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Transcendental Mirrors: Thoreau's Pond, Poe's Sea, and Melville's Ocean

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Transcendental Mirrors: Thoreau's Pond, Poe's Sea, and Melville's Ocean

A Thesis

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in partial fulfillment of the
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in
English

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Relation to Water	2
Chapter 2: Water as a Mirror: The Reflection of Self	9
Chapter 3: Water as Glass: A Glimpse of Transformation	23
Works Cited	32
Vita	34

Abstract

Three seminal 19th-century North American literary works feature bodies of water which serve both as key elements in their narrative structure and as symbolic entities within their meaning systems. The protagonists in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Edgar Allan Poe's *A Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* literally define themselves in terms of their relation to these bodies of water. The best way to determine the function of water in the texts is to analyze the initial relationship between water and the central character, the way that water serves as a reflection of the Self, and the way that its Otherness suggests the ultimate possibility of transformation.

Bodies of still water are themselves like minds—transcendental mirrors, Platonic cameras to catch and hold the phenomenological long enough for the onlooker to grasp its reality, the eternal thing behind it. (21)

—David Mason Greene, *The Frail Duration*

Three seminal 19th-century North American literary works feature bodies of water which serve both as key elements in their narrative structure and as symbolic entities within their meaning systems. Walden Pond in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is a perfect companion for the author—still, peaceful and calm. Pym's ocean in *A Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* by Edgar Allan Poe invites exploration and acts as a venue for death and/or rebirth. By way of contrast, Herman Melville describes in *Moby-Dick* a dark sea with unknown threats deep beneath the surface, a kind of mortal enemy. The protagonists in the texts literally define themselves in terms of their relation to these bodies of water. The best way to determine the function of water in the texts is to analyze the initial relationship between water and the central character, the way that water serves as a reflection of the Self, and the way that its Otherness suggests the ultimate possibility of transformation.

I. Relation to Water

In his quintessentially transcendental work, Henry David Thoreau cultivates an intimate attachment to a pond. He approaches the pond in two separate ways, walking a fine line between scientist and poet. John Hildebidle depicts Thoreau as a reluctant scientist, portraying the author of *Walden* as a scientific observer, but “aware of the limits of science” (35). Thoreau, without a doubt, brings a scientific element to the pages of *Walden*. Emerson, if he had written about the pond, would never have “mapped the pond by the scale of ten rods to an inch” as Thoreau did (Thoreau 271), and Whitman is unlikely to have observed the bubbles in the ice and to have measured the number of them in a square inch (232). Melville never attempts to understand the depth of his ocean; he never tries to dispel the mysteries of its depths. Where Melville plays up the mystery and drama of the ocean, Thoreau scientifically dismantles his pond, his own “bottomless” body of water. He explores and deconstructs its mysteries through intense observation. For instance, in “The Pond in Winter” he states:

There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond, which certainly had no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it. (268)

Many onlookers grant the lake a mystical bottomless quality; however, Thoreau approaches the pond “with a cod-line and a stone weighing about a pound and a half” (268); with this tool, he determines the exact depth of the lake. Careful measurement of the lake reveals, “The greatest depth was exactly one hundred and two feet; to which may be added the five feet which it has risen since, making it one hundred and seven” (268). Thoreau provides the exact depth, before qualifying his observation by taking into account the rise in water level. His efforts to dispel the

myths of Walden along with his meticulous attention to details such as a “thermometer thrust into the middle of Walden on the 6th of March, 1847, stood at 32°” (280) and his observation that slight movements on the surface of the ice render the use of a level inaccurate (274) define Thoreau as a practical man and a scientist. He is like a doctor examining the anatomy of the pond. His measurements and observations allow him to establish a fundamental estimation of its make-up. While these observations are more apt for a scientist than the poet, Thoreau’s study of the pond’s physical characteristics serves as a basis for his poetic exploration.

The mystery of Walden Pond for Thoreau does not reside in its physical characteristics, but instead in the depth and purity of the waters. After detailing his measurement of the pond’s depth, he states, “What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless” (269). Thoreau, the scientist, may measure, but Thoreau, the poet, ponders the depth and purity as a symbol for the profundity of Nature and the minds of men. Physically, the pond has a bottom one hundred and seven feet below the surface; however, the pond remains infinite in purity and in the depth of its soul. Not only does Thoreau assess the pond as a poet, but he ascribes to it poetic qualities. When discussing the pond, he uses the term “purity” again and again; it becomes a central aspect of his musings. Thoreau writes about those riding the train past the pond, “I fancy that the engineers and firemen and brakemen, and those passengers who have a season ticket and see it often, are better men for the sight. The engineer does not forget at night, or his nature does not, that he has beheld his vision of serenity and purity once at least during the day” (183). Even a glimpse of purity as exemplified by the pond changes the beholder, making him a better man. To Thoreau’s poetic sense, a measure of purity replaces a measure of distance. Thoreau’s differing perspectives of

scientist and poet are why Hildebidle refers to the “paradox of Thoreau who is an antiscientific scientist” (36). While he may measure the pond, his journey takes him deeper into the supernatural “other” of the pond, rooted in its purity.

In his essay “Paradox in *Walden*,” Joseph J. Moldenhauer argues that “Nature to the transcendentalist was an expression of the divine mind; its phenomena, when rightly seen, revealed moral truths” (75). It is Thoreau’s exploration of this “divine mind” that explains the other side of his relationship with Walden Pond. While Thoreau dispels the mystical “bottomlessness” of the pond, he emphasizes other mystical qualities of the pond. In “The Pond in Winter,” Thoreau describes himself standing on the frozen ice:

I cut my way first through a foot of snow, and then a foot of ice, and open a window under my feet, where, kneeling to drink, I look down into the quiet parlor of fishes, pervaded by a softened light as through a window of ground glass, with its bright sanded floor the same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky, corresponding to the cool and even temperament of the inhabitants. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads. (266)

The transcendental poet in Thoreau sees the divine in the water. For the frozen purity of the lake makes it an object as worthy to be admired as the heavens. Thoreau’s intense observation of the water makes the pond become not only an object of transcendental observation, but also a type of communication between a heavenly “other” and a man searching for “revealed moral truths.” For instance, Thoreau claims in “The Pond in Winter” that “If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the particular

results at that point” (272), meaning that a single piece of information should yield insight into all of nature. Thoreau provides an example: “Perhaps we need only to know how his shores trend and his adjacent country or circumstances, to infer his depth and concealed bottom” (273). Thoreau continues by contending that “What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics” (272). He offers the example of the human face: “In our bodies, a bold projecting brow falls off to and indicates a corresponding depth of thought” (272). Thoreau takes a principle he has observed in nature, and applies it to the life of men and women. In this case, he employs his poetic sensitivity to observe the elements of the pond in order to gain understanding of its composition along with the composition of the hearts of men and women.

While Thoreau scientifically dissects Walden Pond through measurement and careful record keeping, Edgar Allan Poe’s protagonist Pym in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* explores and charts his own ocean. Although the naïve young Pym stands to inherit his grandfather’s assets, he stays up late into the night listening to Augustus tell stories about being at sea, and he longs for his own role in Augustus’ tomfoolery (Poe 7). Despite the fact that his grandfather pledges to disinherit him should he enter into a voyage with Augustus, Pym still schemes to escape to sea by stowing away on the ship with Augustus’ knowledge and help (19). To Pym, the sea becomes the setting for a journey of exploration to discover unknown land as well as the unknown parts of the Self.

Pym’s voyage delivers him to a vast ocean extending from horizon to horizon. It feels expansive rather than deep. Uncertainty always looms just beyond the field of vision rather than below the surface. Pym, the explorer, begins to make his first discoveries of new territories after he is rescued from being a castaway at sea by the crew of *Jane Guy*. At this point, the novel takes on the characteristics of a travel journal. Similar to Thoreau’s scientific observations of

Walden, Pym records the islands they visit and informs his reader of longitudes and latitudes, along with some of the history of the original discovery of the islands. He continues by listing and categorizing the habits of various fauna he encounters, from “the season for incubation” (140) of sea birds to “some rookeries in which the penguin and albatross are the sole population” (141) to the shores of islands lined with “sea lions, sea elephants, the hair and fur seal” (145). Pym, as seen in the chapters fourteen through seventeen, regards the ocean as a new frontier, a place for him to unearth new discoveries and to search for wealth and adventure.

Discussing the format of the two short stories “A Descent into the Maelstrom” and “MS. Found in a Bottle” as well as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Daniel Hoffman claims that Poe “...took hold of a popular genre of the day, the explorer’s narrative” (151). By utilizing the form of the explorer’s narrative, Poe provides a structure for Pym’s narration, but also limits his perspective. Unlike Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, Pym’s detailed descriptions of longitude and latitude give his ocean a two dimensional quality like a map. The wildlife he describes remains on the surface of the ocean. Where Ishmael mentions corals and the creatures of the deeps, Pym documents birds, seals, and turtles. His ocean is, first and foremost, a surface. Even the mysterious Arctic bear floats to them on “a small floe of ice” in plain sight (Poe 159). The mystery generated from this encounter originates from the fact that previous exploration cannot account for the size of the creature. Pym sails across the oceans as if on the surface of a map, never penetrating into the depths of the ocean. Pym’s initial relationship with the ocean is like that of a young boy staring at a map and imagining the types of creatures he would encounter there. Through the course of the novel, he matures, as will be explained in part two, and it is the ocean that guides him through a metamorphosis of the Self.

Ahab's ocean, unlike Pym's, is unknown and deep, so deep as to challenge human reason. While Pym's ocean is expansive (if possible to explore), Ahab's ocean is deep and mysterious, impossible to comprehend. Furthermore, neither Ahab nor Ishmael attempts to measure or categorize the denizens of their ocean, as Thoreau or Pym might. Unlike Thoreau, who dispels the myth of the bottomlessness of Walden Pond, Melville plays up the mythical quality of the ocean, and the depths never lose their dark mysterious quality. The mystery, generated in the descriptions of the ocean, forces the characters to look into the face of the unknown and encounter the fears that grow in the places they do not understand.

In the chapter "The Castaway," Pip fears the vast mystery below the ocean's surface, the "strange shapes of the unwarped primal world" and the "God-omnipresent, coral insects" (Melville 321). He encounters the overwhelming mystery below the surface when he jumps overboard during a whale hunt, and Stubb, the boat's commander, abandons him to chase the whale. Pip's time alone, abandoned to the unknown beneath him, drives him mad:

He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (322)

As Pip loses his sanity, he gains an understanding of aspects of the dark, mysterious ocean that Ahab cannot fathom. In later chapters, Pip makes observations vital to the unfolding of Melville's tale, such as his observation that "celestial thought" appears crazy to a sane man, and that the man who has come across "celestial thought" becomes as unconcerned with positive and

negative outcomes as Melville imagines God to be. For Pip, God is indifferent, uncaring about events that weigh in the hearts of humanity. These observations can only be revealed to the man who has encountered the mystery of the ocean directly. He has faced the unknown and emerged with new insight. The plight of Pip gains additional value because it foreshadows Ishmael's similar circumstances. After describing the story of Pip, Ishmael narrates, "in the sequel of the narrative, it will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself" (322). Even though the novel ends before the implications of Ishmael's time stranded in the ocean come to fruition, certain inferences can be ascertained based on Pip's experiences. These implications will be addressed in section three.

Thoreau, Pym and Ahab relate to water in their own distinct ways. For Thoreau, water is a pure and instructive friend, leading him on a path to understanding. Pym recognizes water as an inviting and multifaceted expanse, a place to explore and build experiences. For Ahab, Pip and the crew of the *Pequod*, water is the great unknown, a deep unknowable mystery. In all three, water provides insight and self-discovery.

II. Water as Mirror: The Reflection of Self

Walden Pond possesses elements that allow Thoreau to survive on his meager means. The natural resources of the pond allow him to fish and find the materials to build his house. He is able to support his physical needs simply, his mind free to explore the laws of nature. Through his observation of nature and the pond, Thoreau traverses the paths of the mind, learning about the Self. Thoreau does not intend to build a pyramid next to Walden Pond; instead he builds a simple house, discovering aspects of an awe-inspiring nature and the elements of the Self.

Thoreau only needs to look upon the surface of the pond to see its reflective qualities. In fact the reflective qualities of Walden Pond are mentioned several times in the text. For instance, Thoreau describes the surface of Walden Pond as “sky water” (179), referring to the way in which the water reflects the sky, while at the same time connecting the sky with the water, making Nature a kind of seamless whole. For Thoreau, the reflective nature of the water has critical importance. Richard J. Schneider notes in “Reflections in Walden Pond: Thoreau’s Optics” that Thoreau observes that reflections show “substance” not visible to the naked eye and that water magnifies, perhaps even idealizes, the objects of its reflections (119-120). For instance, the reflection of the sky on the water “multiplies the heavens” and “the colors in the reflection were different from those in the sky” (Schneider 120). Thoreau’s observations of these distortions indicate his commitment to examining the pond by observing, not only the physical qualities apparent to the naked eye, but also the features of the landscape that may be seen in the water’s reflection.

Walden Pond, or the surface of any pond with the same clarity, is a mirror like none other: “It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs; no storm, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh” (Thoreau

178). Nature's mirror, the surface of a pond, cannot be harmed because after any disturbance, the water will eventually return to its original state. The man-made mirror, by way of contrast, can be easily broken and rendered useless. Thoreau's description of the reflection in the pond is that of an indelible surface, one that reaches a greater and more-enduring state of perfection than any mirror created by man. Walden Pond is "a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks" (179). All impurities, such as a ripple from a rock thrown into the water, quickly disappear, returning the surface to its original smooth state. Nathaniel Hawthorne fretted about possible human pollution of the pond. He described bathing in Walden Pond: "It is fit for baptisms; but one would not wish to have it polluted by having sins washed into it" (Hough 262). Thoreau's description looms as different Hawthorne's. Thoreau's Walden remains self-regenerative, always returning to its original state of perfection. Thoreau describes the perfect mirror, the only place where a man or woman can observe a reflection even as "Nations come and go" (179).

The reflection in Walden Pond not only functions as a mirror of the world above it. The mirror has two types of reflection. On the one hand, the mirror reflects the caustic medium, in this case nature. On the other hand, the mirror reflects the Self, both the physical representation of the self that allows one to fix his or her hair as well as a deeper look into the Self. Markus Poetsch observes the latter description of a mirror, claiming that the reflection in the pond acts as an autobiographical symbol:

Under these terms, the pond represents more than a mirror of the physical world; it is an inner pool of thought, an element of mental topography in which the author's self is realized and reified. Walden as text thus becomes a travelogue of Thoreau himself, something like a collection of snapshots in which his hair or

fingers constantly stray across the lens, or, perhaps more precisely, a portrait in which he captures himself holding the camera above the glassy rim of water...

(388-9)

Poetsch brilliantly presents an image of the pond as a mirror of both the physical world and the “inner pool of thought” of the writer. As he photographs the pool, he is also recording images of himself. The pure and clean pond thus reflects an idealized Self, partaking of its purity, its transparency.

Eric G. Wilson observes that Thoreau “attempts to translate his activities—ranging from digging to bathing to fishing to planting—as well as the phenomena he studies—such as loons and owls and leaves that blow—into windows through which we can see the constant laws and mirrors in which he can view his own essential nature” (189). To Wilson, Thoreau uses nature as a mirror in which he can observe himself. Through this mirror, he observes qualities that he believes are essential for a person’s sense of Self. An examination of the description of Walden Pond in “The Ponds” may be compared to the descriptions of the ideal person in “Economy” to observe how Thoreau values the same qualities in man and nature.

According to Thoreau, the three prominent ponds in the area of Walden are Flints’ Pond, White Pond, and Walden Pond. A lack of purity, at least in comparison to the other two ponds, plagues Flints’ Pond. As it is “more fertile with fish,” more people visit it (Thoreau 183). Thoreau depicts this pond near Walden as “comparatively shallow, and not remarkably pure” (183). Furthermore, he criticizes the name of Flints’ Pond, declaring it as representing “the poverty of our nomenclature” (184). White Pond, which Thoreau considers to be “a lesser twin of Walden” (186), remains untouched: “Since the woodcutters, and the railroad, and I myself

have profaned Walden, perhaps the most attractive, if not the most beautiful of our lakes, the gem of the woods, is White Pond” (186). For Thoreau, the beauty and purity of the ponds are disturbed by the presence of humans. The more deeply imbedded the lake is in nature and the less disturbed by the presence of people, the purer the pond. “Economy” similarly explains the state of man or woman. As more people make a pond less pure, the more a person shelters in a crowded city away from nature, the less happy he will be (26-7). For pond and man alike, Thoreau advocates simplicity and a close proximity to nature. A pond without a man or woman and a man or woman without anything but the basic necessities remain pure and happy.

Thoreau’s separation from city life and his immersion in nature provided him with the inspiration he required to write one of the most influential books in American literature. In his time at Walden Pond, he was able to determine what he believed were the elements of an ideal Self. In the reflection on the surface of the water, he discovered what he was looking for. Emerson, by allowing Thoreau to squat on a piece of his own property near the lake, made a considerable contribution to the creation of *Walden*. Hough states in his biography of Thoreau that “Emerson had, at considerable cost, sent Alcott to England and was to send Channing to Italy, missions that produced no world-shaking result. The expense of dispatching Henry Thoreau to Walden Pond was nothing at all out of pocket and the harvest of the project proved historic and inestimable” (129-30). Emerson allowed Alcott and Channing to be enriched by the cultural achievements of Western civilization, but the greatest contribution to literature was by the man who separated himself from humans and wrote about his experiences living next to a pond. For while Alcott and Channing may have been surrounded by art, culture, and brilliant minds, all human structures are temporary in comparison to mountains, rivers, and lakes.

Thoreau, instead, surrounded himself with nature and by using Walden Pond as a reflecting pool observed the elements man truly needs.

Critics such as William Goldhurst, Daniel Hoffman, and Jeffrey Meyers have documented the similarities between Poe and Pym (Goldhurst 4-5,13; Hoffman 260; Meyers 30, 99). These similarities range from the likeness between the cadence of the names, Arthur Gordon Pym and Edgar Allan Poe (Hoffman 260) to the fact that Pym's "two different characters named 'Allen' suffer violent deaths," perhaps a reference to the fact that Poe's uncle, John Allan, refused to supply him with the money necessary to remain at a university (Meyers 30). It may be argued, in fact, that Poe lives and dies with Pym. In effect, Poe re-enacts his death experiences through Pym. Like Poe himself, Pym is constantly faced with the deaths of those around him. By facing death, either his own or the death of his comrades, Pym annihilates a prior concept of himself and a new Self is born, a phoenix rising from the ashes. Changes of the self accompany Pym's five annihilations at sea. Four will be discussed in this section and the fifth will be reserved for the discussion of transformation in part three.

Arthur Gordon Pym, as depicted by Edgar Allan Poe before the first annihilation, stands to inherit property from his maternal grandfather. He attends school and is provided with numerous advantages for a life that has been predetermined for him; however, he still craves adventure, the type of adventure his friend Augustus represents to him. His first major annihilation of the Self comes from Pym's desire for a life different from the one chosen for him by his grandfather. When Augustus offers him a chance to adventure at sea, Pym asks his family for permission: "my grandfather, from whom I expected much, vowed to cut me off with a shilling if I should ever broach the subject to him again. These difficulties, however, so far from abating my desire, only added fuel to the flame" (19). Pym, guided by youthful rebellion, stows

away on the ship under the supervision of reckless Augustus. In this way, he destroys the life planned for him and becomes a new person. He enters the situation as a man with expected property and a means to begin a respectable New England life; he leaves a man with no fortune and no fetters, stowed away in the hull of a ship hoping to attain his own glory. The rejection of his grandfather's intentions annihilates the former Self, the one fashioned by his family, and leaves space for him to find a new Self at sea.

Setting off to sea, Pym embodies two important American concepts: the American Dream and manifest destiny. In order for Pym to explore the concept of the American Dream, Poe disconnects Pym from his family. Poe himself experienced a similar separation from his uncle. Jeffrey Meyers claims, "Poe was one of the first satirists of this potentially rich society, ambitiously seeking wealth and power; and the first artist who attempted—and failed—to support himself by writing. Poe's controversial life eventually became a part of the symbolic meaning of his work" (298). Pym possesses this same need to support himself through his own ventures. As a result, he stows away on Augustus' ship and separates himself from his past. Pym gains the freedom to see the world and to discover his Self, which had been stifled under the influence of his family. The journey embodies Pym's need of, as Hoffman describes, "exploring the body of the world, exploring it with his own body" (260). Pym does not follow Augustus into the hull of the *Grampus* for the luxurious accommodations; rather, he pursues the dream of living his own sea adventure.

Jeffrey Meyers labels *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* "an allegory of the American's search for dominion over himself as well as a new geographic territory, a struggle to achieve an individual and national identity" (297-298). For Meyers, Pym explores the Self as he explores the world, generating his own identity (298). Meyers' theory falls in with the concept

of manifest destiny. As America extends its reaches across North American in order to fulfill its manifest destiny, Pym expands his experiences across the oceans learning about new birds and islands. Through this expansion, he seeks to extend the Self; however, he learns that a new and larger Self can only be fashioned after the extinction of the prior Self.

While Thoreau would approve of Pym's blatant disregard of his inheritance, the Pym that enters the *Grampus* makes decisions as a naïve young man rather than as an enlightened hermit. Unaware of the troubles that can occur at sea, Pym entrusts himself to Augustus's care deep within the hull of the ship. Poe both compares the hull to a womb and a tomb. Pym narrates his rescue by Augustus, who gives him a drink of water: "Those only who have been suddenly redeemed from the jaws of a tomb, or who have known the insufferable torments of thirst under circumstances as aggravated as those which encompassed me in my dreary prison can form any idea of the unutterable transports which that one long draught of the richest of all physical luxuries afforded" (44). The naïve Pym, who follows Augustus to disaster in Pym's ship *Ariel* and stows away in the hull of the *Grampus*, is not the Pym who emerges having experienced extreme conditions. The boy, who "felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure" (8) at Augustus's "mad ideas," becomes a man who understands what it means to emerge from a tomb. As one critic puts it, "he is to be entombed to be enwombed, buried to rise again—as though to a new destiny" (Hoffman 262). The *Grampus*' hull is twofold, acting as a physical tomb where Pym is encased unable to escape as well as a figurative tomb where Pym considers himself lost to death. He escapes both from the physical hull of the ship and from imminent death.

Pym has escaped his tomb and has emerged a new man into the sea air. He has relinquished his position as follower. Where Pym once hung on Augustus' words and "was necessarily obliged to leave much to the management of Augustus" (Poe 20), now Pym takes on

the mantle of leader. He conceives the idea of “working upon the superstitious terrors and guilty conscience of the mate” (77). As a result of his plan, he disguises himself as a dead man, frightens the mutineers, and defeats them with the help of his comrades. By playing a ghost, someone risen from the dead, he saves the lives of himself and his mates.

Having “lashed ourselves firmly to the fragments of the windlass” (90) to survive a horrific gale, Augustus, Peters, Parker and Pym begin the stretch of days they spend stranded at sea. Pym is exposed to the whims of a dangerous and primitive sea, inhabited by sharks and plagued with storms. Creativity gains them an extremely limited supply of food and water, but the crew is driven to hysteria in the struggle for survival. The sea, supposedly mother of life, reveals nothing but death to Pym. For instance, a ship comes within sight, and the crew yells to be rescued, only to see the following:

Twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females, lay scattered about between the counter and the galley, in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction! We plainly saw that not a soul lived in that fated vessel! Yet we could not help shouting to the dead for help! Yes, long and loudly did we beg, in the agony of the moment, that those silent and disgusting images would stay for us, would not abandon us to become like them, would receive us among their goodly company. (101)

The castaways’ strange reaction to the death ship reveals the complications of their situation. As their food supply runs out, Pym and crew draw lots to decide who dies to provide sustenance for the others. Even though Pym protests these actions with the last of his humanity, he still consumes another human, consumes the dead, an action that is strictly forbidden by society. Pym takes measures that while drastic ensure the continuation of his life, fueled by his primal needs.

Once Pym has been rescued from this annihilation by the *Jane Guy* and its captain, a new Pym emerges. This Pym discusses longitude and latitude, coming “in sight of Prince Edward’s Island, in latitude 46° 53’ S., longitude 37° 46’ E” (137). He identifies species of animals at sea such as blue peterels and teal (137). Strangely enough, this man with limited experience at sea gains the trust of Captain Guy, recommending to him future courses of action (though not always the best courses of action). The new Pym has achieved both self-respect and the respect of his peers. He is beginning to achieve the goals of the original Pym.

The fourth annihilation occurs on an island. Falling into a trap designed by the natives of the island, the remainder of the *Jane Guy*’s crew perishes under the “utter darkness among a quantity of loose earth” (184). The savages create an avalanche of dirt, burying alive everyone except Pym and Dirk Peters, the survivors of the *Grampus*. Pym and Peters first find themselves trapped in a series of caves similar to the tomb of *Grampus*’ hull; however, they later find that while they are capable of exiting the caves, their options of escape from the savages that killed *Jane Guy*’s crew are limited. Pym notes, “Our situation, as it now appeared, was scarcely less dreadful than when we had conceived ourselves entombed for ever” (189). Once again, Pym finds himself confined in a tomb-like prison. Pym and Peters only escape by navigating a labyrinth of caves, fleeing out of desperation to the coast, capturing a native, and stealing a boat. The fourth annihilation, while reminiscent of his previous experiences, ends with the characters sailing in an unnatural ocean. Pym emerges from first escape to see a realistic sea, overshadowed by the events of the mutiny, but an ordinary sea nonetheless. The Pym that emerges from the island caves fails to notice the physical characteristics of the journey but more and more notices “unusual phenomena” (214), such as a “light gray vapour...having all the wild variations of the Aurora Borealis” and strangely hot arctic waters “of a milky consistency and

hue” (214-215). This Pym is entering uncharted waters, and perhaps a similarly uncharted area of the Self. Pym has survived a number of trials and he is preparing for a fifth and final annihilation, a transformation to be discussed in part three.

While expounding on the “laws of Nature,” Thoreau describes the power of perspective: “The particular laws are as our points of view, as, to the traveler, a mountain outline varies with every step, and it has an infinite number of profiles, though absolutely but one form. Even when cleft or bored through it is not comprehended in its entirety” (Thoreau 272). Whereas Thoreau employs the concept of perspective to illustrate natural laws and the immensity of Nature, Melville explores the issue of perspective within the depths of the human mind. Understanding the perspectives of Ahab and his crew explains Ahab’s interpretation of the reflection of the Self. In his article “The Mariner’s Multiple Quest,” James McIntosh notes an instance of perspective concerning Ahab’s scar:

The scar is interpreted and/or imagined in several ways. To the Manxman, it is the exposed part of a birthmark that covers Ahab ‘from crown to sole’; to an old Gay-Head Indian, it is the result of ‘an elemental strife at sea’ (Chap. 28). The narrator, rather than deciding on one of these readings, complicates the issue by associating the scar with another natural phenomenon—it resembles the ‘perpendicular seam’ of a great tree branded by lightning. (par. 5)

The differing perspectives of the scar reveal different elements of Ahab, the captain of the *Pequod*. The Manxman, the Gay-Head Indian and the narrator each depict a part of the captain that they observe in the scar. The Manxman notices a partially hidden birthmark, suggesting that Ahab has mysteries beneath like the ocean that surrounds them. Moreover, the description of the scar as stretching “from crown to sole” brings into question Melville’s choice of words. It is

never revealed whether the scar extends from head to toe, but it is entirely possible that it marks his “soul.” Secondly, the Gay-Head Indian observes Ahab’s struggle with the sea, an aspect of Ahab that remains vital to the progression of the story. Finally, the narrator compares the scar to a tree hit by lightning, signifying that Ahab has come into contact with a larger force of nature, or perhaps foreshadowing the helplessness experienced by the crew in their encounter with the white whale.

A second instance highlighting perspective occurs in one of the most famous chapters in *Moby Dick*, “The Doubloon.” All of the characters observe a gold doubloon nailed to the mast of the ship. The same gold doubloon represents a mirror for Ahab, a trinity for Starbuck, a symbol of Stubb’s comic fatalism, cigars for Flask, Queequeg’s tattoo, and a symbol of Fedallah’s fire worship (Melville 620-6). After observing the reactions of the crew to the doubloon, Pip, the foolish savant, recognizes the differing perspectives of characters, “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (Melville 625). As “man’s insanity is heaven’s sense,” Pip alone has survived an encounter with the mysterious depths of the ocean, and he alone recognizes perspectives other than his own (322).

After Ahab lost his leg to Moby Dick and became obsessed with the whale, the expectation is that he would see the whale in the gold coin; however, for Ahab, the doubloon acts as a mirror, reflecting his own image (Melville 335). Ahab sees himself in the doubloon because he is so fixated on his own obsessions that he can see nothing else. In his introduction to his sea tale, Ishmael refers to a Greek myth: “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” (20). Like Narcissus, Ahab becomes obsessed with his own reflection, the reflection he sees in the mirror,

in the doubloon, and in the ocean. Ishmael describes the reflection in rivers and oceans as “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (20); however, when Ahab, self-obsessed, reaches for the reflection of himself, his fingers run through the surface of the water, never grabbing the reflection. The “phantom of life” is unavailable. Furthermore, like Narcissus, who obsesses on his own reflection to his demise, Ahab’s obsession with the Self leads to his own death and the death of his crew.

As *Moby Dick* progresses, the ocean emerges as another character, another perspective, perhaps even an anti-Ahab. In the chapter, “The Pacific,” Melville gives the sea both autonomy and a soul:

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about his sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath; like those fabled undulations of the Ephesian sod over the buried Evangelist St. John. And meet it is, that over these sea-pastures, wide rolling watery prairies and Potters’ Fields of all four continents, the waves should rise and fall, and ebb and flow unceasingly; for here, millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, dreaming still; tossing like slumberers in their beds; the ever-rolling waves but made so by their restlessness. (367)

As a result of “mixed shades and shadows” drowned beneath the surface of the ocean, the waters toss in their sleep and breathe as “they rise and fall.” This living breathing sea haunts Ahab, and the sea, more specifically the whale, becomes the object Ahab identifies with “not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations” (156). The sea becomes the “the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung” (156). The ocean becomes a

symbol for the part of Ahab he despises. It becomes his rival, a force of nature, a mirror of the madman hurtling his crew toward destruction.

Melville's description of the sea below and the air above emphasizes their symbolic disparity. Henry Nash Smith explains the difference between "a bland, peaceful, feminine upper air, and the murderous masculine depth of the ocean" (70), embodied both in sharks and leviathans. He says the two realms:

...present an image of society having two aspects: a substratum of rapacious competition, with a tiger heart, the sphere of masculine murderous sharks and leviathans; and a fictitious, aerial superstructure of peace, beauty, reverie, poetry, feminine in tone, passive not active, delightful but deceptive, as Delilah was deceptive. Melville feels sympathy with both these spheres...the beautiful feminine air is false, the murderous sea is ruthless. (Smith 72)

Ahab's ruthless and distinctly male ocean sheds light on Ahab's relationship with the sea. His ocean is not the nature of Thoreau, pure and asexual. Below the surface lurks Melville's dark, sometimes phallic, always foreboding sea. The white whale himself and perhaps the image of the whale in general is extremely phallic, beginning with the pun in the title of novel. From the description of whales emerging from the water and that of the Sperm Whale's head in "The Battering-Ram" to the chapter "The Cassock" devoted to the mincer creating and wearing a protective covering from a whale's phallus, the whale acts as a symbol of the ocean's masculinity. Ahab ruthlessly competes with this masculinity, seeking to castrate the ocean by slaying the whale. He seeks to destroy the anti-Ahab, the part of himself that he has identified

with the whale, or he hopes to die in the attempt as he sinks restlessly into the ocean, another “drowned dream, dreaming still” (Melville 367).

A reflection in the water embodies various representations in the three texts. The mirror on the surface of the water signifies purification and perfection of the Self for Thoreau. Pym’s reflection in the ocean epitomizes his annihilation of the Self. Finally, self-hate and self-destruction characterize Ahab’s reflection. For all three, the mirror in the water symbolizes a some aspect of the Self.

III. Water as Glass: A Glimpse of Transformation

In “Paradox in Walden,” Joseph J. Moldenhauer describes Thoreau’s goals as being “determined by the character of Transcendental thinking, with its emphasis upon the perception of a spiritual reality behind the surface of things. Nature for the Transcendentalist was an expression of the divine mind; its phenomena, when rightly seen, revealed moral truths” (Moldenhauer 75). Transcendentalism is spirituality generated from intuition rather than from organized religion. For Thoreau and many other transcendental writers, nature and transcendentalism connect inseparably as nature inspires one to a place of higher thinking, and as a part of nature, the pond is transcendent as well, acting as a cleansing agent, and helping Thoreau achieve his own purified state.

Gazing at his reflection in the pond, Thoreau imagines the perfect Self with the ability to attain the purity of Walden Pond. As Thoreau studies the reflections in the water, the pond gains human qualities. Markus Poetsch describes the personification of Walden Pond, saying that “like a breathing body [it], ‘rises and falls’” (395). Moreover, Thoreau consistently compares the pond to an eye, calling its green color to “the color of its iris” (Thoreau 167). Thoreau continues: “A lake is the landscape’s beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (176). As Thoreau denies his appetites, the materialism of fashion, and other corporeal desires in favor of the bare physical necessities (food, shelter, and fuel), the pond gains corporeal qualities; it takes on aspects of the human body. As he becomes more like it, the pond becomes more than simply material, it becomes a symbol of his transcendentalist beliefs, of the liberating qualities that allow him to rise past his base human needs and ascend into the purity of nature.

The pond is not simply a reflection of Thoreau's life. The waters allow Thoreau figuratively and literally to cleanse his body, mind, and soul. While Thoreau does not focus on the concept of sins, through reflection and careful study of himself he does admire the pond for its purity in the same way he strives for purity in the Self. Since the pond "is a mirror which no stone can crack" (Thoreau 178), Thoreau releases the burdens of living in the city without tarnishing the pond, and he becomes a better person as a result of his time living beside the pond. Even as the pond becomes more corporeal, more humanlike, Thoreau himself gains an intimacy with nature, relying on it for food, shelter, and fuel. Without the business of life among men, his mind is free to transcend to thoughts beyond the corporeal world.

Moldenhauer states that Thoreau "always believed that to recognize one's relations with nature is the basis of moral insight; and he was convinced that the obstacles to this wisdom were removed by the simplification of life" (Moldenhauer 75). By identifying the portions of his life that need simplification, Thoreau achieves transcendence. For Thoreau, life around people is not simple, and people are not pure. Thoreau does not identify with the definition of purity given to him by the Calvinist preachers of New England or the professors at Harvard, where purity is associated with heaven. Readers may choose their own fate by ignoring public opinion (6) or living without luxuries (12); furthermore, the crowds of the city cloud the mind and limit the ability to better the Self":

It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them; or even to look over the old day-books of the merchants, to see what it was that men most commonly bought at the stores, what they stored, that is, what are the grossest groceries. For the improvements of ages have had but

little influence on the essential laws of man's existence: as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors. (10)

Thoreau argues that civilization has not advanced the knowledge of “the essential laws of man’s existence”; man or woman requires only a minimum to live happily. He pairs this concept with the beautiful idea that even as humans have built palaces and have advanced science and math, the skeleton supporting the structure of the body has not changed. By cleansing life of the “improvements of ages,” the mind strips itself of needless worries and elevates itself to a place of higher thought. By eliminating the distraction of material items and replacing them with proximity to nature, Thoreau can achieve transcendence.

In “Economy,” Thoreau asks his readers to “accept such portions [of *Walden*] as apply to them,” adding “it may do good service to him whom it fits,” suggesting a reader make discoveries about nature and the Self (Thoreau 2). He writes *Walden* as a pilgrimage, an epic quest for the Self. In this quest he searches for the perfect symbol of purity and finds it in Walden Pond. Thoreau achieves transcendence by likening himself to Walden Pond. He hopes his own words are invested with its transcendental powers: “I should be proud if no more fatal fault were found with my pages on this score than was found with the Walden ice” (304).

Thoreau is essentially a philosopher whose interpretation of transcendence runs parallel to that of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other transcendental writers; however, Poe and Melville write works of fiction, not philosophic ponderings on nature and transcendence, and their words and themes are significantly darker. While Poe and Melville composed their novels during the same time period as the transcendental thinkers, their works have different intentions. Nevertheless, the influence of transcendental thinking or perhaps the concept of transformation

comes through in their work, helping to clarify unexplained and mysterious circumstances occurring in both *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* and *Moby-Dick*.

In his book, Ronald C. Harvey remarks the “dissensus” in the criticism of the final portion of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. He notes that “criticism often reflects rather than interprets the ambiguity of the text itself” (12). Without a doubt, the final chapter and “Note” following the text contain copious amounts of ambiguity. The lack of a clear explanation of the events leads to a diversity in the criticism and adds to the mysterious quality that ebbs and flows in the text. By looking at the conclusion as a final chapter in a series of life-changing annihilations and rebirths, the reader gains the perception that, like Thoreau, Pym searches for transformation and finds some version of it with the guidance of the sea.

The end of the novel depicts Pym’s fifth and final annihilation. After escaping his final entombment in the caves of Tsalal by boat, Pym, Peters and their captive “rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow” (217). The events that occur after the sight of the chasm opening in the sea and the appearance of the white-skinned figure remain unwritten. The note following the final chapter indicates that “the two or three final chapters” disappeared in an event which also claimed the life of the protagonist (219). Moreover, the preface clearly states, “Upon my return to the United States a few months ago, after the extraordinary series of adventures in the South Seas and elsewhere, of which an account is given in the following pages...” (3). The quote implies that Pym survived the incident and returned to New England. Death befalls him at a later undisclosed date and is largely unexplained: “The circumstances connected with the late sudden and distressing death of Mr.

Pym are already well known to the public through the medium of the daily press” (219).

Therefore, his death occurred after Pym returns to the United States, implying that he has survived the chasm.

Daniel Hoffman offers an explanation of the chasm opening before the boat and the apparent survival of Pym and Peters (Hoffman 271). Hoffman explains a theory contemporary to Poe and Melville, perhaps influencing both writers: “The Symmes Theory proposed that the currents of the seas all poured through a vortex at the South Pole, emerging at the North Pole and re-circulating around the globe” (271). According to this theory, Pym and Peters become sucked into the chasm and travel to the other side of the world, reappearing at the North Pole.

Pym’s unrecorded encounter with the supernatural at the end of the earth accounts for the disparity between the naïve young man described in the first pages of the novel and the mysterious A. G. Pym who “wrote” the preface. The Pym in the preface does not disclose the details of his journey. Instead he alludes to events and circumstances as being “positively marvelous” (Poe 3) without offering an explanation. Since lack of knowledge heightens the sense of mystery, the post-journey Pym emerges as a puzzle. Even “the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym” adds to the mystery. While he clearly survives the incidents at the end of the novel, his life is soon concluded. The irony arises in the fact that he lives through five repeated entombments and rebirths, but he dies upon his return to the United States. The lack of information provided about his death compounded with the implication that his death might have been unnatural allows the reader to speculate as to whether some element from his journey played a part in his death before he could reveal what he has seen.

Pym’s elevation to a high state of mind differs from that of Thoreau. For Thoreau, transcendence is achieved through study and proximity to nature. As he brings himself closer to

Walden Pond physically and emotionally, he transcends. For Pym, the discovery of transformation proves to be treacherous. Following the Symmes theory, Pym encounters an unnatural creature and an unbelievable phenomenon. Pym's final annihilation comes from another entombment in the center of the earth. He is sucked into the chasm and into the mystical pathway from South to North Pole. When he emerges, he has transformed. He has experienced an unparalleled closeness with the ocean and has emerged a new man with a knowledge that an everyday man could scarcely believe. The "Note" following the novel supports the inevitable disbelief in the story by the public by stating that "Poe" could not finish the tale for Pym because of "his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration" (219). For Pym, transformation may be aided by nature and marked by the acquisition of fresh knowledge beyond the ordinary circumstances of man. It may even be as beautiful and pure as the shrouded figure. Harvey notes that, "Melville first suggested (in an 1850 review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*) a predilection in American writers for questing after truth, and that the truth they sought took them to depths and extremities beyond superficial reality" (133). To Pym, the "superficial reality" of the sea is the observation of the ocean up to the horizon; truth, however, is discovered beyond the horizon. Here, Pym finds a chasm and a creature and truth; that transcendental truth, however, proves to be unspeakable, unable to be conveyed in language.

In *Moby-Dick*, the truth lurks in both the depths of the ocean and the depths of the human soul. At the end, Ahab's narcissistic obsessions sink into the depths alongside Starbuck's Christian values. Only Ishmael remains. Of all the extraordinary characters, the least individualized character survives. Ishmael acts only as an observer or narrator, and for a part of the novel he loses those roles, becoming noticeably absent; he, however, is the only person who emerges from the disaster of the sinking of the *Pequod*.

Unlike Ahab, Ishmael has the ability to begin again and to be reborn. While Ahab's ocean throughout the book looms as ominous and fierce, Ishmael's sea protects him even from the sinking of the *Pequod*. The final chapters of *Moby-Dick* reveal, on the one hand, Ahab's ordeal with the sharks: "the un pitying sharks accompanied him; and so pertinaciously stuck to the boat; and so continually bit at the playing oars, that the blades became jagged and crunched, and left small splinters in the sea, at almost every dip" (Melville 424). On the other hand, Ishmael describes his idyll with the same creatures: "The un harming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks" (Melville 427). The comparison is night and day between the tormented Ahab and the lone survivor Ishmael. Like his biblical namesake who was the son of Abraham but exiled nonetheless, Ishmael is rejected even by the ocean. As the biblical Ishmael survives the wilderness with the protection of an angel, Melville's character perseveres when he is stranded at sea in unforgiving conditions. The entire natural order pushes for an unexplained perpetuation of Ishmael. Citing a second biblical allusion, the epilogue begins with a quote from Job 1.14-19, "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee" (427). Ishmael "escapes alone" to repeat the tale of Ahab as these messengers survive to tell the tale of Job's strife. Ishmael's fate does not involve a simpler life like Thoreau or the exploration of new locations in the world and his mind like Pym; instead Ishmael gains a purpose to his life and a means to accomplish his task for without Ishmael, the story of the *Pequod* sinks below the surface of the ocean. The memory of Ahab, Queequeg and the others is preserved only through Ishmael. He performs his essential function, recounting the tale of the *Pequod*.

As Ishmael survives to live another day and to begin again as the first Ishmael began another tribe, the remainder of the crew on the *Pequod* sinks to their death beneath the surface of

the dark and mysterious ocean. As death is often described “as piercing the veil,” so must Ahab and his crew pierce the surface of the ocean. The comparison of Melville’s ocean to death gains relevance in an examination of the unknown. For death is also mysterious, unfathomable, and terrifying. Moreover, Melville consistently describes the depths of the ocean in terms of symbols of the afterlife. For instance, the depiction of the *Pequod* descending into the ocean conjures images of heaven and hell: “his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it” (427). In this case, Melville directly links the ocean with hell and the afterlife. Another example occurs when Pip finds himself castaway. The creatures of the sea are “God-omnipresent,” and he sees “God’s foot.” The sea drives him mad because he faces not only the unknown of the ocean, but also his own reckoning, his death, and God. The ocean in *Moby-Dick* is consistently depicted in terms of death. This intimacy between Melville’s description of the ocean and the images of death reveals the intricacies of the crew’s relationship with the ocean. It is an acquaintance with the unknown and with death.

Completing his competition with the white whale and the ocean, Ahab meets his own fate. To say Ahab “transcends” would contradict the spirit of the text; however, Ahab certainly “descends” into the depths of the ocean. He sinks into the water, merging with the anti-Ahab. His hatred for his enemy and his revenge converge with the unrelenting malice of the ocean as Ahab interprets it. The merge is seamless. After the ship has been pulled under, the ocean returns to its previous state like the mirror on the surface of Walden Pond: “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (427). Ahab and crew have added their number to the mysteries below the surface. Releasing their own dreams, goals and perspectives, they become the “strange shapes of the unwarped primal world” and the “God-omnipresent,

coral insects” (319) that Pip observed in “The Castaway.” The ocean is not content with the ill-fated *Pequod*: “the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship” (427). The ocean drags a bird from the sky into its gaping mouth because it could not be satisfied with a heavenly bird flying freely above. Even the light feminine heavens are weighed down by the dark masculine ocean. For Ahab, the water is not the source of transformation as it is for Thoreau and Pym. Ahab remains a static character burdened by his ambition of slaying the white whale from his first appearance to the last page. He descends into the depths of his own twisted mind and later into the depths of the ocean. Only Ishmael retains a positive outcome, the remnant of the closest thing Melville can come to transformation.

In conclusion, the water symbolism in *Walden*, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* and *Moby-Dick* becomes emblematic of an expedition within the Self. For Thoreau, the pond serves as a mirror of nature and a window into the soul. Pym’s sea expands across the world allowing him to explore the reaches of the seas as he explores his Self, emerging as an enlightened character with incommunicable knowledge. Melville’s dark mysterious ocean drags Ahab into the abyss of the coral insects, while releasing Ishmael to tell the tale of the *Pequod*. The central water feature proves to embody qualities of the Self and an “Other,” creating a fabric of work where the desire for a refined Self weaves together with a natural vision of higher being and establishes a connection between the symbolism of water and the journey to find something beyond the human mind.

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Vita

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