own tendencies toward parody, illustrate an odd form of negative criticism masking a deeper understanding and even admiration that is often overlooked. While Bryant's well-laid argument supports *Moby Dick* as an engagement with transcendental thought, and presents Melville as a sort of transcendental skeptic/believer, he does not examine Melville's direct engagement with Emerson or the literary techniques with which he enacts that engagement. Such an examination invariably requires a closer look at the object of the focus of that engagement — Emerson — in order to better understand its origins.

Not unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson in his public *and* literary life, Herman Melville had a tendency to uphold surface and appearances with the same energy used to undermine them. While little is known about Melville's personal engagement with Emerson, Melville had, on at least one occasion, seen Emerson lecture, and he owned a copy of his works<sup>1</sup> (Braswell 318). Melville's well-known letter to Duyckink (1849) reveals much about his ambiguous relationship with Emerson. As previously mentioned, in the letter, Melville states that he does "not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow," and would *prefer* "to hang [him]self in [his] own halter than swing in any other man's swing" (Melville 534). This not only provides

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Emerson owned a copy of "Typee," though it is uncertain whether he'd ever read it (Braswell 319).

an overt statement about Emerson — a sly rephrasing of “imitation is suicide,” as already indicated — it also illustrates the crux of his rather elusive and dimorphic tendencies to parody. In Emersonian fashion, Melville’s letter spins circles of language. Writing at one point that Emerson is full of “myths & oracular gibberish,” and “a fool,” Melville then asserts, as previously noted, that he would “rather be a fool than a wise man” (Melville 32). One can imagine that Emerson himself — who exclaimed in “Self-Reliance,” “whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist”— would have been proud of such a statement at his own expense (Emerson 261). Melville’s preference for the label “fool” (over the social implication of “wise man”) expresses his knack for the type of rhetorical self-abnegation familiar to Emerson. And Emerson might very well have completed Melville’s thought with his own, adding that “he who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (261). Both Melville and Emerson express their comfort with the “immortal palms” of personal individualism, which come at the expense of public regard and admiration.

Early twentieth-century scholars of Melville, such as William Braswell, miss the double-edged language in his letter to Duyckink. Melville utilizes dimorphic language, critical yet laced with a profound cordiality that parodies the rhetoric of Emerson, the self-proclaimed “parlor soldier” of “Self Reliance.” Braswell, who reads Melville as a negative critic who knew very little about Emerson, misses the

wit and familiarity in Melville's parody. Braswell claims that Melville's "unfamiliarity with Emerson's works, together with the fact that he had heard only one of Emerson's lectures, convinces one that at the time of writing the letter Melville was hardly qualified to pass judgment upon the merits of his famous contemporary" (318). But Braswell, by a wide margin, misses Melville's linguistic homage in a letter masked as a critique of Emerson. And while there is no doubt that Melville found faults in Emerson, the letter as a stand-alone piece of literature shows a profound understanding of the sheer craft of Emerson's rhetoric and reason. Statements such as "I was agreeably disappointed in Mr. Emerson" bare the phraseology of a well-versed student of Emerson (Melville 34). And while Braswell allows that Melville gives at least some credit to Emerson's ideas — citing Melville's statement "I love all men who dive"— he overlooks the great tribute that Melville pays to Emerson's *language*. Gently flipping Emerson's philosophy and style on its head, Melville disregards Emerson by imitating him, delicately constructing an inverse reflection. Emerson tells us in "Experience," "we wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight," and "we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them"; Melville responds that "any fish can swim near the surface, it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more," implicating Emerson (whom he calls a "diver") as both a fish *and a whale* (Melville 32; Emerson 471).

Despite Melville's sophisticated (though playful) criticism of Emerson, this letter is a small-scale model of Melville's lifelong critical engagement with Emerson. Emerson, in parodied form, would dive and resurface at least twice in Melville's fictional waters, first in the Pacific Ocean of *Moby Dick* and later on the Mississippi River of the *Confidence Man*. The *Confidence Man* runs into an Emerson *con anima* and more theatrical than in other Melville parodies, but he also meets an emotionally distant version who avoids – not unlike the real Emerson – defining himself and his philosophy. Yet atop “The Masthead,” as will be seen, Ishmael dives – almost quite literally – head long into a direct engagement with Emerson.

During the nineteenth century, Emerson was a towering figure on the American literary landscape, despite keeping to his own rural existence in Concord, Massachusetts (Richardson 526). And his tendency to not exist (or not *oscillate*) within mainstream New England culture – while still remaining part of its intellectual center – constitutes a physical expression and the *nature* of his philosophical idea. This idea is best expressed in his essay “Nature,” a text not only central to Emerson's philosophy, but also to Melville's parody of Emerson in “The Masthead” chapter, another physical expression of philosophical ideas.

In his essay “Nature,” Emerson asks his readers to understand his transcendental union with Nature beginning from a dislocation. “To go into

solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society,” he writes, “I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me” (Emerson 9). Emerson’s “Nature” begins with solitude, which constitutes the platform upon which a new union in nature is formed; this being a union between “nature” as a *non-human* element and the *human Nature* of identity. This union merges nature and man and potentially reunites man with his own fragmented self. Emerson creates a dimorphic structure of dislocation; he asks readers to consider a physical dislocation from society — a retreat into solitude — as well as a metaphysical dislocation from mental associations and convention — a *cerebral* separation of sorts. Emerson’s philosophy thus relies heavily on human imagination, rather than on physical experience alone. Using the eye (and the implicative “I”) as a key metaphor, this realignment becomes an occasion of transcendence by taking the individual beyond the limits of conventional thought, up into a heightened perspective from which one can look out over the labyrinthian boundaries; one observes the vista not as human being, but as the intermediary, or “soul,” between the individual self (“Nature”) and non-human element “nature.” This is an act that fuses the gap between the nature of man and the nature of the “other.” The implication of this transcendental union with nature is that man not only can achieve a union with nature, but that that union can become a *reunion* with the self. However, this is a union firmly rooted in dislocation— from both society and reality. It is also call for a dislocation that would prove to be Emerson’s

biggest fault in the eyes of his critics.

In “Nature,” Emerson finds his moment of transcendental unity in an utterly banal experience during which he enters a state of euphoria after an upward leap of imagination. “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in [his] thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune,” Emerson is taken to a heightened sense of “perfect exhilaration [...] glad to the brink of fear” (10). He continues:

Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God (10).

Emerson’s transcendental experience launches an entire realignment of his perspective on the world around him. His is a spiritual awakening, Romantic in passion and imagination as it disregards the “facts” of a common experience and literally transforms *it* (the nature around him) and *him* (the Nature within him). Emerson speaks not of feelings, but of an actual transcendence. He is “uplifted into infinite space,” shifting into a new state of being — or anti-being — in which the boundaries between the self and Nature are nullified, fusing the two in a marriage that expands the self while diminishing the ego.

Emerson presents his transcendental awakening not as a distinct moment, but rather an ever-present opportunity for those with the eyes to see it. Nature, then, becomes an *occasion*, or event, rather than a disconnected thing. It is an

occasion that is presented as common, always present (both in and around us) and in a never-ending series of circular patterns. Here is where individuals can foster a deeper and less transient relationship to the world around them. However, Emerson's union with nature is not attained by any physical exchange, but by transcending, via the imagination, the common perspective through which we routinely see "nature":

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other...

(47)

Emerson argues that adults are inherently broken in a way that impairs their ability to *see* and thus build a relationship with nature. For Emerson, the act of truly *seeing* nature is intimately connected to uniting with nature. Through inward self-reflection and outward contemplation, one can transcend to a vantage point at which that brokenness can be mended:

The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself.

(47)

The “ruin or blank” in our eye, as Emerson puts it, is a disconnection of mankind, not only from the natural world, but from itself. The problem as well as the solution is therefore at the level of individual perspective. A transcendental relationship to Nature, for Emerson, thus becomes an issue for the individual, and the individual alone — a retreat into solitude. In seeking to surpass the labyrinthian boundaries between man and nature, Emerson proposes, man can not only fuse the gap between himself and the natural world, but also rediscover and reunite *with himself*. This reunion occurs, Emerson suggests, when man repairs his perspective and return to a primordial state. Emerson conceptualizes the primordial state as a dimorphic incarnation of the soul.

The soul *raised* over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. (46-47 emphasis mine)

Emerson’s conception of the soul is elusive; it is the sort of *anti-philosophy* philosophy, or religion, based on the self-reliant, independent and Romantic imagination that is Emerson’s trademark (see “Self Reliance”; “Nature”; “Circles”; “The Over-Soul”). Social dislocation and disconnection — solitude — provide the best opportunities for forming a greater union with Nature, and eventually, with the self. However, Emerson’s aspirations in “Nature,” to transcend passion and discover a new sense of self (“identity”) and meaning (“eternal causation”), tend to disconnect the philosopher from all that upon which he looks down. For though

Emerson finds solitude critical to mending one's own broken perspective, the imaginative transcendence can also become a rejection of the physical world. Emerson's mystical, mythical vision of nature and transcendence appeals to a nineteenth (or twenty-first-) century American's sense of a ruggedly self-reliant identity. But his vision becomes problematic when juxtaposed with the ground-level, life-and-death issues of human experience, with the physical reality of nature. Critics, like Melville, saw Emerson's transcendentalism - a worldview in which his "vision is not coincident with the axis of things" - as a cold and potentially irresponsible disconnection from the harsh facts of human experience during the mid-nineteenth century, such as slavery, poverty, and civil war (Menand 257). The physical reality of *things*, and their contrast to *ideas*, is central to Melville's contrary vision of nature and his parody of Emerson in the "Masthead" chapter of *Moby Dick*.

In the "The Masthead" chapter in *Moby Dick*, Melville presents Emerson's Romantic perspective on nature Transcendentalism—as a dangerous pitfall for naïve intellectuals. Melville parody of Transcendentalism highlights the philosophy's foolish disregard of physical reality in favor of metaphysical ideas, and its idealized relationship with nature based solely on imagination. However, like his 1849 letter to Evert Duyckink, "The Masthead" exemplifies Melville's clever satire *and*, subtly, his profound understanding of Emerson. While Transcendentalism is presented as a (nearly *literal*) pitfall, it is one into which Melville himself could not help falling. For despite Melville's criticisms of Emerson, "The Masthead" is a near-perfect

recapitulation of Emersonian thought. The chapter features a parody that speaks to the profound complexity and power Emerson's philosophy and rhetoric...as well as to the power of satire itself – and Melville's talent for it.

When, after a “due rotation,” Ishmael climbs atop the masthead to serve his turn as the Pequod's lookout, he is quickly enthralled with the atmosphere, literally transcended high above the deck. As the deck and all the drudgeries of a sailor's life shrink to insignificance, Ishmael obtains a new perspective, an expanded vision of the natural landscape enveloping and unifying everything – including himself. Almost immediately Ishmael's experience mirrors Emerson's in “Nature,” albeit literally. This dislocation from his fellow shipmates alters Ishmael's spatial relationship to his environment and allows him to retreat into solitude, where his perspective on nature and his placement within it changes. Ishmael mirrors Emerson, who in the course of his own “rotations” also found himself disconnected socially, while crossing a bare common, and suddenly “uplifted into infinite space” to a new realigned perspective (Emerson 10). Once above, Ishmael begins an imaginative discourse, inserting himself into a lineage of others who stood watch atop the literal and metaphorical *mastheads* of history. From the Egyptians, to the tower of Babel (considered a sort of masthead by Melville), and up through Napoleon, Ishmael's imaginative channeling of the ages distinctly echoes Emerson, who fancies himself a descendent of “the era of the Egyptians and the Brahmins, to that of Pythagoras, of Plato, of Bacon, of Leibnitz, of Swedenborg” (Melville 132,

Emerson 10).

The self-implication of both Melville and Emerson as the regeneration of a type of historical and transcendental *masthead* expresses not only an alignment with a type of lineage, but it is also an emulation of cast of characters whose place in history can be seen as a similar social disconnection and transcendence — that is, from the unknown masses of names and groups who have existed *not in solitude* through history, yet are never read. It is this social disconnection and transcendence — *through solitude* — that Melville and Emerson emulate and parody. Through their emulation they find their new vision of a nature that fuses them, like one of a series of lightening rods, to a natural current. And by employing this same method of emulation, Melville also fuses himself to Emerson, parodying Emerson in a way that perpetuates him. It is with biting irony that Melville chooses characters like Napoleon and places like the Tower of Babel, to counter Emerson's Plato and Ancient Egypt, Melville's list being also a series of historical "highpoints," with questionable contributions to the good of mankind. However, by naming the great names and civilizations, Ishmael's state of physical and cerebral transcendence atop the masthead does in fact spark a very valid realignment and genuine unification of his own perspective on both the environment and his identity. While this *is* a humorous restaging of Emerson's "Nature," the parody also validates Emerson in that Melville proves his (Emerson's) point, which is: that to retreat into solitude and realign one's vision *can*, in fact, provide an individual with an opportunity for a

historically relevant transcendence from the unknown masses. Melville of course proves this by virtue of the fact that without his having retreated into solitude and imaginatively refocusing *his* vision of the world – and becoming a writer – we, as readers, would have had no idea Melville had even existed. With Emerson's vision, Ishmael becomes the sole eye (in his case of the ship), a literal "transparent eyeball" high above and out of sight, "uplifted into infinite space," which, like the great leaders and thinkers of history, is deferred to for guidance, safety and direction (Emerson 10). However, such a vision quickly becomes problematic on Melville's high seas.

Ishmael embraces his transcendental experience until he too feels a sense that "all mean egotism vanishes," and it is here that everything falls apart. Ishmael experiences the intoxicating euphoria of transcendence, "but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity" (Melville 136). With his head bathed by blithe sea air and uplifted into space, Ishmael's mean egotism vanishes, like a page lifted from "Nature." The rhythmic cadence of nature, like Emerson's "currents of the Universal Being (that) circulate," pushes Ishmael into a state of "vacant unconsciousness" as he "looses his identity"; this description echoes Emerson's vanished ego, who proclaims: "I am nothing" (Emerson 10). Enthralled to a point of intoxication, Ishmael is encapsulated in a state of vertigo and he loses his grip on himself and the ship's lines, until at last he

nearly falls from the masthead to his death — catching himself at the last second. Though the chapter’s literal restaging of “Nature” offers a seemingly light-hearted jab at Emerson, one cannot take the humor lightly. In forcing Emerson’s philosophical ideas into a physical context, Melville reveals that Emerson’s perspective in “Nature” *over-looks* the scientific *facts* of nature, such as gravity. Melville challenges Emerson’s metaphysics with Newton’s physics, thus playfully portraying Transcendentalism as not only impractical, but even dangerous to society as a whole—especially if society relies on intellectual *mastheads* like Emerson for direction on how to live.

By catching himself before losing his grip on *physical reality*, Ishmael potentially saves the ship from destruction. Afterward, he admits the potential danger that such mental departures can possess, both for the individual and his community. Bringing a wiser Ishmael down from the masthead, Melville reunites Ishmael with his shipmates rather than with nature or his soul. By contrast Ishmael, unlike Emerson (with his “head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,”) comes to his senses, and takes to task Emerson, who is made to seem like he simply has his *head in the clouds*. “How could I,” says Ishmael, “being left completely to myself at such a thought-engendering altitude — but lightly hold my obligations to observe all whale-ships’ standing orders, ‘Keep your weather eye open, and sing out every time’” (135). Melville’s point here is that Emerson’s “Nature,” as a way of life, is invariably at odds with the responsibility and reality of

physical facts in human experience. Admitting that such a perspective encourages him to take his “obligations lightly,” Ishmael is startled that he put the entire crew at risk. When his judgment is clouded by transcendental vision, Ishmael neglects his responsibility to sing out and alert the crew to whales or danger. “Let me make a clean breast of it here, and frankly admit that I kept but sorry guard,” adds Ishmael (135). Moreover, Ishmael even admonishes ship captains who endanger their crew by harboring “lad[s] with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditateness; and who offer to ship with the *Phaedon* instead of *Bowditch* in his head” (135). The sailing metaphor likens the transcendental mind to a head *knotted* with Platonic philosophy, instead of *balanced* by mathematical reason (characterized by the mathematician *Bowditch*, who worked on ocean navigation), and marks Ishmael’s transformation from a Romantic Transcendentalist into a critic. Melville writes, “The whale-fishery furnishes an asylum for many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber” (135).

When Ishmael, the converted Romantic, speaks of “those young Platonists [who] have a notion that their vision is imperfect,” he speaks of men like Emerson, who find the “ruin or the blank...in [their] own eye” and who “accept the sentence of Plato, that poetry comes nearer to the vital truth than history” (Melville 135, Emerson 47). To Ishmael, Transcendentalists are blinded by their imagination and creativity, which causes them to look too far beyond that which is directly in front of

them. To emphasize this point he asks his reader, “what use, then, to strain the visual nerve? They have left their opera-glasses at home” (Melville 135).

Melville’s criticism is unique because it is also an homage; his parody pushes Emersonian rhetoric away with one hand, but pulls it closer with the other. Melville proves the effectiveness of Emerson’s own vision and rhetoric, by using it against him. Emerson, who regularly criticized the “opera glass-eyed” society of “parlor soldiers,” did very much the same – against himself – since he referred to both himself and to those he abhorred in the similar terms (see “Self-Reliance.”) Melville’s homage lies in his near-perfect recapitulation of Emerson’s rhetoric. Ishmael reflects on “the problem of the universe revolving in me,” a phrasing that clearly echoes Emerson’s own: “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me” (10). And while Melville does not completely accede to Emerson’s philosophy in “Nature,” his parody exposes a deep intimacy with Emerson’s writing. For instance, despite reservations regarding Emerson, Melville maintains Emersonian rhetoric through the end of the chapter—and even returns to it again and again throughout the book. Given Melville’s strong criticism of Emerson, the philosopher’s influence on Melville is even more striking. Indeed, the concept of seeking a relationship with nature in order to repair the inherent disconnection between man and the natural world is a reoccurring theme that drives Melville’s exploration of nature not only in *Moby Dick*, but also in other works as well—in particular, “The Encantadas.”

In addition, Melville later uses a distinctly Emersonian rhetoric of imagination to refute writers of a more scientific “nature,” in “The Encantadas.” This begets a remaining question: if Melville’s parody uses Emerson’s philosophy and rhetoric against him (to disprove or debunk him), and the philosophy and rhetoric in fact *work*, does that ultimately validate Melville’s criticism of Emerson, or validate Emerson’s philosophy and rhetoric? Though it is perhaps unanswerable, arriving at such a question is significant. Though Melville deconstructs Emersonian philosophy in “The Mast Head” chapter, the overarching structure of *Moby Dick* reveals Emerson’s deep influence. Emerson’s transcendence and subsequent spiritual transformation in “Nature,” spurred by a metaphysical dislocation, finds a parallel in Ishmael’s own journey throughout the course of the novel.” The contrarian argument in Melville’s parody of “The Masthead,” a restaging of Emerson’s “Nature” that *literally* falls short, does not lessen impact of Emerson’s influence on Melville, nor does it imply that Melville’s even disagreed with Emerson; rather it implies a conflict with Melville regarding Emerson. Melville’s parody of Emerson highlights Melville’s conflicts with Emerson, *but also* with himself, as he will later use a Transcendentalist argument to refute Darwin’s image of the Galapagos.

Melville’s intricate parody clearly expresses his intimate and careful study of Emerson’s work and style, which disproves Braswell’s claim that Melville was an ignorant critic. In “The Masthead” Melville aligns himself with Emerson’s

imagination in a way that suggests his careful contemplation of a metaphysical response to nature. But in this alignment Melville asserts himself in a way that negates Emerson's patriarchal tendencies. Though Melville's parody does express understanding, it is clear his reservations stem from Emerson's dislocation from the brutal and physical facts of human experience. And here lies the paradox of Melville's relationship with Emerson: that by his own literary method (parody) Melville takes to task those who hold "the problem of the universe in [their] head[s]," a group of which he is a member and with which he clearly "oscillates."

#### IV. *Outside "uniformity in the broken state": Melville's Encantadas as refutation of Darwin's Galapagos*

After reading "The Masthead" chapter in *Moby Dick* one might be quick to characterize Melville as an open-minded pragmatist – one willing to consider the power of the Romantic imagination, but preferring practical and scientific fact to theoretical considerations. However, Melville's publication of "The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles" (1857), three years after *Moby Dick* (1854), complicates matters. Melville's short story is a direct assault on *The Voyage of the Beagle* that focuses critical attention on Darwin's scientific perspective on nature. In its construction, Melville's "Encantadas" is a parody that shares many similarities with "The Masthead"; it can, I suggest, be read as a companion piece to it. Like "The

Masthead,” it is a vibrant parody and critical platform for deconstructing another writer’s perspective on nature. “The Encantadas” also reveals Melville’s familiarity and identification with the parodied author that – once again – brings about just as many questions as answers about Melville’s own perspective on nature and his subject of parody. Yet, the most striking quality of Melville’s portrait of the Encantadas – a literal parody of Darwin’s Galapagos – is that Melville completely contradicts his own arguments in “The Masthead,” inverting not only his previous position on Emerson, nature and Romanticism, but utilizing a Romantic philosophy of nature to refute Darwin’s scientific perspective. In “The Encantadas,” Melville uses parody in much the same way as he did confronting Emerson in “The Masthead.” Yet in this instance, Melville critiques Darwin, whose perspective on nature is grounded in the physical, scientific, rational aspects of nature – those lacking in Emerson. As a critical response to the Galapagos islands Darwin presents in chapter seventeen of *The Voyage of the Beagle*, “The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles” parodies the polar opposite of Emerson’s “Nature” – Darwin’s nature, a nature lacking in imagination, based instead on physical facts and scientific observation.

Melville’s “The Encantadas” is a fictional sketch of the Galapagos Islands. These islands were a familiar location to mid-nineteenth century readers as they were the very same islands Charles Darwin wrote about fifteen years earlier in a non-fiction account wildly popular in both England and the United States (Brown

131). The Galapagos were familiar territory to Melville as well, who, after a sporadic education, went to sea as a sailor upon the whaler *Acushnet* in 1839, and found himself on the Galapagos Islands in 1841 (Parker 530-34). While one can only speculate as to the effect ten years (between the time of Darwin's and Melville's visits) had on the Galapagos' actual physical environment, what is certain is that Melville and Darwin ended up with two extremely different accounts of the same geographical location. Melville's contrasting account of the Galapagos in "The Encantadas" presents a world that mirrors *and* conflicts with Darwin's parallel world. Another literal parody, Melville's short story paradoxically tells of a set of islands, both the same as, and yet far removed from, those presented in chapter seventeen of *The Voyage of the Beagle*. As the story's narrator explains, the islands are the "Encantadas." Though they are sometimes known as the "Galapagos," these islands are best described using their alternative or "secondary Spanish name," meaning the "Enchanted Isles" (Melville 137). The significance of the name "Encantadas" makes it clear that these are very different islands from those known as the "Galapagos," for these islands possess a mysterious and supernatural quality absent from Darwin's previous account. Yet while these islands are different, the narrator emphasizes that they are, in fact, the very *same* islands known previously as "The Galapagos" (Melville 137). The issue of names and naming (all too familiar to Melville's readers) establishes the question: *how* are Melville's islands different from Darwin's, and more importantly, *why* are they different?

The difference between Melville and Darwin's islands is that they are created from two vastly different perspectives on nature. The role human imagination plays in the way people view and relate to an environment is a central theme in Melville's short story. It is with this theme that Melville parodies and uncovers the flaws of Darwin's perspective. Darwin seeks to establish an empirical and objective relationship with nature by way of scientific facts, but this goal ignores the limitations, margin of error, or inherent "brokenness" (as Emerson describes it) of all perspectives filtered through a subjective, individual human eye (Emerson 17). Melville creates a different set of islands — fictional by literary standards, yet equally valid as a depiction — through parody. Parody allows Melville to realign a discussion of the *real* Galapagos with a discussion of the impact of human imagination on the physical world. In addition, Melville's parody not only dismisses the notion of a *real* Galapagos, but it also suggests that the impact of human imagination on nature can be so great that it rivals any natural evolution. In presenting an alternative to the scientific calculations that make up Darwin's version of the islands, Melville bases his own observations on an expanded and "enchanted" vision of nature. This vision utilizes Romantic themes and language, such as myth, mystery and the supernatural, in order to account for the ambiguities and *unknowns* — present in a subjective human experience of nature — that are absent from Darwin's scientific account. The question of *why* Melville chooses to contradict his previous statement from "The Masthead" and refute Darwin in this

way is better addressed through a close examination of Darwin and Melville's two separate visions of the same nature — the Galapagos/Encantadas.

Published in 1839, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (a shortened version of its complete title, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Round the World*) is Darwin's travel log from the HMS Beagle. It was a several-year journey that took Darwin across the Atlantic, around South America and across the Pacific. Darwin's account is a collage of observations, a literal catalog of the various specimens — plants, reptiles and birds — he encountered. Chapter seventeen offers an account of an archipelago located some six hundred miles off the coast of Chile — the Galapagos Islands. Darwin describes this island cluster “all formed of volcanic rocks” in an exploratory tone of discovery and with a unique certainty. Yet the discovery in many ways is not of the islands themselves, but of the way in which they are seen and processed (Darwin 332).

Darwin leaves nothing to the imagination. Illustrating the Galapagos through systematic observation and the rational analysis of physical evidence, Darwin's scientific perspective on nature is based on the philosophy that all things *can* be understood completely. Confident and methodical, Darwin's perspective on nature is full of certainty, answering all the questions and supplying all the causes of the

island's creation. "The islands owe their origin," he writes "to eruptions of volcanic mud without any lava":

... As all these craters apparently have been formed when standing in the sea, and as the waves from the trade wind and the swell from the open Pacific here unite their forces on the southern coasts of all the islands, this singular uniformity in the broken state of the craters, composed of the soft and yielding tuff, is easily explained...

(332-333)

Darwin's Galapagos are "easily explained," observed physically rather than experienced emotionally (a stark contrast to Emerson's bare common). Darwin's vision reduces the islands to a landscape devoid of mystery, without the slightest ambiguity and with origins certain and known. This "singular uniformity in the broken state" of the island's surface is found in Darwin's eye, which seeks and — using science — subsequently finds conclusion everywhere. To the untrained (unscientific) eye the *islands'* surface appears broken; yet with Darwin's scientific knowledge that brokenness is made whole. Such a perspective smoothes over the rough edges of the Galapagos' crumbled surface, closing the open circuits with science. Any lack of symmetry or mystery is explained away with empirical reason and cause. How things were created, when they were created, and why they were created are no longer left to the imagination. "Hence, both in space and time," Darwin says of being on the island, "we seem to be brought somewhat near to that great fact — that mystery of mysteries" (Darwin 352). Though Darwin is brought

nearer to the mystery, he replaces the mystery with a knowledge supported exclusively by the systemic processing of scientific observation. Unlike Emerson's transparent eyeball, the scientific eye reduces the Galapagos' landscape to an almost mechanical structure, rather than conceptualizing the islands as a living thing with unpredictable and individual characteristics. Darwin's is an eye that renders the landscape predictable. For example, from Darwin's perspective he observes that the islands are, "chiefly caused by the singularly low temperature of the surrounding water, brought here by the great southern Polar current" (Darwin 334). Such an explanation is based on reason and does not allow further interpretation (in fact, it is an end to individual interpretation); rather, like clock work nature is presented as a finite system, knowable, predictable, and, as will be seen, capable of being caught and harnessed.

Darwin's relationship to nature in *The Voyage of the Beagle* is more stable than Emerson's relationship to nature because of its foundation in physical fact and reason rather than imagination. However, though situated geographically upon the exact same landscape, Melville's Encantadas could not be further from Darwin's Galapagos. In an odd juxtaposition with "The Masthead," "The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles," is a story in which Melville parodies Darwin in order to criticize Darwin's reason-based rendition of the Galapagos—and to do so Melville embraces Emerson's metaphysical perspective on nature. Published in 1854 as a series of

sketches in *Putnam's Magazine*, "The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles" are emphatically *Melville's* islands despite their being based on the Galapagos (Parker 525).

This dichotomy between reason and imagination marks the difference between the Galapagos and the Encantadas. In fact, Melville's short story suggests that a foundation in physical fact and reason comes at nature's expense. While Darwin's relationship with nature brings it closer, rendering it knowable and calculable, he risks — paradoxically — a greater estrangement from nature. As in chapter seventeen in *Voyage*, the natural world evolves into something inorganic that can be tallied:

| Name of Island | Total Number of Species | Number of species found in other parts of the world | Number of species confined to the Galapagos Archipelago | Number confined to the one island | Number of Species confined to the Galapagos Archipelago but found on more than the one island |
|----------------|-------------------------|---|---|-----------------------------------|---|
| James          | 71                      | 33  | 38  | 30                                | 8   |
| Albemarle      | 4                       | 18  | 26  | 22                                | 4   |
| Chatham        | 32                      | 16  | 16  | 12                                | 4   |
| Charles        | 68                      | 39  | 29  | 21                                | 8   |

(or 29, if the probably imported plants be subtracted.)

(Darwin 355)

To an eye that subscribes solely to a scientific perspective, it's hard to find an abstract quality in such a chart (especially living in a culture so heavily inundated by statistical charts). But what Darwin provides here is a new way of looking at nature — contrary to Emerson's imaginative transparent eyeball — containing everything Melville found lacking in Emerson. Darwin's is a vision of materiality that abolishes an emotional experience with the living (and unpredictable) environment and replaces it with a symmetrical, *natural world*, as seen through the lens of science— or a “singular uniformity in the broken state” (Darwin 335). The unexplainable and mysteriously broken island of crumbling rock is not characterized but rather cataloged in a way that mends the mystery with scientific theory and explanation. Cataloged items, in Darwin's view, become *species*, or things valued as numbers of “snakes, frogs, tortoises...” (Darwin 330). However, their individual significance is altered when categorized and tallied. They become *elements* of nature, and their mystery or individualism is deflated by the numbers they compose and by the data they hold inside them.

“I opened the stomachs of several [lizards],” Darwin writes, “and found them largely distended with minced sea-weed (*Ulvae*), which grows in thin foliaceous expansions of a bright green or a dull red colour” (345). Darwin's descriptions imply a totality; providing observations of species' behaviors, habitat, markings and size, he seemingly leaves nothing out — even the contents of their stomachs. In seeking to know the animals, plants and geological structures

empirically – inside and out – Darwin understands nature as physical matter and material components, and nothing more. Darwin’s macroscopic perspective is firmly rooted in the physical reality of nature and in a belief that reason and rationalism (in contrast to imagination and emotion) provide sound guidance in dealing with nature. After reading “The Masthead,” we can imagine Melville’s perspective aligning completely with Darwin’s. Contra Emerson, Ishmael’s momentary lapse of regard for the physical reality of natural facts (which nearly sends him to his death) marks the arrival of a perspective not unlike Darwin’s on the Galapagos – one that disdains imaginative departures.

However, Darwin’s perspective soon becomes problematic. As he tallies and dissects, calculates and catalogs, an indifference to their individual significance is lost in their being a part of species. “Their meat to my taste is indifferent,” Darwin admits tellingly, after eating some of his tortoise specimens whose individual significance is lost – the loss of which Darwin appears indifferent to (Darwin 346). But individuality is not lost on Melville, as is evident in his rebuttal to Darwin, “The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isle.” Instead of voicing a similar perspective, as readers might expect, “The Encantadas” reveals Darwin’s complete disconnection from the mysteries and ambiguities ever-present in nature, as well as the limitations and dangers of valuing nature only for what it expresses physically. Unlike Darwin’s static and measurable Galapagos, Melville’s Encantadas possess an “apparent fleetingness and unreality,” which is the “reason for the Spaniards calling

them the Encantadas, or Enchanted Group” (Melville 136). The weather on these *enchanted* Galapagos is unpredictable, mystery is present in all aspects of the islands, including their climate and location: “Indeed, there are seasons when currents quite unaccountable prevail for a great distance round about the total group, and are so strong and irregular as to change a vessel’s course against the helm, though sailing at the rate of four or five miles the hour” (Melville 137).

Compared to the weather of Darwin’s Galapagos, which is “chiefly caused by the singularly low temperature of the surrounding water, brought here by the great southern Polar current,” these islands possess a supernatural quality that is “unaccountable,” “irregular,” and ambiguously composed of mystery (Darwin 334, Melville 137). Even more extreme, the Encantadas’ actual location possesses a supernatural quality that gives them the impression of being a series of duplicate islands, mirroring another set in existence (which of course they actually do—with Darwin’s islands) and transcending both time and space:

The difference in the reckonings of navigators produced by these causes, along with the light and variable winds, long nourished a persuasion that there existed two distinct clusters of isles in the parallel of the Encantadas, about a hundred leagues apart...and as late as 1750 the charts of that part of the Pacific accorded with the strange delusion. And this apparent fleetingness and unreality of the locality of the isles was most probably one reason for the Spaniards calling them the Encantadas, or Enchanted Group (Melville 137).

Whether or not the result of an optical illusion or of an alternate reality, Melville puts forth an environment with a nature that is nonetheless explainable — only with uncertainty. The mirroring of two “parallel” and “distinct clusters” alludes to the dual existence of both the Encantadas *and* Darwin’s Galapagos; however, they also parody one another and illustrate two different ways of looking at nature.

As with his parody of Emerson in “The Masthead,” language is critical to Melville in “The Encantadas.” However, in a departure from the literary techniques he used to parody Emerson, Melville does not parody Darwin’s rhetoric and philosophy but rather his science. With his series of “enchanted” islands, Melville presents a nature that exists far beyond the compass of Darwin’s science; he places the Encantadas outside the realm of scientific classification and above rational patterns of nature and physical facts. Throughout the narrative, Melville utilizes an imaginative, mythical, and Romantic language. Illustrated by the narrator as a wasteland “grim and charred,” likened to “heaps of cinders dumped here and there in no particular order,” the Encantadas possess a bareness of mythical — and even biblical — proportions (Melville 134). The narrator asserts, for example, that “in no world but a fallen one could such a land exist” (Melville 146). The irony is that this description does describe the same landscape as Darwin’s — it is still rocky and volcanic, barren and broken — yet there is something far different about the chaos of Melville’s version. The difference lies in the language of Melville’s narrator, which alludes to Spenser’s “Fairy Queen,” Milton’s “Satan,” and to Daniel Boone

in order to present an alternative perspective on the same landscape — one based not on fact, but on human imagination.

What is the significance of a relationship with nature based on imagination and not on fact? Taken in a scientific mode, Melville's illustration of the Galapagos' landscape and its imaginative transcendence of physical facts resembles an Emersonian experience of nature. It is a landscape transformed by a leap of individual imagination that transcends reality, expands beyond the boundaries of time and space, and achieves a greater emotional connection. However, there is another crucial difference between the visions of Melville and Darwin's nature on the Galapagos. By providing a language for describing the unknown, Melville's Romantic vision accommodates the existence of all that science cannot — the *ambiguities* ever-present in nature.

Operating on the notion that science and reason can explain all things, Darwin's perspective is limited to the physical realm and thus excludes all that is undiscovered, shrouded in mystery, and ambiguous. Melville takes issue with this rationale in "The Encantadas," illustrating that mystery and ambiguities exist whether science allows for them or not. All the creatures Darwin tallies in his chart of island species are those he counted physically (Darwin 355). Melville's response to this seems to be: *do those uncounted not exist?* And further, given the possibility of the existence of things in the non-physical realm (the undiscovered), do these things invalidate Darwin's scientific perspective on nature?

While interpreting the Galapagos Islands Melville takes Emerson's side, indicating that even a scientific perspective can be subjective, that though a bare common may be just a bare common, there can always be more than meets the human eye. Science, a human law, can only account for what falls within its boundaries, providing, as Darwin put it, "uniformity in the broken state." However, as Melville suggests in his positioning the Encantadas *outside* conventional notions of time and space, some things might fall outside scientific locative and classification systems. Referred to as "fallen," Melville describes the Encantadas as "exempted in a good degree from both the oversight and the memory of human law" (Melville 180). This "human law" from which the islands are exempted implies the significance of their *otherness* and *outsider* position. However, their existence -- in spite of their position far outside human law -- leaves the narrator at a linguistic loss at how to explain them. Lacking in scientific or rational explanation, the Encantadas are rendered so completely foreign to the narrator of Melville's story that he sees no order and thus perceives the islands mythically, as a "broken," "vast wasteland." So, in correspondence with Emerson, Melville's narrator mends this brokenness through a Romantic transcendence and fusion by the imagination. An imaginative and emotional connection is therefore the only means to encompass the ineffable nature of the Encantadas, which mere physical facts cannot explain.

Like Emerson, Melville uses human imagination to transcend the limitations imposed by an exclusively physical relationship with nature. Myth compliments fact on the Enchanted Islands, enabling the existence of that which falls outside Darwin's limited scope of vision. Melville's imagination provides an expansion of Darwin's physical view of nature and incorporates the possibilities expressed by an individual imagination. In a direct parody of Darwin, Melville offers his own statistical breakdown of the islands' population, mimicking Darwin's empirical tone and tallying the island in his own "clean total of 11 million" (Melville 149):

|                       |            |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Men . . . . .         | none       |
| Anteaters . . . . .   | unknown    |
| Man-haters . . . . .  | unknown    |
| Lizards . . . . .     | 500,000    |
| Snakes . . . . .      | 500,000    |
| Spiders . . . . .     | 10,000,000 |
| Salamanders . . . . . | unknown    |
| Devils . . . . .      | unknown    |

(Melville 149)

This list expresses the limitations of Darwin's perspective on nature, given that it introduces the concept of the "unknown," the ambiguous. Melville provides his reader with all that is absent from Darwin's journal. "Clean totals" of 500,000 and 10,000,000 may seem absurd in contrast to "unknown" quantities; however, in providing these Melville points out the very real limitations of human perspective in

making a list such as this. This passage, like Emerson's "Nature," shows how human imagination not only develops an expanded view and relationship with nature, but also Romantically transcends "human law" to the point of supernatural. The ambiguity of such terms as "Man-hater" and "Ant-eater" represents a vast chasm of possibility because they can easily describe almost anything and nothing at the same time. Similarly, the category of "Devils," defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, contains everything from an evil spirit or demon to a mischievously clever, self-willed, or cruel person (O.E.D.). The power of these terms, and the large descriptive net they cast, force the reader to make assumptions based on their own individual perspective and association with these terms and the nature the terms represent. This is daunting given the millions of creatures that both *eat ants* and *hate men*, or could be considered "Devils." Melville's list provokes the reader to form their own relationship to the nature of Encantadas, just as Emerson does with the bare common in "Nature." For Melville and Emerson, nature is not a collection of physical facts, but rather a correspondence between the physical realm and the individual's imaginative eye. In providing a landscape that allows for ambiguities and the "unknown," Melville makes an argument against Darwin's scientifically and emotionally disconnected perspective on nature. "The Encantadas" is a counter-perspective to Darwin's Galapagos, one that is rooted in an imaginative and emotional relationship with nature, and which places a much greater significance on the role of the human element in its definition.

In contrast to Darwin's Galapagos, Melville's Encantadas illustrate not only the elements of the island's nature that science excludes, but also the people. "The Encantadas" provides a vastly different landscape socially. Stories like the "Dog King," "The Chola Widow," or the "Hermit Oberlus," present characters that are not only Romantic in their mythic and mysterious narratives but also in their existence *outside* the social realm of "human law" as well. All the characters in "The Encantadas" defy social classification and find themselves lumped in the ambiguous categories of "Runaways, Castaways; Solitaries...or Gravestones," as suggested by the title of the final sketch (Melville 180). Socially, the characters inhabit a world beyond the *order* of human society and its laws, a world that — despite its alienation from "civilized" society — exists nonetheless in human imagination. "Much thus, one fancies," says the narrator in the third sketch, [the Encantadas] "looks [like] the universe from Milton's celestial battlements. A boundless watery Kentucky. Here Daniel Boone would have dwelt content" (Melville 140). The Encantadas feature a landscape of myth and literary allusion, inspired by Milton, which is a forever-expanding home to a population of exceptions to the rules — Satanic outsiders ("Devils"), hermits and castaways, like the mythic masthead figures (Daniel Boone) that fall outside "human law" and history.

Melville's fictional parody of Darwin's documentation illustrates that science is still only one way (of many) in which humans relate to and communicate their

relationship with nature. As comparative texts, the greatest contrast between Melville's "The Encantadas" and Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* (Chapter 17) is that Melville presents a fictional account and Darwin a non-fictional account. It is obvious that Melville could have, in fact, written his own non-fictional account of the Galapagos, and yet he chose not to. A household name for more than a decade because of books such as *Typee* (1846), *White Jacket* (1847) and *Omoo* (1850), Melville would have been synonymous with a first-hand experience of the Pacific Ocean and sea life (Parker iv). Therefore, the reasons Melville challenged Darwin with fiction cuts to the heart of the matter between the two writers.

Darwin's Galapagos and Melville's Encantadas represent two distinctly different notions of truth, both of which developed from two separate experiences at the same location. When Melville landed with the *Acushnet* on the Galapagos he would have seen a strikingly different set of islands than Darwin had ten years earlier. One reason for this difference was in the very nature of the voyages Darwin and Melville took. Whereas the *Beagle's* voyage was purely exploratory, the *Acushnet's* (a whaler) was exploitative, out for commercial gains. By Melville's time, the islands were already known, their value assessed. Possessing no mystery, the Galapagos were being commodified when Melville visited; the islands' nature was to be carved up, boiled down, packaged, priced and sold in the form of exotic feathers for hats, and oil.

The second reason for the difference between Melville and Darwin's island experience was due in part to Darwin's account. *The Voyage of the Beagle* – widely read, in multiple printings both in England and the United States, and published as a second edition in 1845 – was a publishing success (Brown 145). One could easily suggest that Darwin's account in some way led to Melville's voyage, for without Darwin's *Voyage*, the Galapagos would have (at least for some time) remained either an *unknown* or another series of uncharted ambiguities. The fact that many of Melville's shipmates *and* readers were familiar with Darwin's account is important because it supports Melville's emphasis on the power of literary texts on the way nature is viewed.

The literary allusions of "The Encantadas" suggest not only the power of literary texts and the notions they create, but also the ways in which those texts and notions (read and preconceived) can change an entire landscape once it's experienced. In his parody of Darwin, Melville suggests that Darwin's popular account of the islands changed readers' view of them – even without their having visited the islands themselves. Meant as a text of scientific exploration, one can imagine that one of the *Voyage's* unintentional consequences was that readers began to see the Galapagos – and other areas of the Pacific Darwin visited – as a source of endless natural resources, ripe for the taking. Melville's "Encantadas" can therefore be read as an attempt to return (or rewrite) the island to its mysterious, pre-Darwinian state, to the origin of its species. Already known and, in a sense,

ruined, fiction and the Romantic imagination provide Melville with the only means to replenish the Galapagos' diminishment. Melville's restoration is therefore a literary enchantment, which, in presenting a fiction, also provides a greater truth concerning the loss of the Galapagos, and a relationship with its nature deeper than any of Darwin's factual observations.

Melville's Romantic and allusive parody of Darwin in the heavily laden landscape of the Encantadas reminds readers of the impact human imagination can have on nature – in the books it writes and the voyages it inspires.

## V. *Fact and Fiction: Melville and the Nature of Parody*

Discussions of Herman Melville in the context of fact versus fiction continue to this day. An article in the most recent *New York Times Book Review* examines this subject as it relates to scholar Jay Parini's latest book, *The Passages of H.M.*, a historical novel based on the life of Melville. Megan Marshall's review suggests that Parini finds a higher truth in fiction as opposed to exclusively fact-based, historical biography. Marshall argues that – as with most historical novels – the central thematic thread of Parini's narrative is built on a Romantic and imaginative foundation. Describing Parini's Herman Melville as “a spokesman for the *fiction is more true than fact camp*,” Marshall critiques this novel about a

Herman Melville—as opposed to *the* Herman Melville — asking, “in this novel do we get at the truth of Herman Melville?” (Marshall 22).

Parini’s Romantic resurrection of a Herman Melville echoes Melville’s enchanted Galapagos, and Marshall’s pointed review, sounds off from a *masthead* not unlike the Pequod’s; both Parini and Marshall recapitulate the central argument Melville himself took up in his engagement with Emerson and Darwin. If history is a major obsession of American writers in the twentieth century, then nature certainly provided the fuel to literary fires in the nineteenth century. Whether musing on irreconcilable gaps in history, or irreconcilable gaps between man and nature, central to these discussions are the ways in which we construct truths about the world around us (historical, environmental) and the understanding of our position in the context of that world. Do we base our understanding of Nature on physical facts or on our individual imagination? Both Darwin and Emerson present convincing arguments, and Melville’s literary explorations of their theories illustrate his profound understanding as well as his conflicts. Unable to sever his literary and philosophical explorations from either a physical grounding in fact *or* a transcendent imagination, Melville found a middle ground in parody and investigated the possibilities of imagination without losing sight of shore.

Melville’s “Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles” parodies Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*, presenting an alternative to Darwin’s Galapagos that mirrors the real islands, yet reflects its inherent opposite, in order to reveal its flaws. Similarly, “The

Masthead” chapter in *Moby Dick* offers a critical reading of Emerson’s “Nature” when Ishmael is thrown almost literally on his head. In both of these instances, Melville’s parodic mode of discourse allows him to argue against their perspectives on nature. Flawed by their limited scope of vision, their attempt at reconciliation with nature by fact or imagination alone, and their endeavors to convey their misguided treatises of *Natures* to a general readership, Darwin and Emerson are depicted to be foolish at best, and dangerous at worst. However, Melville’s parodies can also be characterized as a two-way mirror; they provide a platform for criticism but also demonstrate Melville’s identification with and understanding of those he parodies. It is evident that, for Melville, criticism and identification are inseparable.

Melville’s vision of nature, depicted in “The Encantadas” and “The Masthead,” can be understood as an exploration of the irreconcilable state of brokenness, or gap, inherent in the relationship between man and nature – and the ways that man attempts to remedy that state by force. To borrow again from Emily Dickinson, those who *block up* the gaps by inserting the “thing that caused it” are of great interest to Melville (Dickinson, line 2, 546). Indeed, many of his works focus on characters (or narrators) whose narratives are fundamentally reflected in their efforts to “solder the abyss” (line 5, 546). Melville’s parodies of Emerson and Darwin suggest the *thing* that caused this gap inherent between man and nature – and that which mankind uses to block it up – is the human perspective itself. Darwin and Emerson endeavor to breach the brokenness between man and nature,

to fill the gap with philosophy and science, but science and philosophy are the very things that Melville suggests have created and perpetuated that gap. Thus, Melville's criticism of Emerson and Darwin is that each narrates an experience that claims to reconcile man and nature, yet both perpetuate this disconnection — a disconnection that Melville finds intolerable.

Melville's textual response to Darwin and Emerson invites the question of whether a reconciliation with nature is even possible for man if that reconciliation would require mankind to shed its *mankindness*, its inherent perspective. I suggest that Melville answers this question by providing his own alternative to Emerson and Darwin through parody. Utilizing parody not simply as a literary technique but as way of reconciling two inherently disconnected perspectives, Melville demonstrates the potential and possibilities for a reconciliation of two seemingly oppositional schools of thought: Science and Romanticism, the natures of Darwin and Emerson. When Ahab cries out to the severed cranium of a whale, "speak, thou mighty head and tell us the secret thing that is in thee, of all divers, thou has dived the deepest" (Melville 39), he speaks to a creature whose being—or closer yet, whose *nature* — is so far from his own. Melville's sympathies with and criticisms of Darwin and Emerson follow this same pattern. When Melville likens Emerson to a fish in his letter to Edward Duyckinck — or explores "The Encantadas" or the high seas from "The Masthead" — he implies that all human relationships (with nature, history...) are irreparably broken due to the disconnection inherent in an individual human

perspective. According to the conclusions of both “The Encantadas” and “The Masthead,” any additional perspective, no matter how perfect or objective it may seem, will only serve to widen the gaps it attempts to close by leaving something or someone out...eventually. Therefore, Melville uses parody as a sort of *anti-perspective* or a counter vision, within which he aligns his vision to that of another (opposite his own) while at the same time providing a space for criticism. In contrast to someone like Emerson, who suggested that “imitation is suicide,” Melville imitates and commits *not* suicide but rather a form of reproduction – the very basis of nature itself – reproducing Emerson’s rhetoric and philosophy for the purpose of negating and refuting him (Emerson 251). For Melville, parody as an anti-perspective establishes a composite, or bifocal vision, through which he can explore Emerson’s nature of transcendental imagination *or* Darwin’s nature of physical fact without relinquishing his personal experience— a unified vision that balances the polarities in a relationship based on disconnection. When applied to real nature itself, as Melville does in his depiction of Ahab, parody achieves a transcendent *and* grounded relationship with nature by emulating nature while never losing sight of its broken opposite (mankind). Conceived of as parody, Melville’s nature fills in the gap inherent – not with that which created the gaps, but with a mirror that completes a circuit where the *parodied* and the *parody* are taken as two parts of a whole. One can therefore view Ahab’s lonely soliloquy as an image of both the reflector and the reflected – “O Nature, and O soul of man! how far

beyond all utterance are your linked analogies” (Melville 250). Melville’s is a vision that constitutes a new relationship with nature, one that “has its cunning duplicate in mind” (250).

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