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All Worlds Are My Kin: Melville and the Cartographic Imagination

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by

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Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest?
or who hath stretched the line upon it?

Job 38:5

Introduction

"Herman! we are once more all together & I pray God that we may never be seperated more —." So wrote Allan Melville to his older brother in 1844, after the latter had sent word of his arrival in Boston on the frigate *United States*, aboard which he was kept for two weeks before being formally discharged. This was the slightly anti-climactic conclusion to a voyage begun four years previously, during which Herman, in his early twenties, had deserted two ships and lived for a month among reputed cannibals before making his way to Hawaii. Enlisting as a sailor in the navy, he finally made his way home (*Correspondence* 567; Parker 289).

Melville's stories of this time enthralled his family, and at their suggestion, he began writing (Parker 354). In the next five years, he would publish six novels. Though he would write several more, it is in these early books that we find a particularly clear-cut progression—evident, most of all, through the comparison of the first and last in this group.

Typee, published in 1846, is a straightforward account of the narrator's desertion of a whaling ship and life among a Polynesian tribe—embellished and exaggerated in some ways, but otherwise largely factual. More tellingly, it was the most successful book Melville would publish, gaining him instant recognition—and dubious fame, as the man who had "lived among cannibals." Its arresting subject aside, however, it stands as the

book that conformed most readily to the popular taste of the time. *Moby-Dick*, on the other hand, obeys no easy categorization: "it is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships' cables and hausers," wrote Melville to his neighbor (206). In place of the single protagonist of his early books, it has, at minimum two, and arguably more. Its pages are divided not into the 34 of *Typee*, but 135 chapters dealing with equally numerous topics, along with two prologues—the "Etymology" and "Extracts"—and an epilogue. Its reception was decidedly mixed.

To immediately classify one work as more characteristic or true to an author who later wrote that "the very fingers that now guide this pen are not precisely the same that just took it up and put it on this paper" would be just as presumptuous as refusing to recognize the inherent similarities between both novels, and the prefigurations of one in another (*Correspondence* 213). And yet, a kind of broadening or expansion recognizably takes place between the two. The questioning impulse that, in *Typee*, attempts to understand an utterly foreign culture and language as much as it does the actions of American missionaries, manifests in *Moby-Dick* on a far greater scale. "Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand!" exclaims Ishmael. If *Typee* has much to say about the Marquesas, and the Pacific in general, it is *Moby-Dick* that takes us to far more distant places, "as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe" (ch. 104).

The extraordinary, varied language that Melville brings forth throughout, and his adept mining of sources from the King James Bible to contemporary American

magazines, might lead us to separate this prowess from the lived experience of these formative years. And yet, the quality that repeatedly comes to the forefront of his work is a sense of geographical space, of the wider world. “You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in,” he writes (“Hawthorne” 1162), and it is in the navigation of such expanses that his prose seems to reach its greatest sweep.

But though the ocean itself has a timeless quality, seeming to bring us back to the time of the Flood, or the eons of geologic time, it has already been delineated by, and suffused with, the structures of Melville’s world. It is in *Moby-Dick*, above all, that formerly aimless movements come to be warped, by both these constraints and by the larger malignancy underlying them.

I
A Plurality of Worlds

> *The imagination of this cosmos is as immediate to me as the imagination of my household or my self, for I have taken my being in what I know of the sun, and of the magnitude of the cosmos, as I have taken my being in what I know of domestic things.*
>
> Robert Duncan, "Towards an Open Universe"

In 1835, the French engineer and statesman Michel Chevalier wrote a letter to his compatriots from Lancaster, Pennsylvania—a place we might now consider the sleepiest in America, its daily life still measured by the movements of the draft horse—in which he remarked with incredulity on the wanderlust, the evident nomadism, of the young nation's inhabitants:

> [The American] is always in the mood to move on, always ready to start in the first steamer that comes along from the place where he had just now landed. He is devoured with a passion for movement, he cannot stay in one place; he must go and come... He always has something to do, he is always in a terrible hurry. He is fit for all sorts of work except those which require a careful slowness. Those fill him with horror; it is his idea of hell. (qtd. in Schivelbusch 112)

At the beginning of *Call Me Ishmael*, his free-form exegesis of *Moby-Dick*, Charles Olson declares: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America... I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy" (11).[*] Later, he adds that "space has a stubborn way of sticking to Americans, penetrating all the way in,

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[*] An echo of *Moby-Dick,* where Ishmael jokes that "unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals... in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan" (ch. 104).

accompanying them. ... Trajectory. We must go over space, or we wither" (114). It is by their movements through space, first and foremost, that Melville's characters are defined: the sailors and whalemen of his early work; the boat passengers in *The Confidence-Man*; Israel Potter's years of exile; *Clarel*'s young pilgrim. In Ishmael's words, they are "tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote" (ch. 1)—a longing that perpetuates itself without end, less of an incidental feeling than something akin to fate itself. *Mardi*'s protagonist reaches the end of his quest only to move onward still, taking flight "over an endless sea" (ch. 195).

The background for this questing is a moment in American history defined by such movements. The 19th-century frontier has been mythologized endlessly—unlike geographical boundaries such as coastlines or rivers, its manmade, expanding contours lend it an immutability, requiring the invention of imagined spaces to compete with it. Melville does this in a sense—but instead of creating a fictional topography (as, say, Faulkner does, in Yoknapatawpha County), he turns to the ocean, to ships moving through endless seascapes. Leaving the geography of American expansion on the mainland, he instead taps into its underlying kinetic urge, and in doing so anticipates its future: beyond the transient Western frontier, and into the "eternal swells" of the sea (*Moby-Dick* ch. 111). This would hardly be singular—the American presence in the Pacific having preceded him by several decades—but Melville refuses to stop there. In this literal space, he sees a portal to far broader ones, to vast imagined worlds, where "my soul sinks down the depths, and soars to the skies; and comet-like reels on through such boundless expanses, that methinks all the worlds are my kin" (*Mardi* ch. 119)—not "the

world," but "the worlds," the plural alluding to infinite space and variety. Such intimations of a larger cosmos bring into play questions of its extent in the imagination of the time—questions, in other words, of the geography of the world that Melville lived and worked in.

As *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi* were being written in New York, the United States officially became a transcontinental nation, with the acquisition of Texas in 1845, the Oregon Territory in 1846, and the Mexican cession of 1848. This was no mere formality—particularly the last of the three had immediate ramifications: the discovery of gold less than ten days after the war's end, then the admission of California, two years later, into the Union as a free state. Already, these places find their way into Melville's work: Redburn compares "the melancholy state of his wardrobe" to that of the "Texian Rangers" (ch. 15); *Mardi* includes a satirical version of the California Gold Rush (ch. 166); Ishmael speaks of the "black bisons of distant Oregon" (ch. 42). Even as this expansion was underway, however, the time when the country ended at the Mississippi remained in living memory—and, especially to the inhabitants of Eastern cities such as New York and Boston, what we now would refer to as the "wild West" constituted the greater half of the continent.

Melville's personal acquaintance with this broadly defined frontier is scant, having only visited it once, going down the Erie Canal and onward to Illinois in 1840, looking for possible job prospects but returning soon afterward (Parker 167). The presence of a quintessentially American wilderness in the imagination of the time, however, is undeniable, and such imagery is indeed present in his work. In "Hawthorne

and his Mosses," Melville writes that "the smell of your beeches and hemlocks is upon [Hawthorne]; your own broad prairies are in his soul; and if you travel away inland into his deep and noble nature, you will hear the far roar of his Niagara" (1165), demonstrating, in his metaphors, a currency to that wilderness, whether drawing on the imagination of upstate New York or of areas further to the west. Kentucky is invoked repeatedly as the home of a particularly hardy breed of frontiersmen—most memorably when the penis of a sperm whale, in *Moby-Dick*, is said to be "longer than a Kentuckian is tall" (ch. 95).

There is a sense, however, of the continental American landscape as aesthetically subordinate to the seas on either side. "Go visit the Prairies in June," Ishmael tells us, "when for scores on scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lilies—what is the one charm wanting?—Water—there is not a drop of water there!" (ch. 1). Going westward with the spirit of the times, Melville had not stopped, but continued past the coast, straight into the other ocean. Even while writing *Moby-Dick* in 1850, he remarked in a letter that "I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is all covered with snow. I look out my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port-hole of a ship" (173).

Amidst sprawling concepts like nature and wilderness, however, we risk neglecting another space of equal importance to the young nation. This is, of course, the city—exemplified most of all in New York, a burgeoning metropolis of over half a million people by the time Melville set out on his first voyage in the early 1840s.[*]

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[*] At the time of Melville's death in 1891, the city's population numbered one and a half million—ten years later, it had grown to over twice that amount.

Ishmael's description of it emphasizes not its edifices or monumentality, but movement and conglomeration: "breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land," "ships from China," "crowds of water-gazers," "thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries" (ch. 1). In its constant motion, the city comes to resemble the sea, and the burgeoning attempts to describe its currents stand in analogy to the emerging science of oceanography (touched on in the second chapter below).

Urban, industrial spaces bring with them not only new patterns of movement, but —tied to these—new forms of sight and experience as well. Particularly the railroad, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes, "created its own new spatiality," and with that a new way of seeing (10). Seemingly freed, by the power of steam, from the natural constraints of draught animals, even of topography itself, the railway seemed to present a strange landscape to the eyes of travelers, as if "the railroad and the landscape through which it ran were in two separate worlds" (23). Its effect, in other words, was to create a space of experience that differed not only from earlier forms of transportation, but that seemed to separate itself even from the physical landscape through which it moved. In America, where the railroad "was not the industrial successor to a fully-fledged pre-industrial transportation system," but "served to open up, for the first time, vast regions of previously unsettled wilderness" (89), much of the country's expanse came to be known primarily through mediated forms of perception.

With this in mind, we arrive at another facet of Melville's experience: a vastly increased awareness of the world brought on by the print culture of the time. In *Redburn*, we read about the young protagonist's family home, dominated by depictions of faraway

places: “Versailles... rural scenes... pictures of natural history, representing rhinoceroses and elephants and spotted tigers,” and a library of “long rows of old books, that had been printed in Paris, and London, and Leipsic [*sic*]” (ch. 1). In his recollection, these bring about in him the desire to travel—but more directly, they serve to turn the faraway and exotic into familiar aspects of his vocabulary: in other words, they make him a cosmopolitan before he is even aware of the fact.

In July of 1851, in the New York *Literary World*, an interested person could read about “Steamboats and Steamboating in the Southwest,” “Studies of the Spanish Drama,” “Scenes on the Amazon,” “Professor Pfitzmaier and the Japanese Language,” “Superstitions of the Australians” and “How to Purchase a Diamond, &c.”—while a perusal of *Harper's* might shed light on somnambulism, giraffes, bison, an impending solar eclipse, Lapland and “The Worship of Gold.” Melville not only read a number of contemporary periodicals (Sealts 46, 86), but began to publish in them as well. “The Town-Ho’s Story,” *Moby-Dick*’s longest chapter, was to be found in the October 1851 issue of *Harper's*—accompanied, in turn, by a serialized life of Napoleon, an account of “Lima and the Limanians,” an article on crickets, and, rather appropriately to the times, the parodic “Natural History of the Bookworm.”*

Even if far less noteworthy, for the most part, than the much-feted expeditions that had opened the way for them, magazine articles and other accounts continued to bring new places into the vocabulary of the time, serving as continual reminders of the

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* Perhaps tellingly, this issue also contained the obituary of James Fenimore Cooper. Melville, though unable to attend a commemorative ceremony in December of that year, replied to the invitation with the remark that Cooper’s works were “among the earliest I remember, as in my boyhood producing a vivid, and awakning power upon my mind” (216).

wider world. Apparent in all of these—whether geographical, scientific, or otherwise—is a particular optimism, an exaltation of knowledge and, by extension, of the cultivated reader. Mary Louise Pratt sees this print culture as integral to the formation, in the new democratic republic, of an imperial subject, understood to be "European, male, secular, and lettered" (30). The concurrent presentation of various places and important developments finds its analog in another 19th-century technology: that of the panorama, which meant "to surround the observer with a totalizing image" and simultaneously place them "in a superior position over the represented landscape:" what effectively amounted to "at once a technology, an art form, and a complex instrument of power" (Aguirre 40-41; 36). The accumulation of popular entertainment into a cumulative view of the world, in other words, placed the reader in a position of power and control. John Keats provides a paradigmatic example of this dynamic when, to describe his sense of revelation at reading Homer, he famously invokes both scientific discovery and imperial conquest, placing the two side by side: "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken; / Or like stout Cortez, when, with eagle eyes / He star'd at the Pacific..." (32).*

The effects of this rich substratum among cosmopolitan writers are readily apparent. Edgar Allen Poe drew from the newly discovered Mount Erebus in "Ulalume" to create the exotically named "Mount Yaanek," belching out "scoriac rivers" (89). With "scoriac," Poe uses a geological term, even as he elsewhere holds its originators responsible for having "torn the Naiad from her flood" and demystifying the world (38).

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* He alludes on the one hand to Sir William Herschel's discovery of the planet Uranus in 1781, and on the other to Vasco Núñez de Balboa's arrival at the Pacific coast in 1513—famously conflating the latter with Hernando Cortéz (32n11).

In “Salut au Monde,” Walt Whitman broadens his consciousness to include the entire earth: “Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens... Within me zones seas, cataracts, forests, volcanoes, groups, / Malaysia, Polynesia, and the great West Indian islands,” “I see plainly the Himalayas, Chian Shahs, Altays, Ghauts, / I see the giant pinnacles of Elbruz, Kazbek, Bazardjusi” (287, 289). Melville presents a similar vision in *Mardi*: “Andes on Andes, rooted on Alps; and all round me, long rushing oceans, roll Amazons and Orinocos” (ch. 119). What is at play is not the mere fact of knowledge of distant places—Milton, in the 17th century, could speak of “Chineses” and the Spice Islands (3.438; 2.639)—but their increasingly ubiquitous presence in the popular sources of the time, so that a strangely telescoped perspective of the world, like those found above, comes as second nature. A *Quarterly Review* article in 1839 noted “the gradual annihilation, approaching almost to the final extinction, of that space and those distances which have hitherto been supposed unalterably to separate the various nations of the globe,” postulating, as the result of such shrinkage, precisely the image of “one immense city” (qtd. in Schivelbusch 34). The exciting tension in Melville’s work, and what gives it resonance towards both the distant past and the technologically-inclined present, is the confluence of older forms of experience—the sailing ship, the overpowering forces of the ocean—with a newfound mental geography, in which vast tracts of space can be navigated at ease.[*]

Astronomy, too, did not escape Melville’s attention: not only the close observations of stars or nebulae, but tantalizing ideas, widely discussed at the time, of the

[*] Nor is this spread of knowledge limited to mere geography: the piercing baptismal incantation that Melville referred to as *Moby-Dick*’s “secret motto” comes not from his reading of Shakespeare, as was long surmised, but from an 1823 article in the *Quarterly Review* (Sanborn 217).

plurality of inhabited worlds. Ishmael compares the land experienced by a sailor to how "the Moon would appear to an Earthsman" (ch. 14), while *Mardi* draws extensively on astronomical imagery: "the voyagers who have circumnavigated the Ecliptic; who rounded the Polar Star as Cape Horn" (ch. 13). Following a broader pattern in Melville's work, these mental wanderings proceeded from lived experience—the "long night-watches in the remotest waters... beneath constellations never seen here at the north" (*Moby-Dick* ch. 16). "To study the stars upon the wide, boundless sea," he writes in *White-Jacket*, "is divine as it was to the Chaldean Magi" (ch. 19). Even back in New York, he talks in a letter of having "strolled down to the Battery to study the stars" (159).

If a particular 19th-century space could be said to correspond most meaningfully with the peak of Melville's career, however, it is the Pacific Ocean, movements over the surface of which form the contours of all his early novels. Olson writes that "Melville... was long-eyed enough to understand the Pacific as part of our geography" (13)—an ocean that stands in for all, "the Indian Ocean and Atlantic being but its arms" (*Moby-Dick* ch. 111). His first encounter with this immense space came on April 15th, 1841, when the *Acushnet* rounded Cape Horn amid "thick and hazy weather" perhaps akin to the grisaille, "peculiar to that coast," that opens "Benito Cereno" (Parker 193; "Benito Cereno" 161). In *Moby-Dick,* we get some sense of his accompanying excitement: "now the long supplication of my youth was answered; that serene ocean rolled eastwards from me a thousand leagues of blue" (ch. 111)—a seemingly accurate recollection coming from the writer who, as a younger man, had walked around New York with a copy of Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (Parker 181). Unlike the *Acushnet*, the

Pequod only reaches the Pacific after sailing through two other oceans—certainly a plausible whaling route, but one that endows the voyage, in the process, with a particular finality and grandeur.

Melville “had a pull to the origin of things,” Olson writes, “the first day, the first man, the unknown sea, Betelguese, the buried continent” (15). The spatial experience of the Pacific—a combination of literal sensation and imaginative extrapolation: “a thousand leagues of blue”—gives way, for Melville, to vast tracts of time, “for here, millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries; all that we call lives and souls, lie dreaming” (ch. 111). In the chapter before this, we read of the sea burials of Queequeg’s Polynesian kin, who believe not only “that the stars are isles, but that far beyond all visible horizons, their own mild, uncontinented seas, interflow with the blue heavens; and so form the white breakers of the Milky Way” (ch. 110). In this manner, the ocean carries us not through geographical space, but in other, more surprising directions—and though its “gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath” (ch. 111), its nature is not easily divulged.

In Chapter 58, Ishmael asks, referring to a Biblical account (Num. 16:32) of the earth opening up to swallow several men, "wherein differ the sea and the land, that a miracle upon one is not a miracle upon the other?". The answer, it would seem, lies in a kind of inherent unknowability of the ocean: its "infinite perspectives" (ch. 69); "eternal blue noon" (ch. 81); “bottomless profundities” (ch. 86); "infinite blueness" (ch. 134). "It is the ungraspable phantom of life," he writes, "and this is the key to it all" (ch. 1). This is a breed of experience different from the mock Transcendentalism of “The Mast-Head”

that it resembles—it is not a loss of self in one's surroundings, but an inscrutability that is all the more striking for being mundane.

As he goes aboard the Pequod for the first time, Ishmael meets Peleg, one of its owners, who, upon his expression of a desire to "see the world," orders him to "take a peep over the weather-bow" and come back:

> Going forward and glancing over the weather bow, I perceived that the ship swinging to her anchor with the flood-tide, was now obliquely pointing towards the open ocean. The prospect was unlimited, but exceedingly monotonous and forbidding; not the slightest variety that I could see.
>
> "Well, what's the report?" said Peleg when I came back; "what did ye see?"
>
> "Not much," I replied—"nothing but water; considerable horizon though, and there's a squall coming up, I think."
>
> "Well, what does thou think then of seeing the world? Do ye wish to go round Cape Horn to see any more of it, eh? Can't ye see the world where you stand?" (ch. 16)

Ishmael understates his own observation, displaying a reasonable awareness of the ship's position, and of the tides and weather, picked up, we might infer, in his time as a merchant seaman. The sense of monotony remains, however, as any discernible qualities of the ocean, apparent to the trained eye, arise out of an initial blankness and uniformity.

At another point in time, however, on the threshold of the Pacific described earlier, we find a vastly different set of images:

> The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted by the recentest race of men, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham; while all between float milky-ways of coral isles, and low-lying, endless, unknown Archipelagoes, and impenetrable Japans. (ch. 111)

The uniform sea has been replaced with an exuberant, compounded multiplicity: "endless, unknown archipelagoes." It should be noted that this occurs some hundred

chapters later in the book, but isn't necessarily the product of a linear progression. In another early chapter, we find a similar apprehension of vast space—"the wide and endless waters, only bounded by the far-off Eastern Continents"—only shortly before the ship "blindly [plunges] into the lone Atlantic" (ch. 22).

What comes to the forefront here is a surprising heterogeneity to the book—a rapid shifting across registers of perception and thought. If initially indicative of a writer who, as D. H. Lawrence writes, "with sheer physical vibrational sensitiveness, like a marvelous wire-station... registers the effects of the outer world" (378), these disparities come to form larger trajectories, taking shape as they course through the novel. That the ostensibly blank space of the sea—akin to the whiteness which "shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" (ch. 42)—should give rise to such kaleidoscopic pontifications, if unsurprising, is undoubtedly pertinent.

Edward Mendelson includes *Moby-Dick* in his study of what he terms "encyclopedic narratives": works that "occupy a special historical position in their cultures, a fulcrum... between periods that later readers consider national pre-history and national history" (1267), and distinguished, as implied, "not by a single plot or structure, but by encompassing a broad set of qualities" that result in a "peculiar indeterminacy of form" (1270).[*] Though indebted to the tropes of the epic (1269)—either explicitly, as in Dante's allegiance to Virgil, or not—this form has reached a point where it "identifies itself not by a single plot or structure, but by encompassing a broad set of

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[*] *Moby-Dick*, Mendelson writes, "occupies the American seat in the encyclopedic pantheon" (1271). Melville himself was familiar with the other proposed members: Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Goethe's *Faust*—excepting those from later points in time: Joyce's *Ulysses* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1268).

qualities" (1270). Particularly interesting is Mendelson's assertion that "these are imperial works, [that] assert the claims of a grander imperium than love or the family—just as their publication (or more accurately, their reception) asserts the national imperium of their cultures" (1271).

Edward Said sees the theme of empire played out in *Moby-Dick* through a new conception of Americans as a people of the sea: "whereas other empires control land, America seeks sovereignty over water... only the Americans, and the Nantucketer in particular, live on and derive a living from the sea" (363)—an act of redefinition, placed against the frontier-set gaze of the time, that can only occur through a similarly adventurous encapsulation of a culture in its full breadth. Thus, "each encyclopedic narrative is an encyclopedia of literary styles, ranging from the most primitive and anonymous levels of proverb-lore to the most esoteric heights of euphuism" (1271). No better example exists in Melville's novel than the "Extracts" that precede the narrative itself, which, in roughly chronological order, present quotations on whales ranging from the Bible to contemporary newspaper articles. The section ends with Darwin, and two vernacular whaling songs. These sources serve, on the one hand, as a kind of divestment from previous authority—think of Emerson's "American Scholar," or Melville himself in "Hawthorne and his Mosses"—but without denying affinity. In other words, Melville recognizes them as integral to his own work, even while setting them apart.

Though hardly belonging to the ranks of great discoverers, Melville resembles such figures insofar as he straddles two realms: an urban, intellectual print culture, and the practical, vernacular knowledge—the unwritten undercurrent of higher learning—of

seamen and whalers. Even while at sea, he read frequently—the frigate *United States*, on which Melville returned to Boston in 1844, contained a sizable library (Parker 267). Considering the young American writer, unsure of his literary heritage or calling, he proclaims: "let him write like a man, for then he will be sure to write like an American" ("Hawthorne" 1164). Here is some lingering aspect of the frontiersman, except—like Ishmael, who speaks of having "swam through libraries and sailed through oceans" (ch. 32)—the movement described is one traversing vast realms of knowledge just as much as topographical space. "Aye, many, many souls are in me," Melville writes in *Mardi*, "many worthies recline and converse" (ch. 119).

Echoing Ishmael's pronouncement that "writers... rise and swell with their subject" (ch. 104), Mendelson notes that "all encyclopedias provide an image of their own scale by including giants or gigantism" (1271). There is a strong affinity between the vastness of *Moby-Dick*'s subjects—whales, the Whale, the sea, variously manifested "heartless voids and immensities of the universe" (ch. 42)—and its size and breadth of focus. "In its vast spaces and in Melville's blazingly original style," writes Edward Said, "*Moby-Dick* is about (it seems silly to say it this way) the whole world; it willingly incorporates everything, leaving such small matters as resolution, inconsistency, and indeed evaluating the *consequences* of so tremendous and shattering an experience to lesser natures" (369). The key here is not to dwell on supposed inconsistencies, but to embrace them, following them not back to their source, but forward to wherever they might lead.

Playing on the botanical meaning of his impending subject, a whaling implement known as the "crotch," Ishmael introduces the eponymous chapter by stating that "out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters" (ch. 63)—an organic metaphor that in some sense seeks to explain his own effulgence. This isn't entirely satisfactory—after all, can any one character describe the totality of the work they find themselves in? It defines some of it, to be sure, particularly those chapters in which Ishmael continuously digresses on whaling, but seems too simplistic. Robert Burton could preface each partition of his mammoth *Anatomy of Melancholy* with a tree-like array of braces and section headings, but *Moby-Dick* obeys no such structure—the chronological table of contents, marking the *Pequod's* forward motion as well as the linearity of reading, is the only guideline given. To follow a more arborescent model would ultimately—like Ishmael's similar attempt at categorization and sorting in "Cetology" (ch. 32)—end in exasperation, leading one to the realization that "this whole book is but a draught"—an imperfect attempt at formulating a complete whole.

Instead, we might conceive of the novel in terms of space and volume—not a single path, but a wide expanse. To read *Moby-Dick* is to find oneself in, and attempt to navigate, staggeringly vast spaces. Echoing Olson's emphasis on trajectory, Edward Said notes that "Melville's prose... tells of someone always moving away from the expected or the known... in some very profound and affecting way the voyage of the *Pequod* in *Moby-Dick* is something like Melville's own voyage in language and form away from domestic life, into an alternative realm of visionary imagination and entirely novel

striving" (359). This is the exciting aspect of exploring a book of seemingly oceanic proportions: the movement towards the new and unexplored.

The most obvious of these trajectories is that through physical space: the voyage of the Pequod itself. This strongly follows the geographical emphasis of Melville's work, from *Typee* onwards to *Moby-Dick*: novels marked, at times in complete independence from the narrative events of each chapter, by a movement in space. If initially a matter of veracity with regard to Melville's own experience, this tendency becomes more deliberate: first in *Mardi*, in which the protagonist's travels altogether cease to follow the author's real experience, and later in *Moby-Dick*, in which the Pequod, like "the circus-running Sun... within his fiery ring" (ch. 87), not once touches land, being perpetually in motion. The reluctance to stop on land has some basis in practices of the time: Melville himself knew the widespread propensity of whalers to abandon their ship, having done so himself in the Marquesas (Parker 214)—but it is perhaps fortuitous that this authentic basis for remaining at sea overlaps with a more mythic concept of the voyage, allowing that of the *Pequod* to be aligned with anything from the wanderings of Odysseus to the movement of planetary and lunar bodies through a far greater ocean.

But like the rings of Saturn—the innumerable fragments of which feign to a distant eye contiguity and wholeness—the ostensibly unified journey of *Moby-Dick* is, in fact, one carefully grafted together from individual experiences persisting even amid Ahab's attempt to "weld" them together in an oath (ch. 41). If the ship comes to stand for a kind of polity—a community, certainly, and a metaphor, not unreasonably, for a burgeoning nation—it is wildly disparate as well. Despite the manmade order that seems

to separate it from the fluid ocean, it is itself susceptible to processes of entropy. In describing the crew's search of the Pequod's hold, Ishmael writes that "so deep did they go; and so ancient, and corroded, and weedy the aspect of the lowermost puncheons, that you almost looked next for some mouldy corner-stone cask containing coins of Captain Noah..." (ch. 110). Ahab's "dusky phantoms" remain similarly hidden until called forth at the first lowering, unknown to the rest of the crew until their sudden appearance (ch. 47). That writers may divide their own thoughts, dealing them to multiple characters, is understood—but it is particularly here that this is played with, as the ship and its crew oscillate between seamless conglomeration and disparate, individual voices. In *Mardi*, we find a similar divergence of the writer into a multitude: "like a frigate," we read, "I am full with a thousand souls; and as on, on, on, I scud before the wind, many mariners rush up from the orlop below, like miners from caves; running shouting across my decks" (ch. 119). In Whitman's poetry, the most obvious analog, this occurs explicitly, as the landmarks of the outside world—places, people, things—are called up in succession. What Melville implies here, however, is that such registers are, in fact, omnipresent, existing in prose as a hidden undercurrent.

Out of this multitude, Ishmael is nonetheless firmly marked as our guide, and the initial path we follow through the book is his own. Defined in the first chapters by his stark individuation, he gradually opens up, his searching, inquiring gaze increasingly on display. Previously, he has been "lording it as a country schoolmaster" (ch. 1)—a detail that would seem to account for his educated opinion on many topics. More importantly, though, the move "from a schoolmaster to a sailor" parallels the relinquishment of a

certain idea of narrative authority. Rather than "making the tallest boys stand in awe of [him]" through superior insight (ch. 1), Ishmael in his new incarnation assumes a position that is less secure—not outright ignorance, but a continuous questioning and observation: a kind of investigation that probes in many different directions instead of reaching for a singular conclusion.

That this kind of effulgence should occur in direct proximity to incomprehensible vastnesses of space—floating on the sea's surface—is no accident. In its wide range, the type of discourse that Ishmael—and Melville's other protagonists, to a lesser extent—engage in constitutes a kind of "mapping" of novelistic space, akin to the similar imaginative organization of physical expanse occurring within it: an act that proceeds out of the insufficiency of more conventional forms. "This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught," writes Ishmael in "Cetology" (ch. 32). *Pierre*'s eponymous protagonist slaves away at "two books... of which the world shall only see one... the larger book, and the infinitely better, is for [his] own private shelf" (304). Implied in works such as *Mardi* or *Moby-Dick* are structures more far-reaching than can be grasped or held in linear sequence—and to consider these, we must move outward to spatial terms.

At the "thought-engendering altitude" of the mast-head, writes Ishmael, "every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing... every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems... the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continuously flitting through it" (ch. 35). Here are two equally pervasive, and equally boundless, spaces, and the attempt to grasp them, to some extent, is the task of all

writers. Though Melville sometimes despairs at the futility of this venture—writing in *Pierre* that "all the great books in the world are but the mutilated shadowings-forth of invisible and eternally disembodied images in the soul" (284)—it is more often that this fact is not denied or lamented, but manifested actively, creatively. "For in this world of lies," he writes in "Hawthorne and his Mosses," "Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands, and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself" (1160). Though this flight constitutes an escape or elusion on the one hand, we can also read it as a generative movement: the most rewarding, if difficult path to take:

> When I stand among these mighty Leviathan skeletons... I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun, for time began with man. Here Saturn's grey chaos rolls over me, and I obtain dim, shuddering glimpses into those Polar eternities; when wedged bastions of ice pressed hard upon what are now the Tropics; and in all the 25,000 miles of this world's circumference, not an inhabitable hand's breadth of land was visible. Then the whole world was the whale's; and, king of creation, he left his wake along the present lines of the Andes and the Himmalehs... (ch. 104)

Here, Ishmael ventures forth into entirely alien realms of experience: "Saturn's grey chaos;" "Polar eternities;" "the whole world was the whale's." Note the image of a flood as bearer of these images, suggesting both its biblical antecedent and the oceanic explorations of the *Pequod*. What ultimately occurs here, as in the geographic movements of the latter, is the creation, or the mapping, of spaces. Initially, Ishmael stands "among" the whale skeletons, dwarfed by them—several sentences later, he has become a creator of vast worlds.

There is a crucial difference, however, between *Moby-Dick* and the works that precede it: the presence of an overpowering malevolent force in the form of Ahab. *Mardi*

has as its antagonist a largely absent sorceress, while *White-Jacket* skillfully explores the abuses of power among officers of the navy—but only now do we find a frighteningly real, imperial power that threatens to engulf everything around it. Like the relentless push westward, and the printed dominion over nature and remote peoples, this plays out through expanse. “I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space,” says Hamlet— “were it not that I have bad dreams” (2.2).

II
Journeys, Maps, Empires

Even if this land is only made up of trees and water... we will conquer it.

Lope de Aguirre (Klaus Kinski), *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*

If a narrative form, broadly defined, could be assigned to *Moby-Dick*, it would be that of the travel narrative—both in itself and as a logical continuation of the form that predominates in Melville's earlier novels. As in *Typee* and *Omoo*, he drew from several sources in this vein: the Arctic whaling journals of William Scoresby (Sealts 60), the voyages compiled by Richard Hakluyt, and others. In the manner of Ishmael's tangents from the delineated space of the ship to imaginative ones, both below and beyond, we must broaden our view from a single, charted course, and towards the larger spaces that surround it; the histories in which Melville's novel is situated.

In this vein, it would be naive to consider the kind of written cartography discussed above as being an end in itself. Where, after all, does it lead—for Ishmael, Ahab, Melville, the reader? To ask these questions, we should first of all consider where this kind of cartography might come from, and to do this, in turn, is to turn from a narrower context to a broader one. What is at play here is not merely the act of making maps—metaphorically or literally—but the history of how we conceive of the larger world.

We can begin by going far back indeed—to Homer's *Odyssey*, the middle part of which—the eight books comprising the wanderings of Odysseus—constitutes what might be called the first extant travel narrative: no tale divorced from subjective experience, but one given by a wanderer to his audience. The *Odyssey*, of course, is interesting in that it takes place in a largely unknown geographical space. Mariners in ancient times largely stayed close to the shore; Hesiod, in the *Works and Days*, advises his brother to avoid the ocean altogether. As Father Mapple observes in *Moby-Dick*, Jonah's flight from Joppa to Tarshish—from Syria to the Straits of Gibraltar—is a "world-wide" one (ch. 9). All this makes Odysseus's venture out into the open ocean, to unknown islands, unusual to the extent that his geography should be regarded as imaginative rather than indicative. The space he travels through is more temporal than physical, a vast uncharted sea of time that separates him from home.

It is rather in Dante's *Inferno* that Odysseus, now the "cruel Ulysses" of Virgil's *Aeneid*, is taken up in a new context. No longer a prisoner of space become time, he appears here as an explorer in the modern sense, exhorting his men to a final voyage on the "open deep" (26.100), past the Pillars of Hercules, driven by a "fervor... / to gain experience of the world / and learn about man's vices, and his worth" (26.97-99). After heading far to the west and south, in sight of "the stars that light / the other pole" (26.127), the ship is met with a divine whirlwind and sinks.

Dante would seem to see, in Ulysses' final voyage, an act of hubris, but we might detect something else in the desire "to gain experience of the world"—if not a fundamental change in human nature, then certainly a burgeoning historical shift, and one

that the poet was undoubtedly aware of. It has been surmised that this story is based on a vanished voyage undertaken by the Vivaldi brothers, two mariners who sought to find a way to India in 1291 (*Inferno* 26.110n). That this was undertaken by ship, even to reach a known destination, is highly important. Untried sea routes, far more than their counterparts on land, lead to the truly new and unknown—not simply strange kingdoms, but a more fundamental novelty, present in the weather, landmasses and currents. It is not by chance that this coincides with the rise of the portolan chart—a map that drew its details from direct observation and the use of the newly adopted compass, a very different method from that of earlier cartographers—with which much of the Mediterranean and Atlantic coastline would be mapped with unprecedented accuracy (Crone 29). The reasons are such ventures are largely economic, but what is inaugurated here is a new, outward perspective that reaches its height two centuries later.

Consider, too, the beginning of a precedence, broadly stated, of space over time. If earlier geographical knowledge comes in the form of the chronicle, in which knowledge of distant peoples is intrinsically tied to historical events, we now reach a point at which this relationship is reversed. The travels of Marco Polo or John Mandeville, though bound to an ostensibly real journey, consistently turn toward the broadest scale: the histories of kings, armies, countries:

> Let us now pass on to talk of another province, whose name is Bengal. This also lies towards the south on the confines of India. In the year 1290, when I, Marco, was at the court of the Great Khan, it had not yet been conquered; but the Khan's armies were already there and engaged in the conquest. This province has a king and a language of its own. The people are grossly idolatrous. ... The oxen here are as high as elephants, though not so stout. The people live on meat, milk, and rice. They have cotton in plenty. (189)

Polo's presence is briefly stated, but only as an indicator of larger events. Two centuries later, however, the larger picture has receded in favor of the actuality and strangeness of the voyage or encounter itself.

A section of the Psalter world map, from the late 13th century. The Garden of Eden stands at the world's easternmost edge, with the Red Sea recognizable on the right.

This newer form—evident in the accounts of Christopher Columbus or Bernal Díaz—is based far more in the experience of an individual subject, taking the form of tendril-like forays into a vast unknown. Unlike the broad surveys of before, single encounters possess a seismic importance, and the scope of description is accordingly limited to the immediate surroundings. Bernal Díaz writes that "canoes came close to our ships, and we made signs of peace, waving our hands and our cloaks as an invitation to them to come and speak to us. For at that time we had not interpreters who knew the languages of Yucatan and Mexico..." (18). What is, above all, in question here is the

relation of the individual to a larger totality. As the latter increases in size and complexity, the prospect of knowing it in its entirety diminishes. The world has become far larger than previously conceived, and a single work can hardly hope to encompass it. Schedel's *Chronicle of the World*, published in 1476, thought nothing of combining Biblical paraphrase—the Creation and Last Judgement begin and end the work—classical and contemporary history, and engravings of major cities and countries. The decisive change taking place—that which would render the former obsolete—isn't a literal expansion of known space as it is a redefinition, or redrawing, of the very categories at play. Marco Polo goes through many different realms, but describes them in terms that seem to render them all as permutations of the same.* The seismic change that then occurs doesn't result from such discoveries themselves as it does from the realization that these newfound landmasses aren't simply mirrors of old ones. Instead of an array of foreign kings—perhaps Christian—ready to inaugurate trade, explorers encountered peoples they found utterly strange, for which their notions of culture and sovereignty did not account.†

With these discoveries, cartographic representations of the earth undergo a shift from the encapsulatory—the map as an idealized picture of the world: Europe, Asia and Africa radiating outwards from Jerusalem—to the fragmentary—coastlines that stop abruptly, blank interiors, the ubiquitous *terra incognita*. And yet, there is always a movement back towards the unified whole. While new discoveries had unexpectedly distended and burst a formerly complete image of the world, efforts began immediately to

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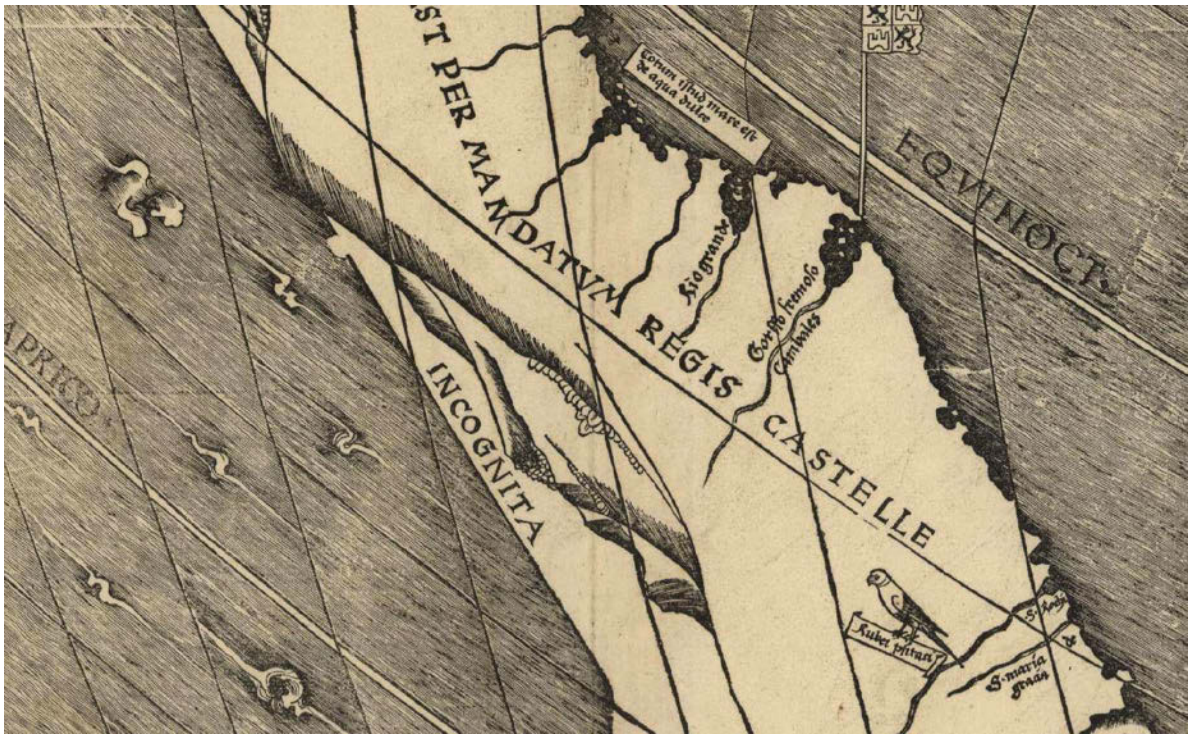
* As Italo Calvino writes: "*Marco Polo's cities resembled one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements.*" (43).

† This is not to say, of course, that attempts were not made to incorporate the new into a present system: Bernal Díaz speaks of "the great Montezuma," recording that, when Cortes approached the latter, "each bowed deeply to the other" (217).

grasp it anew. This blankness in the image of the world "stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation" (ch. 42), as Ishmael writes, hence the steadfast belief that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world



A section of Martin Waldseemüller's Universalis Cosmographia *of 1507, showing a part of South America—the continent that the map famously named.*

itself but an empty cipher." When several characters thus examine and attempt to decipher Ahab's doubloon, the captain himself remarks that "there's another rendering now, but still one text" (ch. 99).

The sphericity of the earth, and renderings of latitude and longitude, had been known since antiquity, but only now, with ships venturing onto the Atlantic with regularity, were attempts made to accurately utilize these principles. The first recorded use of the quadrant, by which a ship's latitude can be accurate ascertained, dates to 1460 (Crone 17; 78). On Mercator's world map of 1569, a steady compass bearing would, for

the first time, produce a continuously straight line—thus achieving a concordance of magnetic details with the aforementioned celestial ones (114). This forms only one part, of course, of a long process—the accurate measurement of longitude, for example, remained an impossibility until the 18th century (142). A gap exists, with constant attempts at bridging it, between successively perfected models of the world and the perpetually incomplete task of applying them to actual movements.

Out of this, a notion emerges of geographical space as such, where any point on a map corresponds to one on the surface of the earth. This is decisive, and its consequences are unexpected. For just as it opens the way to large-scale trade, and the commodification of land and populations, it also creates, in place of the broader categories by which the world was known before, a virtual infinitude of *localities*. The world-picture is less complete than ever, and its blank spaces harbor any number of marvels: El Dorado, the Northwest Passage, the kingdom of Prester John.

Instead of fencing in or schematizing the unknown, imagined conceptions of the world are freighted with growth and complexity, and with that, a newfound sense of possibility. Fictions of the era hardly restrict themselves to literal discovery, but invent any number of hypothetical islands and countries. Even in the 19th century, the idea of uncharted seas still holds a certain plausibility: thus *Mardi*'s protagonist can sail from the real Pacific into a mythical archipelago.

This manifests, more simply, in the way that narratives of exploration possess a generative quality. Alexander von Humboldt, writing of his first sight of the Southern Cross in 1799, remarks that "when we first glance at geographical maps, and read the

narratives of navigators, we feel a special charm for certain countries and climates, which we cannot explain when older... [which] exercise a considerable hold over what we do in life..." (*Personal Narrative* 42). Ishmael describes being enthralled by "the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale," and "the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk" (ch. 1).

As noted above, the proposed "encyclopedic mode" that *Moby-Dick* exemplifies involves, as one of its primary characteristics, the successive encapsulation of a previous culture, its "whole social and linguistic range" (Mendelson 1268), in its near-entirety. While the world that Ishmael explores is very much that of his time, the way in which it is recorded or filled brings together the vestiges of everything before. A contemporary of Lyell and Darwin, Melville still describes the fossilized remains of whales as "antediluvian," "pre-Adamite" (*Moby-Dick* ch. 104). In what Guy Davenport terms the "geography of the imagination," his Atlantic and Pacific are thoroughly haunted by the ancient Mediterranean, precisely "because its imaginative authority refuses to abdicate" (11). Ahab hunts the biblical Leviathan, just as Ishmael thinks in Greek terms when he speaks of having "boarded the Argo-Navis, and joined the chase against the starry Cetus" (ch. 57). In the "eternal swells" of the Pacific, the seas of Odysseus's wanderings, in which space becomes time, come back to haunt the *Pequod.*

And, amid the continuing precision in geography and navigation, there is a still a constant turn towards the blank and unmapped: "seas and archipelagoes which had no chart," "numberless unknown worlds" beneath the surface of the ocean (ch. 24; ch. 58). Queequeg's island of Rokovoko "is not down on any map; true places never are" (ch. 12).

At the same time, the limiting qualities of comprehensive geography make themselves apparent: “Were this world an endless plain,” imagines Ishmael, “we could forever reach new distances, and discover sights more strange than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon... but in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of... they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed” (ch. 53).

Ishmael’s position is complicated, as discussed before, by the disparate types of experience that come to interact both within the novel and on the level of the text itself: the closeness to the sea, the larger trajectory of the narrative—both anticipated and recalled in writing—and the myriad of cultural contexts that comprise the larger world in which he resides. Ishmael’s subordinate position as a member of the crew, as well as the fact that the world he sails on has largely been mapped, lose importance when we recognize that his explorations take on a more subtle form than the mere venture into unknown territory. Taking the last phrase figuratively, though, we can indeed reduce the act of exploration to the unexpectedly simple form of individual moments of discovery.

At the same time, however, ways of the seeing the world move on and develop, a trend that also “correlates with an expanding search for commercially exploitable resources” (Pratt 30). Out of the newly expanded globe, and empty spaces described before, come new schemes of classification and knowledge. These are tied, in particular, to the rise of the natural sciences, with which the world is apprehended by radically new methods. “For three centuries,” writes Mary-Louise Pratt, “European knowledge-making apparatuses had been construing the planet above all in navigational terms... [giving] rise to two totalizing or planetary projects:” circumnavigation, completed early on, and the

mapping of the earth's coastlines (29). Unlike these two, however, both concerned with the broader contours of the earth, the new sciences go beyond that, wrenching meaning from the entirety of nature. Being drawn here is "not the thin track of a route taken, nor the lines where land and water meet, but the internal "contents" of those land and water masses whose spread made up the surface of the planet," in what constitutes a 'mapping'... of every visible square, or even cubic, inch of the world's surface" (30). This bears witness not only to scientific sophistication—as its own narrative would assert—but to the increasingly complex networks of exchange that underlie any such endeavor: measuring, accumulating, synthesizing the forms of nature into concrete representations. Forays into remote territories are gradually refashioned for these purposes. Alexander von Humboldt includes in his *Personal Narrative* an exhaustive list of scientific instruments brought along on the journey (17n).

As discussed before, the spatializing function of cartography is particularly suited to the representation of complex systems or arrays—the organic currents of an archipelago, or the extensive body of statements concerning a subject of knowledge. This is precisely achieved, however, through a simultaneous equalization of disparate objects. Just as an actual landscape is "flattened" in order to render it in two dimensions, disparate objects and categories are rewritten in a unifying language.

Hence comes the central position of the map in Bruno Latour's understanding of the scientific culture that emerges at this time. The term that Latour uses for these notations—the basic unit, in other words, of the world's scientific conception—is the *inscription*. The production of these—through "bearings, clocks, diaries, labels,

dictionaries, specimens, herbaries" and more—comes to form the goal of every expedition sent out from Europe (218). Out of these inscriptions, and by a longer process, "immutable and combinable mobiles" are formed, with which information about the world comes to be circulated and utilized (227). Through this steady accumulation, the traveler in a foreign land—ostensibly in the weaker position—becomes the more powerful, even if visiting a place for the very first time (220-221). Alongside the conceptual shift discussed above—the change in images of the world—we can identify a functional one as well, in which such representations move from merely being byproducts of a given time, or symbols of dominion, to the actual tools of conquest and subjugation.

In this vein, we can turn to a particular episode of Melville's novel. Soon after Ahab has declared to the crew his intent to find and kill Moby Dick, we read the following passages:

> Had you followed Captain Ahab down into his cabin… you would have seen him go to a locker in the transom, and bringing out a large wrinkled roll of yellowish sea charts, spread them before him on his screwed-down table. Then seating himself before it, you would have seen him intently study the various lines and shadings which there met his eye; and with slow but steady pencil trace additional courses over spaces that before were blank…
> ...with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul. (ch. 44)

This scene provides a glimpse into the literal mapping out of the Pequod's voyage, in opposition to the more abstract forces—"that monomaniac thought of his soul" or the more distant powers Ahab himself ponders—that, in a broadly poetic reading of the novel, seem to guide the ship. Despite the apparent madness of his intent, Ahab's method

is rational, scientific. Even “in that broad madness,” writes Ishmael, “not one jot of his great natural intellect had perished” (ch. 41), and it is with this that apprehends the sea and its creatures in their inner workings, as a system to be deciphered (“you would have seen him intently study the various lines and shadings...”). This is something of a revelation, writes D. Graham Burnett: “Ahab, despite his surging, demonic passions, is a creature of incisive rationality, of methodical and empirical mind... a practitioner of some of the most sophisticated natural science of his day” (113). What appears, at first, to be a unified action—the clear line of the ship’s course, the singular driving force of Ahab’s will—is in fact far more complicated. Ahab’s act of plotting (“with slow but steady pencil [tracing] additional courses over spaces that before were blank”) encompasses several different elements and stages: grasping information from logs and previous records, synthesizing them, charting the ship’s course, and relaying the relevant information to the crew—in other words, precisely the kind of knowledge creation, through mobile sources of information and newly created inscriptions, that Latour describes. Mapping the ship’s course, then, occurs not only through its nominal act, but in the confluence of any number of other elements.

Nor is this broader perspective limited to later criticism, being instead acknowledged implicitly by Melville himself. In the same chapter, we read that “attempts have been made to construct elaborate migratory charts of the sperm whale,” a statement accompanied by a brief footnote explaining that “since the above was written, the statement is happily borne out by an official circular, issued by Lieutenant Maury, of the National Observatory, Washington, April 16th, 1851. By that circular, it appears that

precisely such a chart is in course of completion...” (ch. 44). “Lieutenant Maury” refers to Matthew Fontaine Maury—a figure less known today but recognized in his time as an eminent oceanographer.

Pratt writes that “unlike navigational mapping... natural history conceived of the world as a chaos out of which the scientist *produced* an order” (30). From this comes a tendency toward grandly synthetic projects: a “planetary consciousness,” suggesting both the substrate of such endeavors as well as the view of the world they engendered (29). In the 1830s, Alexander von Humboldt conceived of his magnum opus, *Cosmos*, as a “physical description of the universe, embracing all created things in the regions of space and earth... the remotest double stars in the regions of space, no less than the telluric phenomena included under the department of the geography of organic forms” (x). Within this grandiose rhetoric is a profound belief in the scientific method as the means by which this grandest scheme is revealed: only “considered *rationally*, that is, submitted to the process of thought,” is nature grasped in its “unity in diversity of phenomena; a harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole (τὸ πᾶν)* animated by the breath of life” (24). This is the sentiment of the day, under which Melville writes and Ahab operates. As late as 1870, an article in *Harper's*, written by one T. B. Maury† about Atlantic currents, reads as follows:

> Above all, we behold the wheels of the terrestrial machinery in motion—every breeze that blows, every wave that rolls, even the volcanic fire beneath the sea, conspiring to make good to man the dominion of the earth, and to instate him in the possession of every inch of his Heaven-given heritage, from pole to pole. (81)

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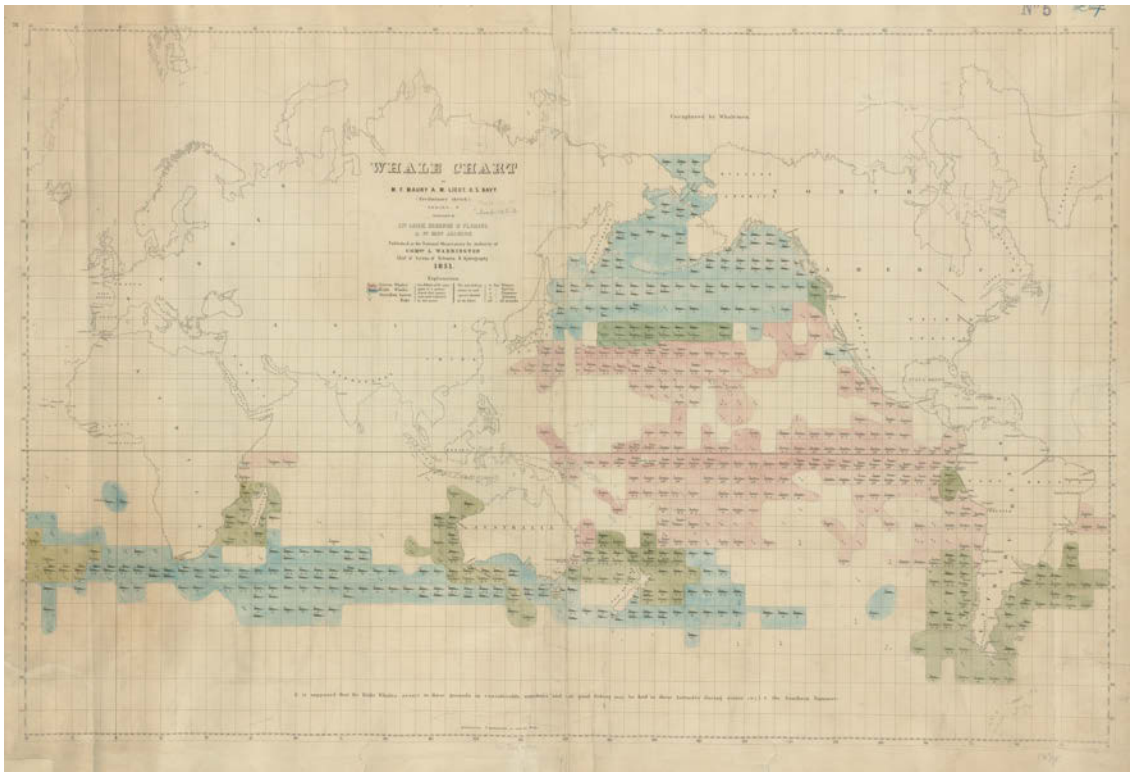
* Greek for “the total,” “the whole,” or as Melville would put it: “the all.”

† Whether or not both Maurys are related is unclear—if not, the coincidence is striking.

The religious invocation might be distinctly American—or suiting a popular publication —but more important is the conception of nature—not only is it a "terrestrial machinery," but one serving a single purpose.



Maury's 1851 chart, indicating the presence of sperm and right (Greenland) whales according to season and geographical location.

Like Maury, Ahab approaches the "formless, empty, recalcitrant space" of the sea "with the intention of showing that it was a precisely calibrated and complex machine" (Burnett 128). The two share a vertiginous urge to link together, to interpret, during the process of which the mechanisms and reasoning of scientific practice are placed in the service of unified goals. In both cases, these conclusions lie in a transcendent realm. "For Maury," writes D. Graham Burnett, "teleology and biblical apologetics retained a central place in the proper investigation of nature. As he put it in

The Physical Geography of the Sea: 'The theory upon which this work is conducted is that the earth was made for man,' and it followed from this that nature manifested divine intelligence in all its elements, from the stem of a snowdrop flower to the meridian transit of a bright star" (128). It is tempting, then, to see Ahab as Maury's demonic counterpart, obsessed not with "divine intelligence" but with what Ishmael terms "the subtle demonisms of life and thought" (ch. 41). In the vein of Pratt's "planetary consciousness," we can consider Melville's aim as the similar creation of a microcosmic world out of wildly disparate particularities. Ishmael and Ahab both share this, albeit in different ways.

Here is *Moby-Dick*'s immediate political dimension, coming out of a certain moment in history. In ascertaining the dominant ideologies of this time, we often speak of "empire" or "imperialism." These words both come from Latin: *imperare*, to command—and it is in this sense that we can view Melville in a broader context once again. Rather than restricting ourselves, we might consider how he deals more abstractly with power—speaking not in the language of history or politics, but about gravity, cohesion and dispersal. Olson goes so far as to talk about "magic," which "has one purpose: compel man or non-human forces to do one's will" (13). Ahab's plotting of a singular course in a world of ceaseless fluxion, itself an act of unforeseen complexity, requires as its antecedent a mastery of the forces—human and otherwise—surrounding him.

Launched out onto the sea, he expounds on whaling with the proverbial zeal of a new convert. The Nantucketer, he writes, "launching a navy of great ships on the sea, explored this watery world; put an incessant belt of circumnavigations round it" (ch. 14). In humorously polemical dialogue—repeating each mock question incredulously, and

following it with an indignant retort: "*No dignity in whaling?* The dignity of our calling the very heavens attest..."—he sets out to "prospectively ascribe all the honor and the glory to whaling" (ch. 24), positing it as the secret undercurrent to any and all triumphs of Western civilization. In this and other places, Melville's depiction of whaling is by no means unequivocally negative—a perceived inadequacy that has led to his exclusion, at times, from the American environmentalist canon that includes Thoreau, Muir, and others. It is precisely this ambiguity, however, that conveys the hold whaling might have on the imagination: the prospect of "honor and glory" (ch. 24); "the attending marvels of a thousand Patagonian sights and sounds" (ch. 1). And, as Ahab takes over not only the *Pequod*, but—it seems—the narrative itself, Ishmael threatens to turn, in our mind—from the kind of manic tour guide of before—to something more sinister: a passive enabler of Ahab's endeavor.

In part, this comes out of the unusually grand scale at which Ishmael often seems to regard the world. To what extent could the death of one whale, or many, hold particular significance or stand as a calamity to a narrator who seeks out the broadest possible moral perspective—"the scales of the New Testament" (ch. 1)—or who describes the sea in terms of its "universal cannibalism," an "eternal war since the world began?" (ch. 58). Debating whether or not the whale "will perish," he concludes that it is impossible, that "if ever the world is to be again flooded... the eternal whale will still survive (ch. 105). It is this tacit acceptance of violence—not only of the novel, but of the world at large—that seems problematic at times.

This is somewhat predicated by Ishmael's entrance into a realm of vastly different social class.* Charles Olson notes that unlike "the days when [sailors] knew the fathers of every man in their crew... [whaling] was already a sweated industry by the time Melville was a hand," and that "the crews were the bottom dogs of all nations and all races" (21). Ishmael's exuberant defense of whaling is to some extent a worthy cause, even a necessary one, as it goes against the view, common at the time, of whaling as the most demeaning and lowest of all professions. What this prejudice amounts to, given the very dependence of 19th-century Americans on this dirtiest of professions—an indebtedness apparent in "all the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn round the globe" (ch. 24), as well as in its less visible economic dimensions—is a hypocritical consignment of barbarism, and scapegoating of moral responsibility, onto the lower classes.

But there is a broader point being made here. Human violence, like its animal counterpart below the hull, is natural, immemorial: its stage, as the Old Manx Sailor says, is "the ringed horizon" where "Cain struck Abel" (ch. 40). Ahab's dismembering encounter with Moby-Dick stands in similar antecedent to the events of the novel. To condemn strife that seems thus preordained would be to miss the book's "larger, deeper, darker" center (ch. 41). The same patterns that reign on deck are manifested in the sea: the "subtleness" of its "most dreaded creatures" (ch. 58), the predation that is perpetual yet unseen, turns from an undertone to a vertiginous center when sufficiently galvanized. Sharks, normally out of sight, congregate in the "thousands and thousands" around a whale carcass, as urges particular in themselves accumulate into a vast, unidirectional

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* This has its basis in Melville's own middle-class background, from which going to sea as a whaler constituted a notable break. In *Typee*, he surmises that his traveling companion Toby, "like myself, had evidently moved in a different sphere of life" (ch. 5).

force.* The *Pequod*'s cook, maintaining first in his sermon to these creatures, that "if you gobern de shark in you, why den you be angel; for all angel is not'ing more dan de shark well goberned," soon gives up this endeavor (ch. 64). If this futility makes a comic point about the impossibility of human-shark communication, we can see another, more general one within it: the inscrutability, and seeming opacity, of individuals—animal or human—drawn into spheres of power.

Violent acts, inert by themselves, suddenly accumulate in the presence of a catalyst: a vertiginous force that rigorously commands attention, steering all drives towards itself. What stands, in Melville's cosmos, as the center of gravity, is the kind of power, embodied in Ahab, that might impose its will on the actions of many individuals —not simply through ordering them around "to scrub the decks," as Ishmael speculates dismissively in the first chapter—adding, simply, "who ain't a slave? Tell me that" (ch. 1), but by welding many disparate volitions into one:

> They were one man, not thirty. For as the one ship that held them all; though it was put together of all contrasting things—oak, and maple, and pine wood; iron, and pitch, and help—yet all these ran into each other in the one concrete hull... even so, all the individualities of the crew, this man's valor, that man's fear; guilt and guiltiness, all varieties were welded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to. (ch. 134)

In Olson's words, Ahab "invokes his own evil world... uses black magic to achieve his own vengeful ends. With the very words 'in nomine diaboli' he believes he utters a Spell and performs a Rite of magic," the purpose of which is to "compel men or non-human forces to do one's will" (53; 13).

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* "If you have never seen that sight," remarks Ishmael, "then suspend your decision about the propriety of devil-worship, and the expediency of conciliating the devil" (ch. 64).

Ahab shares his name with an apostate ruler in the Old Testament—and though Peleg strongly rebukes Ishmael for his mention of "that wicked king," insisting that the captain "did not name himself," he acknowledges that "yet the old squaw Tistig, at Gayhead, said that the name would somehow prove prophetic" (ch. 16). Of the same figure, we later read that "though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it" (ch. 34); an observation that, if initially inferred, is later confirmed unmistakably, perhaps most notably in the Satanic baptism of his harpoon and final cry of "from hell's heart I stab at thee...!" (ch. 135).

Through his "dark characters," Melville writes in "Hawthorne and his Mosses," Shakespeare "craftily says, or sometimes insinuates the things, which we feel to be so terrifically true, that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them" (1160). *King Lear*, writes Charles Olson, "was most kin to Melville," with Ahab and Pip standing in a similar relationship to Lear and the Fool, and "Ishmael at the end to tell the tale of Ahab's tragedy as Kent remained to speak these last words of Lear" (51; 63). Just as Hawthorne's "great, deep intellect... drops down into the universe like a plummet" ("Hawthorne" 1158), "dark characters" such as Lear—or Ahab—possess a mysterious weight or force that plunges down beneath everyday life, pulling along everything in the vicinity, illuminating their surroundings, as Milton writes in *Paradise Lost*, with "no light, but rather darkness visible" (1.63).

Ishmael, for all his silent anticipation of the sea's "attending marvels" (ch. 1), finds himself strangely inarticulate even before Peleg and Bildad's relatively benevolent authority: unconsciously mimicking the Quaker "I dost," and understating, as discussed

above, his apprehension of the sea (ch. 16). Ahab is different: his rhetorical powers lie not in the art of writing, but in oratory,* enabling him, with incantatory power, to bend the crew, even the narrative itself, to his ends. Even the silence prefiguring his speech becomes weighted with portent. The novel, ostensibly written by Ishmael about his experiences, becomes dominated, in its broad structure, by Ahab's struggle.

Ishmael shrinks back from claims of divine will or knowledge: "the awful tauntings in Job might well appall me" (ch. 32). This is not so with Ahab, however, who sets himself apart by implying his status as an equal, or even antagonist, of the divine. He acts as a usurper, akin to the Gnostic demiurge, in place of the actual, unseen God, and herein lies his power. Charles Olson implies a similar falsehood in such invocation: "this is the Ahab-world," he writes, "and it is wicked" (54). The central struggle of *Moby-Dick*, then, is between Ishmael and Ahab—or rather, between Melville and the vertiginous presence—called "evil" by some, but more than simply that at the same time—that he sets out to represent.

This is one way of conceiving the book, but a strange one, precisely because it casts the dynamic in terms of a struggle or antagonism that, though useful, isn't entirely there. Ahab and Ishmael never speak or confront each other, and—rather than moving away from Ahab as the narrative progresses—Ishmael only inches ever closer, finally serving in the same boat, as an oarsman in the final chase. How can we refer to two characters—two worlds—when they seem to be intrinsically enmeshed, with Ishmael fully complicit in Ahab's venture?

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* It should be noted that the two were less separate in the 19th century—members of the Melville family, for example, often read aloud to each other in the evenings (Parker 806).

The recognition of this unity is key, and, moving away from the earlier emphasis on opposition, leads us to a view of the novel in terms of its different affinities. Initially, the outcast Ishmael befriends Queequeg, at which point, he writes, "no more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world" (ch. 10). This is, in fact, a pattern characteristic to Melville—every protagonist from Typee to White-Jacket finds a similar "bosom friend." "For Melville," writes Guy Davenport, "the alter ego was male and complementary" (216). Unlike the relative constancy of his earlier works, however, the pattern here is complicated by a larger constellation of figures.

Most notable among these is Ahab, whose almost mesmeric appeal resembles a strange, inverted version of the warm friendship of before. "A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me," says Ishmael in retrospect, "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (ch. 41). At the root of this is a propensity towards similar feelings of unity that occur in Melville's work, often described in terms of synchronized movement or motion: "...beneath me, at the Equator, the earth pulses and beats like a warrior's heart, till I know not, whether it be not myself" (*Mardi* ch. 119). These are extreme states, to be sure, always transitory. To Hawthorne, Melville writes that "this *all* feeling, though, there is some truth in... But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (194). The feelings are there, however, and we are continually drawn to them.

"To evoke night and day or the ancient hypnosis of the sea," writes Robert Duncan, "is to evoke our powerful longing to fall back into periodic structure, into the inertia of uncomplicated matter" (2). At the mast-head, Ishmael tells us, "there is no life

in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God" (ch. 35). Far from being the indulgence of "absent-minded philosophers," these sensations constitute the fulfillment of deep, primal urges. Such mystical correspondences, at their most rudimentary, are intensely physical. As Duncan writes, "tide-flow under the sun and moon of the sea, systole and diastole of the heart, these rhythms lie deep in our experience" (2)—a yearning towards a being in concordance with that of the outer world.

This is particularly interesting, and especially appropriate, when described in astronomical terms: "the tinglings of life... that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars" (to Hawthorne; *Correspondence* 193). In *Redburn*, we read of "a wonderful thing in me, that responded to all the wild commotion of the outer world; and went reeling on and on with the planets in their orbits" (ch. 13). In *Mardi*, the image is externalized, with the protagonist and the "many souls" that reside in him conceived of as a planetary system within yet another, akin to Jupiter or Saturn and their moons: "though many satellites revolve around me, I and all mine revolve round the great central Truth, sun-like, fixed and luminous forever in the foundationless firmament" (ch. 119).

This is a compelling register of images, and one that readily carries over to *Moby-Dick*. The crucial difference—the "dark center" remarked on earlier—is that the central position here is occupied by Ahab, who confronts the central star directly: "These eyes of mine look into the very eye that is even now beholding [Moby Dick]; aye, and into the eye that is even now equally beholding the objects on the unknown, thither side of thee, thou sun!" (ch. 118). In the manner of an eclipse, Ahab's ascendance constitutes an

occlusion or occultation of the divine. His influence on the crew is gravitational, successively pulling them, like smaller planets and moons, into his malignant orbit. And if, for a moment, we abandon the Newtonian model for Einstein's—in which successively larger bodies sink more deeply into the planar fabric of space-time—the manner in which he "drops down into the universe like a plummet" becomes newly apparent. Like a black hole, the "larger, deeper, darker part" of which allows nothing to escape (*Moby-Dick* ch. 41), not even light, he remains mysterious even to those who revolve around him.

With this in mind, we arrive at another view of "The Chart," this time not in the literal implications discussed above, but as the point at which multiple strands of determination intertwine, and where Ahab's chart, besides the physical and geographical function discussed above, also serves as a means of confronting the similarly uncharted space of the novel. Ahab seeks to find the whale, at the same time that Melville attempts to render plausible the idea that Ahab should even be able to do so, in all the "unhooped oceans of this planet" (ch. 44).

The schematization of the sea, or the *plotting* of a course, find an appropriate analogy in the novel, as the mapping of celestial latitudes and meridians onto the earth's surface comes to mimic the fixture of a sprawling, disparate text onto a "starred" fate or doom. Just as the contours of a map belie the heterogeneity beneath, the concept of a fated voyage is strangely at odds with the bulk and variety of Melville's novel. In the same manner in which he draws the disparities of the sea together to form a unified course, and makes the *Pequod's* crew an extension of his own volition, Ahab binds the unbound space of the novel itself.

In a letter to his brother in 1850—a year before the novel was published—the editor Evert Duyckinck noted that "Melville has a new book mostly done, a romantic, fanciful & most literal & most enjoyable presentment of the Whale Fishery" (qtd. in Olson 35). Setting out to write a romance, perhaps in the manner of his earlier *Mardi*, Melville found at the center of his preoccupations the malignancy of Ahab. "Now revolving in the troubled orbit of his book" (*Pierre* 298), his sojourns in language and space, like those of Ishmael, would be dictated by those of the *Pequod*'s captain.

But Ahab, though he strives for totality, or absolute power, is only one part of a larger cosmos—one that includes much more. It is easy to neglect this, for Ahab's power extends to readers of *Moby-Dick*, who mistake his pursuit for the entirety of the novel, and his usurpation for legitimate sovereignty. The central question, then, becomes the way in which Ishmael subverts Ahab, recounting the narrative of his quest for vengeance without letting its retelling subsume him once again. Here, the idea of mapping comes in once more: not simply in the sense of plotting out a chart or course, but of depicting the broader world. The idea, present here, of "elsewhere"—the myriad of other things in the world that demand attention—is key.

III
Mare Fecunditatis

> *...powered not by physical strength but by a momentum of mind, of wonder and joy, movement driven by movement itself, by the sun and heat and cold on his neck, the astonishment of the natural world unfolding.*
>
> Daniel Mason, "The Ecstasy of Alfred Russell Wallace"

In Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, we return to the Pacific, continuing the American fascination with that sea begun with Melville's own Polynesian romances a century and a half before.[*] Now, however, the ostensible island paradise is dotted with bunkers, the sounds of birds mingled with those of artillery, as we find ourselves amidst the Battle of Guadalcanal during the Second World War. Beyond this geographical affinity, however, we can observe familiar processes at work. Disparate individuals are collected together, made into one entity. Territorial ambitions are narrowed down to half-mad fixations—*this* island, *that* ridge. We have seen these patterns before: on the deck of the *Pequod*. And in both works, all of this occurs in the midst of an infinitely wider world, one that never ceases to present itself.

In one scene in Malick's film, two soldiers, sent ahead as scouts, are shot unexpectedly by unseen enemies. Then a cloud moves, and the entire hill, covered in waving grass, is suddenly illuminated. The two events are worlds apart, even if joined in

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[*] It should be noted, however, that both islands are not only separated by considerable geographical distance, but belong to different cultural groups: the Marquesas to the Polynesian, Guadalcanal to the Melanesian.

narrative sequence. “What’s this war at the heart of nature?” asks Witt, the film’s narrator, “why does nature vie with itself?” The second question seems to answer the first: how different, after all, is that nature from the violence that occurs within it—have we not simply made arbitrary distinctions, drawn false lines, from the very beginning? But to abandon these, it seems, would be to leave behind something of ourselves as well. If Witt’s language is run through with such questions, his physical existence answers them with a kind of quiet astonishment: “through... a distancing from [the world]; an evenness of witnessing” (Bersani 158). Like the conviviality of Ishmael, who seeks to be “on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (ch. 1), Witt’s equanimity is one that threatens to turn into outright passivity. The problem that confronts us in Malick’s film is the same we face in Melville’s novel: how to open oneself fully to the world and, at the same time, avoid being devoured by its vertiginous centers of power.

The path that Malick takes, as Leo Bersani suggests, involves a decisive embrace of the film’s aesthetic dimension—that which necessarily lies outside of narrative events. The very act of looking—through characters that, by the camera apparatus, are “individuated not as personalities but as perspectives on the world” (146)—becomes here “a mode of implication, of connectedness” (159). Questioned in a brig for his erstwhile desertion, Witt claims to have “seen another world”—a weighty claim, and one we initially assume to refer to the Melanesian village we find him in at the film’s beginning (set, no less, to Fauré’s “In Paradisum”). But as the film moves on—and with it, the constant accumulation of images that look outward from the violence of the narrative events themselves—it becomes clear that the “other world” is, in fact, manifest in this

one. Bersani speaks of the emergence of an “ontology of universal immanence: the surfaces of all things ‘quiver’ from the presence within them of all the other things to which they relate” (169).

Interconnectedness, in this sense, suggests not the immediate apprehension of things in a totality, or the sudden dissolution of the individual. Rather, it involves, as its necessary antecedent, the recognition of all objects, of the world’s localities, as grounded in their actual existences: the thing-ness that exists before and beyond the grasp of any “totalizing classificatory schemas” (Pratt 28). This infinite, teeming variety in all its concrete particulars, Melville suggests, is what lies at nature’s deepest, most unfathomable level—a fact that even Ahab comes to surmise.

> Then gazing at his quadrant, and handling, one after the other, its numerous cabalistical contrivances, he pondered again, and muttered: "Foolish toy! babies' plaything of haughty Admirals, and Commodores, and Captains; the world brags of thee, of thy cunning and might; but what after all canst thou do, but tell the poor, pitiful point, where thou thyself happenest to be on this wide planet, and the hand that holds thee: no! not one jot more! Thou canst not tell where one drop of water or one grain of sand will be to-morrow noon; and yet with thy impotence thou insultest the sun! Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy; and cursed be all the things that cast man's eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him... Curse thee, thou quadrant!" dashing it to the deck, "no longer will I

> guide my earthly way by thee; the level ship's compass, and the level deadreckoning, by log and by line; *these* shall conduct me, and show me my place on the sea. Aye," lighting from the boat to the deck, "thus I trample on thee, thou paltry thing that feebly pointest on high; thus I split and destroy thee!" (ch. 118).

This oration occurs right before "The Candles"—the chapter that Olson identifies as a turning point after which Ahab's "tone, from this moment, is richer, quieter, less angry and strident," akin to "Macbeth in his soliloquy of tomorrow, before Macduff will meet and match him" (60; 62). On the one hand, this moment would seem to be an entry into a realm of pure madness or intent—the point where Ahab gives himself wholly over to fate. But something else happens as well: Ahab seems to extricate himself from the set of mechanical devices that have enabled his progress ("thus I split and destroy thee!") and thus reveals their separate natures. Like the quadrant, hurled not into the sea but, viscerally, upon the deck, Ahab's network of "contrivances," carefully assembled for the purpose of finding the whale, suddenly bursts apart.

"Be a man's intellectual superiority what it will," writes Ishmael, "it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base" (ch. 33). Like Matthew Fontaine Maury, Ahab has depended on "allies, standardized delegates that were faithful, true and subservient," either human or, more interestingly, nonhuman (Crawford 2). Included here, in true Latourian fashion, are not only the "cabalistic contrivances" by which he practices his navigational craft, but a far broader panoply—whales, ocean currents; in short, "the wheels of the terrestrial machinery in motion"—that he has depended on. And if up to now, he has regarded "all visible objects... as pasteboard

masks" behind which "some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features" (ch. 36), what now flashes forth is a radically different conception of the world: one where, instead of being seen in drastically reductive schemata, each and every individual once again stands apart. We have previously considered the map as particularly suited to the apprehension of such a world, but now this itself has to be called into question: the map's bringing-together of disparate forces, in a way that always seems somehow synthesizing and teleological—even in the guise of greater space and freedom than its written counterparts—runs counter to what remains perpetually heterogenous and fragmentary: the thing-ness of the world.

The act of mapping thus always threatens to deny the ceaseless flux of the landscape it seeks to describe. In *Redburn*, the young protagonist attempts to find his way around the city of Liverpool with an old guidebook of his deceased father, but finds it to be hopelessly out of date. He tells himself that "as your father's guidebook is no guide for you, neither would yours (could you afford to buy a modern one to-day) be a true guide to those who come after you. Guide-books... are the least reliable books in all literature; and nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books." (ch. 31). The problem lies not with the city itself, but with the persistent attempts to catalogue it. And though the sea would seem exempt from this—an "everlasting terra incognita" (*Moby-Dick* ch. 58)—this has already changed by Melville's time, having begun with the emergence of the world's oceans as a crucial new stage for conflict and trade, and more decisively with the advent of sciences, described above, allowing one to locate and classify the movements and patterns of the sea, along with the living organisms whose "hidden ways... remain, in

great part, unaccountable to [their] pursuers" (ch. 41). But even if the danger posed by imperial ambitions to the "empty" sea is very real—a fact more easily grasped in hindsight, as we recognize, in the factory-like *Pequod*, a harbinger of various distended industries to come—it is also here, on the open ocean, that its ultimate failure becomes clear.

Ishmael, at first, loudly trumpets the explorations of whalers, writing that "thus have these naked Nantucketers... overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders; parcelling out among them the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans" (ch. 14), and that "for many years past the whale-ship has been the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth… seas and archipelagoes which had no chart, where no Cook or Vancouver had ever sailed" (ch. 24). The possessive nature of cartography is made clear here: not only does it involve apprehending a space, but "ferreting [it] out," placing boundaries and names on "archipelagoes which had no chart." Going onward from here, however, he arrives at an admission of the futility of such endeavors amid the unknowability of the sea, "so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one" (ch. 58). Our attention moves, in other words, from singular, "pioneering" achievements—discovery, conquest and possession, geographical and otherwise—to the myriad, tangential outgrowths that surround the singular on all sides.

This should already be familiar to us through the narrative structures that Melville first explores in his earlier work, moving not strictly from one narrative event to the next, but from point to point of interest or fascination—narrative as a navigational act. In

Mardi, a chapter is devoted to describing "the Chondropterygii, and Other Uncouth Hordes Infesting The South Seas" (ch. 8), another to "Time and Temples" (ch. 75)—while *White-Jacket* takes this furthest, moving with complete freedom through the various echelons of a man-of-war, and ending only with the ship's arrival in Boston, at the end of its journey.

Some of Ishmael's more ecstatic tangents come to sound almost parodic, as when he imagines "long rows of angels in Paradise, each with his hands in a jar of spermaceti" (ch. 94). Edward Said notes the novel's frequent "exaggerations, its elephantine humor, and its often grotesque rhetoric," writing that they "suggest not the learned scholar but a writer trying relentlessly to impress his audience" (360). This need not be a drawback—instead, it is indicative of a relentlessly searching state of mind, seeking through infinitely articulated space for the island of expression that will give a reader imaginative purchase. Melville's exaggerations in rhetoric, his sometimes gleeful pursuit of the seemingly extraneous, points to a mode of inquiry much like that of Thomas Browne, who habitually and rapidly moves between subjects. Browne compiles, in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, a collection of "Common Errors" ranging from elephants, griffins and lampreys to Egyptian hieroglyphs and the "cessation of Oracles" (*Major Works* 169; 164), and invents, in his *Musæum Clausum*, a fictional array of curiosities: lost works by Ovid and Cicero; various artifacts that include "the Skin of a Snake bred out of the Spinal Marrow of a Man" and "the Homerican Battel between Frogs and Mice, neatly described upon the Chizel Bone of a large Pike's Jaw" (109-111; 118-119). Like the cabinets of curiosities maintained in the same period, Browne's work depicts—or

rather intimates—the world through successive fragments, "one irreducibly individual object after another, the brute singularity of each resisting all attempts at generalization or categorization" (Daston 266; 272). We think here of prodigies and wonders, but this "brute singularity," if sought after, exists everywhere. It was in insects and rodents, writes Browne, that "*Solomon* chose the object of his admiration, indeed what reason may not goe to Schoole on the wisedome of Bees, Aunts, and Spiders?" (*Major Works* 77-78). If still grounded firmly in Aristotelian cosmology, he anticipates later thought in this regard. The achievement of Hume, writes Gilles Deleuze, was to conceive of a "world of exteriority... in which the conjunction 'and' dethrones the interiority of the verb 'is'; a harlequin world of multicolored patterns and non-totalizable fragments" (38). The contemplation of any one fragment leads only to another fragment, and so on.

Here we return to the lines and courses of the map, which, in Melville's hands, aren't an attempt to wrench tangible things out of a recalcitrant outer world so much as a representational space that—through its structure and language (recall here the "peculiar indeterminacy of form" that Mendelson ascribes to the encyclopedic mode)—opens itself fully to that world's complexity. Consider Borges' story, "On Exactitude in Science," about an empire in which "the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it" (325). Within this *reductio ad absurdum*, there is a broader point being made about the nature of cartography. Where does the map end and the world begin (or vice-versa)? The boundaries are indistinguishable and obscure. A notion of mapping emerges here that, rather than subordinating complexity to abstraction, meets it halfway, so to speak,

working through innumerable points of interest. This image of the world, then, is as thoroughly teeming as its external counterpart.

To conceive of the world in this way is to abandon attempts at quantifying, reducing, totalizing—even including metaphysical categories: the self, the world, divinity. In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville hypothesizes that "perhaps, after all, there is *no* secret"—no ultimate mystery, akin to "the Freemason's mighty secret, so terrible to all children," being withheld by divine powers. He adds: "as soon as you say *Me*, a *God*, a *Nature*, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam" (186). The very inevitability of these categories would seem to make defeat a certainty. But even "in this world of lies" ("Hawthorne" 1160), the infinite fragments beneath shudder forth, are glimpsed, if for a moment. Pip, in "The Castaway," has such a vision:

> ...strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. (ch. 93)

To *warp* means to bend or deform, but also to wind a thread around a loom to create the horizontal framework, or *warp* (the vertical threads being the *weft* or *woof*)—hence the double meaning here: rather than an uncorrupted, ideal realm, Pip finds himself at the fulcrum of a world being created continuously. He is witness to a constant generative motion, one akin to the "pantheistic vitality" that Ishmael observes in sharks surrounding a whale carcass (ch. 66). Here too, there is an eventual move to the divine—"God's foot

upon the treadle of the loom"—but immediately before this apotheosis, a world of infinite particularity is revealed: "the multitudinous, God-omnipresent coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs." This is not the "abortive gulf" of Milton's chaos, "the void profound / of unessential night" (2.441; 2.438-9),* but its opposite, bottomlessly fecund.

The "strange shapes" that Pip glimpses above are nothing less than those of the world's inchoate origins, separated from the quotidian not by time but by our failure to perceive them. "The world is as young today, as when it was created," writes Melville in "Hawthorne and his Mosses," "and this Vermont morning dew is as wet to my feet, as Eden's dew to Adam's" (1162). Amid these "ever-juvenile eternities," we cannot help think of Charles Darwin—the last figure to appear in Melville's own "Extracts"—who, eight years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, would postulate that "whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved" (131). Finding the classificatory systems laid out by Linnaeus and Cuvier insufficient for his task (ch. 32), Ishmael, in his language and thought, anticipates these "endless forms."

Who is Ishmael, and where is he writing from? "Call me Ishmael," the opening imperative, serves not only a first volley, but a kind of invitation—not merely informing the reader but asking, implicitly, for a response. A command, it precludes the questioning

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* These are Satan's words, and Milton, it should be noted, later describes this realm as "the womb of Nature" (2.911). But while his "embryon atoms" remain in disarray until "th' Almighty Maker them ordain / ...to create more worlds" (2.900; 2.915-6), Melville's "unwarped primal world" is a place of constant generation.

of the narrator's identity. Of the biblical Ishmael, we read that "he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand will be against him" (Gen. 16:12). The use of such a significant name suggests purposefulness: not an alias—there is no "real" Ishmael—but an identity carefully constructed from the outset. The strange subsumption into and resurfacing from the narrative to which Ishmael is periodically subject—"my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs," he writes (ch. 41)—is a compelling indicator that the character we might mistake for a unified figure might be better considered as two different incarnations: the young sailor of the novel, and the writer, reconstructing his experiences years after the fact. Significantly displaced in time by the strange circumstances of the epilogue, Ishmael's survival can simultaneously be read as a kind of death—after all, does he really outlive the crew, or are they actually bereft of him? It is from beyond the grave that Witt, in *The Thin Red Line*, speaks in voice-over for the last time: "Look out through my eyes, look out at the things you made. All things shining... ."

Central to this doubleness is a shift in the way we understand the novel's timeframe. Instead of regarding the book's ending as the final cataclysm towards which all events move, we can see the sinking of the Pequod—and the demise of its crew—as a fulcrum between one set of movements and the rest. The evocations of death are striking —the "great shroud of the sea," the "dirge-like main" and coffin life-buoy (ch. 135)—but so are broader implications of eschatology, and more importantly, of a kind of cosmic renewal. This is present elsewhere: a whale's bulk revolves "like a waning world," thus implying a waxing to come (ch. 81); "the world goes round, and the other side comes

up" (*Correspondence* 212). Ishmael himself is no stranger to cosmologies of repetition, writing that "for the millionth time we say amen with Solomon—Verily there is nothing new under the sun" (ch. 45). Disaster, for Melville, always implicates its afterlife, in which the fragments are redrawn, seen in new arrangements, relived along new paths.

In the final, epistolary chapter of Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, the letter's author comes face-to-face with a large tapestry, created by one of the novel's characters, that depicts the town and plantation of her former life, "all in one exquisite Creation" (384):

> The dead in the cemetery have risen from there and they, too, stand at the cabins where they once lived. So the slave cemetery is just plain ground now, grass and nothing else. It is empty, even of the tiniest infants, who rest alive and well in their mothers' arms. (385)

This retrieval of the lost, the reshaping of the world, profoundly affects its beholder, who writes that "there are matters in my memory that I did know not were there until I saw them on that wall" (385). *Moby-Dick*, too, can be seen as such an imaginative reconstitution—what Thomas Browne, writing of the Resurrection, describes as "that one day, that shall include and comprehend all that went before it, wherein as in the last scene, all the Actors must enter to compleate and make up the Catastrophe of this great peece" (Major Works 119).

In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne in June of 1851, Melville entertains the thought of "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. Then shall songs be composed as when wars are over; humorous, comic songs..." (192). If this desire first manifests itself as a strictly narrative impulse—the retelling of

catastrophic events—it also gives rise to something else, akin to the "comic songs" that Melville imagines. The word *comedy* itself comes from the Greek *kōmos*: revelry or carousal, and it is in this sense that we should imagine the movements of thought that Melville displays: acting not out of irreverence, but in ecstatic freedom. "Left to itself," writes Deleuze on Hume, "the mind has the capacity to move from one idea to another, but it does so at random, in a delirium that runs through the universe" (41)—and though this delirium is normally tamed through the structures of everyday life and language, it remains there as an ever-present substrate. In November of 1851, Melville writes to Hawthorne again, this time after *Moby-Dick* has been finished, and Hawthorne—in a letter now lost—has expressed his thoughts on it. Herman seems exhilarated: "ineffable socialities are in me... It is a strange feeling — no hopefulness is in it, no despair. Content — that is it; and irresponsibility; but without licentious inclination. I speak now of my profoundest sense of being, not of an incidental feeling" (212). Here is Thomas Browne, moving excitedly between "vulgar errors," and Ishmael, going from the whale's etymology to its anatomy to its antediluvian forebears—a movement that reveals the author's "profoundest sense of being." It is a feeling of peace, defined not by stasis, but what we might describe as the purest motion. Melville continues:

> I can't stop yet. If the world was entirely made up of Magians, I'll tell you what I should do. I should have a paper-mill established at one end of the house, and so have 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)

That "*Moby-Dick* was two books" is a familiar idea: the whaling adventure that Melville began writing in 1850, and what it became: the vertiginous story of Ahab's

obsession with the whale (Olson 35). By analogy, we can suggest a different pair of *Moby-Dicks*: the narrative of the Pequod's voyage, and its imaginative rearrangement, in which Ishmael is left to pick up the pieces—to "come to fish up this old mast, and find a doubloon lodged in it, with bedded oysters for the bark" (ch. 99). Far from being easily discernible by chapter or style, the two flow into one another, constantly interpenetrating. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* make for compelling parallels, the two constituting a movement from a narrative of shifting alliances and companionships to a far emptier world in which the protagonist attempts to navigate back to a kind of completeness or understanding.

The extra-narrative recollections that Ishmael litters throughout the novel—telling the Town-Ho's story "at Lima, to a lounging circle of my Spanish friends" (ch. 54), referring to a wide variety of literary texts, such as those of the "Extracts"—indicate precisely such an afterlife. "In the wake of his survival," writes Elizabeth Schultz, "Ishmael begins to travel—geographically, culturally, and literarily—to learn what he can about life and nature, whales and human beings" (110). This journey, unlike that of the *Pequod*, shoots its tendrils over the entire earth.

This occurs, most tellingly, through a kind of attentiveness to phenomena that stand apart in their strangeness, seeming to point infinitely outward—a stone harpoon head "might have been darted by some Nor'West Indian long before America was discovered" (ch. 81); the whale, "having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over" (ch. 104). In literal events, this takes place through the recognition of natural phenomena that seem to beckon from a state of existence completely alien: the "unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition" of a giant squid (ch. 59); the suggestion

that, by the movements of its tail, the whale “intelligently conversed with the world” (ch. 86); the glimpse, “far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface... suspended in those watery vaults,” of “the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales” (ch. 87).

Following Ahab’s ruthless conquest, the ruins of his final voyage are left for Ishmael to rediscover and create anew. Like the whale skeleton in the Arsacides, “every month assuming greener, fresher verdure” until “Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories” (ch. 102), Ishmael’s narrative occupies this indeterminate space between death and life, past and future, a narrative defined by inevitable ruin and ceaseless fecundity.

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