

PREFACE TO THE  
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE EDITION

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Reading and the Right to Death

TO READ MELVILLE—such will have been my project. Yet I very quickly found myself confronted with this evidence: to read Melville, and *Moby-Dick* in particular (it was the great novel of my childhood, when my father brought to life some of its passages for me, in his hotel room, which resembled Jonah's cabin in chapter 9), is to read *what reading means*. This is why reading Melville is an abyssal enterprise, which demands, finally, that one read reading—and thus, in a very precise sense, which I will try to indicate here, demands *re-reading*.<sup>1</sup>

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THESE *PROPHECIES*, as I will call them for the sake of brevity (leaving out a part of my heading), end with a “scene” in which a number of heads fall: the head of Leviathan himself (the whale) whose beheading Ishmael narrates in chapter 70 of *Moby-Dick*; the head of the regal chimney in Melville's short story “I and My Chimney,” which ceaselessly accompanied my reading of the great novel, all the way to its last page, where a regicidal decollation occurs; and, above all, the head of the text itself, delivered to a space in which reading is said to be “without end,” “without heading,” “without head.” If one takes Melville at his word, a word around which *Prophecies* does not cease to turn (“Leviathan is the text”), the beheading of Leviathan is also, indissociably, the beheading of the text. Yet it is at the very instant in which it loses its head that the text sends and dispatches itself, in the open address to the other that closes *Prophecies*. “Once again, it is your turn.” And if I recall this final staging