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## Melville and Nietzsche: Living the Death of God

Mark Anderson

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MARK ANDERSON

MELVILLE AND NIETZSCHE:  
LIVING THE DEATH OF GOD

**Abstract.** Herman Melville was so estranged from the religious beliefs of his time and place that his faith was doubted during his own lifetime. In the middle of the twentieth century some scholars even associated him with nihilism. To date, however, no one has offered a detailed account of Melville in relation to Nietzsche, who first made nihilism a topic of serious concern to the Western philosophical tradition. In this essay, I discuss some of the hitherto unexplored similarities between Melville's ideas and Nietzsche's reflections on and reactions to the death of God and the advent of nihilism in the West.

SCHOLARS LONG AGO EXPOSED the black vein of nihilism that runs through Herman Melville's life and thought. But the majority of those who have endeavored to track its course have lacked the philosophical background prerequisite to a thorough exploration, and their works are now many years old.<sup>1</sup> The most notable exception is *All Things Shining*, the recent effort of two professors of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, however, as I have previously argued in these pages, the authors of this book are less interested in the reality of Melville than in constructing of him an image to turn to their own particular purposes.<sup>3</sup> In this essay I propose to lay out in some detail the surprising similarities between Melville's ideas and Friedrich Nietzsche's account of the death of God and the nihilism that threatens as a consequence of His passing. There is more to be said on this subject than can be treated conveniently in a single essay, but I shall make every effort to provide here a generous supply of the relevant information.<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1876, Melville published *Clarel*, a book-length poem in four parts, of approximately eighteen thousand lines, that narrates the journey of a young divinity student (Clarel) through the Holy Land in the company of a shifting variety of religious, irreligious, and philosophically inclined travelers. The substance of the poem reflects Melville's lifelong psychological-spiritual-philosophical journey. The setting of the poem was inspired by his physical journey from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and back twenty years earlier, during which time he also visited Italy, Greece, and Egypt. Melville kept a journal during his Mediterranean travels, and his entries give voice throughout to a nihilistic worldview, a gloomy and equivocal view that resurfaces in *Clarel*.

In the winter of the year that Melville's poem appeared, Friedrich Nietzsche spent several months in Sorrento, Italy, at the invitation of his friend Malwida von Meysenbug. Ensnared in the Villa Rubinacci, Nietzsche and his fellow houseguests spent their days in walks and conversations, and their evenings writing. During this time Nietzsche experienced a growing estrangement from the metaphysical idealism of Schopenhauer, as he had expressed it in, for example, *The Birth of Tragedy*, and under the influence of his rationalist friend Paul Rée he began to develop the positivist mode of thought that characterizes his so-called "middle period." His intellectual activities in Italy would lead to his book *Human, All Too Human*, which, he later informs us, "was written in the main in Sorrento."<sup>5</sup> This book, if not itself an account of the death of God, certainly marks the beginning of Nietzsche's movement in that direction. See, for example, his description of the work in *Ecce Homo* as a "monument of rigorous self-discipline with which I put a sudden end to all my infections with 'higher swindle,' 'idealism,' 'beautiful feelings,' and other effeminacies" (*BWN*, p. 744). He also makes a point of associating the book with his later ideas and philosophical projects, in particular his assault on metaphysics and his revaluation of values, both of which are directly related to his insights into the death of God and the advent of nihilism (*BWN*, p. 745).

In order to provide the relevant philosophical background in which to consider Melville in relation to Nietzsche's ideas, I offer the following general account of Nietzsche's understanding of nihilism, which we may divide into two parts or phases.<sup>6</sup> The first manifestation of nihilism, which we may call "metaphysical nihilism," amounts in brief to the rejection of belief in any metaphysical reality or truth (which is really what the death of God amounts to); the second, which we may refer to as "psychological nihilism," is the condition of despair or depression

resulting from the assumption that without metaphysical truth the world is valueless and life is not worth living.

Nietzsche approves of the first type of nihilism, metaphysical nihilism, and we may, I believe, fairly label him a nihilist in this sense of the word. Of the second type of nihilism, psychological nihilism, Nietzsche vehemently disapproves, and he struggled to resist it himself. When he claims in a late note that he had been “the first perfect nihilist of Europe,” but that he has “lived through the whole” of it, “leaving it behind, outside himself,”<sup>7</sup> I read him as claiming to have lived through and left behind psychological nihilism. It mustn’t have been easy, for even Zarathustra comes perilously close to succumbing to nihilism in its guise as nausea at the eternal recurrence of small and despicable men.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche’s desire, often expressed, to be a Yes-sayer (*Ja-sager*) involves his striving to affirm every aspect and element of the world rather than nihilistically to deny or disparage anything or anyone. It is, as I say, a struggle, which is why Nietzsche must remind himself repeatedly that this is what he is after.

Anyone who has thought his way into metaphysical nihilism will find it difficult to avoid psychological nihilism. In fact, if one fails to consider the matter carefully, metaphysical nihilism *may actually induce* psychological nihilism. Nietzsche discusses this phenomenon in a note on nihilism “as a psychological state” written around the same time as the note from which I have quoted just above (*WP* §12). Here, Nietzsche explains that a man descends into psychological nihilism by having and then losing faith in the “aim,” “unity,” and “truth” of the universe. That the universe has no *aim* means that it has no objective *telos*, no goal to which it is heading through an inherent motive force, either its own natural force or a force infused by a deity. In short, universal movement and change do not track any particular course; events just happen, Becoming just is, all things flow without purpose, plan, or teleological directionality. That the universe has no *unity* means that we are not part of any greater organizing whole, nor are we modes of the deity, emanations of the One, or the articulate productions of a heavenly creator. We do not stand in the context of or exist in relation to any superior structure or system; we do not fit into an overarching rational whole, like pieces of a puzzle safe in their proper position. That the universe lacks *truth* means in this instance that there is no “true world,” no realm of Being, in which the aim and unity absent from the eternally cycling current of Becoming may reside. Some may chase the dream of a transcendent realm of pure Being as a defensive reaction to losing their faith in the aim and unity of

*this* world, hoping to discover beyond the barren void a fullness in some other state of existence, a state attainable either now through meditation or prayer, for example, or after death for those who merit the reward. But when these dreamers realize that they have fabricated this ideal of Being from weakness and the fear of the reality of Becoming—that is, *if* they realize this; some, perhaps most, will not—then through this realization they will have rejected the imaginary “true world” and will, thereby, have taken the final step into nihilism as a psychological state, which is to say, into the depressive condition of psychological nihilism. This, as I have noted, is the view that the world is valueless, the world as taken to include oneself, which by implication must be regarded as valueless too. One had thought of oneself as having value *precisely through* the aim, unity, and truth of the world of which one is a part, but now that one no longer believes in these categories, one finds no source of value at all. To quote Nietzsche on this: “The categories ‘aim,’ ‘unity,’ ‘being’ which we used to project some value into the world—we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*” (*WP* §12).

I have referred to “losing faith” in these three categories, but the descent into nihilism actually requires that one lose faith in one aspect of their application only, while continuing to accept another. One must cease to believe that the categories apply to reality—which is to say that one must be a metaphysical nihilist—but one must retain one’s belief that they are the sources (the *only possible* sources) of the value of existence. Without this latter belief as to the source of value, the rejection of one’s former belief in metaphysics will not generate the conclusion that the world is valueless—it will not lead to psychological nihilism. Nietzsche stresses this himself, remarking that “nihilism as a psychological state” may be overcome, or avoided altogether, by rejecting the metaphysics of these categories *and also* their supposed existential import. In his own words, we must “give up our faith in [these categories],” for “once we have devaluated [them], the demonstration that they cannot be applied to the universe is no longer any reason for devaluating the universe” (*WP* §12). In short, we must lose faith not only in the reality of these categories but also in their role as guarantors of value: in this way, we shall be metaphysical nihilists without succumbing also to psychological nihilism. The distinction is important, for Nietzsche regards metaphysical nihilism as potentially liberating, as providing for the healthy and powerful man an opportunity for a Dionysian affirmation of life, whereas he regards psychological nihilism as the deplorable condition of the life-denying weak and timid man. For the right type of man, then, for

the sort of man Nietzsche admires and strives to be himself, metaphysical nihilism is a cheerful, emancipating event. If God never really was the source of meaning and value, then His passing undermines nothing. And although His death may distress those too feeble to stand on their own, the higher types will celebrate their radical independence and with Nietzsche strive to be Yes-sayers. For such men, the nihilistic consequences of God's demise are "like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn."<sup>9</sup>

I turn now to Melville's recognition of the death of God and his own struggles with nihilism, and I approach the subject through the door of epistemology. But before I address the long bleak period of Melville's life and thought, a period that includes both his Mediterranean travels and his composition of *Clarel*, I should provide some account of *Moby-Dick*, for in addition to demonstrating that Melville shared, and in fact *anticipated*, Nietzsche's recognition of the death of God and the onset of nihilism in the West, I intend to display their different personal reactions to these phenomena. We shall see not only that Melville in his *Moby-Dick* period effortlessly achieved a state of "happiness . . . exhilaration . . . dawn" as a result of God's demise, a state, in short, of jubilant affirmation, which Nietzsche himself had constantly to strive to match, but also that Melville could not sustain this condition and eventually sank more deeply into psychological nihilism than Nietzsche ever did.

In a late chapter of *Moby-Dick* entitled "The Gilder," Ishmael observes, "There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence's doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally."<sup>10</sup> This is not Nietzsche's eternal return of course, meaninglessness repeated ad infinitum, which Nietzsche often employs as an image of nihilism. But it is an expression of goallessness, of an antiteleological view of human life. And here is another:

Were this world an endless plain, and by sailing eastward we could for ever reach new distances, and discover sights more sweet and strange than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon, then there was promise in the voyage. But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, sometime or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed. (*MD*, p. 237)

But quite apart from the fiction of *Moby-Dick*, Melville expressed these same ideas in his own voice, as, for example, when during this period (April 1851) he wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne, "We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little information upon certain points Himself."<sup>11</sup>

If there is no end to our pursuit, no answers to the questions we put to the universe, no essences as objects of knowledge, then there is no God, certainly no god as conceived either by Plato or by traditional Christianity, God as the source and ground of reality and objective truth. And the deep ontological relativism, or (to employ a Nietzschean term) perspectivism, that must be the result of this appears, for example, in the chapter of *Moby-Dick* entitled "The Doubloon." In a previous chapter ("The Quarter-Deck"), Ahab nailed a doubloon to the mainmast as a reward for the first man to spy the great white whale. In "The Doubloon," various men inspecting the coin impose a variety of interpretations on the images inscribed on its face. The second mate, Stubb, overhearing these many interpretations, eventually remarks, "There's another rendering now; but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see" (*MD*, p. 434). But Stubb does not penetrate as deeply into the problem as does Ishmael, who earlier in this same chapter reflects that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher" (*MD*, p. 430). Stubb observes epistemological relativism: different interpretations but still one text, "one kind of world." But Ishmael ponders ontological relativism: the relativism resulting from a fundamental lack of essences and objective meaning, the possibility that (and here I employ another Nietzschean formulation) there are no facts, only interpretations. Or, to express the idea in Melville's own voice, by citing the same letter to Hawthorne from which I have quoted above: "And perhaps, after all, there is *no* secret. We incline to think that the Problem of the Universe is like the Freemason's mighty secret, so terrible to all children. It turns out, at last, to consist in a triangle, a mallet, and an apron—nothing more!" (*C*, p. 186). Melville understands that this sort of universe—or, to return to *Moby-Dick*—this sort of world, a world that is *not* at bottom "one kind of world," would be "an empty cipher," which is to say, he understands that metaphysical nihilism follows upon the death of God.

Although Melville appears at times to stress the value of truth in a manner that Nietzsche would not countenance, a careful inspection of his use of the word tends to minimize the difference. In a letter from his *Moby-Dick* period in which he praises Hawthorne's "intense

feeling of the visable truth," Melville explains that he has in mind "the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him" (*C*, p. 186). And in *Moby-Dick* itself he writes that "in landlessness alone lies the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God," providing further insight into his meaning by adding, "so better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!" (*MD*, p. 107). So "truth" for Melville has less to do with an *adaequatio intellectus ad rem* than with the fearless expression of "the tragicalness of human thought in its own unbiased, native, and profounder workings" (*C*, p. 186). Properly understood, then, even Melville's references to "truth" ring with a Nietzschean tone. To seek or state the truth is not to strive for correspondence or reference but rather to look into the abyss without fear of the abyss glaring back.

Melville seems to have learned these things, or to have been set on his way to learning them, as a young sailor at sea encountering a plurality of exotic worldviews and developing a facility for inhabiting multiple perspectives. He saw through Christianity while seeing into native paganism in person, through the direct experience of roaming around the Pacific islands. In his early twenties, at an age when Nietzsche was but a schoolboy, a studious scholar in training reading ancient history and philosophy books in his cramped apartment by candlelight, Melville was working aboard a whaling ship; brazenly deserting his post, trekking into the wilds of a jungle, and winding up captive to a warrior tribe of cannibals; bathing with a pagan beauty in the pristine interior of a Polynesian isle; escaping from cannibals; signing on to another ship only to join a mutiny and spend some days imprisoned in a Tahitian calaboose; escaping confinement by moonlight and making for Eimeo (known today as Moorea); working and wandering around the island for kicks; recklessly attempting to meet a Polynesian queen; and finally, joining the American navy just to hitch a ride home. His wild adventures at sea stretched on for four years.

We often say that Nietzsche was one of the few philosophers who really lived his ideas. This is true in some sense, but not at all in every sense: for how did Nietzsche live? For ten years he lived in a university town (Basel) as a professional pedagogue. After his early retirement he traveled through Europe by train and carriage from one hotel or rented room to another; roamed the streets and haunted the cafés of each town he visited, alone; jotted down his thoughts and wrote his books. Melville, on the other hand, lived indeed—in his youth anyway



he was an irrepressible wanderer, gathering experience through the sort of free-spirited exploits that a boyish academic like young Fritz could only read about in storybooks. Unlike Nietzsche, Melville had to do without the classical education he so craved. But as a compensation he dove headfirst into the realities Nietzsche was denied. In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche admits, and *laments*, the bookishness of his upbringing and education, his lack of practical, physical training. As a result of “our German education—its ‘idealism,’” he complains, he was as a youth “backward to the point of holiness.” The problem is that the sort of “classical education” he received “teaches one from the start to ignore *realities* and to pursue so-called ‘ideal goals’” (*BWN*, p. 693), precisely the variety of goal he spent most of his philosophical life railing against.

In any case, however Melville stands in relation to Nietzsche with respect to these things, he had experience of the world well beyond the confines of nineteenth-century New England provincialism, beyond the boundaries in particular of established Christianity. The heathens he encountered were no depraved devils (cannibals though some of them may have been!). In fact, to Melville’s mind they compared quite favorably to the ignorant and often brutal missionaries sent out from the States to convert and save their poor pagan souls. Melville himself made this clear in his works, and for this he was censured by a variety of pious critics, including a few of his literary friends less intellectually daring than himself. In short, Melville was a “free spirit” among the hidebound New England faithful.

Melville’s worldliness enabled him to be the thinker and artist that he was, but shuffling through multiple perspectives like this can—and in Melville’s case most likely eventually did—result also in nihilism, as in Nietzsche’s note that “there are many kinds of eyes. Even the sphinx has eyes—and consequently there are many kinds of ‘truths,’ and consequently there is no truth” (*WP* §540). Perhaps something like this, the potentially deflating consequences of this, combined with professional failures and familial hardships, finally brought Melville down into Nietzsche’s “nihilism as a psychological state,” or what I have called psychological nihilism.

Melville’s disenchantment with the world is evident in the journals he kept during his Mediterranean travels, and in the book, *Clarel*, that these travels inspired. Formerly a bright young romantic, Melville on the Mediterranean is a gloomy realist. He cannot project the great archaic myths and legends onto the modern landscapes he encounters, and he suffers from this incapacity. Delos, for example, the birthplace of Apollo

and site of the ancient Ionian festivals, once so “flowery in fable,” now presents “a most barren aspect.”<sup>12</sup> Patmos, too, is equally barren; and when, later, Melville looked upon this island’s “arid height,” his “spirit partook of the bareness” (*J*, p. 97). In *Clarel* Melville employs this same vocabulary, but he applies it to something far vaster and, one might think, much more inherently significant than a Greek island. Upon the death of his beloved, Clarel cries: “O blind, blind, barren universe!”<sup>13</sup> A barren universe is a godless universe, and whether the divine exists or not, the fact that faith in its presence has waned in the modern world is brought out in *Clarel* through a rhyme recited by the character Rolfe, which as well as any line in the poem expresses the death of God:

Flamen, flamen, put away  
 Robe and miter glorious:  
 Doubt undefies the day!  
 Look, in vapors odorous  
 As the spice-king’s funeral-pyre,  
 Dies the Zoroastrian fire  
 On your altars in decay:  
 The rule, the Magian rule is run,  
 And Mythra abdicates the sun! (*CL* 4.16.208–16)

Earlier in the poem the character Mortmain makes a similar point when he scrawls on a rock a verse headed “by one who wails the loss” (*CL* 2.31.43). The short poem is a lamentation of the death of God by way of a reflection on the constellation of the Southern Cross. It reads in full as follows:

Emblazoned bleak in austral skies—  
 A heaven remote, whose starry swarm  
 Like Science lights but cannot warm—  
 Translated Cross, hast thou withdrawn,  
 Dim paling too at every dawn,  
 With symbols vain once counted wise,  
 And gods declined to heraldries?  
 Estranged, estranged: can friend prove so?  
 Aloft, aloof, a frigid sign:  
 How far removed, thou Tree divine,  
 Whose tender fruit did reach so low—  
 Love apples of New-Paradise!  
 About the wide Australian sea

The planted nations yet to be  
 When, ages hence, they lift their eyes,  
 Tell, what shall they retain of thee?  
 But class thee with Orion's sword?  
 In constellations unadored,  
 Christ and the Giant equal prize?  
 The atheist cycles—*must* they be?  
 Fomentors as forefathers we? (*CL* 2.31.50–70)

Have the gods declined to heraldries, *mere* heraldries? The fear is that the cross, and all it represents—God foremost—has become a vacuous symbol, a signifier with nothing to signify.

Perhaps the starkest personal (as opposed to literary) statement of Melville's intellectual distance from the faith of his fathers is this, written as he sailed past Cyprus: "From these waters rose Venus from the foam. Found it as hard to realize such a thing as to realize on M<sup>t</sup> Olivet that from there Christ rose" (*J*, p. 95).

Was Melville, then, an atheist or anti-Christian? It is hard to say. Probably he could not have said himself. Or, like many thoughtful individuals, he would have provided different answers at different times, or mutely refrained from answering altogether. But my point is less about Melville's personal beliefs than about his insight into the spiritual condition of the West in his day. He understood that God is dead, and the only reason he did not formulate the fact in precisely these terms is that his literary proclivities ran more toward the labyrinthine than the aphoristic. His prose style, vocabulary, and conceptual inventory were influenced and informed more by Shakespeare, Milton, and Thomas Browne than by Plato, Kant, and Schopenhauer.<sup>14</sup>

No man for whom the Christian God is alive and well could have written *Clarel*, as no man who devoutly believed in a god under any conception could have written *Moby-Dick*. *Clarel* is something like a very long Platonic dialogue, in verse, with a multiplicity of interlocutors addressing or being overheard by a young student of theology. The very characters and context prepare the ground for a relentless interrogation of God's existence and the purpose and significance of human life, and the content is unrelenting indeed. Every perspective, including the most thoroughly atheistic, is given a hearing, and as to the effect of the whole, one could do no better in describing it than to paraphrase Melville's own formula from *Moby-Dick* and say that it leads one round the course of unconscious spell, thoughtless faith, doubt, skepticism,

and disbelief, with a pondering pause at If before beginning the cycle again, and then again, eternally.

As we have seen, Melville knew well before his Mediterranean tour that the world is disenchanted, in the sense, that is, of lacking any indication of objective meaning, truth, or value as traditionally understood by the Platonist philosopher or the Christian theologian. During the period he wrote *Moby-Dick*, Melville was no simple believer. He did not, however, *suffer* from the absence of any God or gods; he did not regard the universal void as a “barrenness.” In those days, Melville was “young and healthy,”<sup>15</sup> physiologically robust in a Nietzschean sense. At age thirty-one he made the famous trip to Monument Mountain with a group of friends and associates, during which excursion he first made the acquaintance of Hawthorne. While on this ramble, Melville leapt without a care onto a rock that projected out beyond the cliffs, a feat that made others in the party nervous and queasy. On another occasion, he scurried up a tall tree, sat on a precarious branch, and called out to the approaching members of his party. He notoriously drove his wagon with wild abandon, and he regularly tramped out for walks and hikes of miles. Melville in his early thirties was, in short, full of vigor and overflowing with instinctive power. Indeed, despite the high pitch to which his intellect had by this time developed, Melville’s conscious mind did not inhibit the workings of his unconscious vitality. J. E. A. Smith’s recollection that Melville in the Berkshires often “threw off thoughts suggested by the locality or the incidents of the day, although he seemed as unconscious of any effort as of his breathing or the beating of his heart. It was involuntary” reminds one for all the world of Nietzsche’s reflections on the superiority of free-flowing unconscious activity, as in his remark that “artists . . . [know] only too well that precisely when they no longer do anything ‘voluntarily’ but do everything of necessity, their feeling of freedom, subtlety, full power, of creative placing, disposing, and forming reaches its peak.”<sup>16</sup> Here we have an apt description of Melville at this time, a powerful artist who was (to return to Smith’s account) “full of jovial life and enthusiasm . . . ; one whose like is rarely found.”

All this is to say that whatever the state of the world, as *himself* when writing *Moby-Dick*, and through Ishmael the character he created, Melville confronted the world as a Nietzschean *Ja-sager*. He transcended the intellectual’s facile dichotomy of belief and unbelief, rose above even the philosopher’s “pondering repose of If,” and understood that one must always “trace the round again . . . eternally.” Because of this

understanding, together with his affirmative cheerfulness in the face of it, we might say that Melville possessed a joyful wisdom and call him downright Zarathustran. Through his Ishmael, Melville revels in exploring the deepest matters, which inevitably prompt unanswerable questions. The uncertainty does not unsettle him; rather, it thrills him, spins him up, and spurs him on. From the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick* we encounter a mind that delights in exploring the labyrinths of life's great imponderables:

Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all. (*MD*, p. 5)

*Moby-Dick* is, among many other things, Melville's record of swimming in pursuit of this phantom without drowning.

Melville during his *Moby-Dick* period experienced such a sustained mood of liberated and self-sufficing exultation that he could insist on and celebrate not only the greatness of his achievement but also its antinomianism, immoralism, even "wickedness," in terms that prefigure in an extraordinary way Nietzsche's own most boldly expressed self-assessments. When Nietzsche refers to *Beyond Good and Evil* as a "frightful" book that flowed from his soul "very black, almost [as from a] squid,"<sup>17</sup> one cannot help but recall Melville's comparison of *Moby-Dick* to whale blubber that must be cooked up to get oil out of it (*C*, p. 162), and his warning to his friend Sarah Morewood not to read the book because it "is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships' cables & hawsers. A Polar wind blows through it, & birds of prey hover over it." And when he advises Morewood in this same letter to "warn all gentle fastidious people from so much as peeping into the book" (*C*, p. 206), one thinks of Nietzsche's remark to his friend Meta von Salis that one must read *Beyond Good and Evil* "with clinched teeth."<sup>18</sup>

Nietzsche concludes *Beyond Good and Evil* by describing the contents of the book as the "sudden sparks and wonders of my solitude . . . my old beloved—*wicked* thoughts" (*BGE* §296). It is hard to resist setting beside this Melville's remark in a letter to Hawthorne that "I have written a *wicked* book, and feel spotless as the lamb" (*C*, p. 212; my italics). One

thinks as well of Melville's referring in a previous letter (*C*, p. 196) to "the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled" and to "the book's motto (the secret one),—Ego non baptizo te in nomine," the rest of which formula he advised Hawthorne to make out himself: it is, in fact, the beginning of a passage that Melville had read in an essay on witchcraft entitled "Superstition and Knowledge" (from 1823, by Francis Palgrave, but published anonymously) that runs "Ego non baptizo te in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti—sed *in nomine Diaboli*" (my italics).

Nietzsche had previously written, in a book to which *Beyond Good and Evil* was originally intended as a sequel and expansion, "We investigators are, like all conquerors, discoverers, seafarers, adventurers, of an audacious morality and must reconcile ourselves to being considered on the whole evil."<sup>19</sup> Melville, of course, was the authentic seafaring adventurer here, and as for being considered evil, and quite apart from the rebukes he received in the press for his ironical-critical treatment of Christianity, and the animosity of his Pittsfield neighbors who resented his refusal to attend church, he himself once claimed to have summoned *Moby-Dick* with an "evil art" (*C*, p. 209).

Melville could, like Nietzsche much later, affirm his free-spirited accomplishment because of his *übermenschlich* state of well-being. When in *Moby-Dick* he depicts Ishmael as depressed when he goes to sea (as in "Loomings") but as improving while watching Queequeg conduct his pagan rites, and then even turning pagan himself (in "A Bosom Friend"), Melville alludes to his own ability to occupy and affirm various perspectives in the wake of the death of God. "I felt a melting in me," his Ishmael says. "No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it" (*MD*, p. 51).

As further evidence of Melville's psychological-spiritual condition, consider his account of the "free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" that enables his Ishmael, even "in some time of extreme tribulation" and "in the very midst of his earnestness"—as, for example, when confronting death in a little harpoon boat attacked by a whale—to consider the whole affair a good-natured joke. Indeed, for this variety of philosopher, in the whole of life "nothing dispirits, and nothing seems worth while disputing. He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby," and looks on the world "tranquilly and contentedly" (*MD*, p. 226). Finally, consider the following expression of affirmation that follows from the *gaya scienza* of Melville's desperado philosophy:

But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve around me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy. (*MD*, p. 389)

Nietzsche likely never fully attained so complete an affirmation of a godless world in his own person, and as sickly as he was throughout his life, he most definitely did not attain the Zarathustran state *physically*, as Melville did during his *Moby-Dick* period. But this Melville, this Massachusetts Zarathustra, did not live long. By his mid-thirties, after the decline of his literary fortunes, and as his Mediterranean journals attest, Melville fell into a quiet despair that in later years at best resolved into a mellow Schopenhauerian resignation. When he visited Hawthorne on his way to the Holy Land, the latter lamented in his diary what he regarded as the deleterious consequences of his old friend's deep-diving, inquisitive mind, noting that Melville "persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro" in thought and speculation concerning "Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken." To this characteristic of Melville's way of being Hawthorne seems to have attributed the fact that his friend had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated" (*J*, p. 628).

Hawthorne described Melville at this meeting as looking like his old self but "perhaps a little sadder," and he opined that his friend's works, "for a long while past, have indicated a morbid state of mind" (*J*, p. 628). In short, Hawthorne observed Melville's decline in person. The "ontological heroics" that Melville, while writing *Moby-Dick*, looked forward to engaging in with Hawthorne over a drink were no longer sport for Ishmaeleian exuberance. Melville now was weary, enervated. Looking about him on his Mediterranean tour, all Melville can see is "the decayed picturesque" and "life after enthusiasm is gone" (*J*, pp. 71–72). This last phrase is telling, for although he applied it to the Greek islands, we may take it as indicative of the nihilistic perspective through which he contemplated them. And what is worse than this unbelief, Melville can no longer muster the old affirmation, the celebration of uncertainty, even of blank disbelief, of which he was so vibrantly capable in a healthier phase of life, a phase only recently passed chronologically but an eon gone as marked by the measure of his psychology.

No longer naive, in Schiller's sense of this term, Melville on his Mediterranean tour could not even attain to Schiller's sentimental

perspective. He was “afflicted,” as he put it, “with the great curse of modern travel—skepticism” (*J*, p. 97). For this he condemned the moderns, the Germans in particular, with their all-pulverizing enlightenment *Wissenschaft*: “Heartily wish Niebuhr and Strauss to the dogs,” he writes, “the deuce take their penetration & acumen. They have robbed us of the bloom. If they have undeceived anyone—no thanks to them” (*J*, p. 97). In *Clarel* he put the matter thus (through the character of Rolfe): “All now’s revised: / Zion, like Rome is Niebuhrized. / Yes, doubt attends” (*CL* 1.34.18–20).

Nietzsche seems never to have gone through an extended period of psychological nihilism similar to Melville’s post-*Moby-Dick* phase. For a time, of course, in his early period he was a Schopenhauerian pessimist, but only theoretically, and perhaps for only a very short time, though looking back in *Ecce Homo* he does castigate himself for “very earnestly deny[ing] my ‘will to life’ at the time when I first read Schopenhauer (1865)” (*BWN*, p. 693). But at worst Nietzsche suffered from disgust at the modern world and modern man, and sadness over certain personal disappointments (poor health, lack of readers, isolation, and loneliness). To this extent, at least, we might say that he succumbed to a form of psychological nihilism, even after the affirmation of *Zarathustra*. In fact, there is reason to believe that he judged himself incapable of reaching the heights of affirmation to which his *Zarathustra* could so effortlessly ascend, and that he created *Zarathustra* precisely to accomplish in writing what he could not accomplish himself through living.<sup>20</sup> Still, the dissimilarity to Melville is evident. Melville’s was a deep and abiding malaise, which perhaps in the end he transformed into a mild, content resignation but did not overcome into anything approaching Dionysian affirmation.

Yet despite Melville’s inability to live at peace with his philosophical insight into the godlessness of this world, we should give him his due for having had this insight and for pursuing its consequences so uncompromisingly. Nietzsche’s first statement of the death of God comes in 1882, but Melville announced His demise, if only indirectly, as early as 1851 in *Moby-Dick*. Melville, then, anticipated Nietzsche by a full *thirty years*, and it is worth remarking that he did so in an environment much less primed to engender the idea, and much more hostile to it, than the academic and philosophical circles of late-nineteenth-century Western Europe. It is also remarkable that, apart from Melville’s historical precedence, he also anticipated Nietzsche in terms of biographical chronology, realizing and exploring by age thirty what Nietzsche comes to see at thirty-six.



Quite apart from the tangle of problems that such questions of precedence might raise, however, I think we may without fear of cavil apply to Melville and Nietzsche both the following resonant, and in its way terrifying, line from *Clarel*:

Alone, and at Doubt's freezing pole  
He wrestled with the pristine forms  
Like the first man. (CL 1.17.194–96)

BELMONT UNIVERSITY

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1. See, for example, J. J. Boies, "Existential Nihilism and Herman Melville," *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* 50 (1961): 307–20; Joyce Carol Oates, "Melville and the Manichean Illusion," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 4, no. 1 (1962): 117–29 (revised as "Melville and the Tragedy of Nihilism," in *The Edge of Impossibility: Tragic Forms in Literature* [New York: Vanguard, 1972], pp. 61–83); Kingsley Widmer, *The Ways of Nihilism: Herman Melville's Short Novels* (Los Angeles: California State Colleges, 1970); Stanley Brodwin, "Herman Melville's *Clarel*: An Existential Gospel," *PMLA* 86, no. 3 (1971): 375–87; John E. Barnum, "Nihilism in Melville's *Moby Dick*," M.A. thesis, The College at Brockport, State University of New York (1972).
2. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
3. Mark Anderson, "Melville in the Shallows," *Philosophy and Literature* 36, no. 2 (2013): 496–503.
4. For more on this and related themes, see Mark Anderson, *Moby-Dick as Philosophy: Plato—Melville — Nietzsche* (Nashville: S.Ph. Press, 2015).
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 744; hereafter abbreviated *BWN*.
6. For a more detailed account of Nietzsche on the death of God and nihilism, see Mark Anderson, *Plato and Nietzsche: Their Philosophical Art* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 65–75.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), preface, §3; hereafter abbreviated *WP*.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 331.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), §343.
10. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston: Northwestern Newberry Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), p. 492; hereafter abbreviated *MD*.
11. Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern Newberry Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), p. 186; hereafter abbreviated *C*.
12. Herman Melville, *Journals*, ed. Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern Newberry Press and The Newberry Library, 1989), p. 71; hereafter abbreviated *J*.
13. Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston: Northwestern Newberry Press and The Newberry Library, 1991), 4.30.100; hereafter abbreviated *CL*, with part, canto, and line numbers provided in the text.
14. This is so despite the undeniable significance of Melville's conversations with George J. Adler concerning metaphysics and the philosophy of Kant while sailing to London in 1849.
15. This, and all other quotations concerning Melville in this paragraph, from Hershel Parker, "Melville and the Berkshires: Emotion-Laden Terrain, 'Reckless Sky-Assaulting Mood,' and Encroaching Wordsworthianism," in *American Literature: The New England Heritage*, ed. James Nagel and Richard Astro (New York: Garland, 1981), pp. 65–80. For more on Melville's psychological-existential condition during this period, see the relevant chapters of Parker's invaluable *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 1: 1819–1851* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §213, in *BWN*; hereafter abbreviated *BGE*.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Correspondence: Critical Edition), ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), no. 690 (April 21, 1886, to Heinrich Köselitz).
18. See Curtis Cate, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2005), p. 485.
19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §432.
20. On this, see Paul Loeb, "Ecce Superhomo: How Zarathustra Became What Nietzsche Was Not," in *Nietzsche's "Ecce Homo,"* ed. Duncan Large and Nicholas Martin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).