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"Ego Te Baptizo": The Typology of Baptism in *Moby-Dick*

Kathryn Mogk

In a famous letter to Hawthorne, Herman Melville reveals that Ahab's delirious howl, "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli," is the secret motto of *Moby-Dick* (*Letters* Nov. 17, *Moby-Dick* 421). I believe that this key sentence is important not only in reference to the "hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled" (*Letters* Nov. 17), but also in terms of the ritual and archetypal imagery of baptism. A reading of *Moby-Dick* informed by Biblical typology discovers potent baptismal echoes in far more passages than those which explicitly refer to the sacrament. Baptism appears in the novel as the washing away of sins, initiation into a new identity and community, second birth, initiation into mysteries, consecration for a holy purpose, and death and resurrection. In each example, however, Melville subverts the type; his baptisms are reversed, incomplete, or uncertain. Melville's characters are not baptized into Christian community and spiritual life, but into a savage, pagan identity as whalemens; what is consecrated is not dedicated to holiness, but to violence and bloodshed; and for him death does not lead to resurrection, but madness, insoluble ambiguity, and final destruction. In the end, only Queequeg's coffin offers a slight hope that the principles of baptism, though not its Christian origin, may have some power to save.

It is a commonplace in Melville criticism that sacramental rituals play an unusual and important role in *Moby-Dick*. As Daniel Hoffman notes, "The interstices of the action are braced by the enactment of rituals" (62), which consistently appear at key

moments in the novel and resonate with powerful imagery and themes. The scenes most often cited in this context are the “communion” in which the harpooners ritually drink grog from the goblets of their canted harpoons and the “baptism” in which Ahab’s new-forged harpoon is quenched in the harpooners’ blood. These scenes, which are parodies or inversions of the two Christian sacraments instituted by Jesus himself, are central to religious readings of the novel. They exemplify the way in which Ahab’s rituals “literalize and desacralize the Christian ritual tradition, turning them upside-down or inside-out” (Patton 137). Noting the appropriation of ministerial offices for unholy ends, one critic argues that “through the use of two rituals—communion and baptism—derived from *The Book of Common Prayer*, Melville indicates that the underlying role of Ahab is that of a ‘minister’ who allied himself with the devil” (Bullock 7). In addition, other writers note such rituals as the “marriage” of Ishmael and Queequeg, the “funeral” of Fedallah, and the sermons of Father Mapple and the cook (Patton 139, Hoffman 62). R. H. Winnick offers a fascinating reading of the chapter “The Candles” as closely and deliberately replicating the Easter Vigil service to create “an anti-sacrament of corresponding images, actions, and utterances ... which appear to be modeled upon, to invert, and implicitly to mock their pious counterparts” (185).

However, fewer critics have observed that baptism, in particular, extends far beyond the famous ritual scene in “The Forge,” being in fact woven through the entire novel. In order to recognize just how pervasive, indeed ubiquitous, baptismal symbolism is within *Moby-Dick*, we must turn to the traditional form of Biblical exegesis known as typology. This method of reading works by a simple principle: “In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; in the New Testament the Old Testament

is revealed" (Frye 79). Events and people before Christ are considered types, or figures, or foreshadowings, which have their fulfillment in the life of Christ. So, too, ritual observances may be considered as types of the spiritual realities they represent. By this method of reading, apparently disparate historical events, religious practices, and spiritual states are so closely identified with one another that they can hardly be separated. One of the most important such groupings includes the Flood of Noah, the crossing of the Red Sea, Jonah's days in the whale, Christ's descent into hell, and the individual believer's baptism. Just as Christ descended into the grave and defeated the devil, and just as Noah by God's power triumphed over the sea, so baptism "involves a descent into a watery grave for the supreme conflict against the sea beast over which the baptized person is permanently victorious" (Danielou 73).

These identifications, especially in this particular group of types, are not merely the product of medieval ingenuity; the Bible itself encourages them. For example, Paul clearly teaches that the individual Christian's baptism is a participation in Christ's death and resurrection: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (New International Version, Romans 6:3-5). In addition, Jesus identifies himself with Old Testament types when he describes his death as "the sign of the prophet Jonah": "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:39-40). As early as the Psalms, the Flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the defeat of the monster Leviathan are grouped together as sharing a single meaning (Danielou 71-72). To hundreds of years

of Biblical commentators, all these events have appeared intimately and organically connected, and their parallels have proved endlessly instructive.

The identifications are also enshrined in liturgy. The very Easter Vigil service which Winnick shows Melville to imitate includes readings about Creation, the Flood, the Red Sea, and the new identity of God's people (*Book of Common Prayer* 288-291). This night, which lies between Christ's death and his resurrection, is the traditional time for baptism of catechumens and the renewal of baptismal vows for the whole congregation (*BCP* 292). Thus theory becomes lived reality through the enactment of sacramental ritual. Since "Melville's mind seems to have been saturated with [the Bible's] stories, its ideas, its language" and he read not only the Bible itself but Biblical commentaries from Augustine to Calvin (Wright 6-7), he undoubtedly was aware of the watery typology of baptism, death, and resurrection and employed its symbolism deliberately in *Moby-Dick*.

The first form of baptism to appear in the novel is the initiation of Ishmael and the rest of the crew into a new identity and community aboard the *Pequod*. The ship itself calls to mind Noah's ark, which in turn typologically represents the Church that will carry its members safe through tribulation, death, and the Last Judgment. Melville explicitly compares the whaler to the ark several times, specifically in reference to its ability to survive a second Flood. For example, he writes, "Did you carry [the whalers] the news that another flood had come; they would only answer—"Well, boys, here's the ark!" (330). The powerfully symbolic element of water is also omnipresent in the book. The ship passes through water, the physical element of the sacrament, simply by setting out

on its voyage; as Melville several times notes, crew and cargo are literally underwater, "sunk ... beneath the waterline" (38) when they descend into the holds of the ship.

The clearest evidence for the baptismal significance of the voyage, though, is Queequeg's remarks about his intention in sailing. A faithful pagan, the cannibal fears that his years of association with "Christianity, or rather Christians, had unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him" (49). He will return to his home on Kokovoko only "as soon as he felt himself baptized again" (49). By sailing in the *Pequod*, Queequeg hopes to wash away the stain of Western civilization and once more become faithful to his native gods, just as in baptism Christians "wash [their] sins away" (Acts 22:16) and, "having our bodies washed with pure water ... hold unswervingly" to a faithful God (Hebrews 10:22-23). And, just as Queequeg must be purified by his sea voyage in order to claim his inheritance as the rightful king of Kokovoko, so Christians are baptized to receive adoption as sons and become co-heirs with Christ. The one case is a precise replica of the other, although the direction of movement is reversed; in each there is a movement from pollution to purity and exile to inclusion, accomplished by the means of water.

Although Queequeg is the only crew member explicitly described as seeking baptism, everyone on board the *Pequod* undergoes a similar process as they leave their old selves on shore and receive a new identity as sailors, whalers, and members of a common crew. The immense and obvious pride which Ishmael takes in his title as a whaler testifies to this powerful identification. Melville observes a profound change in men at sea, arguing that "long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, *i.e.* what is called savagery"

(236). Even American-born Christians, like Queequeg, have the varnish of civilization washed away in the salt water of their nautical baptism. In another passage, Melville describes the Pequod as “freighted with savages” (366). Regardless of their previous identities—whether they were green landlubbers or South Sea cannibals—the crew members can now all be identified by that single title. Ishmael himself had been “lording it as a country schoolmaster, making the tallest boys stand in awe” (4); now he proudly proclaims, “I myself am a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him” (236). These changes correspond to the words of the New Testament: “That is what ... you were. But you were washed” and received a new nature in Christ (1 Cor. 6:11). Again, the resemblance is exact but inverted; where Christians cast off their old identities as sinners, the sailors confirm or create an identity as savages and cannibals.

United by a common identity, a common goal, and a common initiation, the members of the crew form such a tightly knit community that Melville writes, “They were one man, not thirty” (475). This degree of unity and interdependence is precisely that of the universal Christian church described in the Bible. Melville elaborates his point in a striking epic simile:

As the one ship which held them all; though it was put together of all
contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and
hemp—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull ...
balanced and directed by the long central keel; even so, all the
individualities of the crew ... were melded into oneness, and were all

directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to.
(475-76)

This simile closely resembles two Biblical images for the church. First, the church is imagined as the body of Christ, and each individual member of it as a part of that body (1 Cor. 12:12-28). The many different parts—hand and foot, eye and ear—must work together in harmony. Thus innumerable men together form a single man, Christ, who is called “the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). Melville’s assertion that the crew members were “one man” and his enumeration of the ship’s many parts clearly parallel this scriptural idea. In a second metaphor with the same import, the members of the church are said to be “living stones” which are “being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5), of which Christ is “the chief cornerstone” in whom “the whole building is joined together” (Eph. 2:20-21). By echoing these Biblical passages, Melville further strengthens the *Pequod*’s identification as both ark and church. He also makes Ahab, as the unifying will and the “one lord and keel” of the whole ship, the Christ-figure for that church. Ahab’s mad and diabolical purpose reorients the community, so similar in form to the Christian church, toward an object antithetical to it. The baptism of ocean voyage which incorporates members into this pagan church is thus further tainted by the blasphemous exaltation of Ahab to the position of lord, head, and cornerstone.

In a major stage of Ishmael’s initiation as a whaleman, he confronts his fear of death, symbolically accepts it, and thus overcomes it. After his first encounter with a whale, which involved a stove boat and a long, fearful night separated from the ship, Ishmael for the first time appreciates the real dangers of whaling and concludes, “I might as well go below and make a rough draft of my will” (198). Thus, through what he

refers to as a “ceremony,” he resigns himself to death; but, peculiarly, this very action frees him from all fear of death. He describes his new state of mind with two Biblical allusions: “A stone was rolled away from my heart” and “All the days I should now live would be as good as the days that Lazarus lived after his resurrection” (198). Lazarus’s resurrection is, of course, a prefiguring of Christ’s, as well as a foretaste of the final resurrection of all believers. Ishmael’s making of his will is thus clearly a type of baptism in its aspect of death and resurrection. Like a Christian in baptism, he chooses to accept and symbolically, ritually undergo death while still living so that death in the future will no longer hold any terror for him. The baptized person is told, “You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). In a comically prosaic echo of this phrase, after he has stowed his completed will Ishmael thinks, “My death and burial were locked up in my chest” (198). This contrast captures the tone. Ishmael’s “baptism” is not spiritual, but secular; it is part of his initiation as a whaleman, something that every whale hunter has experienced. In addition, Queequeg, as Ishmael’s “lawyer, executor, and legatee” (198), takes the role of officiating priest, marking the sacrament as pagan rather than Christian. Thus, Melville subverts the Christian idea of ritual enactment of death and resurrection by placing it in secular and pagan contexts.

A similar strategy of comic reappropriation is also employed in the story of Tashtego’s rescue from the whale’s head. When Tashtego falls into the spermaceti case while baling it, Queequeg must dive into the water, cut into the head, and pull his fellow harpooner out. This “deliverance, or rather, delivery” is described in terms of giving birth; Ishmael praises Queequeg’s “great skill in obstetrics” and vigorous “midwifery” (289). Thus, Melville slyly links the incident with baptism, for that action too

is at once deliverance from danger and delivery of a new birth. The passage reads like a comically literal and grotesque answer to Nicodemus, who asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? ... Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" (John 3:4). A womb is too small for a full-grown man, but a whale fits him quite nicely. Jesus' answer, of course, is that "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6); that is, he means spiritual rebirth in the sacrament of baptism. On the general principle which Jesus has proposed, Tashtego, being born of a whale, must be a whale, or at least partake of its qualities. This bizarre proposition is borne out by other passages in the novel. Starbuck speaks of the sailors as "such a heathen crew that have small touch of human mothers in them! Whelped somewhere by the sharkish sea" (146). Tashtego's second birth thus stands as the visible example of a process that all the crew members have undergone, an initiation which makes them more akin to the wild and inhuman ocean than to Christian civilization on land. In this episode, too, Queequeg is the savior who rescues from a watery death, the midwife who delivers the birth, and the priest who presides over a sacrament. Since Queequeg performs in Christ's role as the one who descends into death to save others from it, he clearly marks this baptism as pagan and the new life it begins as savage. Tashtego's birth from the whale is a grotesque parodic reiteration of the baptism motif, which, reduced to a literal, physical event, has lost its salvific spiritual significance.

Pip's fall into the ocean highlights another element of baptism and provides a far more serious subversion of its meaning. When this castaway is abandoned by his whaleboat and left alone in the immensity of the ocean, he loses his mind. Though the ship eventually rescues him, they find that "the sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up,

but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths” (359). Life and death mingle; in his descent into and re-ascent from the water, Pip symbolically and spiritually dies while remaining physically alive, powerfully recalling the rite of baptism. However, his death is not matched by a corresponding resurrection. The Christian leaves his sinful nature in the symbolic grave and receives in its place new and everlasting life; Pip leaves his sanity, his very self, in the depths of the ocean and receives nothing in return. Although his body was drawn from the water, in the deepest sense Pip never emerges from the depths: in his mad soliloquies he says, “Seek out one Pip, who’s now been missing long” (413) and “Base little Pip, he died a coward” (414), indicating that the body walking around the *Pequod* is but a shell, its inhabitant lost. In this story Melville both echoes and questions the great Biblical principle: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:39). Pip, acting out of cowardly fear, jumps from the whaleboat to save his life, and for that very reason loses it, seeming to illustrate Jesus’ lesson. However, in another sense, Pip loses himself in a divine mystery. “He saw God’s foot upon the treadle of the loom,” and glimpsed “strange shapes of the unwarped primal world”; “the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps” (359). He has found “heaven’s sense,” “that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic” (359). These secrets of the deep recall “the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3), a wisdom which seems foolishness to unbelievers (1 Corin. 1:18-25). Pip’s experience recalls the Biblical commentators who described the mystical life as a second and deeper baptism (Danielou 27). But while some mystics report experiences in which the self is

annihilated or subsumed, Christianity affirms that in final union with God the soul is not simply swallowed up or melted into the whole, but on the contrary becomes more truly itself than ever before; individual identity and will are lost only to be found, given over to death that they may be raised to eternal life. In Pip's case, however, this process is incomplete. There is no turning upward, but only descent and descent past any point of return, loss and death without the faintest hope of redemption. The mysteries into which he is so terribly initiated speak not of divine love, but the "dark Hindoo half of nature, who of drowned bones hast builded [its] separate throne somewhere in the heart of these unverdured seas" (426). This diabolic baptism mocks the hopes of Christianity, denying the resurrection promise and suggesting that the longed-for mystery of God may in fact be dark, sinister, and better kept secret.

The making of Ahab's harpoon, although referred to explicitly as a baptism, more closely resembles consecration. As Linda Bullock observes, "In baptizing the harpoon, Ahab was setting it aside, making it 'holy' to be used for one purpose only" (8). The consecration of an object, however, is analogous to the baptism of a believer, since both confer a high status and special purpose. In the Old Testament, objects used for worship and venerated as holy were consecrated for that use with blood: "[Moses] sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood" (Hebrews 9:21-22). The book of Hebrews interprets these rituals as a type of Christ's sacrifice, noting that "the law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming" (10:1) and its promises were finally fulfilled "when Christ came as high priest" (9:11). This same sprinkling with blood is also a type of baptism, in which "our hearts [were] sprinkled to cleanse us from

a guilty conscience" (Hebrews 10:22). By consecrating with blood rather than water, Ahab rejects the new covenant in favor of the old, moving backwards from fulfillment to figure, from reality to shadow. In addition, the harpooners' blood takes the place of Christ's, making this baptism pagan rather than Christian. Not only does Ahab twist the form of the ritual, he appropriates it for a purpose antithetical to its original meaning. The task this harpoon is set apart for is not one of devout worship, but blasphemous destruction. The power Ahab calls upon is not the holy Father, but the devil. The novel's most explicit instance of baptism is also its most obviously and deliberately diabolic action, invoking the devil not only in allusion but by name: "Baptizo ... in nomine diaboli" (421). This passage sets forth the principle behind Melville's twisted types, which are "shadows" of reality not only because they are lesser copies, but also because their images are dark and distorted.

The penultimate baptism in *Moby-Dick*, faithfully Christian in its execution, remains ambiguous in its final effect. The *Pequod* meets the *Delight* in the midst of the burial of one of five men slain by Moby Dick. Unlike the savage and devil-haunted ship of Captain Ahab, in which all rituals are parodied or inverted, the *Delight* seems to be a Christian ship. We catch just a snatch of their funeral service: the captain says, "'Oh! God—' advancing towards the hammock with uplifted hands—'may the resurrection and the life—'" (461). Even this stolen glimpse shows a pious ritual, obedient to Christian tradition; "the resurrection and the life" are some of the Bible's most memorable words in response to death and a repeated phrase in funeral services. When the corpse splashes into the ocean, "some of the flying bubbles might have sprinkled [the *Pequod's*] hull with their ghostly baptism" (461). The phrase "ghostly baptism" suggests

several implications but confirms none. "Ghostly," in today's language, means only "of or pertaining to, or issuing from, a ghost, disembodied spirit, or spectre," but definitions now archaic or obsolete include "pertaining to the spirit or soul; spiritual," "concerned with sacred things, or with the church," and "spiritual, devout, religious." The recipient of this baptism, too, is left unclear; is it the *Pequod*, sprinkled with water, or the dead man, now immersed? Typology identifies baptism with physical death, for both are "an entry into Paradise" (Danielou 25). In one burial service, the prayers explicitly link the two concepts: "Grant that all who have been baptized into Christ's death may die to sin ... and that through the grave and gate of death we may pass with him to our joyful resurrection" (BCP 480). By referring to Christian burial as "ghostly baptism," Melville may be implicitly comparing this purely spiritual rite with the secularized and literalized versions aboard the *Pequod*. In this interpretation, the *Delight's* name is not bitterly ironic but accurate; the deaths the ship grieves for are a prelude to resurrection, an entrance into eternal joy. However, the dark and ominous connotations of the word "ghostly" in contemporary usage and the unsettling image of the corpse slipping underwater likely overpower any suggestion of consolation. In this reading, the captain's prayer for "the resurrection and the life" is empty and unanswered; the sea's watery grave will never give up its dead. Melville leaves the meaning ambiguous, holding both interpretations in tension.

Moby-Dick, of course, ends with the sinking of the *Pequod*. The ship, which as ark and church ought to protect its inhabitants from the flood and fire of God's wrath, is overcome and destroyed by its adversary. Like Christ in medieval accounts of the harrowing of hell, it descends into the watery depths of the ocean; unlike him, it will

never rise again to the light of day. *Moby Dick*, the leviathan, who in early Biblical commentaries is a type of the devil, is finally victorious. Melville's version seems deliberately written against the psalmist's lines of praise for God's saving power: "It was you who split open the sea by your power; / you broke the heads of the monster of the waters. / It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan" (Psalm 74:12-13). Instead, the leviathan splits and crushes its pursuers; the devil defeats the people of God. Read in typological terms, *Moby-Dick* asserts that the forces of chaos, evil, and destruction overcome civilization and Christianity; that the pattern of death and resurrection is broken, and the world sinks like a foundered ship. Here we find the fullest statement of the novel's secret motto, the reality of which all its previous baptisms are various types. It is failed baptism, the very means of salvation from the devil utterly overcome by demonic power.

Ishmael, however, survives the wreck of the *Pequod*. His descent and reascent from the ocean and his miraculous salvation, first by the coffin and then by the *Rachel*, seem to mark him as a type of baptism. Is he a Jonah spit back by the whale, a Noah who has survived the ocean? In the epilogue, Melville explicitly refers not to any Biblical character associated with the baptismal type, but to the messengers in Job, who one by one report the destruction of Job's possessions, livelihood, and family and end their stories, "And only I am escaped alone to tell you" (*Moby-Dick* 492, Job 1:15-19). These minor characters survive not because they are consecrated for a holy purpose or saved by their willing acceptance of death and loss, but simply in order that they may testify to what has occurred. Likewise, Ishmael lives to recount the tragedy of the *Pequod*, a witness and messenger. Also like Job's servants, he has lost his home and family.

When the *Rachel* picked him up, she “only found another orphan” (492). The shipwreck reverses the initiation that had given Ishmael identity, community, and purpose, undoing the effects of his first baptism.

The means of Ishmael's salvation is Queequeg's coffin, which has been transformed into the life-preserver for the ship. Although Ishmael remains on the surface of the water during the wreck, the buoyant coffin is dragged deep underwater with the ship and then “upward burst ... rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea” (492). Only this wood consecrated by the willing acceptance of death, which powerfully reminds us of the cross, both descends to and ascends from the deep. As Ahab says, more truly than he knows, “Here now's the very dreaded symbol of grim death ... made the expressive sign of the help and hope of most endangered life” (451). We could hardly have a better description of the cross; in it horrific torture and shameful death become “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corin. 1:24), the triumph over powers and authorities (Col. 2:15), the only cause for boasting (Gal. 6:14), the way of salvation. Ahab also muses, “Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver!” (451-52). This touches upon the typological identification of baptism and death, in which death itself is but another baptism into eternal life. Once again, Queequeg, the faithful savage and cannibal, serves as the saving Christ-figure. Because he has transferred his own mysterious tattoos to his coffin, it stands as a symbolic representation of his body: “Queequeg gives up his body to die for his friend, and gives up the sign of his body, his coffin, which will eventually surface to preserve the body and life of Ishmael” (Patton 146). The salvation of the coffin echoes Christianity in form and principle while

remaining firmly pagan in execution. Although Queequeg himself dies without hope of resurrection, his acceptance of death allows another to preserve life.

Melville has reappropriated baptism for secular, parodic, and blasphemous purposes; he has inverted it and made it sacred not to God but the devil; and he has broken the pattern of descent and reascent, denying the final victory of life over death. Faithful Christian baptism, as witnessed on the *Delight*, holds out a promise of ghostly comfort whose efficacy Melville neither confirms nor denies. Alone among Melville's many baptisms, Ishmael's salvation by Queequeg's coffin suggests a dim ray of hope amidst the bleak waters. The salvation which Melville holds open as a possibility is not by the ark of the institutional church, not by the members of a Christian civilization, but by individual relationships, with people of any culture or creed, which enact the deeply Christian principles of sacrificial love and life-affirming acceptance of death. The way of baptism, which is also the way of the cross, is not finally rejected but adapted for a darker and more pessimistic world in which final victory may be impossible, but the human struggle for life and love still has meaning.

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