

“AN ENDLESS SERMON”: RELIGIOUS MOTIFS IN MELVILLE’S LETTERS TO HAWTHORNE

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As perhaps the most consequential friendship in American literary history, the relationship between Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne while living as near-neighbors in the Berkshires in 1850-51 continues to fascinate readers of both authors. Scholars attempting to evaluate the friendship regularly turn to Melville’s letters to Hawthorne as an invaluable resource for examining its emotional and intellectual tenor, but they have less often focused on the letters’ religious dimension. Yet if Melville’s well-known review of Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse* conveys Melville’s conception of Hawthorne as a messianic literary genius, Melville’s impassioned letters illustrate the centrality of Christian tradition in his thought along with the unsettled nature of his religious beliefs, a paradox suggestive of larger currents in Anglo-American cultural history. Having embraced a rebellious skepticism by mid-century, Melville still relied on Protestant Christianity and the King James Bible as templates for his moral imagination, while the sacrament of communion provided a key paradigm for Melville’s attitude towards his older literary friend, with whom he expressed his “infinite fraternity of feeling.”¹ Examining the religious motifs in Melville’s letters to Hawthorne, many of which can be related to scenes from his current whaling novel, will help restore an essential dimension to the friendship. This is especially true of the many biblical allusions which make the letters

into what Melville would call "an endless sermon" relying on key scriptural texts, following the standard sermonic structure of the era (191).

Before examining Melville's letters to Hawthorne, it will be useful to compare the two writers' religious heritage at the time of their meeting. Although separated by fifteen years in age, Melville and Hawthorne shared a similar religious background as descendants of Calvinistic ancestors, but both had nominally moved toward a liberal Unitarian faith by adulthood. Famously descended from a stern line of Salem magistrates, master mariners, and civic leaders, Hawthorne came of age with loose ties to the Unitarian church and in 1842 married Sophia Peabody, whose family embraced the same liberal faith. Following his Unitarian father's death in 1832, Melville was steeped in the Calvinist rigors of the Dutch Reformed church practiced by his mother and her Albany relatives, but his marriage to the Unitarian Elizabeth Shaw in 1847 reoriented him towards her church, just as his faith was waning. Both Hawthorne and Melville lost their fathers at an early age (Hawthorne at three, Melville at twelve), causing them both to grow up as poor relations within larger moneyed clans, instilling them with a feeling of disinheritance from their more prosperous middle-class social and religious milieus. Both writers were omnivorous readers of literature, history, travel, philosophy, and theology; both were deeply versed in the Bible; and both were recurrently preoccupied with the problem of evil in human nature, society, and the cosmos.²

First meeting at a literary picnic on August 5, 1850, Melville and Hawthorne became acquainted during the various social events of that month when Melville was temporarily summering with his family at his uncle's former mansion in Pittsfield, after which he decided to buy a nearby house and move to the area that September, all while interrupting work on his current whaling novel; but it is not until several months later that the surviving correspondence provides a clear indication of his evolving relationship with his literary neighbor six miles to the south. Thus, following an initial short missive of late January 1851 insisting that Hawthorne must come for a visit with or without his family, Melville's first surviving extended letter to Hawthorne dates from mid-April, just as he was finishing writing *Moby-Dick* and had taken the time to read Hawthorne's recently published *The House of the Seven Gables*, a copy of which the author had given him on April 11.³

In his letter to Hawthorne, Melville described the strong appeal of the new novel using the analogy of an attractively furnished room in an old house and then mentioned two memorable dramatic scenes involving Clifford and Judge Pyncheon while highlighting the unique qualities of the former character. But in an abrupt transition to more general statements, Melville bestowed more of the exalted praise he lavished on Hawthorne

in his *Mosses* review, now noting that his friend's literary works embody "a certain tragic phase of humanity which, in our opinion, was never more powerfully embodied than by Hawthorne. We mean the tragicalness of human thought in its own unbiassed, native, and profounder workings" (186). Hawthorne has accordingly conveyed the "visable [sic] truth" better than any other writer:

By visable truth, we mean 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,—the man who, like Russia or the British Empire, declares himself a sovereign nature (in himself) amid the powers of heaven, hell, and earth. He may perish; but so long as he exists he insists upon treating with all Powers upon an equal basis. If any of those other Powers choose to withhold certain secrets, let them; that does not impair my sovereignty in myself; that does not make me tributary. (186)

In Melville's formulation here, some of the "Powers" of heaven, hell, and earth may withhold their "secrets" but this does not imply any slavish subjection; the writer who seeks the visible truth will interrogate the moral universe of unnamed divine "Powers" based on the dignity of his democratic faith, even at the risk of death.

While evoking the Romantic Prometheanism that characterized Ahab in the chapters on "The Quarterdeck," "The Sphynx," and "The Candles" in *Moby-Dick*, Melville seems to be saying here that in his fiction Hawthorne is able to look unflinchingly at the human condition and not shy away from its most fearsome implications; indeed, he is capable of dealing with divine "Powers" almost as though he himself were a divine agent. As an affirmation of the Romantic notion of the divinity of the creative artist, such a formulation suggests the heterodox poetic creed of Melville's contemporary Walt Whitman, who wrote in a manuscript notebook in the late 1840s: "If the presence of God were made visible immediately before me, I could not abase myself. . . . If I walk with Jah [Yahweh?] in Heaven and he assumes to be intrinsically greater than I it offends me, and I shall certainly withdraw from Heaven,—for the soul prefers freedom in the prairie or the untrodden woods."⁴

While his remarks on Hawthorne's assumed challenge to unnamed metaphysical "Powers" may seem overstated, it is important to note that Melville is likely conflating his friend's moral critique with those of two biblical figures, Job and St. Paul. Not coincidentally, both the book of Job and the letters of St. Paul served as major sources for *Moby-Dick*—Job for the character of Ahab as quester for divine justice and St. Paul for Ishmael's secular sermonizing.⁵ It is not surprising that the language of rebellion that Melville was imputing to Hawthorne is descriptive of the role of Job, the

most eloquent Old Testament figure directly challenging God's justice following his devastating loss of property, family, and health. A selection of Job's remarks to his three "comforters" regarding God's undeserved treatment of him shows the patriarch's fearless moral independence and demand for an explanation from God for his fate:

Therefore I will not refrain my mouth: I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.⁶

The earth is given into the hand of the wicked: he covereth the faces of the judges thereof; if not, where, and who is he?⁷

I will say unto God, Do not condemn me; shew me wherefore thou contendest with me.⁸

Surely I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to reason with God.⁹

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him.¹⁰

Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and holdest me for thine enemy?¹¹

What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?¹²

My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.¹³

In his mid-April letter to Hawthorne, Melville's paradigm of a "sovereign nature" insisting on his right to know the secrets behind the "Powers" of the universe implicitly rehearses the situation of Job, whose outspoken demand to know God's moral plan for the universe led to the deity's final revelation as the voice from the whirlwind.¹⁴

In addition to Job, Melville's characterization of Hawthorne's imputed metaphysical revolt likely draws on St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, which exhorted his fellow Christians: "Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.... Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness."¹⁵ Like St. Paul, Hawthorne in Melville's formulation is willing to stand up to unnamed cosmic "Powers" in spite of any personal risk. While St. Paul is here specifically referencing the demonic powers of the universe to be resisted, elsewhere in his letters

he implies that these “principalities and powers” are also divine.¹⁶ Like St. Paul, Melville similarly leaves the origin of his cosmic “Powers” ambiguous; and like the apostle encouraging early Christians to wear a “breastplate of righteousness,” Melville depicts Hawthorne as ontologically secure in his possession of the “visable truth” and a “sovereign nature.”

Melville’s intense sense of spiritual communion and identification with Hawthorne manifestly made him think that the two were pursuing the same agenda as writers, especially in their frequent challenges to the reigning religious pieties of the era; and it is revealing that Melville’s phrasing in this letter uses personal pronouns eliding the difference between Hawthorne’s artistry and his own (“that does not impair my sovereignty in myself; that does not make me tributary”). While Melville seems to be using his description of Hawthorne as a way of describing his own creative mandate, it is also apparent that certain aspects of Hawthorne’s fiction, such as the pathos of Clifford’s misfortunes in *The House of the Seven Gables* and their Job-like challenge to divine justice, might be viewed as partially conforming to Melville’s admiring description.¹⁷

Melville’s praise of Hawthorne’s presumed role as a spiritual quester like himself now leads Melville to dive into the metaphysical mysteries of Christian providence and the related issue of theodicy, or the problem of evil in a universe allegedly ruled by a good god—a question most fully presented in the Bible in the book of Job. In his letter Melville accordingly speculates that the celebrated “Problem of the Universe” might be comparable to “the Freemason’s mighty secret” which “turns out, at last, to consist in a triangle, a mallet, and an apron,—nothing more! We incline to think that God cannot explain His own secrets, and that He would like a little information upon certain points Himself. We mortals astonish Him as much as He us” (186). If such a statement suggests the simple solution to the cosmic mystery of Job’s devastating misfortunes in the moral test suggested by “Satan,” it also evokes the gnostic idea of an imperfect divine creator who made the radically flawed visible universe, an important theme in *Moby-Dick* associated with the character of Ahab.¹⁸ Melville is here presenting an image of the deity that would be more fully developed by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill in his essay on “Theism,” published in the posthumous collection *Three Essays on Religion* (1872):

The skill of the Demiourgos [the Gnostic creator god] was sufficient to produce what we see; but we cannot tell that this skill reached the extreme limit of perfection compatible with the material it employed and the forces it had to work with. I know not how we can even satisfy ourselves on grounds of natural theology, that the Creator foresees all the future; that he foreknows all the effects that will issue from his own contrivances. There may be great wisdom without the power of foreseeing

and calculating everything; and human workmanship teaches us the possibility that the workman's knowledge of the properties of the things he works on may enable him to make arrangements admirably fitted to produce a given result, while he may have very little power of foreseeing the agencies of another kind which may modify or counteract the operation of the machinery he has made.¹⁹

As we can see from Mill's essay on "Theism" as well as Whitman's remarks above, heterodox ideas like Melville's were being propounded by other contemporary Anglo-American intellectuals and literary artists. And even if Hawthorne would likely not endorse Melville's theological speculations as we find them in his correspondence, the older author was undoubtedly sympathetic to the metaphysical questions Melville was posing, as his wife Sophia confirmed in a letter to her older sister Elizabeth Palmer Peabody.²⁰

As he completes his assessment of Hawthorne's allegedly rebellious creative imagination in his April letter, Melville asserts that Hawthorne is free of the conventional pieties of contemporary Protestant Christianity. Thus, using the symbolic language he found in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Melville inverted the English author's endorsement, formulated as an "everlasting yea," of the conventional belief in a benevolent creator god and a theistic universe:

There is the grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says NO! in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say *yes*. For all men who say *yes*, lie; and all men who say *no*,—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious, unencumbered travellers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag,—that is to say, the Ego. Whereas those *yes*-gentry, they travel with heaps of baggage, and damn them! they will never get through the Custom House. (186)

Hawthorne's imputed message of "NO! in thunder" can be interpreted as conveying his dissent in thunderous, god-like tones—or perhaps expressing it in spite of intimidating, divinely sent thunder; both interpretations have literary precedent even though the first would seem more likely.²¹ (Significantly, God taunts Job by asking him, "Has thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?")²² Using the analogy of modern European tourism, Melville also suggests that Hawthorne is an "unencumbered" traveler who will get into eternity because of his lack of theological or moral baggage, a metaphor suggestive of Christian's passing through the wicket gate and dropping of his burden of sin below the cross in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.²³ By so doing, Bunyan's protagonist illustrates Christ's well-known teaching that "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."²⁴ Melville's reference to "the Custom House," recalling the preface to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* published a year earlier, thus functions like Christ's narrow gate admitting travelers

into eternity. Travelers with too much personal baggage may have to pay a hellish price (“damn them!”) at the borders of life and death.

In his description of Hawthorne’s imputed response of “No” to the devil, moreover, Melville implicitly presents Hawthorne as resembling the patriarch Job who confronted God with scathing indictments of divine injustice. Yet in a conflation of identities, Melville’s image of Hawthorne also potentially suggests the figure of Christ who was famously tempted three times by Satan, as depicted in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and in Milton’s *Paradise Regained*.²⁵ In Melville’s suggestively allusive formulation, then, Hawthorne, like himself, could not accept the prescribed beliefs of his culture. Yet, paradoxically, their lack of conventional Christian beliefs allows them to attain the condition of personal immortality by challenging, not endorsing, the religious dogmas of their era—a fate that resembles that of Job, who was ultimately rewarded with a restoration of his family and fortune in spite of his outspoken challenges to the deity.²⁶

Melville’s subsequent letter to Hawthorne in early May is the longest communication he sent to his friend in Lenox, and despite his continued joy in Hawthorne’s proximity, the mood of the letter is more somber, weary, and even anguished; it is thus appropriate that the book of Ecclesiastes is the dominant biblical “text” of the letter, just as the book of Job dominates the previous letter celebrating metaphysical revolt.²⁷ Melville begins this May letter by reporting that he has been busy with outdoor work in addition to continuing composition on his whaling novel. Claiming to stand on no ceremony with anyone “except the Christian ones of charity and honesty” (190), Melville proceeds to make a distinction between his political devotion to radical democracy and his respect for what he calls the “intellectual estates” (190), warning that the fastidious Hawthorne may be shocked by the former belief:

So, when you see or hear of my ruthless democracy on all sides, you may possibly feel a touch of a shrink, or something of that sort. It is but nature to be shy of a mortal who boldly declares that a thief in jail is as honorable a person as Gen. George Washington. This is ludicrous. But Truth is the silliest thing under the sun. Try to get a living by the Truth—and go to the Soup Societies. Heavens! Let any clergyman try to preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of his church on his own pulpit bannister. (190-91)

Taking to heart the nation’s founding belief that all (white) men are created equal, Melville associates this with the radical equality of persons that forms a basic tenet of Christianity, an idea that would inspire Ishmael’s salute in chapter 26 of *Moby-Dick* to the “Spirit of Equality” of the “great democratic God.”²⁸ Melville’s adherence to an ideal of “Truth,” on the other hand,

evokes the idea of a spiritual "truth" embodied in Christ but also found in St. Paul, who claimed that "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."²⁹ Melville's awareness of the unpopularity of "truth," as represented by the spiritual and political equality of human beings, implies that he is very much aware of the dangers that his truth-telling in his fiction poses to his survival as a writer. The publication of *Pierre* less than year after the appearance of *Moby-Dick* would confirm the prescience of Melville's remarks here. Melville's dominant mood in this May letter thus accords with the theme of "vanity" in the book of Ecclesiastes, which asks, "For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun? / For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity."³⁰

Refocusing on his own case, Melville expresses his feeling of exhaustion and demoralization over finishing the composition of *Moby-Dick* as financial demands are pressuring him to speed up the completion of his new book. He is now aware more than ever of the conflict between his desire to write books of philosophical reflection like the unprofitable *Mardi* and the practical need to write accessible popular fiction that will sell and put food on the table: "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches" (191). Acknowledging that he is weary with worry and overwork, Melville now presents a vision of a posthumous realm where he and Hawthorne can permanently enjoy themselves without worrying about the financial result of their literary labors:

If ever, my dear Hawthorne, in the eternal times that are to come, you and I shall sit down in Paradise, in some little shady corner by ourselves; and if we shall by any means be able to smuggle a basket of champagne there (I won't believe in a Temperance Heaven), and if we shall then cross our celestial legs in the celestial grass that is forever tropical, and strike our glasses and our heads together, till both musically ring in concert,—then, O my dear fellow-mortal, how shall we pleasantly discourse of all the things manifold which now so distress us,—when all the earth shall be but a reminiscence, yea, its final dissolution an antiquity. (191-92)

In this punch-drunk beatific vision, Melville imagines himself in a future paradise with Hawthorne as his eternal drinking and conversational companion. Such a vision accords with another repeated message of Ecclesiastes that "a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun."³¹ All the hard labors that Mel-

ville has expended on *Moby-Dick* amid the recurrent stresses of his domestic life in Pittsfield are now imaginatively envisaged as creating the necessary conditions to produce the champagne they will drink in the afterlife.

Now that he is finishing *Moby-Dick*, Melville in fact feels the incipient despair of an author who is increasingly aware of the ephemeral impact of a modern novel in the overcrowded Anglo-American literary marketplace; indeed, even the most profound contemporary literary production would likely fail to support the author: "What's the use of elaborating what, in its very essence, is so short-lived as a modern book? Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter" (192). The fate of Edgar Allan Poe, author of the recently published cosmological "gospel" of *Eureka* and dead at age forty in October 1849, would provide grounds for Melville's fears. Melville's despair over the lack of proper appreciation in the American reading public is somewhat relieved, however, by the fact that he can share his misery with Hawthorne, and he goes on to report that he has read Hawthorne's recently published story "Ethan Brand," with its cautionary moral of a man obsessed with finding sin in others and inadvertently becoming the arch-transgressor himself by committing the "unpardonable sin" of an overdeveloped intellect and underdeveloped heart. In reaction to Hawthorne's allegory, Melville takes a dramatic stand: "I stand for the heart. To the dogs with the head! I had rather be a fool with a heart, than Jupiter Olympus with his head. The reason the mass of men fear God, and *at bottom dislike Him*, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch" (192). Implicitly claiming allegiance to the foolish wisdom of St. Paul ("If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise" ³²), and anticipating the turbulent career of his forthcoming fictional hero Pierre, Melville criticizes the supreme Judeo-Christian god, here elided with his Roman counterpart (as was common in Elizabethan drama), for having an overdeveloped intellect and underdeveloped heart like Hawthorne's Ethan Brand. In keeping with his father's and wife's Unitarian heritage, Melville rejects the inquisitorial and punitive god of the Old Testament and implicitly embraces the charitable and compassionate God of the New.³³

Despite his complaints about the ephemeral nature of modern literature, Melville notes that while on a recent visit to New York, he has seen Hawthorne's fame being spread through reviews, conversations, and notices of publications, his reputation evidently being "in the ascendant" (193), in contrast to the public's fixation on Melville exclusively as the author of the five-year-old *Typee* and a "man who lived among the cannibals" (193). In order to compensate for his sense of despair at the public's failure to support his goals as a writer of morally and metaphysically profound fiction,

Melville reports to Hawthorne that he has in fact been reading the book of Ecclesiastes, the premier text of biblical wisdom teaching the concept of "vanity," or the capricious and unpredictable nature of human life in which earthly rewards do not go to the most deserving: "I have come to regard this matter of Fame as the most transparent of all vanities. I read Solomon more and more, and every time see deeper and deeper and unspeakable meanings in him" (193). As the reputed author of Ecclesiastes, the legendarily wise Solomon had taught that "all is vanity," for "There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after."³⁴

The somber wisdom of Ecclesiastes was thus fully embraced by Melville at this time, and parts of it would serve as thematic reference points in *Moby-Dick* in "The Line" (ch. 60), "The Try-works" (ch. 96), and "Stowing Down and Cleaning Up" (ch. 98), while the *vanitas* theme of Ecclesiastes would also serve him personally as he faced the mixed reception of *Moby-Dick*, the failure of *Pierre*, and the struggles of maintaining his literary career in the 1850s.³⁵ Marveling at the change in his attitude toward fame, and the mystery of his own intellectual growth and literary development since the age of twenty-five, Melville compares himself to "one of those seeds" taken out of an Egyptian pyramid and planted in English soil after three thousand years, which "grew to greenness, and then fell to mould" (193). Using another related organic metaphor, he frames his continuous creative unfolding from the age of twenty-five as like that of a flower: "But I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould" (193). Such remarks recall the message of vanity and futility in Ecclesiastes ("All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again")³⁶ as well as a floral metaphor in Job ("He cometh forth like a flower and is cut down"),³⁷ echoed in the apostle Peter: "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away."³⁸

Such pessimistic thoughts lead Melville to circle back to the text of Ecclesiastes in his letter to Hawthorne while insisting that even the alleged author of the somber wisdom of this Old Testament book was not entirely frank with his readers, either because of fear of being too outspoken or due to a corrupted text: "It seems to me now that Solomon was the truest man who ever spoke, and yet that he a little *managed* the truth with a view to popular conservatism; or else there have been many corruptions and interpolations of the text" (193). Following his renewed endorsement of the skeptical wisdom of Solomon, Melville goes on to express his skepticism of what he sees as the superficial pantheism in Goethe's poetry, which claimed that one should "*Live in the all*" (193).³⁹ Rejecting this invitation to

seek a spiritual merging with the cosmos just as Ishmael had done in the chapter on "The Masthead" in *Moby-Dick*, Melville notes that merely identifying oneself with everything in the universe cannot alleviate the pain of someone "with a raging toothache" (193), and he ends the letter by noting that "what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (194). Rejecting Goethe's intoxicating pantheism, or his contemporary Emerson's related transcendentalism, Melville prefers to embrace the moral pessimism and skepticism of the book of Ecclesiastes.

Melville's subsequent letter to Hawthorne of June 29 is substantially shorter than his previous missive of early May, as Melville reports to his friend that his new novel is half-way through the process of being readied for publication in New York, where Melville had spent time overseeing the stereotyping of plates at his own expense. Despite his nervous preoccupation with publishing his new book and taking care of matters on his Pittsfield farm, Melville continues to find consolation in the proximity of his friend, with whom he imagines himself forming a kind of apostolic series of sacred outposts in the wilderness: "This most persuasive season has now for weeks recalled me from certain crotchety and over doleful chimaeras, the like of which men like you and me and some others, forming a chain of God's posts round the world, must be content to encounter now and then, and fight them the best way we can" (195). Using a metaphor historically appropriate to the Western Massachusetts frontier a century earlier where Jonathan Edwards missionized among the Indians of Stockbridge, Melville changes the perceived threat from mythical fire-breathing chimeras to adversarial "Indians" and "mosquitoes" while presenting himself and Hawthorne as making up two missionary or military outposts harassed by both lethal threats and minor annoyances (195). While encouraging Hawthorne to come for a visit so that they can talk together even "though we show all our faults and weaknesses,—for it is a sign of strength to be weak," Melville self-consciously realizes that in so writing he is "falling into my old foible—preaching" (196). Melville is indeed beginning to preach here, for he borrows his text from St. Paul, who characterized his missionary sufferings as strengthening his faith: "There I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."⁴⁰ For Melville, it shows strength of character, not Christian faith, to be aware of one's weaknesses.

If Hawthorne won't come to Pittsfield, Melville claims he will ride to Lenox and whimsically instructs Hawthorne to have a bottle of brandy ready so they can talk "ontological heroics" (196). And in a concluding gesture of friendship, Melville asks Hawthorne if he should send him a

“fin of the *Whale* as a specimen mouthful,” or a portion of his new book to read: “The tail is not yet cooked—though the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled might not unreasonably have cooked it all ere this. This is the book’s motto (the secret one),—Ego non baptiso te in nominae—but make out the rest yourself” (196). Significantly, the Latin quotation here is the one used by Ahab in chapter 113 (“The Forge”) when he is “baptizing” in blood the newly forged harpoon he thinks will kill the White Whale, the full statement in the novel reading “Ego non baptize te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli” (“I do not baptize you in the name of the father but in the name of the devil”). In Christian tradition, of course, one baptizes in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Melville had learned of Ahab’s blasphemous Latin formula in Sir Francis Palgrave’s review of books on witchcraft, published in an 1823 issue of the *Quarterly Review*.⁴¹ His quoting it for Hawthorne here reveals him to be paradoxically mixing two Christian sacraments—the communion motif of offering Hawthorne a “fin” of the body of the book and the baptismal motif of the book’s unofficial diabolical “motto”—while continuing the idea that the two writers were both secret rebels against conventional Christian beliefs. While Melville’s invitation to Hawthorne to be initiated into the darker themes of his new whaling novel seems deliberately blasphemous, as though confirming Ishmael’s nightmare vision of Ahab’s hellish mission in chapter 96 of *Moby-Dick* (“The Try-works”), he may have felt justified by Hawthorne’s depiction of the diabolical scene at the witches’ Sabbath in “Young Goodman Brown” implying the omnipresence of evil in the world, as Melville had earlier noted in his *Mosses* review. Unbeknownst to Melville, Hawthorne had in fact characterized *The Scarlet Letter* as “positively a h-ll-fired story” in a letter to his friend Horatio Bridge on February 4, 1850.⁴²

Almost five months elapsed between his June 1851 letter and the last that Melville wrote Hawthorne in Lenox in November, a period during which Melville completed the final preparations for the publication of *Moby-Dick* and engaged in more socializing over the summer, some of which included Hawthorne. When *Moby-Dick* was finally issued by Harper Brothers on November 14, Melville had lunch that day with Hawthorne at the Curtis Hotel in Lenox to give him a copy of the new novel, with its dedication to his fellow author, and two days later Hawthorne sent him a now lost letter highly praising it.⁴³ In an ecstatic mood because of Hawthorne’s praise of the novel, Melville begins his letter of 17 November to Hawthorne by postulating that if people generally expect to be rewarded for their hard work, he himself is contented to “sit down in a corner and eat my supper comfortably,” for in this way he is “at peace” and “My peace and my supper are my reward, my dear Hawthorne” (212). The repeated allusion to “supper” here is ap-

appropriate because in this letter Melville will be expressing his appreciation of Hawthorne's "joy-giving and exultation-breeding letter" (212) praising *Moby-Dick* in language that evokes the New Testament account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John, with its many assertions of mystical unity between God, Christ, and the disciples, especially the "beloved disciple" who was assumed to have given his name to this gospel. Significantly, John was the favorite gospel of many Victorian writers, notably Tennyson in his elegy for his close friend Arthur Hallam in *In Memoriam*. And while Melville mixes allusions to classical religion and mythology along with his Christian motifs in this letter, it is always the latter that predominate in emphasis.⁴⁴

Before Melville fully develops his motif of communion with Hawthorne, however, he cites his friend's generous recognition of the genius of *Moby-Dick* as a reversal of the norm in human affairs, as was evident in Melville's discussion, in his letter of the previous May, of the overriding message of "vanity" found in the book of Ecclesiastes; "for not one man in five cycles, who is wise, will expect appreciative recognition from his fellows, or any one of them" (212). In a hyperbolic conceit, Melville goes on to note that this lack of appreciation even extends to God himself (again using the Elizabethan moniker of "Jove"), who, despite his biblically prescribed plan for humanity, must face lack of appreciation: "Is Jove appreciated? Why, ever since Adam, who has got to the meaning of his great allegory—the world? Then we pigmies must be content to have our paper allegories but ill comprehended" (212). If most humans have failed to understand the creator and the deeper meaning of the creation, Melville can hardly expect anyone to understand or appreciate his great allegorical whaling novel, except that Hawthorne has now bestowed that rare understanding and appreciation.

Melville's sense of gratitude to his friend leads to a metaphor of coronation that mixes literary, mythological, classical, and biblical imagery: "In my proud, humble way,—a shepherd-king,—I was lord of a little vale in the solitary Crimea; but you have now given me the crown of India. But on trying it on my head, I found it fell down on my ears, notwithstanding their asinine length—for it's only such ears that sustain such crowns" (212). Hawthorne's praise of *Moby-Dick*, anticipating the growth of its twentieth-century reputation, has thus promoted Melville from being an author-farmer living in the Berkshire Mountains to a world-class writer, worthy of a legendary imperial crown later worn by British monarchs. If the allusion to "shepherd-king" suggests a displaced reference to the Old Testament history of David, who went from teenage shepherd to king of Israel; the allusion to a "proud, humble" shepherd rising to an imperial throne also evokes Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, in the first part of which the hero, a Scythian shepherd, becomes a charismatic general and later king of Persia

while conquering a vast swath of the Near East. Melville's self-deprecating allusion to his own asses' ears, on the other hand, likely draws on the comic figure of Bottom who, transformed into an ass, becomes temporary consort to the Queen of the Fairies in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; it also evokes the Greek myth of King Midas, whose ears were transformed into those of an ass after he failed to appreciate Apollo's harp playing in the latter's musical contest with Pan, as described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, book 11.

Yet Melville quickly goes from a feeling of humble gratitude towards his literary friend to a sense of spiritual communion, as he rehearses the feeling he had when handed Hawthorne's letter the previous evening on the way to visit his neighbor the Morewoods: "So now I can't write what I felt. But I felt pantheistic then—your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both in God's" (212). The language here is suggestive of the Gospel of John: "At that day [after his heavenly ascension] ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you."⁴⁵ Melville's assurance that Hawthorne "understood" his book leads him to express his sense of assurance that his new novel, with its challenging religious themes, has found its ideal reader: "A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb. Ineffable socialities are in me. I would sit down and dine with you and all the gods in old Rome's Pantheon" (212). Despite his provocative representation of the blasphemous career of Captain Ahab, Melville feels as innocent as Christ, the spotless lamb of God⁴⁶—a sentiment reminiscent of Ishmael's cleansing himself of the guilt of Ahab's quest by immersing his hands in the communal bath of sperm oil in chapter 94 of *Moby-Dick*. Melville's sense of spiritual oneness with Hawthorne and the world leads him to the idea that he could happily banquet with all the gods of the classical Roman religion in an act of polytheistic communion, a sublime feat suggestive of the inflated persona of Whitman's "Song of Myself." Melville's reference to "Pantheon" here does not refer to the contemporary Roman temple-church, whose statuary was now dedicated to Christian figures, but rather to the ancient roster of gods beginning with Jupiter ("Jove") and including the twelve deities to whom the original temple was dedicated.

At this point, Melville turns from sublime celebration of banqueting to renewed focus on the sacrament of communion as he suddenly remarks: "Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips—lo, they are yours and not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling" (212). The archaic-sounding adverb and conjunction "whence" likely comes from several uses

of the word in reference to Jesus in the Gospel of John, reiterating Melville's previous imputations of Christ-like qualities to his friend. Thus, following a scene of teaching in the Temple during the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus gets into a dispute with the Jews who question him: "Howbeit we know this man whence he is: but when Christ cometh, no man knoweth whence he is."⁴⁷ The Jews subsequently remarked of the unknown new teacher, following Christ's healing of a blind man: "We know that God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is."⁴⁸ Finally, at his trial Pilate asked of Jesus, "Whence art thou? But Jesus gave him no answer."⁴⁹

Melville's use of the word "flagon" similarly points to the sacrament of communion, for this was the name of the small pitcher in which the wine was held during the consecration of the Eucharist and then dispensed into chalices for drinking during communion service. Melville's questioning of Hawthorne's right to drink from his "flagon of life" uses the metaphor of the Eucharist to convey his sense that their identities have mysteriously been interchanged when he tries to drink his own Eucharistic wine; the pantheistic feeling of being bodily merged with Hawthorne in the body of the deity is continued here, in keeping with the repeated emphasis in the Gospel of John on Christ's physical merger with the Father. Turning from the wine to the bread of the Eucharist, Melville now asserts that he and Hawthorne are pieces of the body of God, or the "Godhead,"⁵⁰ in the manner of the communion wafer as the body of Jesus, and they are therefore mystically bonded in the body of Christ and the deity; hence arises Melville's sense of an "infinite fraternity of feeling."

Melville continues to develop this idea by blending Christian and classical references when he claims that Hawthorne "understood the pervading thought that impelled the book" (212-13) and then remarks: "You were archangel enough to despise the imperfect body, and embrace the soul. Once you hugged the ugly Socrates because you saw the flame in the mouth, and heard the rushing of the demon,—the familiar—and recognized the sound; for you have heard it in your own solitudes" (213). Melville's awareness of the "imperfect body" of *Moby-Dick* was evident in an earlier complaint to Hawthorne in his letter the previous May that he has been hurried to finish the novel and in fact all his books were "botches." Yet he appreciated the fact that Hawthorne saw the larger allegorical and mythological design of his new whaling novel, and continued this same metaphor of defective "body" but beautiful "soul" by invoking a famous scene near the end of Plato's *Symposium* in which the charismatic young aristocrat Alcibiades told a story of trying to seduce the admired philosopher Socrates on several occasions, finally spending the night next to him without getting any response. In Melville's adaptation of the story, Hawthorne has symbolically "em-

braced' him because he recognizes in him a fellow literary artist possessed of prophetic powers. To characterize the latter, Melville combines the idea of Socrates's demonic familiar or prophetic voice, as mentioned at the end of Plato's *Apology*, together with imagery of flame and rushing wind drawn from the New Testament story of the disciples' divinely inspired speech at Pentecost: "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."⁵¹

Suddenly self-conscious about the confessional intimacy of his remarks, Melville now shares a sense of the "atmospheric skepticisms" overcoming him and questions his sanity in sharing his deep sense of spiritual communion with Hawthorne by quoting St. Paul's remarks to Porcius Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea (59-62 CE): "But believe me, I am not mad, most noble Festus" (213). In this scene from the book of Acts, Paul defended himself in front of the Roman authorities in Jerusalem after being imprisoned by the Jews for his work as a proselytizer, rehearsing the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus and of his work to spread the new faith of the resurrected Christ; thus when Festus claimed that Paul must be "mad" for recounting such a story, the apostle famously replied, "I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness."⁵² In his review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, Melville effectively described his quasi-religious literary "conversion" after reading Hawthorne's book, in the manner of St. Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus, and the quotation from St. Paul continues this previous motif.⁵³ After noting that "when the big hearts strike together, the concussion is a little stunning" (213), Melville tells Hawthorne not to promote his novel with a favorable review as it would diminish Hawthorne's privately expressed praise of the book, and he shares his ambition to write a book that is even more ambitious than *Moby-Dick*: "Leviathan is not the biggest fish;—I have heard of Krakens" (213). The anxiety that Melville expressed in his letter of the previous May, feeling he had reached the end of his creative blossoming, is now seemingly obsolete.

Melville closes his November letter by noting his sense that his spiritual and intellectual life is constantly changing even as he has been writing, but amidst this constant sense of development he feels blessed to have Hawthorne as his confidant and fellow traveler on his life's journey, which he imagines as a solitary coach ride on a cold night. Thus, Hawthorne's imagined companionship now elicits a remarkable assertion: "I shall leave

the world, I feel, with more satisfaction for having come to know you. Knowing you persuades me more than the Bible of our immortality" (213). Such an assertion demonstrates Melville's alienation from traditional Christian doctrine, with its faith in Christ's resurrection as a foundation for belief; instead it is now Hawthorne himself who is the Christ figure guaranteeing the truth of spiritual immortality. And in keeping with this heterodox remark, his friendship with Hawthorne would be the most momentous and influential event in Melville's literary life.

In a postscript Melville expresses one final conceit of sharing all his thoughts with Hawthorne, imagining a paper mill at one end of his house, with "an endless riband of foolscap rolling in upon my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand—a million—billion thoughts, all under the form of a letter to you" (213). Such an idea recalls an earlier letter of December 13, 1850 to Evert Duyckinck, when Melville had written to his New York friend of his ambitious literary projects: "Can you send me about fifty fast-writing youths, with an easy style & not averse to polishing their labors? If you can, I wish you would, because since I have been here I have planned about that number of future works & cant find enough time to think about them separately" (174). The phrasing of Melville's postscript in his November 17 letter hyperbolically amplifies his capacity to write, now expressed as an act of devotion to his Berkshire friend. As such, Melville's remarks implicitly evoke the ending of the Gospel of John, when the apostle noted the immeasurable plenitude of things that remained to be written about the life of Christ: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written."⁵⁴

Continuing this parallel with the Gospel of John, Melville's letter concludes: "The divine magnet is in you, and my magnet responds. Which is the biggest? A foolish question—They are *One*" (213). Melville is claiming here that both he and Hawthorne possessed a divine power of literary creativity, precluding any need for measuring their precise amount—a possible source of literary rivalry—since they are both the same.⁵⁵ We may compare this assertion with Jesus's Prayer of Intercession in John: "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me."⁵⁶ Just as God and Christ, Father and Son, are one, so too Hawthorne and Melville are united in a sacramental merging of identity.

In Melville's November 17 letter to Hawthorne, we clearly see the writer repeatedly using the metaphor of communion with his friend, as most extensively set forth in the Gospel of John, which provides a source for much of the letter's figurative language. For in keeping with the larger message of this letter, Melville implicitly takes on the role of "beloved disciple" John to Hawthorne's Christ, or the "branch" to Hawthorne's Christ-like "vine." All this is consonant with Melville's later use of the name "Vine" for the Hawthornean character in *Clarel*, and for the imagery of the grape vine in his poem "Monody" written upon Hawthorne's death, both of which draw on the vine symbolism of the Gospel of John: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. . . . If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples."⁵⁷

Following his friend's final departure from the Berkshires on November 21, Melville would go on to write a few more letters to Hawthorne, notably in the summer of 1852 during an attempt to recruit him into writing up the story of a long-suffering Cape Cod woman, Agatha Robertson, whose life Melville heard about from a New Bedford lawyer while he was traveling with his father-in-law Lemuel Shaw to Nantucket in July. However, none of his later letters expressed the confessional urgency of his letters in the spring and fall of 1851, while *Moby-Dick* was being completed and published, and while Melville was exhilarated by the presence of a sympathetic fellow writer and ideal audience for his teeming literary, philosophical, and theological ideas. Given the importance of Hawthorne's influence on the composition of his new whaling novel, it is not surprising that Melville's letters contain many remarks thematically keyed to passages in *Moby-Dick*. We also find allusions to a series of biblical proof texts that show his abiding devotion to the King James Bible as a template for his literary creativity. On the other hand, in his letters Melville shows himself to be—like his contemporaries Whitman and Mill, but not necessarily like Hawthorne—in revolt against both conventional Christian morality and traditional ideas of the omniscience and omnipotence of the deity. In the end, Melville's letters to Hawthorne demonstrate the centrality of religious tradition to the friendship, as Melville elevates Hawthorne to a godlike status of literary genius and expresses ideas of fraternity, communion, and mystical unity with him, in keeping with the Johannine and Pauline idea of the unity of the church in the body of Christ. Critics who have insisted on Melville's devotion to Hawthorne as homoerotic in nature are overlooking the religious basis for

his most personal and revealing remarks to his friend. In search of a missing god in his life, Melville thought he found one during the fifteen months that he and Hawthorne spent as neighbors in the Berkshires.

Sterling, Virginia

NOTES

1. *Correspondence*, 212, hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. Melville's letters to Hawthorne have more recently been republished (without annotations) with related materials on the Melville-Hawthorne friendship in Niemeyer, *Divine Magnet*. Studies of the Melville-Hawthorne literary friendship include Wilson, *Hawthorne and Melville Friendship*; Cook, "Introduction"; Argersinger and Person, *Hawthorne and Melville*; Hage, *Melville-Hawthorne Connection*. On Melville's ascription of a messianic identity to Hawthorne in his *Mosses* review, see Cook, "Melville's *Mosses* Review." For comparative studies of American literary friendships that include discussions of the Melville-Hawthorne friendship, see Laskin, *A Common Life*; Lingeman, *Double Lives*. On the close connection between preaching and mid-nineteenth-century writers including Hawthorne and Melville, see Coleman, *Preaching*; on the era's sermonic form and delivery manner, see ch. 1. For a recent essay arguing that Melville's devotion to Hawthorne as a literary soulmate, as illustrated by his correspondence, was in large measure a fabrication of twentieth-century Americanist critics seeking to boost Melville's reputation (a conclusion with which I strenuously disagree), see Stein, "Herman Melville's Love Letters." Stein's surprising conclusion is that "Melville's affections for Hawthorne were ordinary" (121).

2. On Hawthorne's life, see Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne*. On Calvinism and Unitarianism in Melville's religious development, see Herbert, "*Moby-Dick*" and Calvinism. On Melville's life through the publication of *Moby-Dick*, see Parker, *Herman Melville*. For studies of Melville's knowledge of the Bible, see Wright, *Melville's Use*; Heidmann, "Melville and the Bible." For an exploration of Melville's reading of the New Testament and his estimate of the personality of Jesus, see Yothers, *Sacred Uncertainty*, 21-43.

3. For a selection of contemporary reports about the social events of August 1850, see Olsen-Smith, *Melville*, 32-54; see also Parker, *Herman Melville*, chs. 35-36.

4. Whitman, *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, 2:64, 68. In Section 41 of his initially unnamed "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Whitman would assert his god-like persona's redemptive interest in the physical world and his absence of intimidation by the divine powers.

5. On the pervasive influence of the book of Job and St. Paul's letters on *Moby-Dick*, see Cook, *Inscrutable Malice*.

6. Job 7:11. All references to the Bible are from the King James (Authorized) Version.

7. *Ibid.*, 9:24.

8. *Ibid.*, 10:2.

9. *Ibid.*, 13:3.

10. *Ibid.*, 13:15.

11. *Ibid.*, 13:24.

12. *Ibid.*, 21:15.
13. *Ibid.*, 27:6.
14. James T. Fields, Hawthorne's publisher, noted in his memoirs: "Hawthorne was a diligent reader of the Bible.... It was a great pleasure to hear him talk about the Book of Job, and his voice would be tremulous with feeling, as he sometimes quoted a touching passage from the New Testament" (*Yesterday with Authors*, 94-95). It should be noted that some of the biblical references that Melville makes in his letters to Hawthorne refer to passages Melville marked in his various copies of the Bible; for a roster of his marked passages, see Heidmann, "Melville and the Bible," 244-61.
15. Eph. 6:11-13, 15.
16. St. Paul elsewhere refers to "principalities" and "powers" in Rom. 8:38; Eph. 3:10; Col. 1:16; 2:15; Titus 3:11.
17. For a discussion of passages in *The House of the Seven Gables* that might have provided grounds for Melville's interpretation of Hawthorne as a moral rebel, see Miller, "Hawthorne and Melville," 201-3.
18. Job 1:6-12.
19. Mill, *Three Essays*, 182.
20. See Olsen-Smith, *Melville*, 76.
21. See Norsworthy, "NO! in thunder" and "Hawthorne and Jove."
22. Job 40:9.
23. On Christian at the wicket gate dropping his "burden" at the foot of the cross, see Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, 21-23, 31. On the extensive influence of *Pilgrim's Progress* on the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*, see Cook, *Inscrutable Malice*, ch. 2.
24. Matt. 7:14.
25. Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:11-13; *Paradise Regained*, Books 1-4.
26. See Job 42:7-17.
27. On the re-dating of this letter to early May from the previously estimated June 1 of the *Correspondence*, see Parker, *Herman Melville*, 841.
28. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 117.
29. 1 Cor. 1:27.
30. Eccles. 2:22-23.
31. Eccles. 8:15. On the pursuit of enjoyment in Ecclesiastes, see also 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22; 5:17-19; 9:7-10; 11:7-10.
32. 1 Cor. 3:18.
33. Melville read the works of William Ellery Channing in the six-volume edition published in Boston in 1848 and owned by his wife; see Coleman, "Introduction."
34. Eccles. 1:2, 11.
35. On the role of Ecclesiastes in *Moby-Dick*, see Hutchins, "*Moby-Dick*," 27-28; Cook, *Inscrutable Malice*, passim.
36. Eccles. 3:20.
37. Job 14:2.
38. 1 Pet. 1:24.
39. Jonik (*Herman Melville*, 82-84) notes that Melville had likely read this remark in Carlyle's writings on Goethe.
40. 2 Cor. 12:10.
41. See Sanborn, "Name of the Devil."
42. Hawthorne quoted in Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne*, 303.
43. On the afternoon meeting of the two authors at the Curtis Hotel, see Parker, *Herman Melville*, 879-83.

44. On Victorian writers' devotion to the fourth gospel, see Wheeler, *St. John*; on Tennyson's use of John's mystical language in *In Memoriam*, see 70-77. Yothers (*Sacred Uncertainty*, 22) notes that Melville annotated the Gospels of Matthew and John most heavily in his New Testament.

45. John 14:20; see also 14:10-11.

46. See 1 Pet. 1:19.

47. John 7:27.

48. John 9:29. Melville double bracketed this text in his New Testament; see Heidmann, "Melville and the Bible," 257.

49. John 19:9.

50. See Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:20; Col. 2:9.

51. Acts 2:3-4. On Alcibiades' account of his attempt to "seduce" Socrates, see Plato, *Symposium*, 100-11. On Socrates's "prophetic voice," see Plato, *Apology*, 74.

52. Acts 26:25.

53. See Cook, "Melville's *Mosses* Review."

54. John 21:25.

55. Compare Ernest Hemingway's remark to F. Scott Fitzgerald in a letter of October 1929: "So why make comparisons and talk about superiority.... There can be no such thing between serious writers. They are all in the same boat" (quoted in Lingeman, *Double Lives*, 5).

56. John 17:21-23.

57. John 15:5, 7-8.

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