



Materiali e documenti



Eight Lectures on Herman Melville

New Perspectives in the Age of Post-Truth

a cura di Giulia Magro e Giacomo Traina



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A Note on Texts

The following abbreviations are used throughout this volume to refer to Melville's works. For the specific editions used, see the bibliography of each chapter.

M — *Mardi*

MD — *Moby-Dick*

P — *Pierre*

PT — *The Piazza Tales*

CM — *The Confidence-Man*

BB — *Billy Budd, Sailor*

C — *Clarel*

Introduction: Reading Melville in the Age of Post-Truth

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Herman Melville died in 1891, exactly one hundred years before the launch of the very first web page in August 1991. His may be an unusual voice to comment upon our media-saturated age of post-truth, wherein (mis)information is just one tap away on one's smartphone, the political discourse has curdled into dangerous polarization, and liberal democracies unravel at high speed before our eyes as a result.

And yet, as C. L. R. James, among others, lucidly remarked back in the 1950s, Melville is also the one American writer who, by giving birth to a character like Ahab, has managed to “portray the totalitarian type as early as 1851” (23). In *Moby-Dick*, James saw an unheeded prophecy of the twentieth century written in the Antebellum era. In his famous essay from 1953, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, he invoked American fascism as a possibility while focusing on Melville's prescience of European totalitarianisms. He saw the emergence of demagogues rallying disaffected masses by harnessing technology foreseen in fiction by Ahab's ‘coup’ in chapter 36 of Melville's novel, when the Nantucket captain hijacks the *Pequod* to wage his personal vendetta on the White Whale. More than a Shakespearean villain driven by Romantic titanism, James's Ahab is a neurotic despot from the 1930s who subjugates lesser men through fear and awe. Much like Hitler and Stalin, he relies not “on a regular army, a regular police, and the normal protection of power” but on “a special force, loyal to [himself] alone” (61)—his secret crew consisting of Fedallah and the Mawmilla oarsmen. While watching the news in 2026 with James's book on the coffee table, the idea of a US president enlisting a federal law enforcement agency as his own personal militia does not sound far-

fetched anymore. Melville's 'prophecy,' as James read it, feels now more prescient than ever.

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionaries selected "post-truth" as the word of the year. According to their definition, post-truth relates or denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Flood). A decade later, with Donald J. Trump securing a second term also thanks to the backing of Silicon Valley moguls, nobody flinches when the most powerful man in the world says something plainly false or at odds with his previous statements, and his base scrambles to justify both. In 1953, James recognized this same psychological pattern while discussing the *Pequod's* second mate, Stubb. Not to be mistaken for a comic relief character, jolly as he is Stubb also reveals himself to be a ruthless officer ready to leave his men at the mercy of the waves. In Stubb—a spineless underling who rationalizes even the blows Ahab deals him—James saw a "prototype" for Stalinist cadres "accepting with apparent joy and enthusiasm policies which they execrated up to the very day they were announced" (58). Fear, however, is not the only driving force behind such an attitude. As Lee McIntyre (2018) reminds us, cognitive bias was with us millennia before the birth of Soviet Russia or the rise of social media. As some of this book's chapters argue, many a Melvillian character stands as proof of how self-deceit is a foundational trait of human nature. In tracing Melville's acuity regarding human cognitive behavior back to his Pacific years—to the power dynamics at play on the deck of a whaleship—James had put his finger on something crucial. Melville, says James, had observed power firsthand, in his rawest form; he had seen Stubbs and Ahabs in action. What was impossible for an intellectual writing in the McCarthy era to envision, though, is the odd merge of the clownish and the cruel we see today—the wrestling-like bombast and the dehumanizing policies flooding news feeds on a daily basis. What James failed to see, in other words, was that when the United States would have finally started to crack under the weight of its own contradictions, it would not be a gloomy Ahab standing at the helm, nor a cowardly Starbuck—but a smiling, jovially callous Stubb, ever ready with a quip, as bonhomous as brutal.

But if James did not foresee Trump's America, Melville himself—to an extent—did. While James, writing in the shadow of the atomic arms race, identified totalitarianism's premises in the lethal nexus of tech-

nology and charisma—arguing that this very mechanism is already at work, symbolically, in Ahab—he could not see how far the erosion of meaning can go once information travels faster than electrons around a uranium nucleus. In a toxic political landscape marked by the failure of legacy media and the unstoppable rise of AI, deranged tub-thumpers go further than cold, Machiavellian autocrats who weigh their every move. The appearance of an American strongman who steers the ship of the State away from its preordained path speaks the loudest about Melville's insight. What some of the following contributions will especially foreground is the surprising kinship between Ahab's rhetoric and today's post-truth world—how Melville foresaw part of the epistemic conditions that made the rise of an American tyrant possible.

For this and other reasons, as editors of this collection we maintain that Melville's works can still help us navigate the "world we live in," to borrow James's book's subtitle. At the heart of these *Eight Lectures* lies the belief that Melville's place in university syllabi is not a weary, perfunctory tribute to a dead white male author from the American Renaissance, but evidence of a voice that simply refuses to stop speaking. The impetus behind this volume is to read Melville's work in the post-truth age, understood as an umbrella term encompassing the broader crises and challenges of our time. Some of the following chapters attempt to reexamine Melville's corpus paying attention to post-truth rhetoric, issues of perception, hermeneutics, interpretation, and questions of (dis)trust. Others give us the opportunity to widen the frame, centering marginalized subjectivities, both human and nonhuman, while yet others provide the readers with various insights into Melville's authorial voice, from his literary influences to his travel writings, covering transnational and cross-Atlantic perspectives. Each essay takes into account one or more aspects related to the whole Melvillian macrotext through an articulate range of viewpoints and methodological approaches.

Some of the ensuing pieces in this collection were initially conceived as lectures, and we present them here as such. Our aim is to offer university students (MA and graduate) and curious readers a resource to deepen their knowledge of Melville, allowing even non-specialist readers to navigate current critical and scholarly debates. We do not envision this volume as a gateway to Melville's corpus, nor do we claim it to be an exhaustive survey of scholarly viewpoints. Rather, it is devised as a small addition to the already abundant material that reads Melville in

light of contemporary and sociopolitical issues—as an attempt to show how his work can still resonate with the challenges of our time. To accomplish that, we revisit major works such as *Moby-Dick*, along with less explored bends and junctures of Melville’s literary production, including pieces of juvenilia such as his “Fragments from a Writing Desk,” rarely seen in university syllabi. Our hope is that this collection of lectures can help students, teachers, and interested readers to gain a broader understanding of Melville, somewhat freeing him from the amber of canonicity by stressing the topicality of works like *The Confidence-Man*—whose endless procession of crooks and swindlers seems ominously reminiscent of the current world stage.

In keeping with the book’s subtitle, we begin with two essays that more directly situate Melville’s prose works within the post-truth debate. To do so, we start from the work that has long been considered the great load-bearing pillar of Melville’s opus, *Moby-Dick*. Readers will see that the first half of this collection largely revolves around the 1851 novel and, to a relevant extent, around the figure of Ahab. In the chapter that opens the volume, Paolo Simonetti puts the text in dialogue with present-day challenges and realities. Taking one of the novel’s core chapters—“The Doubloon”—as a starting point, Simonetti explores the manifold dimensions and resonances of the doubloon as a symbol. In his lecture, the golden coin nailed to the mast by Ahab as a reward for whoever sights the White Whale first serves as a “poignant metafictional reminder that interpretation is inherently partial and subjective, often concealing underlying agendas and intentions” (Simonetti, “Unscrew it!” 22), responding to every character’s individual reading as an AI chatbot would do, accommodating and exasperating their worldviews. In the same vein, Giacomo Traina approaches “The Piazza,” the last short story Melville ever put into print, as a post-truth narrative written 160 years before the concept itself existed. Traina demonstrates how in *The Piazza Tales*’ opening story/preface, pre-held views, daydreams, and reveries end up reshaping one’s world until they shatter before one’s eyes. Establishing a parallel between Ahab and the story’s narrator, he argues how “The Piazza”—read as a parable of truth-seeking, a satire, and a metafiction—is Melville’s way of showing us how cognitive bias and self-deception can effectively function as survival strategies, eerily predating the post-truth age.

The two following chapters position themselves within different, yet equally topical branches of theory. Although Giulia Magro main-

tains her focus on *Moby-Dick*, her lecture addresses Melville's whaling epic through the critical lens of ecocriticism, illustrating different ways ecocritical readings can be applied to the novel. Magro shows how the text can be seen as a forerunner of petro-fiction, a nuanced depiction of conflicting human attitudes toward animals as well as of animal subjectivity and material existence, and finally as a reflection on ecological degradation and animal extinction vis-à-vis current climate crisis anxieties. Magro makes the case that, in today's age of post-truth politics and climate denialism, *Moby-Dick* awakens readers to the complex entanglements among human and nonhuman beings, laying bare the dichotomies between fact and fiction, knowledge and unknowability. Pilar Martínez Benedí also starts from the 1851 novel to tackle a broader sample of Melvillian works, reading them through the lens of disability studies. Drawing on episodes from *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Confidence-Man*, she investigates Melville's empathetic perspective on disability and the blurred boundaries between difference and "normalcy." In her lecture, Martínez Benedí reframes preexisting notions that view Melville's portrayal of disability as a pathologizing one, putting forth a more nuanced interpretation. Her chapter highlights how characters like Ahab allow for different kinds of "physical, sensory, and cognitive variation" (Martínez Benedí, "Unfortunate Beings?" 88) that anticipate some aspects of the contemporary discourse on disability.

The next two lectures deal with Melville's lifelong fascination with Italy, both in terms of literary models and firsthand travel experiences. In her chapter, Alice Balestrino traces Melville's use of the quest as a narrative pattern back to the very beginning of his literary career, his 1839 "Fragments from a Writing Desk." She tackles Melville's first piece of writing as a chivalric romance modelled on sixteenth-century examples, addressing questions of authorship, authority, and intentionality. Balestrino contends that Melville's choice of adopting the L.A.V. pseudonym both obscures and eventually gives life to a form of authority that resonates with the norms of the chivalric tradition, with particular reference to Italian poets Ariosto and Tasso. In keeping with Melville's relationship with Italy but shifting the focus to matters of biography and travel, Carlo Martinez's lecture focuses on the author's 1857 sojourn in Rome. Martinez frames Melville's visit to the eternal city within the broader context of nineteenth-century travel writing and transatlantic tourism, approaching his journal as a literary text that had not failed to leave a mark on his subsequent production. Mel-

ville's travelogue, Martinez argues, both reflects his enduring fascination with Rome as well as his reticence to fully embrace the traditional "tourist gaze" of his time.

Circling back to the volume's broader concerns with post-truth rhetoric, the two final essays revolve around questions of trust and distrust. Daphne Orlandi's lecture focuses on Melville's last published novel, *The Confidence-Man*. In Orlandi's analysis, the 1857 novel becomes a case study for understanding modern-day post-truth rhetorics. She specifically lingers on Melville's satirical depiction of Transcendentalism, with a special focus on what many critics deem to be a caricature of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the mystic Mark Winsome, and more generally on Melville's ambivalent relationship with the philosophy of the Concord Sage. With her lecture, Orlandi argues that the novel may be seen as a contact point between optimism and skepticism, between Melville's 'Everlasting Nay' and Emerson's 'Everlasting Yea.' Shifting from an interrogation of deception and credulity to one of connection and relationality, Paweł Jędrzejko wraps up the collection with an examination of what he calls 'the ethics of seafaring,' focusing on *Moby-Dick's* maritime dimension. Jędrzejko argues for the centrality of friendship within a life at sea that only offers uncertainty and impermanence. Reframed this way, camaraderie and solidarity take on an existential hue, becoming an ethical imperative for survival against the "universal thump" of life. To prove this point, Jędrzejko goes back to *Moby-Dick's* chapter 94, positing how Ishmael's "squeeze of the hand" can be seen as a gesture of non-mediated recognition of the Other's subjectivity and an expression of humans' capacity for kindness and compassion. The volume thus comes full circle, opening and closing with reflections on *Moby-Dick* and confirming once again the interpretive complexity and contemporary relevance not only of the 1851 novel but also of Melville's oeuvre as a whole.¹

The occasion that gathered such a diverse array of perspectives and gave rise to this volume is the retirement, in November 2024, of Professor Giorgio Mariani. Mariani is a renowned scholar in Anglo-American literature, and author of articles and monographs that have made a key contribution to the development and advancement of research

¹ All the translations of non-English sources in the following chapters are the contributors' own.

in this area of knowledge both in Italy and abroad. He has served as a full professor of Anglo-American literature at Sapienza University of Rome, where he also held the role of coordinator of the PhD program in Studies in English Literatures, Language, and Translation. He has also taught at Rutgers University and the University of Salerno and was a visiting professor at L'École normale supérieure de Lyon, as well as at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Among the many publications that marked a career that spans decades, we can count volumes on nineteenth-century authors, war literature, contemporary American Indian literature, and literary theory. His extensive scholarly production has revolved around the US as both an idea and a political reality, a deep fascination also shaped by his prolonged sojourns stateside as a child, a student, and an adult.

This lifelong interest informs a body of work that can hardly be compressed into but a few pages. Among his books, his seminal *Waging War on War: Peacefighting in American Literature* (2015) asks what constitutes an anti-war text—and whether such a thing is even possible—addressing authors ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Faulkner to Tim O'Brien and the literature on the Iraq War. Mariani's engagement with such matters goes a long way, and it can be traced back to his PhD years at Rutgers University in the 1980s that culminated in his first monograph, *Spectacular Narratives: Representations of Class and War in Stephen Crane and the American 1890s* (1992). His long-standing preoccupation with Indigenous authors and culture is instead the object of his two other monographs released at the turn of the 2000s, *Post-Tribal Epics: The Native American Novel between Tradition and Modernity* (1996) and *La penna e il tamburo. Gli indiani d'America e la letteratura degli Stati Uniti* (2003). He is also the editor of several volumes of collected essays and journals, and the author of articles, translations, and reviews published in international academic venues. Most recently, he edited the ambitious volume *Il romanzo americano. Storia, forme, canoni* (2025), a comprehensive Italian-language survey of the "history, forms, and canons" of Anglo-American literature from its roots to modernity. His latest book, *"One Step Beyond the Hero": Disrupting War and Violence in American Literature and Culture Collected Essays* (2025), gathers a selection of his most significant essays from the past twenty years. Many of these contributions were originally published in journals or volumes that are not easily accessible today; bringing them together in a single collection makes them readily available to students and scholars, who

can now benefit from a body of work that has helped shape critical debates on war, violence, and peacefighting in American literature—and of course in Melville studies.

In fact, although Mariani's career has explored varied avenues of research, one of its most consistent focal points has been Herman Melville. Since the 1980s, Mariani has been an active presence in Melville studies, contributing to the consolidation and further development of the Italian tradition of scholarship in the field while mentoring new generations of Americanists. Among his numerous publications on Melville, his Italian-language monographs deserve special attention. In 1993, he published *Allegorie impossibili. Storia e strategie della critica melvilliana*, a critical mapping of decades of Melville scholarship from the so-called Melville Revival to the turn of the 1990s. His later monographs—*Leggere Melville* (2013) and *Melville: guida a Moby-Dick* (2022)—are conceived as critical handbooks aimed especially at students and non-specialist readers. The former provides an overview of Melville's life and works, outlining the evolution of his poetics and major themes; the latter zeroes in on *Moby-Dick*, examining its composition, structure, characters, and reception. In addition to these volumes, Mariani has published numerous essays on the subject, addressing topics such as Melville's war poetry, the afterlives and adaptations of his works, and, notably, a Girardian interpretation of *Moby-Dick* centered on Father Mapple's sermon.

Beyond his scholarly work, Mariani has long been a source of inspiration for students and colleagues alike. His teaching has never been confined to the classroom, nor have his intellectual commitments been limited to the page. From early in his career, he has spoken out against systemic inequalities within and beyond the university, treating academic life as inseparable from the broader social and political realities. Throughout his decades-long career, Mariani has consistently embodied the paradigm of the engaged scholar who resists the comforts of the ivory tower but rubs shoulders with protesters in the streets. His example has shown students that critical thinking carries ethical and civic implications, and that intellectual work does not end with publication. For some, that example has proved decisive, as several contributors to this volume first encountered him in the classroom before pursuing academic careers of their own. This *Festschrift* is, in part, a sign of their gratitude—for his guidance, his intellectual rigor, and his generosity as a mentor. It also includes essays by colleagues and

long-time friends, who have been inspired by his work, advice, and from sustained exchanges over the years. As editors of this volume, we sincerely hope that this collection reflects the breadth of his influence and conveys, with clarity and measure, our gratitude and esteem for Giorgio Mariani.

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1. Unscrew it! Reading “The Doubloon” as a Post-Truth Narrative

Paolo Simonetti

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In April 2015, while working on the first of what would later become four non-consecutive research grants, I was invited by Professor Giorgio Mariani to lecture at Sapienza as part of his renowned BA course on Moby-Dick. The classroom was always packed—not only with undergraduates but also MA and PhD students—some of whom have also contributed to this collection. Twice a week, they eagerly gathered to hear their favorite professor tackle the massive white whale, “take him by his jaw ... and finish him up in some fashion or other” (Correspondence 192), as Melville famously wrote in a letter to Hawthorne. I was already familiar with Giorgio’s classes—as an undergraduate, I had enthusiastically attended his courses on Typee and Moby-Dick, and narrowly missed his course on The Confidence-Man. Thus, on the day of the lecture, I approached the chair with a sense of reverential awe, feeling as though I were about to teach Elizabethan drama in front of William Shakespeare himself. To distill the essence of such a complex encyclopedic novel into an hour-long session, I chose to focus on Chapter 99, “The Doubloon.” I prepared a PowerPoint presentation that condensed the complex network of glances, perspectives, and thoughts described by the narrator into a series of diagrams. My aim was to help the audience experience the same epistemological struggle faced by the characters as they try to interpret the doubloon nailed to the mast—and by extension, the object of their chase. This effort, of course, mirrors the reader’s attempts to decipher both Moby Dicks: the whale and the book. As usual, Giorgio was extremely supportive, encouraging my initiative and complimenting me afterward, even though my approach was probably not all that original. On the occasion of Giorgio’s retirement, it seems fitting to revisit and update the lecture I gave that day, in the hope that it can resonate with today’s students in our post-truth, AI-saturated world. Working with Giorgio, even if only for a few years, has been both an honor and a great

pleasure. Our conversations and time spent in his office provided me with invaluable insights about Melville and how to look at the world.

In the foreword to the 1970 volume titled *Moby-Dick as Doubloon*—a historical collection of essays, reviews, and extracts delving into Herman Melville’s masterpiece—the editors explained how, by choosing such a title, they meant to convey “the tormenting fascination that *Moby-Dick* has exercised upon its readers and stress that the book, like the coin, has remained finally inviolable” (Parker and Hayford xix). The ungraspable nature of Melville’s work finds resonance in the enigmatic veil shrouding whole periods of his life, a theme explicitly acknowledged by the title of John Bryant’s 2021 biography: *Herman Melville: A Half Known Life*. The doubloon Ahab nails to the mast not only serves as “the ship’s navel,” as cabin-boy Pip puts it, but also represents the core of Melville’s artistic vision. In Bryant’s words, by comparing Ahab’s doubloon to “a magician’s glass, [that] to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self” (*MD* 382), Melville “paves the way for this evolving romantic, modernist, and postmodern trope” (Bryant, *Half Known Life* 1142), so that even today everyone is “on fire to unscrew it” (*MD* 385). In fact, only one side of the coin is visible in the novel, and even that remains mostly opaque and sibylline.

Beyond its literal value as a gold coin, the doubloon is a powerful symbol of the three “*Moby Dicks*” that engage the reader—the white whale sought by Ahab, the chapter bearing that title that tells Ahab’s story, and the whole novel, Ishmael’s “mighty book”—yet in each case its true significance eludes full comprehension. The doubloon operates as a surrogate for the novel itself, embodying the crew’s desires by propelling them into action, while at the same time revealing their inmost thoughts and attitudes. Its value transcends the material, intertwining the symbolic with the literal and serving as a poignant metafictional reminder that interpretation is inherently partial and subjective, often concealing underlying agendas and intentions. Charles Olson laid the foundation for subsequent studies by claiming that “the chapter on the doubloon dramatizes the attempt on the part of the chief active characters to reach truth” (56), an attempt that is eventually frustrated by the elusive nature of the object they chase—be it the doubloon, the whale it represents, the novel we are reading, or truth itself.

My aim is to read Chapter 99 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Doubloon,” not only as an ekphrastic *mise en abyme* of the whole novel but also as a

post-truth narrative that is representative of Melville's philosophical and linguistic preoccupations with interpretation. Such an analysis is even more relevant today as it can provide a valid response to AI's supposedly objective narratives and reaffirm the importance of critical reading and a direct engagement with literary texts. The term "post-truth" came to prominence in 2016 to underscore the notion that nowadays, especially after the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States, feelings and opinions wield greater influence in shaping public perception than facts established through logic or science. Within Melville's much-analyzed chapter, eight characters attempt to "interpret" the doubloon in accordance with their respective social standings, and each interpretation is utterly different, suggesting that meaning is not inherent in a text but emerges from the projections, feelings, attitudes, and prejudices of individual readers. Each of these interpretations plays a role in the progression of the narrative, as the doubloon responds to every request as an AI-generated text might respond to various prompts, reinforcing the convictions and fueling the obsessions of each character, thereby shaping the course of the hunt.

A true metaphysical quester, Ishmael keeps reflecting on what he sees and the events he experiences, just as he tries to understand (and then represent) the actions and thoughts of those around him, struggling to assign meaning to everything. Ahab's monomaniacal, tragic pursuit is usually interpreted as opposed to Ishmael's fluid and open-ended epistemological journey, serving as a background for Ishmael's story and enriching the novel's crucial exploration of the narrative strategies useful for producing knowledge and understanding. Over the course of the narration, Ishmael struggles to keep his spiritual and intellectual balance, although his experiences constantly challenge such stability: in Chapter 41, he falls prey to a "wild, mystical, sympathetic feeling" towards the captain's quest that encourages him to enthusiastically declare: "Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (*MD* 172). Then, in Chapter 49, an incident that occurs during the chase generates in him a "free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy" which drives him to take "this whole universe for a vast practical joke" (*MD* 209). Another sudden reversal happens in Chapter 58, when Ishmael experiences the calm and peace of "this green, gentle, and most docile earth," being led to cherish in his soul "one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life" (*MD* 248); in Chapter 94, when he squeezes sperm oil with his

sailor companions, he falls prey to “a strange sort of insanity” that begets “an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling” for humankind (*MD* 368-69). And so on.

As Giorgio Mariani points out, “Ishmael’s narration is characterized by a wide variety of voices and stylistic registers, and by the use of multiple literary forms,” ranging “from the sustained, pressing tones of the early pages to the meditative prose of the moral and philosophical passages; from Romantic-style lyricism ... to the realism of the hunting scenes” (91). However, Mariani is also keen to observe that Ishmael’s voice “rarely enters into dialogue with others (the dialogues are mostly internal to his mind), proceeds in a monocratic key,” and often “cannibalizes styles and forms” (98). This makes “The Doubloon” especially significant, as it marks one of those instances in the novel where the reader gains access to the inner thoughts of other characters. In fact, Ishmael makes here his first concerted attempt to move beyond his own voice. According to Bryce Conrad, “Ishmael’s most vital function as narrator may well consist of his efforts to prevent the cognitive drive which he arouses in his reader from turning both *Moby Dick* and *Moby-Dick* into ‘a hideous and intolerable allegory’” (101). In this sense, Chapter 99 may well be read as a short version of *Moby-Dick* written by the characters themselves.

In a much-quoted letter to Hawthorne, Melville mentioned “visable truth”—probably meaning “visible” but misspelling the term—as “the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him” (*Correspondence* 186). Indeed, the visible “truth” of the doubloon strikes the eyes of the observers, though in an oblique way, while its invisible truth remains forever beyond reach. Similarly, in Chapter 41, titled “Moby Dick,” the narrator states that “Ahab’s larger, darker, deeper part remains unhinted” (*MD* 177), and the captain himself is aware of his own paranoid reasoning: “[A]ll my means are sane, my motive and my object mad.” The narrator then adds that, “without power to kill, or change, or shun the fact,” Ahab knew that “to mankind he did long dissemble” and “so well did he succeed in that dissembling” (177) that he was considered sane and therefore offered the ship’s command.

Thus, Ahab is stuck in his monomaniacal idea of Moby Dick as representing “all evil ... visibly personified, and made practically assailable,” as he piles upon the white whale “the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down” (*MD* 176). In

Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," one of the turning points in the novel, Ahab offers a doubloon, a gold ounce, to the man who first spots the white whale. He dramatically holds up the coin to the declining sun and then nails it to the mast. It is the axis upon which the whole book rotates, and Melville employs a dramatic technique, complete with stage directions, direct dialogue, and monologues, including the narrator's interventions. Here the reader sees Ahab for the first time as a charismatic leader, a demagogue, and a performer, like any successful politician at a public meeting. That this is a key scene in the novel is confirmed by the fact that all cinematic, theatrical, and graphic adaptations have reproduced it quite faithfully, emphasizing its high degree of intensity and drama.¹

In turning the quarter-deck into a stage, Melville also foregrounds the novel's central concern with the production and interpretation of symbols. A number of modern and contemporary representations of *Moby Dick*—on book covers, film posters, and graphic adaptations—struggle to visually convey the idea of an oversized shadow lurching in the depths of the sea: not just a huge sea monster, but also some big, ineffable meaning, "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (*MD* 22), to quote Ishmael's famous expression, so that the quest for the white whale becomes "the search for something spiritual, essential, ideal 'beyond' our physical realm" (Bryant, "To Fight Some Other World" ix), as John Bryant states in the preface to a collection of essays that takes its title from that very sentence. In "The Doubloon," Melville shows how reality can be read as a symbol and thus interpreted in different ways by different persons. Of course, this is a major theme of the novel, as well as the point of literature itself.

The novel is also a sustained reflection on perception, sight being the primary means of assigning meaning to the world. In the novel's opening chapter, Ishmael captures such intersections of glances when he rhetorically asks the reader: "What do you see?" as he begins to describe—"But look!"—his own circumambulations through Manhattan on "a dreamy Sabbath afternoon," inviting the reader to "look at the

¹ For instance, in his series of free-standing artworks inspired by *Moby-Dick*, Italian artist Franco Fortunato highlights the importance of the doubloon by exaggerating its size and color. In two artworks titled "I preparativi del Pequod" ("*Pequod's* preparations"), the doubloon is depicted as much larger than a man, and so heavy that it has to be lifted onto the ship. In "Like a Savage Mother Hen," the massive gold coin, resembling a fallen planet, is transported to the *Pequod* aboard a whaleboat.

crowds of water-gazers ...; some looking over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep" (*MD* 21). In Chapter 36, just before Ahab makes his appearance on the deck, Ishmael similarly asks the reader to notice the marks of the captain's ivory leg on the deck: "Do you fixedly gaze, too, upon that ribbed and dented brow; there also, you would see still stranger foot-prints" (*MD* 156). A few lines later, launching into his inflammatory speech, Ahab asks the crew:

"Look ye! d'ye see this Spanish ounce of gold?" – holding up a broad bright coin to the sun – "it is a sixteen dollar piece, men, – a doubloon. D'ye see it?" ... "It's a white whale, I say," resumed Ahab, as he threw down the top-maul; "a white whale. Skin your eyes for him, men; look sharp for white water; if ye see but a bubble, sing out." (*MD* 157)

Through Ahab's words, the coin *becomes* the whale before the sailors' eyes—the captain's rhetorical ability manages to physically transform the doubloon into the prize for the man who first sights Moby Dick, thus investing it with a talismanic significance and power. Truly enough, "Ahab tries to integrate Moby Dick into the most familiar and apparently manageable form of social exchange and shared meanings, the money systems" (Simpson 51), but of course, Melville is also describing a rhetorical strategy based on sight as well as his own theory of truth. If "all visible objects ... are but as pasteboard masks," as Ahab famously states, whoever depicts the mask in the most persuasive way owns the truth behind the "inscrutable thing" (*MD* 159). The whale equates to the coin because Ahab says so, and this immediately becomes the truth. In this sense, the doubloon will go to the best eyes, meaning of course Ahab's own, those that can read it best.

When Starbuck tries to correct Ahab's interpretation by bringing up the hard fact that Moby Dick "will not fetch much in our Nantucket market" (159), the captain replies by privileging his own feelings, emotions, and instincts over the cyphers, claiming that his vengeance "will fetch a great premium here!" –in his soul—and and inviting his first mate to "take off [his] eye," because "truth hath no confines" (159) except those of his own will. This is exactly how post-truth works. In anticipation of the scene depicted in Chapter 99, Ahab invites his first mate to look at the various members of the crew and recognize that the captain's interpretation is correct, as they all agree with him: "But look ye, Starbuck Look! See yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted tawn ...

See Stubb! ... See yonder Chilian!" (159). Whoever can depict an object in a vivid, alluring way, convincing others to see it the way he wants them to see it, also controls its symbolic meaning.

In this and subsequent chapters, the doubloon functions as a prop, an object used in a performance that stands for something else; thus, it must be physically present on stage, even if other less necessary items can be only imagined by the audience. The doubloon is a substitute for the white whale, a concrete, literal explanation of it for the sailors' use. Otherwise, why should the crew chase Moby Dick? The white whale is dangerous; he may be supernatural, perhaps ubiquitous, and it is even possible that he does not exist. Even if he does, everybody believes he is malicious, evil, enchanted; and most importantly, he is no more valuable than other whales. Why chase and catch him, then? What is the white whale worth? The doubloon is a valuable object, a prize the sailors can look at and strive for, as nobody in his right mind would chase a particular whale or cherish such a peculiar idea only because of Ahab's philosophical, metaphysical descriptions. The crew may well be aroused by the captain's speech, but what is going to happen two hours from then, when the speech is forgotten and the wine digested? The doubloon is there to remind them. It is the sailors' own simplified version of Moby Dick.

Ahab's theatricals, as well as his "little lower layer" speech, reflect rhetorical strategies associated with post-truth demagoguery, where the speaker is more concerned with the response of the audience than with the accuracy of each statement. Ahab creates a scenario where "language has no reference to facts, truths, or realities, [and] it becomes a purely strategic medium," so that "people (especially politicians) say whatever might work in a given situation, whatever might generate the desired result, without any regard to the truth value or facticity of statements" (McComiskey 6). Ahab's speech is full of pathos, another important factor in post-truth rhetoric, because when speakers manage to "control the emotional foundations of their audiences' beliefs, then they can feed their audiences any line of bullshit or fake news whatsoever, and these audiences will accept it without question" (McComiskey 27). Such inflammatory speech generates what contemporary scholars define as "the Trump effect," encouraging anger and fear, as well as violence, in the audience for the speaker's benefit.

As Bruce McComiskey states, "audiences that are susceptible to ethos and pathos do not consider the consequences of shallow beliefs

and knee-jerk responses because they accept the opinions of those who reinforce their own ideas, and they allow their passions to bypass any appeal to reasoned opinion" (37). Starbuck tries to reason with Ahab, but retreats when faced with having to use violence. The "fool" tambourine Pip is the only one who manages (because he is allowed) to tell the truth to Ahab's face, and he admonishes all by asking: "But, unscrew your navel, and what's the consequence?" (*MD* 385). The answer comes from a well-known folktale—a story that, as it happens, is also recounted by the narrator of Thomas Pynchon's first novel, *V.* (1963), a book arguably indebted to Melville's oeuvre. In the tale, a boy desperately tries to get rid of the golden screw he has in his navel; one day, "with the screwdriver he removes the screw from his stomach;" but then, "delirious with joy, he leaps out of bed, and his ass falls off" (Pynchon 40).² Melville's doubloon is the novel's *omphalos*, the center of the story, the plug that prevents all its meanings from proliferating uncontrollably. Any attempt to unscrew it—to look at it in its entirety and fully unravel its significance—would inevitably sink the ship and screw the narrative up.

For this and many other reasons, Chapter 99 marks a pivotal moment in the storyline. From the outset, Ishmael sets the tone by describing Ahab pacing between the binnacle and the mainmast, "strangely eyeing the particular object before him" (*MD* 381). Once again, the narration centers on sight, beginning with numerous references to vectors and sharp objects that pierce their targets. Ahab's gaze "fastened on the pointed needle in the compass, that glance shot like a javelin with the pointed intensity of his purpose ... as the same riveted glance fastened upon the riveted gold coin there," reflecting his characteristic "nailed firmness" (381). However, although his gaze may be fixed, his pendulum-like movement leads nowhere.

The whole chapter is organized as an intricate web of sights, perspectives, and viewpoints. Ahab goes on prowling the deck, until "one morning," he pauses before the doubloon, "as though for the first time beginning to interpret for himself in some monomaniac way whatever significance might lurk" (381) in its figures and inscriptions. At this point, the reader is still unaware of what is depicted on either side of the coin and must rely on Ahab's paranoid overinterpretation. In the

² At some point during the writing, Pynchon half-jokingly proposed to his editor to title his novel "And His Ass Falls Off."

following paragraph, as if to counter Ahab's forced reading, Ishmael provides what seems to be an objective, literal description of the doubloon. He depicts its material, "of purest virgin gold," still retaining "its Quito glow," so that "every sunrise found the doubloon where the sunset left it last" (381). This first description is presented as if it came from the sun's point of view—the very sun that in Chapter 36 Ahab had claimed he would strike if it insulted him. In the following interpretations, the doubloon is linked to the sun, which here performs the function of an omniscient, neutral narrator observing from above. In other words, from the beginning the sun/doubloon reflects only itself and its tautological meaning.

After that, a more subjective account is given, also provided by Ishmael but reflecting the crew's collective perspective. He explains that "the mariners revered [the doubloon] as the white whale's talisman" (381). This is the "official" interpretation of the coin given by Ahab. Yet, it is immediately followed by a more metaphorical description of doubloons in general, referred to as "medals of the sun and tropic token-pieces"—exotic, luxurious symbols of past glories, "so Spanishly poetic" (*MD* 382).³ Thus, the narration gradually shifts from objective description to a coercive interpretation, and finally to a poetic meaning that enhances beauty rather than absolute truth. One could even argue that the whole chapter follows a cinematic rhythm, as if a camera were moving around the deck and then little by little focusing on the doubloon, getting closer and closer until we see the surface of the real coin—or what we are led to believe is the real coin.

The literary technique of describing a visual work of art through words is called ekphrasis, a rhetorical device that offers a detailed portrayal of an artifact, giving it artistic significance beyond the original work. While ekphrasis was common in classical Greek and Latin literature, it was later employed by Romantic poets like John Keats, who famously depicted an imaginary artistic object in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Daniel Garrison compared Melville's description of the doubloon in *Moby-Dick* to the depiction of Achilles' shield in the eighteenth book of Homer's *Iliad*. However, the key difference lies in how Melville's various characters interpret the same object, each seeing different meanings. Unlike the crafted work of art in Homer, moreover,

³ For an analysis on Melville's idea of Latin America as a locus of uncertainty see Lazo, "So Spanishly Poetic."

the doubloon is simply a piece of metal used as currency, one that elicits diverse responses based on its artistic, economic, political, or philosophical meanings.

This is how Ishmael describes the coin:

On its round border it bore the letters, REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO. ... Zoned by those letters *you saw* the likeness of three Andes' summits; from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock; while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics, and the keystone sun entering the equinoctial point at Libra. (382, my emphasis)

The coin described by Ishmael is an eight-escudo gold piece minted in Ecuador from 1838 through 1843. Although it is often confused with a Spanish doubloon, this coin was not struck by the Spanish crown nor endorsed by the Spanish government. It is possible that Melville came across one of these doubloons, either by seeing one or owning one. Such South American coins commonly circulated in the United States in 1851, when *Moby-Dick* was published. Today, in the numismatic world of collectors, this doubloon is called a *Moby-Dick* coin; it is pretty rare, and its market value ranges from \$500 to more than \$25,000, depending on the date (the most common is 1841) and its condition.

Yet the real coin differs slightly from Ishmael's description. This is the official decree of 1836 that specifies the details of the eight-escudo coin, issued in 1838:

To the right will be the two principal mountains that make up the Pichincha mountain chain; on the first point the Guagua Pichincha on which will rest a condor [not a cock as in *Moby-Dick*] and on the second the Ruco Pichincha volcano [smoking, not flame-topped]. To the left of the shield will be engraved a cliff [not a mountain summit], on it a tower and on this will be placed another condor [not mentioned in Melville's text] that will face the one that is on the peak to the right. The inscription will be REPUBLIC OF ECUADOR – QUITO, placed perpendicularly below the sun. (Bryant and Springer 554)

Did Ishmael/Melville imperfectly remember the doubloon he had once seen? Or was he doing something similar to what his characters do in this chapter, adapting the text to their own moods, inclinations, cultures, beliefs, and attitudes? For the time being, let us set this question

aside and turn to a closer analysis of the interpretations offered by the various characters, saving the narrator's for last.

In Chapter 99, the coin becomes a reflection of each character's inner self. Various crew members gaze at the doubloon, each interpreting its meaning and assessing its worth in their own way. This moment is also crucial for the plot's development, as many of the crew begin to question the true nature of their quest, asking themselves: what is the white whale worth? On a literal level, Moby Dick's value could be measured by the market price of the sperm oil, baleen, and other saleable products it yields, as Starbuck reminds Ahab in Chapter 36. After the captain's inflammatory speech, sighting Moby Dick is worth sixteen dollars to the crew—the value of the doubloon. Just as Ahab projects all his hatred and obsession onto the white whale, the sailors similarly channel their desires and values into the small circumference of the doubloon. In this sense, the sun—that is, the coin—*did* insult Ahab with its monetary value. Enraged, he strikes it with the hammer as he nails it to the mast. However, Ahab is careful not to show the crew the other side of the doubloon, which, as we now know, bears the image of Liberty and the inscription: "EL PODER EN LA CONSTITUCION." Moreover, the headband of Liberty is inscribed with the word "LIBERTAD." What might have happened if the crew had been reminded of freedom and the power of the Constitution? They could have come to regard Ahab as a tyrant, an illegitimate ruler, and perhaps even to consider overthrowing him. Mutiny, like that of the black slaves aboard the *St. Dominick* in "Benito Cereno," might well have crossed their minds.

Here is a basic outline of the interplay of glances between the characters, intended to capture the sense of their shifting perspectives. For example, the narrator clarifies that the first one who looks at the doubloon, Ahab, is "not unobserved by others" (*MD* 382). In fact, we know that he is looked at by Starbuck, Stubb, and Pip, although, of course, he is also observed by the narrator. Moreover, keeping up with the cinematographic metaphor, Ahab is also observed by readers. After Ishmael's (or Ahab's?) tautological statement about how "significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth" (*MD* 381), eight characters attempt to read the doubloon and discover "some certain significance" in it. By contrast, at the end of the chapter, even the few initial certainties will gradually disappear as the doubloon becomes more and more opaque and elusive.

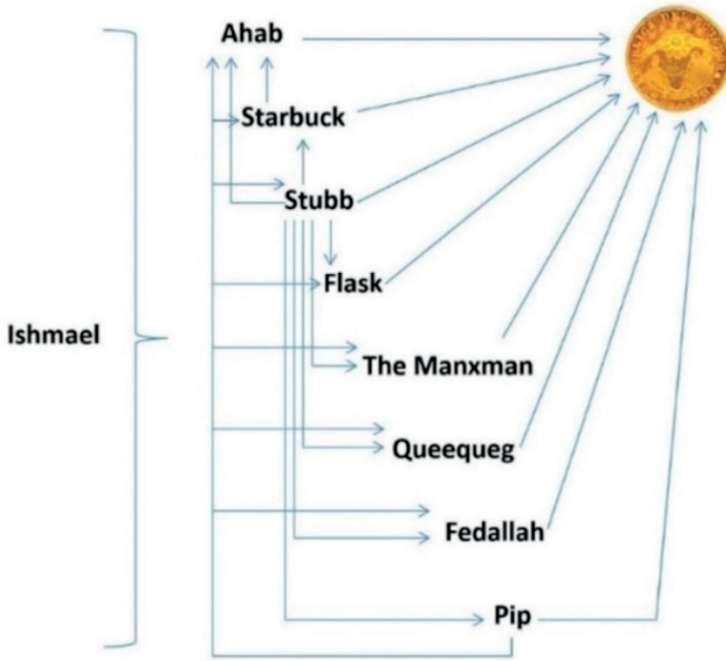


Fig. 1.

Ahab is certain of the doubloon's ultimate meaning and the meta-physical significance of his quest. But do we now, as he gazes at its "strange figures and inscriptions" (*MD* 382), catch a fleeting doubt in him? After all, he has never paid much attention to the sailors, his mates, or even other whales. His focus has always been Moby Dick. As already said, Ahab crafted the doubloon into something symbolic, using it as a readily understandable stand-in for the white whale. He infused it with his personal meaning and directed the sailors to view it through the lens of his own vision. Thus, for Ahab, the coin reflects only one thing, himself:

The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician's glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self. (382)

The meaning is not in the coin itself but in the mind of the beholder. Ahab's reading is paranoid, as it forces the object to carry a prede-

terminated significance, even if this means distorting what the senses perceive. His thrice-repeated "So be it, then" (382) recalls the formula through which the God of the Old Testament created the world. In a similar way, Ahab creates the truth. His hermeneutic flaw resembles that of Christopher Columbus (and every explorer/colonizer), whose reading of the land he reached, as reconstructed by Tzvetan Todorov, was shaped by his preconceived beliefs. Neither Ahab nor Columbus tries to understand what they see; instead, they look for confirmation of a truth they already think they know. Like any charismatic politician in our post-truth age, Ahab channels interpretation in a coercive way, influencing the audience's perception. However, his is a one-sided vision, much like the coin itself, which has lost its other side. Like the "old darkey's wedding ring" (*MD* 385) mentioned by Pip at the chapter's end, the doubloon is destined to remain lodged in the mast as the ship sinks, its reverse side forever hidden.

The other crew members, each in turn, find in the coin a part of themselves. Through Ishmael, seven different readings of the doubloon are given, although the reader may also benefit from the narrator's and the sun's supposedly objective and "cinematic" perspective. Starbuck sees Ahab looking at the doubloon, and then, when the captain leaves the deck, goes there and looks at it too. As a Quaker, the first mate interprets the three "heaven-abiding peaks" as the Holy Trinity, with the sun as the God of the New Testament that "girds us round," and "the dark valley" (*MD* 382) below them as man's earthly path in life. Like the *Pequod's* crew, humankind is doomed to proceed through the "vale of Death" with their only solace coming from God above. In his gloomy mood, however, Starbuck is aware that "the great sun is no fixture," as at night it disappears, leaving humankind in the shadows. He quickly retreats from the coin, as it "speaks wisely, mildly, truly, but still sadly" (382): in the doubloon he sees a premonition of the journey's end but shuns it because he is afraid of the possible truth it foreshadows.

In turn, like characters progressively entering the stage, second mate Stubb observes Ahab and Starbuck looking at the coin and, once the latter is gone, moves to ponder it too. However, he needs a second text, an almanac, to gloss and interpret what he takes as zodiacal signs and "wonders" inscribed on the doubloon. Soon, however, he rejects the other text's authority: "Book! You lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You'll do to give us the bare words and facts,

but we come in to supply the thoughts" (*MD* 383). If Ahab had interpreted everything according to his monomania, and Starbuck had relied on the book *par excellence*—the Bible—Stubb rejects an intertextual interpretation and trusts only his own instincts. Thus, he sees the coin as an allegory of the secular life of man, from birth to grave, from temporary wealth to final misery: "There's a sermon now, writ in high heaven, and the sun goes through it every year, and yet comes out of it all alive and hearty" (383). In observing the cycle of the sun—another circular movement without a fixed destination—, Stubb comes to an earthly interpretation that is the opposite of Starbuck's religious one, although both roads lead inevitably to doom and death. Stubb's distrust of any written authority recalls post-truth rhetorical strategies, that "emerge from, and take advantage of, the circular relationship between the endless reflexivity of late modernity and a loss of faith in institutions that anchor truth claims" (Gibson 3170).

After acting out his monologue, Stubb withdraws to observe Flask, who in turn goes on to read the doubloon, but the practical third mate interprets the coin literally, considering only its practical value: "I see nothing here, but a round thing made of gold ... So, what's all this staring been about?" (*MD* 384). He matter-of-factly calculates how many cigars he could buy with the doubloon, although he miscalculates the final number. Indeed, the chapter is also a meditation on money and its power to motivate, inspire, and corrupt people. When Stubb reflects on Flask's interpretation—we must assume, therefore, that he listened to his monologue—he asks himself whether it is "wise or foolish": "If it be really wise it has a foolish look to it; yet, if it be really foolish, then has it a sort of wiseish look to it" (384). This is Melville's *idée fixe*: truth can look silly, but lies can be dangerously invested with an aura of certainty and verisimilitude by expert demagogues and clever orators. Stubb looks confused by what he sees, and Melville himself challenges his readers' certainties: at the chapter's beginning, we were sure of the appearance and the meaning of the doubloon; now, everything has become complex, ambiguous, elusive, if not utterly incomprehensible.

Stubb steps aside to eye an old sailor, the Manxman, who takes center stage and looks at the doubloon. Unlike Stubb—who cannot trust books—the old mariner, reputed to be a soothsayer, interprets the coin's inscriptions as a dark prophecy of doom, grounding his interpretation in ancient prophetic lore: "I've studied signs, and know their marks; they were taught me two score years ago" (384). After him, it is the turn

of Queequeg, who compares the text of the coin to his own tattoos, as if the interpretation were written on his own body. In this case, Ishmael does not provide us with the South Sea islander's interpretation, but only with Stubb's second-hand interpretation of it. According to the second mate, Queequeg "don't know what to make of the doubloon; he takes it for an old button off some king's trowsers" (384). Then he sees Fedallah, the Parsee who is Ahab's personal harpooner, looking at the doubloon, but he "only makes a sign to the sign and bows himself" (384). Stubb interprets the gesture as proof that Fedallah worships the sun, and thus the doubloon on which it is inscribed. Here, as in *Typee* and "Benito Cereno," Melville refuses to appropriate voices, opinions, and interpretations belonging to people of cultures and religions other than those with which he is more familiar. In doing so, he points out the inherent racism of Western societies, where "savages" like Queequeg and Fedallah have no right to speak. Stubb's is another arbitrary, racist interpretation of an already arbitrary interpretation. How can we be sure that Ishmael's interpretation of the whole scene is not equally arbitrary?

Finally, Stubb sees Pip looking at the doubloon, and also at "all of these interpreters—myself included" (384). His is the final interpretation—"I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look" (384)—a declaration of the relativity of any reading and the inherent subjectivity of any significance. For the sake of speculation, one could attach to each interpretation a specific critical approach. In this way, Ahab adopts a coercive paranoid reading, but by insisting on the exclusiveness of his own perspective and by arbitrarily superimposing a meaning, he ends up as a mystifier and a demagogue; Starbuck's reading could relate to biblical exegesis; Stubb's interpretation may be that of an antiquarian; Flask's attitude could reflect the Marxist approach, while the Manxman could be seen as a sort of ante litteram new historicist critic; Queequeg's and Fedallah's readings may be considered postcolonial, as Stubb is dismissive of them. Finally, Pip's reading can be said to reflect Derrida's deconstruction and the relativism of post-modernism. Alternatively, one could interpret the characters' efforts as oppositional pairs: Ahab's solipsistic vision against Stubb's jollity, Starbuck's faith against Flask's materialism, and Queequeg's curiosity against the Manxman's blind superstition. Or, again, we could consider "Ahab's heroic egotism, Starbuck's uneasy faith in a benevolent God, and Stubb's jolly pessimism," along with Flask's "mindless practicality" (Garrison 181). Ultimately, "the resultant composite vision is

Ishmael's, and it is as ambiguous and inconclusive as the mystery of the whale himself" (181).

In the end, although Ishmael's interpretation of *Moby Dick* shifts from time to time, his own interpretation of *Moby-Dick* may appear tautological: in the novel's epilogue, he describes himself as the one "whom the Fates ordained to take the place of Ahab's boatsman," a position that allowed him to eye-witness the sinking of the *Pequod* "floating on the margin of the ensuing scene, and *in full sight* of it" (MD 500, emphasis mine). The biblical epigraph chosen for the epilogue, "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee," reinforces his interpretation of the whole story as a demonstration of God's (or the Fates') will, which ensured that he survived to see and then narrate what happened. But is Ishmael's story really 'the truth'?

If we take "The Doubloon" as a small-scale representation of the whole novel, just like the coin is a small-scale representation of the whale, things remain ambivalent, even when we move from the fictional coin to the real one: a quick Google search of the "Moby-Dick doubloon" returns pictures of a number of different coins, in which details such as the face of the sun, the bird, and the smoke (or flame), differ slightly from one another. Which one is the real doubloon that Ishmael (and Melville) described? After the characters' interpretations, the coin is still a real coin, even though its "truth" has been dissolved by the subjective gaze of each character. At the end of the chapter, Ishmael's declaration that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are worth little, and the round world itself is but an empty cipher" acquires a more pregnant urgency, especially in our post-truth age, when everything that smells of fiction is often considered a lie, or worse, a waste of time. Is it even possible to tell a true story? How can we interpret a text—even the text of reality—in an objective, accurate way, without being victims of our own biases?

In recent years, amid massive investments by Silicon Valley tech giants and the pervasive hype surrounding the rise of large language models, one increasingly hears that artificial intelligence may provide an answer. AI is often presented as a revolutionary technological tool that can be a corrective to the alleged subjectivity of the humanities. A recent study on AI claims that

AI can be applied fruitfully to text interpretation as a heuristic device, but it can also be seen to attenuate (and even eliminate) the annoying "subjec-

tivity” that often plagues the humanities, allowing for a greater degree of objectivity in text analysis, since the computer has no interest in putting forth and promoting its own “views.” ... AI can be used to make hermeneutics much more efficient and less subjective but also how it unexpectedly reveals meaning patterns hidden in texts that often escape the attention of human interpreters alone. (Neuman, Danesi, and Vilenchik vi)

One wonders if subjectivity in interpretation is really an “annoying” thing that “plagues” the humanities. I believe this idea is the result of post-truth practices that have dangerously destabilized the position of truth. The authors of the study pose the following question: “Can AI perform a *creative* analysis of languaging processes present in texts?” (11) and they answer with a resounding yes. However, they allow that “AI is not aware of what it is doing—it *processes* not *experiences* meaning.” But, they reiterate, “that is an advantage for textual analysis since it eliminates the impulse of a human interpreter to shape the textual meaning to subjective preferences” (11). Thus, centuries of studies on hermeneutics, epistemology, intentionality, point of view, and the critical role of the interpreter go down the drain, annihilated by the naïve, Ahabian idea of an “objective,” final interpretation.

As Melville knew all too well, to critically interpret a text means being a discerning reader who questions what he/she reads; one who reflects on what the author wants us to believe, tries to understand why the author has taken a particular viewpoint or stance, and eventually decides whether the author’s views are worthy of agreement. As we know and as every expert keeps repeating, AI has no actual conception of the answers it delivers. It simply retrieves and recombines existing data that were fed into it in the past. AI does not understand irony or humor, and it has no intelligence at all. Human intelligence depends on consciousness. As Cal Newport explains in a *New Yorker* article:

Consciousness depends on a brain’s ability to maintain a constantly updated conception of itself as a distinct entity interacting with a model of the external world. The layers of neural networks that make up systems like ChatGPT, however, are static: once they’ve trained, they never change. ChatGPT maintains no persistent state, no model of its surroundings that it modifies with new information, no memory of past conversations. It just cranks out words one at a time, in response to whatever input it’s provided, applying the exact same rules for each mechanistic act of grammatical production—regardless of whether that word is part of a description of VCR repair or a joke in a sitcom script.

Like Ishmael, AI seems to change its mind from time to time. If one asks several times the same thing, one may get different answers. However, AI's reconsiderations are not based on experience or new sights. Basically, AI models "learn" by detecting patterns in huge quantities of texts, images, and videos scraped from the Internet, as well as by user feedback. They include, of course, racist, sexist, and illicit content, and there is no way to know what is harbored in proprietary data sets from OpenAI, Google, Meta, and other tech companies. Thus, AI's interpretation is biased just like any other interpretation, and its bias derives from the same human sensibility, emotions, and prejudices that are present in the texts fed to it.

Feelings are an inevitable part of the reading process. They can drive us to organize ideas into coherent stories, even invented stories, and in so doing we may come closer to grasping reality. Ultimately, as the mathematician Junaid Mubeen speculates, "we bring all the baggage of our experiences, prejudices, biases and emotions to bear on our decision-making processes, with the consequence that we do not always optimise for the facts" (94). However, this is how our brain works. This is exactly what makes us human, what gives us the ability to interpret the world we live in and, consequently, the texts that represent (and are) the world. Mubeen concludes that "when it is reduced to algorithms and computation alone, the net effect is a *proliferation* of our human flaws in thinking" (99). Human reasoning, what Mubeen calls "mathematical reasoning," is "a means of lifting ourselves, and subsequently the machines we create, *out* of bias and prejudice" (99). Thus, it seems that the exact opposite of what Neuman, Danesi, and Vilenchik concluded is true: our human reasoning, our subjectivity, is what should defend us against prejudice.

According to Mubeen, "computers can be tasked to solve a range of problems, but which problems are worth the effort? *Questioning* is as vital to our repertoire of thinking skills as problem-solving itself" (33). AI models never doubt or question their answers; when they change their minds, they do so not because they have examined their own answers and identified their faults. Moreover, as Mubeen writes:

Some concepts are too fuzzy to put into words (or symbols) that computers can process. We humans have trouble enough giving expression to some of our most important thoughts and feelings; *ambiguity* and *disagreement* is part and parcel of our shared experience. When computers

enter the fray, certain in their models of the world, written so bluntly in strings of 0s and 1s, we risk losing so much of *the grey area* that makes us who we are. (35)

Human cognitive systems are a complex of rational and irrational processes. We tend to perceive connections between unrelated things and find meanings in them. Storytelling is an evolutionary innovation that helps us link causes and speculate on future events.

While writing this essay, on the 8th of October 2024, I fed an AI model Pip's question: "Unscrew your navel, and what's the consequence?" (MD 385). The supposedly objective answer ChatGPT generated is: "If you unscrew your navel, perhaps you'd set free all the chaos and mystery that's been tightly wound inside you—your innermost thoughts, fears, and desires spilling out into the world. It could be seen as a symbolic release, like unlocking the core of your being. Instead of unraveling physically, you might unravel emotionally or mentally, revealing parts of yourself you didn't even know were hidden." Gemini AI came up with a different take: "The idea of unscrewing a navel is a humorous misconception based on its appearance. Navels are actually the remnants of the umbilical cord, which connected a baby to its mother during pregnancy. They don't have any screws or other mechanical parts." Both answers are, in different ways, true. But do they really answer the question at hand? There would be so much to say about these responses, whose interpretations of the question are worthy of Melville's characters, but for lack of space I will just stop here and say: "(Un)screw it!"

To conclude with Bryce Conrad's words, "the significance of the doubloon itself ... remains the openness of *possibility* by virtue of each interpreter supplying his own subjective and 'self-reflecting' context in order to effect his act of cognition" (93). Of course, as Carol Colatrella remarks, "The Doubloon" also provides "the most celebrated consideration of the idiosyncratic nature of reading," as "considering the way that characters interpret representations helps readers recognize the novel's criticism of rehabilitative education" (166), and of any coercive interpretation that claims to be final or objective, especially when it comes from supposedly objective AI sources. Reading *Moby-Dick* as doubloon thus remains more than necessary today, as all its interpretations serve to challenge our own worldview, deconstructing any oversimplification deriving from what our senses perceive. Even if from

Chapter 99 we may not agree with the crew on what the white whale is worth, we can be sure that it is definitely worth reading.

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2. (Post)Truth Comes in with Darkness: Herman Melville's "The Piazza" and the World We Live In

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"The Piazza" is the last bit of short fiction that Herman Melville ever published. Issued as a prefatory piece to his 1856 collection *The Piazza Tales*, the story caps off Melville's three-year run as a serialized writer, despite being the only one never to appear on the pages of a magazine. In early 1856, facing debts and physical ailments, Melville was in the middle of crafting *The Confidence-Man*. Pressed by publisher Joshua A. Dix, he took a break from the novel to add new material to the five *Putnam's* tales they would reprint that summer ("Bartleby," "Benito Cereno," "The Lightning-Rod Man," "The Encantadas," "The Bell-Tower"). The result is a sketch that distills many of the volume's themes—a veritable "piazza," the perfect entry point to Melville's house of fiction. Perhaps modeled on Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Old Manse" in that both use architectural structures as symbols to frame a short story collection (Breinig 268; Fisher 204), "The Piazza" is yet another instance of Melville deploying first-person narration to explore the limits of perspective. Along with *The Confidence-Man*, it is one of his final experiments with prose on the eve of devoting three decades to poetry: where the first is a deconstruction of the novel form in novel form, the second is the culmination of all the pathways that the short story genre, for all its constraints, allowed him to tread.¹

This chapter reads "The Piazza" as a narrative that anticipates what we now call post-truth via Melville's intuitive grasp of human psychology. My argument unfolds in two parts; Part I provides an overview

¹ The chronological overlap between the two works may be inferred by "The Piazza"'s epigraph, a quote from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* referencing Imogen's cross-dressed masculine alias, "Fidele" ("faithful")—the very name of the Mississippi steamboat at the center of *The Confidence-Man's* "masquerade."

of some of the critical trajectories that have since emerged, sorting out three interpretive categories that help us situate the 1856 story within the broader context of Melville's career. I argue that "The Piazza" is at once a parable of epistemology, a literary satire, and a self-reflexive metafiction where a Melville surrogate faces the limitations of Bovarism writ large. Part II turns to the core of the matter, showing how the story's narrator fits the mold of other Melvillian types (chiefly, *Moby-Dick's* Ahab) while also prefiguring our post-truth world in his systematic recourse to self-deception as a survival strategy. Building on C. L. R. James's 1953 reading of Ahab as an American dictator hijacking the ship of state, and through a close analysis of two passages of the story, I demonstrate how with *Moby-Dick* and "The Piazza" Melville understood cognitive bias as both universal human tendency and latent political threat, hauntingly ushering in the 'world we live in.'

I. A Parable, A Satire, A Metafiction

"The Piazza" is, among many things, a parable. At its center lies Melville's long-lasting preoccupation with the concept of truth vis-à-vis the fallibility of perception. Even before philosopher James Frederick Ferrier introduced the word "epistemology" into the English language in 1854, Melville had already been interrogating the reach of human knowledge in his works. In his writings, sight as a sense often plays a role when it comes to truth-seeking. In a 1851 letter, he presented Hawthorne with a definition that has since gained notoriety partly because of its once-controversial spelling: "By visible truth, we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him" (*Correspondence* 186; Hayford 702). It is no accident that Melville's corpus is rife with characters with 'scales' placed on their eyes, who see everything but comprehend nothing, while struggling to decipher what is right before them. Truth, in Melville, is quite often a matter of opacity—not the least because the visual field is inherently flawed and bound by confines.

References to the realm of vision abound across what Melville scholars define as the 'Cetological Center' of *Moby-Dick*, the cluster of chapters devoted to Ishmael's efforts to dissect reality while dissecting the whale. As the title of the first British edition of the novel—*The Whale*—suggests, Ishmael builds his philosophical system around the

animal as a symbol—a giant, movable, and dangerous object, always half-hidden underwater, that eludes observation and resists representation. Whaling becomes for him the perfect objective correlative of truth-seeking in that both are risky, challenging, and poorly paid businesses that are as vital as underappreciated. Much of the 'Cetological Center' makes manifest how sight is fallible through descriptions of whale eyes and artistic (mis)representations of cetaceans based on direct observation. In "The Fountain," Ishmael argues that amateurs willing to ascertain the chemical composition of the sperm whale's spout firsthand only court the danger of being blinded by it. The underlying, Oedipus-like moral ("truth blinds") also recurs in "The Battering-Ram" chapter, where the sailor-philosopher invokes Friedrich Schiller's "The Veiled Image at Sais," a poem about a youth whose attempt to lift the veil from Isis's statue and see the goddess costs him his sanity.

"The Piazza" pushes this same inquiry further. Five years after *Moby-Dick*, Melville (who around this time, it is worth noting, had experienced bouts of eye pain and photophobia)² reprises the metaphor of truth-as-blinding-light and strips it down to its essentials. The unnamed narrator, an alter-ego of sorts who lives in a house resembling Melville's, becomes fixated with an on-and-off glare appearing on the slopes of Mount Greylock. An avid reader of Spenser and Shakespeare, he finds himself daydreaming about this "spot of radiance" ("The Piazza" 295) from the observation point of his newly built, North-facing piazza: "Fairies there, thought I; some haunted ring where fairies dance" (295). Driven by a yearlong obsession with the gleam—and by the reveries he attaches to it—the narrator embarks on a horseback trek looking for answers. What awaits him on top of the mountain is a sobering discovery: the source of light is no *Midsummer Night's Dream* fairy ring, but a miserable, fly-infested cottage perched on the ridge above the woods. Inside, an orphan girl named Marianna spends her days sewing, treating—not unlike Plato's cavemen—"lifeless shadows ... as living friends" ("The Piazza" 301), giving pet names to rocks' silhouettes. Speaking with her, the narrator learns that she too habitually indulges in reverie while observing a distant glow, a beautiful "marble" house glimmering in the sunset, "that looks so happy" (300), and that is of course the narrator's "own abode" (299).

² See Parker 209.

Literally looking at himself from the outside, and realizing the extent of his delusions, the narrator cannot bring himself to break Marianna's. He heads back home, "stick[ing] to the piazza," clinging to his fantasies about the girl's "golden window," only to be reminded every night that "no light shows from the mountain" (303), as what had caught his eye was no "haunted ring where fairies dance," but sun rays shining on the panes of a shack. As in "Benito Cereno," another narrative where revelation and dusk arrive as one, even here "truth comes in with darkness" ("The Piazza" 303): for the narrator there is no going back; no pleasant fiction can conceal an ugly truth, and no amount of self-deception can erase what he now knows. The story concludes with a segue into the other *Piazza Tales*: "To and fro I walk the piazza deck, haunted by Marianna's face, and many as real a story" (303).

Indeed, the collection unfolds a haunting gallery of faces. As a character, Marianna leads a procession of hunger-striking scriveners, beheaded African revolutionaries, and abused indigenous women, all staring at the reader in silent intensity. Advertised as a pleasant summer read by the publishers and treated as such by its first reviewers (Parker 284), *The Piazza Tales* now hardly feels like escapist entertainment (nor should it have in 1856: just think of the racial reckonings of "Benito Cereno" heralding the carnage of the Civil War). The opening story is Melville at his subtlest: "The Piazza" is a narrative contrivance, a "sphinx riddle threatening readers at the gate" (Balaam 78), a bleak allegory stuffed into a vignette of country life. In reading it, one is struck immediately by its prose; readers are likely to be caught unawares by the narrator's manic enthusiasm, which amounts to calculated deception.

As it turns out, "The Piazza" is one of those parables that mystifies its audience by design. The same gamble that Melville had taken with *Pierre's* opening chapters—hiding a meditation on truth-seeking under saccharine pastoralism—had proved disastrous there but here pays off. William B. Dillingham makes the case that by the mid-1850s Melville had long mastered "the fine art of concealment," taking pride in camouflaging "his attacks on the world" under a "smooth, unripled surface" of "congenial, amusing, and harmless" narratives, disguising "his profundity in an illusion of vapidness" (4). It is not unusual for Melville to use language as a smokescreen, and "The Piazza" is a textbook example of him attempting a style deliberately overwrought to the point of parody to serve an end. In this case, as Barton Levi St.

Armand notes, the narrator's tone betrays "a thinly veiled hysteria," as the story is told in retrospect, building inexorably towards a "dark denouement" (77), his congeniality being but a mask hiding discomfort.

Melville thus casts the reader as the exegete of a parable. My choice of term is not accidental; when speaking of his drive to best his neighbor's piazza, the narrator references Dives and Lazarus, the rich man and the beggar from Luke 16—"I, Lazarus on Abraham's bosom, cast down the hill a pitying glance on poor old Dives" ("The Piazza" 293). As ironic as it may sound, this line suffuses the narrative with lingering Gospel undertones that affect interpretation. Reading "The Piazza" as a parable, however, only makes sense if we keep in mind that the narrator is not the parable-teller but part of the parable himself. Melville's sense of Jesus—as Brian Yothers argues in connection with Melville's markings in his copy of the Gospel of Matthew—is that of an ironist, "a storyteller who bewilders much of his audience precisely because he chooses to do so," providing a model for Melville's "often perverse strategies for bewildering and estranging his audience" (26).

His view of Christ's rhetoric positions him as a sort of nineteenth-century American Socrates, a "parrhesiastic writer" who conveys difficult truths through fiction, as per Paolo Simonetti's recent definition (96). In the words of Giorgio Mariani, for Melville "it is precisely in the realm of fiction that truth can be grasped, because only in an imaginary universe—one that shields and deflects truth's blinding and destructive potential—can one risk probing 'the very axis of reality'" (Melville 17). It all goes back to Melville's 1850 review of the very volume that possibly inspired *The Piazza Tales*, Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*. In the essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses"—the closest thing to a manifesto Melville ever wrote—the author paints the picture of a "world of lies" where "Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands," revealing herself "only by cunning glimpses" through the writings of Hawthorne, Shakespeare, and all "the other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth" (53). This is what Melville was trying to do with "The Piazza": he was tricking his public for its own good, using the narrator's flowery metaphors as a way to smuggle into the hands of summertime readers the hard but necessary message that all striving for knowledge is at best relative, if not utterly vain—and yet strive one must.

What is the point of baiting the audience like this? The answer begins with remembering that "The Piazza" is as much satire as parable.

As a satire, it works on several levels. One of its primary targets is a certain Romantic-derived tendency to idealize the American landscape that was prevalent at the time. Scholars like John Bryant (1991), Robert K. Wallace (1996), and Peter Balaam (2006) have remarked how the story reflects Melville's lifelong engagement with visual arts, particularly his ambivalent relationship with the picturesque. The piece begins with the narrator waxing poetic about the Berkshire countryside as a "paradise of painters" ("The Piazza" 291). Douglass M. Furrh (2018) builds on this to offer a political reading of the story that re-frames Melville's forays into the picturesque into a social critique of forced labor in the antebellum North, showing how behind the "paradise of painters" lies a Tartarus of pale-cheeked girls living in misery. As Furrh contends, "The Piazza" reminds us that scenic beauty is an illusion as much as class is real. At the end of the story, "[r]eality, ... no longer submerged under the narrator's fanciful constructions, takes hold of the narrator" (119), unraveling his idealized visions of New England's farmland to show the inequalities lurking beneath. This is exemplified by the Chinese creeper he has grown on the piazza, whose lushness hides "millions of strange, cankerous worms ... whose germs had doubtless lurked in the very bulb" ("The Piazza" 296). No beauty, the image suggests, is possible without unseen ugliness—as no Eden comes without its serpents.

As always with Melville, every metaphor carries weight. Throughout "The Piazza," one can trace a thread of political signifiers hidden through the lines. While the story explicitly invokes 1848 as a marker of revolutionary ferment, even the references to the Potosí mines in Bolivia or to the Barbary Coast the narrator makes are anything but innocent, hinting as they do to imperial legacies of slavery and exploitation (Furrh 113). What Melville may be suggesting here is that to romanticize the New World's landscape while being oblivious to its realities is to fool oneself, to buy into an "illusion" ("The Piazza" 303), as the narrator himself admits by the tale's end. The over-ornate style (and the discomfort it conceals) would signal that after his encounter with Marianna the narrator's perception of what surrounds him—namely, the society he lives in—is forever disrupted. Beauty, and the art that seeks to represent it, becomes impossible for him to enjoy: the American illusion can no longer hold.

But there is more to this story than class consciousness. Before being a satire on nineteenth-century art, "The Piazza" is a satire of litera-

ture itself—most notably, of a literary model that permeates Melville's work since its beginnings: the quest. From his juvenile "Fragments from a Writing Desk" channeling chivalric romance,³ to *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, centered respectively on the pursuit of a white maiden and a white whale, many Melvillian plots are structured around impossible quests. "The Piazza" is a miniature version of this pattern. As Marvin Fisher argues, the quest model is here so reduced in scope that the story almost borders on self-parody (206). Not unlike the mythical Fisher King, the ailing narrator too believes there is a "cure [for his] weariness" ("The Piazza" 296) waiting for him at the end of his journey. Yet instead of the Holy Grail he pins his hopes on a *donna angelicata*: "some glad mountain-girl; it will do me good . . . to look on her" (295). Fittingly, where the rainbow touches Mount Greylock he will find no "bag of gold" (295), but poverty. In a way, Marianna *does* save him, by reminding him of his class privileges and about how relative his "weariness" is in the face of genuine hardship: "[she] is good for him as shock therapy can be for a depressed person," as William B. Dillingham contends (325). "The Piazza" is subtler, and far more bitter a satire than the innocent jest of Melville's second "Fragment from a Writing Desk," where the woman chased by the protagonist is discovered to be deaf-mute, thus engendering a "grotesque anticlimax" (Simonetti 73) that reduces youthful romanticism to farce. In the 1856 story the anticlimax is somber and grave, with the Arthurian paradigm collapsing quietly under its own weight, revealing its inadequacy in capturing lived experience. "The Piazza" is thus not a jest but a biting—if implicit—critique of the quest model achieved through the very form it critiques.

The story is also a satire of literature at large, as it stages the Bovaesque drama of a bibliophile grappling with reality. Not by accident, in recounting his Greylock hike the narrator namechecks Don Quixote, "that sagest sage that ever lived" (296), so as to foreshadow his final resolution of "stick[ing] to the piazza"—that is, to indulge in conscious, bookish self-deception. (His delusion is so entrenched that even as he grasps what he takes to be Cervantes's lesson—'self-deception is that which keeps us going'—he subconsciously assumes that a literary character ever 'lived' at all!). And yet Marianna proves no Dulcinea—her plight is all too real to project fantasies onto. She also differs from those Melvillian female characters like Yillah from *Mardi*

³ On the subject, see Alice Balestrino's contribution to this volume.

and Ruth from *Clarel* who propel the narrative only to vanish when no longer needed. As Giuseppe Nori observes, she rather belongs to Melville's catalog of "miserable wives and lonely girls ... symbolically located in liminal spaces" like Hunilla, Mrs. Merrymusk, or Martha, all "worthy descendants" (52) of Agatha, the protagonist of a story of abandonment that Melville outlined to Hawthorne in 1852 but probably never committed to paper.

"The representation of these heroines," Nori argues, "is usually complementary to the concomitant portrayal of disinterested beholders and compassionate chroniclers, all male and first-person narrators, often travelers on a local or a larger scale" (52). These narrative personas are all alike in standing by helplessly in the presence of injustice. His compassion notwithstanding, "The Piazza"'s narrator "freezes his moral sentiment into inaction" (66) following the same blueprint that defines many Melvillian narratives of misery—most notably, "Bartleby"—: "[H]e ... abandons the girl and does nothing (can do nothing) for her" (66). Here and elsewhere in Melville, what triggers the tragedy is the moral deadlock of an observer recognizing that while taking action is necessary, it is also beyond one's possibilities; an irresolvable impasse, in this case centered on a stark depiction of gendered poverty.

That said, Marianna is as much a realistic character as she is a literary construct. As Dillingham maintains, she "functions in the story not only as a real girl ... but also as an allegorical figure whom the narrator finds after an allegorical journey... who represents the human plight" (326-27). Her name alone hints at the realm of literature; the scholarly consensus is that "Marianna" comes from Alfred Tennyson, namely the poems "Mariana" (1830) and "Mariana in the South" (1832-42), in turn derived from the eponymous Shakespeare character seen in *Measure for Measure*.⁴ The reference is clear: all three Marianas are forlorn, isolated women looking out their window for their lover. To this list, Michael Clark adds Tennyson's own "The Lady of Shalott" (1842), thus closing the loop of Arthurian/British influences saturating "The Piazza." To Clark's point, Tennyson's ballad also features needlework and

⁴ Given that the narrator sees his mountain trek in nautical terms—"I'll launch my yawl!" (296)—dresses with "relics of [his] tropic sea-goings" (299), and compares Marianna to "some Tahiti girl" (299), the name may also allude to the Pacific archipelago of the Marianas, with the Berkshire girl taken as the living embodiment of the narrator's past adventurous life, an idealized escape in female form from his quasi-depressive state.

revolves around the sense of sight. The Lady, like Melville's Marianna, "weaves by night and day" ("The Lady of Shalott," Pt. II, line 2), and is compelled by a mysterious curse not to look at the world directly but only through a mirror, a curse she violates by falling in love with Lancelot as the knight passes her tower on his way to Camelot. Clark makes the case that here Melville reprises Tennyson's allegory of the isolated artist looking at the world through the prism of their "imaginative faculty" (73), typified by the mirror. The Lady's and Marianna's sewing "can be taken as a symbol of literary creation,"⁵ while Melville's narrator accepts the role of passive spectator by "imagining his piazza to be a seat in a theater" (75).

In this reading, Marianna stands in for the author himself. As an artist-figure, she too incessantly creates in isolation, mirroring Melville's intense writing routine during the Arrowhead years as he churned book after book while his career was waning. A sort of working-class spin on the Lady of Shalott, Marianna's distress as a laboring woman parallels Melville's own; she is in many respects a more extreme version of 1856 Melville—a penniless artist on the edge of despair, with the gender reversal and the class downgrade making her a site of multifold forms of marginalization. This follows a recurrent pattern that emerges in various instances across Melville's corpus. As I argued elsewhere (Traina), Melville's self-reflexive representations of artistic creation all revolve around a projection of the author judging the work of another, often compassionately so. In novels like *Pierre*, we see Melville splitting himself into a host of doubles, foils, and alternative selves that facilitate his reflection on art as well as on the pitfalls of the publishing industry. Usually, the pattern sees two or more of such authorial projections engaging with one another—either as characters partaking in debates about artistry or as narrative voices detailing the deeds of other artist-figures. This pattern extends even to nonfiction pieces like "Hawthorne and His Mosses," as if whenever he has to discuss art Melville always feels the need to impersonate a character—unless we are to believe him a Virginia planter summering in Vermont, as "Mosses"'s subtitle would read.

⁵ Fittingly, Melville had already deployed needlework as a symbol for creation in its absolute sense in at least two famous passages of *Moby-Dick*: "He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom ..." (MD 367), "The weaver-god, he weaves" (396).

In light of this, I take partial issue with Clark's contention that "The Piazza"'s narrator is "unfit to be a spokesman for the author's aesthetic values" (74). While the text does not offer precise evidence of what the narrator's occupation is, we do know that he is a well-read man. The literary allusions, his description of the day he first laid his eyes on Marianna's window as a "mad poet's afternoon" ("The Piazza" 294), and the fact that the narrative spans an entire year, yet he never once mentions working, are all evidence that his livelihood likely involves intellectual labor of some kind. Since the narrator alludes to a seafaring past not unlike Melville's, it is tempting to connect the dots and to read "The Piazza" as much as autofiction as metafiction—that is, seeing the narrator as a Melville surrogate facing a speculative scenario. Both the narrator and Marianna thus become 'spokespersons' for Melville's aesthetics, the first embodying his early enthusiasm for literature—his younger self, fresh from his Pacific years and newly immersed in reading—and the second his mid-1850s 'weariest' self, plagued by debts and critical setbacks, writing for a living. To an extent, "The Piazza," like "The Lady of Shalott," is indeed the story of an artist looking in a mirror, or better yet of an artist *turning away* from a mirror—the narrator's pity for Marianna refracting Melville's pity for himself as a writer in decline.

II. Ahab in the Berkshires; or, "The Piazza" as a Post-Truth Narrative

We have seen how the first *Piazza Tale* lends itself to multiple readings, ranging from social commentary to metafiction. Yet at its core this is a story about self-deception, about a man who always chooses fiction over facts. This becomes especially clear in the final paragraphs, a narrative U-turn signaled by an abrupt dash and by an equally abrupt word:

—Enough. Launching my yawl no more for fairy-land, I stick to the piazza. It is my box-royal; and this amphitheatre, my theatre of San Carlo. Yes, the scenery is magical—the illusion so complete. And Madam Meadow Lark, my prima donna, plays her grand engagement here; and, drinking in her sunrise note, which, Memnon-like, seems struck from the golden window, how far from me the weary face behind it. (303)

The narrator is not the first Melvillian character to break off mid-sentence in obvious discomfort by saying "enough." *Moby-Dick*

readers will recall Ahab's speech in Chapter 36 and the way in which the *Pequod's* captain dresses his mad crusade in metaphysical garb:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. ... If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. *But 'tis enough.* (MD 159, my italics)

It is left to the reader to decide if Ahab proclaims aloud or mutters under his breath the word "enough," but his outburst unmistakably suggests unease. For a split-second the captain ponders that he is about to hijack an expensive whaleship to fulfil some Neoplatonic delusion about the nature of the universe in the name of "naught." He and "The Piazza"'s narrator are alike in that both cannot afford the luxury of doubting themselves and need Quixotic self-deception to function. Saying "enough" is their way of getting back on track, of stopping themselves before it is too late. A sperm whale chewed Ahab's leg, and he impaled himself on the groin with his prosthetic on the eve of departure. He needs a story to make sense of his impairment—possibly of his emasculation—and his story is 'I am humanity's champion, God is evil, I am going to look for his earthly avatar to kill it.' To kill Moby Dick, he believes, "will fetch a great premium" (MD 159) in his heart.

"The Piazza"'s narrator, who is also an ailing, distressed man, finds his solace in chasing fairyland fantasies in the Berkshire meadows, and his story is 'I am an ocean explorer looking for a fairy queen—once I find her, my malaise will cease.' While the narrator has to live past his own illusions, Ahab dies—and takes thirty-plus men to the grave with him—before having the chance to see if he was right or wrong. (One might ask what would have become of Ahab's "pasteboard masks" theory had he managed to actually kill Moby Dick and discovered him to be no god but an oddly colored whale).

Now, humans are narrative animals that feed on stories. Science argues how self-deceit might be an evolutionary trait, a strategy of survival that enables one to carry on through hardships. This was true during Melville's days and has become dramatically more so today. Melville's deep understanding of human nature, sharpened by his readings and by his Pacific years, led him to create fictions that now read as "narrative laboratories" (Simonetti 14) that prove use-

ful for navigating our time. Reading *Moby-Dick* in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic may change the way one approaches Ishmael's mistrust of scientific dogmas; in the age of vaccine denialism what once seemed a harmless, quasi-postmodern exercise in skepticism suddenly takes on all-too-concrete implications. A work like *The Confidence-Man* is no less prescient as it foreshadows our modern social-media-polluted public discourse with all the gaslighting, echo chambers, and blatant lies that come with it, as Paolo Simonetti argues (15). As for *Pierre's* titular "ambiguities," they center as well on the very mechanism at play in today's post-truth logic, "the reluctance to accept information that contradicts one's deeply rooted beliefs and demands a radical revision of one's identity" (179). The protagonist's drive to destroy his life in pursuit of the belief that Isabel is his half-sister is no different from the mindset of a conspiracy theorist willing to assault a pizza parlor with an AR-15 because he thinks it hides a pedophile ring (McComiskey 15): both prioritize emotions over facts while firmly believing that truth is on their side.

Ahab himself, as Simonetti remarks in his contribution to this volume, strikes the reader as a modern-day populist leader giving speeches to a mob. As a demagogue, he equally resonates with us as he did with 1920s-1940s Melville Revival critics living in the age of totalitarianism. While there was no shortage of Ahabs in Melville's century (Napoleon, Andrew Jackson, Simón Bolívar...), so far the *Moby-Dick* captain has been likened primarily to Hitler, Stalin, and their ilk—most famously by C. L. R. James in his *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (1953), written in an Ellis Island cell while the Trinidadian intellectual awaited expulsion from the US. Ahab, James argues, is the poisoned fruit of Western civilization: a madman armed with state-of-the-art technology, a dictator at the helm of a ship heading towards total ruin, whose course mirrors America's and humanity's. He exudes charisma, he rallies the crowd with booze and rituals, he lures the *Pequod* crew with the promise of gold. What makes James's Ahab a true original is that he is an *American* dictator, the byproduct of a democracy so self-satisfied with being a democracy that it inadvertently sleepwalks into tyranny. The ones who let it happen, says James, are the weak-willed Ishmaels and Starbucks who populate the world—men who either find in the despot an answer to their neuroses or who lack the moral strength to counter him.

As Giorgio Mariani notes, one of C. L. R. James's most brilliant intuitions is that *Moby-Dick* is not the tragedy of an individual, but of "an entire social and cultural order" ("C. L. R. James, *Moby-Dick e la Guerra Fredda*" 201). Melville's novel "not only offers us an X-ray of a specific stage of Western civilization, but traces its points of crisis, anticipating conflicts and contradictions that would emerge clearly only much later" (202). Still, I second Mariani when he contends that James's analysis is better read as provocation than as historical argument. To see Melville as the prophet who divined the rise of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism in 1851 makes no more sense than looking for fairy rings on a Massachusetts mountain. What proves genuinely 'prophetic' in James, Mariani argues, is his identification of "the genetic code of modern absolutism in a deadly mixture of science, technology, and persuasive capacity of mobilizing the masses ... [positioning] Ahab as one of many possible manifestations of an authoritarianism against which democracy must always remain vigilant" (208).

This is truer today than in 1851, 1953, and even 2003, when Mariani wrote these lines. While socialist-bloc-style *langue du bois*, propaganda, and engineered fake news predate social media by decades, and generations of cartoonists had fun in depicting one US president after another dressed as Ahab, James's vision of the *Pequod*'s deck (America as a ship hijacked by a madman) now feels more ominous than ever. If Starbuck stands in for those liberals who fail to stir the people against the tyrant because they despise the working class—as James maintains—the moment in "The Try-Works" chapter where Ishmael comes to his senses and realizes the dangers of his fascination with Ahab's cause is no less paradigmatic. We see the sailor-philosopher falling asleep at the helm, mesmerized by the demon-like flames of industry, nearly capsizing the *Pequod*—the image of an intellectual class so enchanted by the marvels of technology that it almost overturns the ship of state as it awakens to the danger that these wonders truly pose. In James's days, all the talk was about the power of the atom; now, nuclear silos *and* social media silos alike threaten us without the cloak of Cold War ideology, in a show of naked imperialism and AI-fueled misinformation that goes beyond Joseph Goebbels's wildest dreams. The "deadly mixture" of populism and technology, in other words, is now deadlier than ever.

And yet, Ahab proves himself a post-truth-era leader not only because of his despotic ways, but chiefly through his mode of appre-

hending the world—in which he foreshadows “The Piazza”’s narrator. His totalitarian reading of reality speaks disturbingly to our present moment because Ahab is deceiving himself even before he deceives the crew. When the *Pequod* gams with the British whaler *Samuel Enderby* in Chapter 100, the monomaniacal captain engages in a banter with the *Enderby*’s commander, Boomer, and the on-board surgeon, Dr. Bunger. As Giorgio Mariani (*Melville* 76) points out, the scene serves the purpose of showing how there is nothing ‘natural’ about Ahab’s revenge; Boomer, another wounded whaler who crossed Moby Dick’s path, is a jovial drunkard who shrugs off his mutilation with pragmatic acceptance. His drinking companion is no more sympathetic; fastidious like the young scientist that he is, Dr. Bunger quickly dismisses Ahab’s obsession by pointing out that a whale’s digestive organs would never allow it to swallow human limbs: “So that what you take for the White Whale’s malice is only his awkwardness” (*MD* 390). Ahab is no man to tolerate having his entire worldview pulled apart by some ship’s doctor, and breaks away in a fit of rage. When Boomer calls out from the bulwarks, trying to reason with him as Ahab rows away, the latter resolutely turns his back to the British ship, as if to physically distance himself from the disquieting notion that Bunger might, after all, be absolutely right.

“In a post-truth world,” says Bruce McComiskey, “audiences do not seek information on which to base their opinions; they seek opinions that support their own beliefs” (12). If we examine how exactly our “post-truth world” came to be, everything comes full circle. The reason why Melvillian characters like Ahab, Pierre, and the narrator of “The Piazza” somewhat bridge the gap between innocuous, Bovaesque self-deception (‘I wish my life was like the stories I like’) and dangerous post-2016 self-delusion (‘Life *is* like the stories I like’) is perhaps to be found in Melville’s oft-noted anticipation of many concerns of postmodernism as early as the mid-nineteenth century, which also accounts for the belated critical appreciation of works like *The Confidence-Man*. Lee McIntyre defines post-truth as “the political subordination of reality” (xiv), and somehow controversially asserts that postmodernism may be seen as its “godfather” (150). He and others see post-truth as a corrupted child of French Theory, as if “largely left-wing relativist and postmodernist attacks on the idea of truth from decades ago have now simply been co-opted by right-wing political operatives” (6). Post-truth would then be a delayed,

"media-driven inflation of postmodernism," as philosopher Maurizio Ferraris (117) puts it—an intellectual lab-escaped virus spreading out of control from the halls of the Sorbonne to the gilded wallpapers of the Oval Office. While a full exploration of this debate falls outside this essay's scope, I agree with Ferraris that retroactive blame is a futile exercise: "Donald Trump," he remarks, "did not need to read Foucault to bring about the post-truth world, any more than Henry Ford needed to read Marx to bring about the capitalist world" (70). And by this very logic, Melville did not need to know any of these names, facts, or concepts to write *Moby-Dick* chapters like "The Quarter-Deck" or "The Doubloon."

This does not stand as a testament to Melville's prophetic abilities as much as to his psychological acuity; a commonplace, perhaps, but one worth stating. I second Pilar Martínez Benedí and Ralph Savarese in their argument for employing "strategic pastism" in Melville studies, that is, to find middle ground between unrestrained presentism—as they put it, "finding ourselves, often quite narcissistically, in everything we look at from previous eras" (4)—and locking Melville "in the prison cell of his own moment ... condemn[ing his] work to the dustbin of history." It makes more sense instead to do "two things at once: situate the author and allow him to roam modestly" (5). Martínez Benedí and Savarese's focus is on Melville as an author who created characters "whom modern readers would call neurodivergent" (5) more than a century before the term was coined. We may do the same here with political science instead of medical science, using Melville's fiction to understand our time rather than the other way around. From our contemporary vantage point, the syllogism is self-evident: Melville anticipated postmodernism, postmodernism gave birth to post-truth, therefore, the reasoning goes, Melville anticipated post-truth. But what is key is that Melville did not predict post-truth as much as he understood self-deception and the power it holds over us. Human nature did not change much in the past thousands of years—technology did. If post-truth, as Ferraris has it, is "a symptom of our epoch's fundamental traits" (155), it is only because now we have the tools to amplify those same tendencies that were always there to begin with. The "deadly mixture of science, technology, and persuasive capacity" Mariani invokes when talking about C. L. R. James's analysis of Ahab only got worse as science, technology, and media got better. Best not to imagine the *Pequod* captain, Pierre Glendinning, and even our innocent

narrator from “The Piazza” with an X account—or with nuclear launch codes at their fingertips in a briefcase.

With this in mind, I finally return to the 1856 story, dwelling on two seemingly negligible passages that show how even the account of a Berkshire excursion from the antebellum era might be read as a post-truth narrative written exactly ninety years before Donald J. Trump was born and 160 years before the Oxford Dictionary selected “post-truth” as word of the year. As Lee McIntyre claims,

[o]ne of the deepest roots of post-truth has also been with us the longest, for it has been wired into our brains over the history of human evolution: cognitive bias. Psychologists for decades have been performing experiments that show that we are not quite as rational as we think. Some of this work bears directly on how we react in the face of unexpected or uncomfortable truths.

A central concept of human psychology is that we strive to avoid psychic discomfort. ... What happens when we are confronted with information that suggests that something we believe is untrue? ... How could I be an intelligent person yet believe a falsehood?

Yet post-truth did not arise in the 1950s or even the 1960s. It awaited the perfect storm of a few other factors like extreme partisan bias and social media “silos” that arose in the early 2000s. (35, 36, 43)

While Melville’s America was no stranger to political turmoil, he could not have foreseen a world where cognitive biases decide elections, elections elect despots, and despots set the world ablaze. What he achieved instead was to devise some of the finest depictions of cognitive bias ever put to paper. “The Piazza” is one of them, with the parable/satire/metafiction model allowing the author to write himself into a cautionary tale where he falls prey to his literary delusions and lives to tell the tale. “The Piazza” shows that books alone will not save us, as they hold the same power of amplifying cognitive bias we now see at work in TikTok reels flattening nuanced issues into one-minute clips. The panacea qualities all too often ascribed to literature neglect how it is ultimately up to the reader not to take romantic fiction as life guidance, or to conflate a character’s opinion with the author’s own. What Melville is telling us is that if fiction is a weapon, every weapon

can harm oneself as much as others, either ricocheting off targets or being directed at one's temple.

Throughout the story, this Bovaresque cognitive bias inspires the narrator's every action. Instead of online forums or Telegram channels, he gets his 'information' from Shakespeare and Spenser and dismisses every voice of reason he encounters. His post-truth mindset is illustrated by two occurrences that take place before the Greylock hike. One is the Chinese creeper episode we have already mentioned; on the one hand, the image of blooming leaves hiding "strange, cankerous worms" works as a symbolic parallel with the narrator's disappointment in meeting an apron-wearing rural girl in lieu of a "fairy queen sitting at her fairy window" ("The Piazza" 299). Both Marianna and the creeper are sites of failed expectations, with the parasites-stricken plant adumbrating Marianna's "golden window," in turn covered in wasps and flies. Yet what is revelatory here is the narrator's way of coming to terms with disappointment. Throughout "The Piazza" cognitive bias constantly pushes the narrator to evade reality by seeking comfortable fictions. When he realizes that the leaves are overrun with worms, he does not think that he failed to properly attend the plant or that he chose the wrong spot to place it; his reasoning is that the infestation was foreordained, that the worms were already in the bulb when he sowed the seeds (Elliott 324). And yet he dares not lift the foliage; like Ahab with Dr. Bunger, he "[can]not bear to look" ("The Piazza" 296) and turns his eyes away—enacting a precise confutation of Melville's "visable truth" principle, which is, again, "the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him."

But it is especially the second passage—one of those textual moments where the narrator's 'retrospective' discomfort, his knowing where all this ends, is blatant—that makes clear how Melville already figured out today's post-truth logic back in the age of the telegraph. Some months after the "mad poet's afternoon" when the narrator first catches sight of Marianna's window, he is back on the piazza fantasizing about the Berkshire scenery:

Time passed; and the following May, after a gentle shower upon the mountains ... I saw a rainbow, resting its further end just where, in autumn, I had marked the mole. Fairies there, thought I; remembering

that rainbows bring out the blooms, and that, if one can but get to the rainbow's end, his fortune is made in a bag of gold. Yon rainbow's end, would I were there, thought I. And none the less I wished it, for now first noticing what seemed some sort of glen, or grotto, in the mountain side; at least, whatever it was, viewed through the rainbow's medium, it glowed like the Potosi mine. But a work-a-day neighbor said, no doubt it was but some old barn—an abandoned one, its broadside beaten in, the acclivity its background. *But I, though I had never been there, I knew better.* (295; my italics)

One could sum up a decade or more of current online debates—political and otherwise—with this last sentence. As the neighbor's commonsense contrasts with the narrator's imagination, the reader is led to sympathize with the latter; but the fact remains that every local he clashes with in the story—starting with “Dives”—is absolutely right; they are all Bungers he does not want to listen to the more they make sense. Like with Ahab, we detect signals that he is deliberately lying to himself (“I knew better,” “the illusion so complete”...), or that at least he was before the Greylock climb. If the mountainside trek is a miniature quest, the narrator is an Ahab who makes it back. His encounter with Marianna does not destroy his appetite for self-deception but it only tempers it, teaching him to indulge his fancies with greater care. It is no accident that “The Piazza” comes out after *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, as if this time Melville wanted to see what happens to a self-delusional character if the plot grants him no tragic finale but only a return to routine. As *Billy Budd*'s narrator puts it, truth is dangerous because it always comes equipped with its customary “ragged edges” (BB 517). “The Piazza” is the story of a man who cuts himself while grazing them yet survives.

Here, then, is how Melville intuitively captures post-truth: the urge not to look beneath the creeper, the need to force oneself to cling to illusion while knowing it is illusion. As an author he gives readers no easy formula—his fiction simultaneously demonstrates its capacity to engage the world's complexity and its inadequacy to exhaust it, outlining characters who feel tragic *and* foolish at the same time, like “The Piazza”'s bookish narrator, or like Ahab when he dies dragged into the water almost slapstick-style after delivering a Macbethian speech about grief and greatness. The narrator's initial belief that “looking on a mountain-girl” might restore his health is no less insubstantial than a vaccine denialist injecting himself with horse dewormer as a COVID

cure; both begin convinced that something will happen, then retreat into fantasy despite being contradicted by the facts. Yet at the journey's end, in a way, we see him shifting from one post-truth archetype to another; as he refuses to shatter Marianna's illusion, the narrator demonstrates a compassion familiar to anyone who has confronted a beloved conspiracy-theorist uncle at the dinner table: he recognizes that human beings require fictions and narratives to endure—that self-deception is a survival strategy. We may imagine him beginning the transition from reader to author, finally understanding that reality does not follow predictable plotlines simply because it has no plot; and we may thus read the final paragraph as him slowly realizing that fiction should not be a refuge, but a North-facing piazza exposed to the icy winds of truth, a "box-royal" in which one must sit uncomfortably while haunted "by many as real a story."

The first time that I read "The Piazza" I was on a plane to the US, at the beginning of a three-week journey that would bring me to the very places described in the story. In the following months I wrote a few lines about Marianna's "golden window" in my MA thesis under Prof. Giorgio Mariani's supervision, marking the culmination of years of research on Melville's aesthetics of incompleteness, all inspired by a single paragraph from his Leggere Melville handbook. As a mentor, Prof. Mariani helped me every step of the way from the very first time I entered his office. I owe him years of encouragement and support. On top of his scholarly work, he set an example I will always follow—he taught me to stay curious and to stay humane. He showed me never to hesitate in questioning even the most authoritative perspective, balancing kindness and grace with quiet determination. I will always treasure the memories of Spring 2015 in Villa Mirafiori, and the way he made me read with new eyes a book I had known by heart since I was in high school; I remember his class was so crowded that once I had to listen from outside the door because there was no space left even on the floor. The following summer, in Tuscania, he mentioned a novel he had heard great things about called The Sympathizer; that day he put me on a path that shaped my entire academic career and more. I am proud that I was his student, and I hope that the volume that Giulia and I edited will serve to celebrate his career and his invaluable contribution to American studies and Melville studies in Italy.

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3. *Moby-Dick* in the Environmental Humanities

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Despite having been written more than a century and a half ago, Melville's *Moby-Dick* still appears as relevant as ever, especially when readings of the novel are put into dialogue with current discourses on the Anthropocene—the geological epoch proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to suggest that humans have become geological agents whose impact is the principal cause of ecological degradation. The latter has foregrounded the crisis of the distinction between nature and culture that has long characterized Western thought, as the climate crisis makes evident the degree to which humans and non-humans affect one another. Therefore, despite it being a controversial concept (Bonneuil and Fressoz; Malm and Hornborg), the Anthropocene is still a useful cultural category that can contribute to decentering the human. This concept has seeped into numerous disciplinary fields, including the environmental humanities, which analyze the cultural, historical, socioeconomic, and ethical causes and implications of the ecological crisis. If “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 9), literature can aid in envisioning new ways of co-existing with other lifeforms and communicating in effective ways the scientific fact of climate change that is all too often minimized or discredited. This is exactly the stance that ecocritical scholars adopt, believing that literary works contribute to exploring and shaping the relationship between humanity and the more-than-human.¹

¹ “More-than-human” is an expression used in the environmental humanities to indicate Earth’s diversity of beings that transcend human societies. It repositions humans into a wider context of multispecies life. See Price and Chao 180.

Ecocriticism officially developed as a field in the 1990s and, since then, it has undergone several transformations. Early approaches focused on local areas and white male encounters with nature, generally failing to address the relation between local and planetary and between social and ecological concerns, while also preserving rigid nature/culture dualisms (Garrard 48–49; Heise 41–42). More recent approaches foreground human-nonhuman entanglements (Buell, *Future* 17–28); the field has also expanded its intersectional dimensions giving rise to sub-categories such as ecofeminism, environmental justice, material and posthuman ecocriticism. It has also become more invested in issues of scale: literature's role can be seen as one of scalar translation, that is, "to transpose into a representation on the human scale events and processes that exceed or escape the usual geographical and temporal limits of how we think" (Clark 49). In fact, the Anthropocene troubles perceptions of scale by forcing humans to contemplate local and global interconnected networks and vast geological and historical time spans.

Ecocriticism is not limited to analyses of nature writing or works that expressly address the climate crisis. It also aims to "recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere" (Kern 11). The field often revisits the literary archive and canonical works with an eye to both manifestations and critiques of anthropocentrism (Love 573). The challenge lies then in unveiling ecological meanings embedded, implicitly, within texts. It is from this perspective that *Moby-Dick* can be approached through an ecocritical lens. Although Melville did not conceive his novel as environmental propaganda (as discourse stemming from self-conscious, modern environmental politics did not yet exist at the time), such a perspective could help readers to reflect on the challenges of the Anthropocene and on past and current approaches to the more-than-human. Until recently, Melville had not been canonized as a "green" writer like his contemporaries Thoreau and Emerson (Schultz, "Environmental Vision" 97). A potential reason for this is that *Moby-Dick* refuses to lend itself to univocal interpretations due to what Giorgio Mariani calls the "open" quality of the novel (7). Yet it is this very plurality that holds the potential to blur rigid dichotomies and allow each age to find renewed relevance in the work.

In times when emotions and personal beliefs play a greater role in shaping public opinion than factual evidence, the climate denialism

that has ensued from dismissals of scientific warnings validates ongoing industrialism and extractivism, which are responsible for ecological deterioration, climate change, and species endangerment. In today's post-truth world, *Moby-Dick* appears eerily topical. On the one hand, it confounds definitive truths by playing with scientific fact and fiction and revealing the limits of Western knowledge. This appears particularly evident in the cetology chapters, which will be further addressed below. On the other hand, it also sheds light on the long history of human-animal relations and the effects of human invasive practices on nonhumans. Melville's whaling epic then belies climate denialism by demonstrating how today's situation depends on anthropogenic processes that have taken place over large temporal scales and that were already in place in the mid-nineteenth century. An ecocritical reading of *Moby-Dick* can thus contribute to historically contextualizing the climate emergency. In this chapter, I focus on the possibility of reading the novel in light of the history of the fossil fuel economy; on its depiction of a wide range of human attitudes toward animals; on its stress on animal subjectivity and material existence; and, finally, on its reflection on ecological degradation and animal extinction.

***Moby-Dick* as Proto-Petro-fiction**

The current global economy largely relies on oil extraction, shaping planetary physical and cultural landscapes. It is for this reason that scholars such as Stephanie LeMenager define our contemporary age as one of "petromodernity" (60); and yet oil has often been taken for granted (Barrett and Worden xvii–xviii). Exploring the history of the industry through literary examples may provide a way of making the invisible violence of oil capitalism more visible. While Amitav Ghosh has lamented the absence of great literary works documenting oil's centrality as a primary energy commodity (Ghosh, "Petrofiction" 29–30), *Moby-Dick* can be seen as one among the first works of petro-fiction.² Petro-fiction, popularized by Ghosh himself, refers to literary works that engage with modernity built upon fossil fuels, where oil plays a central role in shaping politics, economy, culture, identity, and ecology, rather than standing merely in the background. Indeed, Melville's novel highlights cultural practices that have helped to establish

² On *Moby-Dick* in light of the history of the fossil fuel economy, see Krien; Scott.

the conditions for the rise of the modern oil economy responsible for high rates of carbon emissions.

Melville depicts the whale oil industry with great minutiae. The industry reached its peak in the nineteenth century, shortly before the first extraction of fossil oil in 1859. At the time, whale oil was mostly employed for illumination, lubrication, and cosmetics. And yet, because of its scarcity, it was not used to fuel machinery; petroleum, then, did not replace whale oil as they served distinct functions. However, the whaling industry's relevance started to wane from the mid-nineteenth century onward with the development of kerosene, although it witnessed a new surge in the early twentieth century (Scott 3-7). Only in 1986 was commercial whaling banned by the International Whaling Commission. Even though the processes and impact of the whale oil and petroleum industries vary significantly, the current mindset focused on progress and profit depends on a legacy of intensive resource extraction that can already be witnessed in the novel. The whaling industry as Melville depicts it in 1851, then, anticipates and sets the stage for the development of the modern oil extraction industry.

Indeed, the novel repeatedly stresses whaling's contribution to the industrialization process. As Buell argues, "*Moby-Dick* was written in and about the moment when the world was coming under the regime of global capitalism" (*Writing* 205). Ishmael insists that whaling was the first American extractive industry to make a global economic impact. Whaleships like the *Pequod* were nothing less than floating business enterprises meant to obtain spermaceti. The proto-corporate capitalistic set-up is stressed by the unequal distribution of profits among sailors and ship owners. Ishmael argues: "they paid no wages; but all hands, including the captain, received certain shares of the profits called lays, and that these lays were proportioned to the degree of importance pertaining to the respective duties of the ship's company" (*MD* 91). The majority of the profits go to the owners, Bildad and Peleg, who, unlike the sailors, do not endure the hardships of life at sea. The two captains are fundamentally the *Pequod's* majority stockholders: "[p]eople in Nantucket invest their money in whaling vessels, the same way that you do yours in approved state stocks bringing in good interest" (89). Whaling is shown as a profitable business involving numerous people with an interest in the venture's success.

Ishmael foregrounds the international primacy of the US in "the business of whaling" (*MD* 91) and the financial profits to be earned

from it. In "The Advocate," while defending the dignity of whaling, Melville's narrator highlights the money circulating in the business as evidence of its magnitude (*MD* 92), placing its value in its economic impact. Ishmael celebrates the fact that "two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's. For the sea is his; he owns it" (60-61). In view of the financial dominance of US whalers over those of other countries, he claims the Nantucketers' ownership over the sea, establishing whaling as part of a quasi-imperial system that transforms the more-than-human into an exploitable resource. This assertion of US supremacy also demonstrates whaling's competitive nature, mainly motivated by the scarcity of whale oil and a dwindling sperm whale population. As Heidi Scott suggests, this obstacle is one faced both by contemporary oil corporations and whalers (6). Ishmael highlights the necessity to stay at sea for years before being able to collect a rewarding amount of oil: "[f]or years [the whaler] knows not the land" (*MD* 61) and chases his prey "into the remotest secret drawers and lockers of the world" (337). Melville conveys how industrialization erased geographic boundaries and made whaling an industry of global proportions. The text also obliquely alerts readers to the exhaustible character of natural resources; much as today's oil industry is constantly looking for new drilling areas in increasingly remote zones.

Another aspect that makes whaling a precursor of modern extractive industries is its ecological impact. While the mid-nineteenth-century whaling business cannot compare to the current fossil-fuel-based economy in terms of quantity of oil produced yearly and ecological consequences, the chapter "The Try-Works" proves whaling to be a highly polluting enterprise. Ishmael describes the black smoke produced by the burning of whale corpses: "once ignited, the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body. ... his smoke is horrible to inhale, and inhale it you must, and not only that, but you must live in it for the time ... It smells like the left wing of the day of judgment" (*MD* 312). Ishmael details the process of obtaining the oil from the furnaces called the try-works. The dark smoke makes the pollution of the supposedly clean-burning whale oil visibly legible (Krien 1464), while also associating it with apocalyptic allusions.

The whole chapter revolves around the image of fire, which has been taken as a symbol with several interpretations.³ However, the fire

³ On the novel's fire symbolism, see Ausband 204-6; Bezanson 47.

imagery also evokes a crucial aspect of the Anthropocene discourse as it is tied to the fossil economy based on combustion. Its discovery is a “key component of the Anthropocene narrative” (Raupach and Canadell, qtd. in Malm and Hornborg 63). The mastery of fire has set humans apart from all other species. The fire on the *Pequod* seems to evoke this aspect of human transformative abilities, anticipating the fossil fuel combustion of modern industrial processes. The *Pequod* is described as a “red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night ... the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander’s soul” (*MD* 313). This passage highlights not only how fire is associated with Ahab’s monomaniacal desire to conquer nature,⁴ but also how the fire on the ship is caused by the burning of whale corpses, seen as mere commodities. The financial relevance of whaling, its proto-capitalistic competitive nature, its global reach, and its ecological impact are all factors that, despite the differences, echo contemporary fossil fuel extractive industries. The novel thus anticipates current exploitative attitudes turning the more-than-human—the ocean, the whales, and oil itself—into profitable commodities.

Human Attitudes toward Nonhuman Animals

Ecocriticism is also invested in literary depictions of historically situated human approaches to animals. In this regard, ecocritical concerns intersect with those of human-animal studies, which dwells on the treatment, subjectivity, and rights of animals. As Rosi Braidotti explains, animals have been associated with a status of radical otherness along with other modes of embodiment including non-white, non-masculine, non-young, non-healthy subjects (68). This process upholds the normative and universalized notion of triumphant humanity. However, Charles Darwin’s discoveries on species evolution and more recent findings complicate understandings of animal alterity (Love 572), showing how the boundaries separating humans and non-humans are much more precarious than previously thought. In this

⁴ In Chapter 45, “The Chart,” Ahab is explicitly linked to the mythological figure of Prometheus: “God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates.” (*MD* 161-62).

light, *Moby-Dick* provides a ripe terrain to investigate human attitudes toward the nonhuman.

Throughout the text, Melville details the cultural forces that shape the crew's views on whales. *Moby-Dick* engages with a wide range of artifacts of a legal, artistic, literary, and religious nature pertaining to whales. This can already be witnessed in the opening "Extracts," which consist of quotations drawn from various sources. The extracts suggest that, along with the profit-oriented mentality, whalemens' anthropocentric views also derive from cultural legacies, specifically of Christian religion. Both the financial and religious dimensions justify human domination over nature. Melville's fifth extract from Isaiah ("In that day, the Lord with his sore, and great, and strong sword, shall punish Leviathan the piercing serpent, even Leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea," MD 8) strengthens the notion presented across the novel of whales as evil creatures to be conquered. Yet, the text resists straightforward interpretations. Melville warns the reader not to take these cultural sources "for veritable gospel cetology" (7), thus complicating univocal readings. The quotation, however, illustrates how numerous cultural aspects besides capitalist structures have concurred to producing a sense of human superiority over animals.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that whaling was mainly motivated by profit, the capitalistic mindset engendering anthropocentric perspectives. Whales were considered resources for human consumption and commodification. Their bodies are often described in economic terms: "as a petroleum reserve is valued for its projected quantity of barrels, so whale-men also described their catches in terms of barrels" (Scott 8). Flask calls a whale a "hundred barreler" (MD 266), while Ishmael stresses that ambergris—a substance produced by whales' digestive system—is "worth a gold guinea an ounce to any druggist" (303). Whales lose their connotation as animals and become expendable products. The character of Starbuck in particular embodies such a utilitarian mindset. The chief mate often reproaches Ahab for not prioritizing profit: "[h]ow many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab? It will not fetch thee much in our Nantucket market" (MD 166). Starbuck privileges material gain over any other consideration. His attitude seems particularly anthropocentric in defining *Moby-Dick* as "a dumb thing" (133), reflecting traditional views of animals as creatures lacking reason.

Conversely, despite having often been interpreted as embodying capitalist values,⁵ Ahab is more focused on the venture's romantic aspect. He frames whaling as an ongoing, epic battle against nature. The captain dismisses Starbuck's complaint as his interests lie more in his vengeful purpose than in market logics. Not for this reason is his stance any less anthropocentric. He conceives *Moby-Dick* as embodying "all evil" (148); while ascribing a degree of agency to the whale, it is one radically opposed to humans. His stance derives from an inability to accept the whale's perceived inscrutability, suggesting a desire for control which defines Western mindsets. Ahab persistently thinks in dualistic terms, opposing humans and nature, good and evil, with no middle ground in between.⁶ Despite being proficient at living at sea, he fails to recognize interspecies entanglements, standing isolated in his resolute individualism.

Western culture in the first half of the nineteenth century did not generally object to the exploitation of the nonhuman. While Melville was influenced by contemporary worldviews and does not extensively object against them, he does comment on exploitation at large, and laments Western acquisitive tendencies by commenting on the "all-grasping western world" (*MD* 284). This awareness is extended to the predatory quality permeating the entire planet: "Oh, horrible vultureism of earth! from which not the mightiest whale is free" (237). This critique implicates all in the circle of quasi-cannibalistic predation. Melville invites reflection on socially constructed practices that are now widely accepted: "no doubt the first man that ever murdered an ox was regarded as a murderer ... Go to the meat-market of a Saturday night and see the crowds of live bipeds staring up at the long rows of dead quadrupeds. Does not that sight take a tooth out of the cannibal's jaw? Cannibals? Who is not a cannibal?" (231). The fact that Ishmael associates eating animal meat with cannibalism seems to consider other animals as kin. The passage echoes the discourses of ecocritical and animal studies scholars who suggest the need to revise established cultural constructs.

In contrast to Starbuck and Ahab's anthropocentric perspectives, Ishmael's attitude toward nonhumans is more ambivalent. While stressing whaling's importance, he is also critical of its rapacity. He

⁵ See Bryant 79.

⁶ See also Schultz, "Humanizing" 107.

seems to modify his perspective as the novel progresses, though not in a linear way. At first, his position resembles that of the other whalemen. He suggests that he “was one of that crew ... Ahab’s quenchless feud seemed mine” (144). However, he slowly develops his own independent outlook. He gradually distances himself from Ahab’s beliefs: “[w]hat the White Whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid” (151).

On several occasions, Ishmael experiences a sense of interspecies relationality. This can be noticed in “A Squeeze of the Hand”:

I forgot all about our horrible oath ... I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it ... Oh! my dear fellow beings ... Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness ... man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country. (*MD* 308-09)

Ishmael undergoes an ecstatic sense of interconnectedness while squeezing the spermaceti to remove lumps from the fluid. This passage can be interpreted through the lens of material ecocriticism, which emphasizes the agency of matter and trans-species entanglements, analyzing how they exchange energy, matter, and information.⁷ Here, Ishmael realizes the futility of the “terrible oath” he made to Ahab, distancing himself from the captain. This change is produced by an expansive feeling engendered by the sensorial contact with the spermaceti. He blurs here the boundaries between his body and external matter, and realizes that contentment lies in the interfusion between matter and humans.

In a way, here Ishmael appears to embrace Baruch Spinoza’s monistic ontology. Spinoza understands humans as relational, incomplete, and partly nonhuman beings. The philosopher has been taken up by multiple environmental humanities scholars, all seeking to decenter the human. Melville was indeed familiar with Spinozian philosophy: “Spinoza comes to signify for Melville a profoundly nonanthropocentric philosophy, one founded ... on the idea not that ‘nature may obey us, but, on the contrary, that we may obey nature’” (Jonik 4). Spinoza’s

⁷ See Iovino and Opperman.

relational ontology can thus be said to inform *Moby-Dick's* reflections on the entanglements of matter and affect.⁸ The notion of interconnectedness is reiterated in several other passages. While lying in bed with Queequeg, Ishmael ponders that "[n]othing exists in itself" (*MD* 53). In "The Monkey-Rope," as the two friends work tied together, he realizes: "this situation ... was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals" (244).

Melville, however, does not embrace Spinozian thought wholeheartedly. His work presents an array of diverging philosophical positions, and Ishmael retains an ambiguous position toward the more-than-human. If he manifests a relational awareness, he also reproduces hierarchical schemes, celebrating certain species while downgrading others. He describes the right whale as an "inferior creature," suggesting that it is "very hard really to believe that such bulky masses of overgrowth can possibly be instinct, in all parts, with the same sort of life that lives in a dog or a horse" (*MD* 214). Ishmael judges right whales negatively in comparison to other species, seeing them scarcely deserving of being considered living beings. His blissful feeling in "A Squeeze of the Hand" is especially complicated by his rejection of sentimental conceptions of the more-than-human. This can be seen in a letter Melville wrote to Hawthorne commenting on Goethe's pantheistic "all feeling" (Sanborn 15). While Melville admits that there is some truth to this expansive connection to everything, the issue for him lies in the fact "that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (qtd. in Sanborn 15). In "The Masthead," after experiencing the "all feeling" while on watch on the masthead, Ishmael discovers the dangers of romantic pastoralism experienced by "many romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men" (*MD* 128) such as himself. Getting distracted by his own reveries, he risks falling down. He thus retreats from his contemplative mood with the final injunction: "Heed it well, ye Pantheists" (*MD* 129).

The constant references to interspecies entanglements do not necessarily suggest totalities, but rather unfinished assemblages and provisional networks. Ishmael insists on everything's ultimate lack of finality. The oscillation in his perception creates tensions that are never completely resolved, which imply a critique of absolute and dichoto-

⁸ See Cameron.

mic stances. Apparently opposing elements stand in a mutually constitutive relation. In “A Bower in the Arsacides,” weaving imagery highlights such entanglements. Ishmael sees a whale’s skeleton “all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life” (*MD* 331). Death and life are woven together as vines around the skeleton: the reader is ultimately confronted with the world’s provisional and relational nature. Such ontological provisionality reverberates on the level of knowledge, calling into question the possibility of definitive epistemological mastery, which is especially evident in Ishmael’s discussion on whales in the cetological chapters.

Epistemological Uncertainty and Whale Subjectivities

Another interest of ecocriticism is to examine depictions of nonhuman subjectivity in literature. The cetological chapters are illuminating in this regard; they shift the readers’ attention from the “whiteness” of the whale, with the profusion of interpretations on what the whale stands for, to the “whaleness” of whales, focusing on their material bodies and lives.⁹ *Moby Dick* has often been understood as a symbolic being to which multiple meanings are attached. In this process, the whale’s subjectivity disappears.¹⁰ While the novel encourages such interpretative investigations, by conceiving *Moby Dick* not merely as a symbol but as a material animal one can begin to depart from human-centered perspectives and explore the complexity of animals. Jacques Derrida makes a similar point (40–41): he argues for the need to move beyond “the Animal” conceived in the singular. This notion presupposes a misconception of animals as a monolithic undifferentiated whole in contrast to humans. He explicates this notion with the term *animot*, which evokes the plurality (*animaux*) obscured by the notion of “the Animal.” It also brings awareness to humans’ dependency on the abstract singular category, which is merely a word (*mot*). A necessity arises to negotiate between the abstract singular and the multiplicity of animals. Ishmael does exactly this in the cetological chapters by addressing traditional views of whales vis-à-vis their conception as embodied plural beings.

⁹ See Love 573.

¹⁰ See Armstrong 93.

The cetological chapters—those describing whale behavior, appearance, and taxonomy methodically—could be seen as a reification of the epistemological violence humans impose onto the more-than-human, desiring to know in order to control and seeking to categorize what is perceived as elusive, and therefore threatening. Yet some of the strategies Melville employs serve to defy desires of definitive knowledge. Ishmael draws from numerous sources to compile a literature review of all that has been argued and supposed about whales. His “fish-documents” (MD 326) range from classical, mythological, folkloristic, and religious texts to recent scientific studies (Krien 1471-72; Schultz, “Humanizing” 108-09). He enters into dialogue with them, often trying to rectify prejudices and inaccuracies about whales in such depictions. His critical attitude stems partly from his insistence on the primacy of direct observation. He considers whalemens the most authoritative figures on cetology: “the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself” (MD 208). His skepticism is also motivated by a disapproval of the scientists’ arrogance in describing whales’ visual representation, behavior, and anatomy (Buell, *Writing* 212-13; Schultz, “Environmental Vision” 99). Melville playfully unsettles pre-Darwinian attempts at classification. Indeed, scientists continually modify classifications in light of new discoveries. The text then belies the notion of absolute, incontrovertible truths.

The taxonomic obsession with classifying and dissecting the whale also echoes the material hunting and cutting-up of the whale: both constitute forms of violence. The whale’s body becomes an object of scientific inquiry and consumption to be dissected. It is only when alive that “the fully invested whale [can] be truly and livingly found out” (MD 333). A critique of epistemological violence is anticipated in “Etymology,” which lists the word “whale” in thirteen languages. The Greek, Hebrew, and Anglo-Saxon words are intentionally misspelled and the Fegee and Erromangoan versions are invented (Cowan 63). The chapter unsettles anthropocentric needs to force labels that mediate notions of “whaleness” onto the real animals (Schultz, “Humanizing” 107). The narrator highlights the contrived nature of language, dramatizing Derrida’s *animot*. The animal as an abstract conception becomes a mere word wherein its meaning is lost. Although Ishmael tries to be as exhaustive as possible, much of cetacean life remains unknowable. His attempts at categorizing whales reveal only “the

constituents of a chaos" (134). He further realizes the limits of the dissecting process: "[d]issect him how I may, I go but skin deep; I know him not, and never will" (379). The overview of cetology only serves to confirm science's failure to fully grasp more-than-human complexity; with his deconstruction of taxonomic classification, Ishmael reiterates the impossibility of finality. It is worth noting, however, that Ishmael's skepticism toward scientific writings on whales does not constitute the kind of denial of factual evidence based on an unfounded whim that can often be witnessed in today's post-truth era. As Mariani reminds us (10), Ishmael both "swam through libraries and sailed through oceans" (*MD* 110). Not only has he experienced ocean life directly, but he has also studied all sorts of material on cetaceans meticulously. In this sense, his disbelief in the notion that any definitive, universal truth may be reached is one grounded in personal experience and informed research, and actually reflects a sense of epistemological humility.

Despite Melville not being aware of recent discoveries highlighting the extent of cetacean complexity, *Moby-Dick* also touches upon different ways in which humans and whales are similar. It employs emotive strategies that animal activists use to move people to sympathize with whales (Scott 14-15). This is accomplished by emphasizing the whales' intelligence, agency, and ability to feel emotions. Ishmael repeatedly focuses on the cetacean species' intelligence in a way that somewhat aligns with contemporary views. Scientists have recognized the whales' complex brain activity, their ability to adapt, socialize, play, and their sophisticated vocal and communicative capabilities. This aspect is stressed through Ishmael's references to Moby Dick's malignant intelligence (*MD* 147). While it serves to raise the awesome aura of Ahab's antagonist, Ishmael is also invested in "the reasonableness of the whole story of the White Whale" (163-64). He aims to demonstrate cetacean intelligence to make his account credible. Ishmael suggests that "the Sperm Whale is in some cases sufficiently powerful, knowing, and judiciously malicious, as with direct afterthought to stave in, utterly destroy, and sink a large ship" (164). He frames the sperm whales' actions as intentional.¹¹ In both "Grand Armada" and "Will the Whale's Magnitude Diminish," Ishmael claims that cetacean intelligence works in favor of their survival. He relates that whales had been observed to swim in larger pods for protection and to retreat to re-

¹¹ See Buell, *Writing* 213-14.

mote areas (*MD* 285). This behavior appears in line with Marian Stamp Dawkins's definition of "animal cognition" as the ability of animals to solve problems under novel conditions through social communication and implementation of learning strategies. In this sense, Ishmael's account gestures toward a model of intelligence that destabilizes rigid species hierarchies and reconfigures the whale as a cognitive subject rather than a passive object of human interpretation.

While whales are portrayed as intelligent beings with a sophisticated social organization, Moby Dick is ascribed an uncommon intelligence and degree of agency for a whale. It refuses to become a product, victim, or trophy, embodying a form of nonhuman resistance against attempts to conquer it (Szlezák 42). In the nineteenth century, "the imputation to whales of agency of any kind was among the most contested of notions in contemporary whaling literature" (Armstrong 100). As Philip Armstrong argues, the traditional conception, exemplified by Starbuck's evaluation of whales as 'dumb brutes,' saw them as passive resources. Yet Ahab does attribute agency to Moby Dick, even while antagonizing it and creating an opposition between humans and animals. Melville complicates both models of agency. If Ishmael reiterates Ahab's view of the whale as endowed with malicious agency, he stresses that these are features *ascribed to* the whale:

Moreover, *as if perceiving this stratagem*, Moby Dick, with that malicious intelligence *ascribed to him*, sidelingly transplanted himself, as it were, in an instant, shooting his pleated head lengthwise beneath the boat. (*MD* 393, my italics)

It is not, however, his prodigious magnitude, nor his strange white hue, nor his deformed visage that so much invested the monster with unnatural terror, as the unexampled and intelligent malignity which he had repeatedly evinced when attacked by different whalers, so that no turbaned Turk; no hired Venetian or Malay, could smite his foes with more *seeming* malice. (*MD* 148, my italics)

Such comments foreground human speculations on the whale's unknowable intentions. Ishmael also suggests that Moby Dick's aggression might be motivated by the fact that it feels threatened. This is stressed by the impression, just before the three-day chase, of Moby Dick displaying a "gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness" (392). Its peacefulness seems at odds with a supposed

hateful nature. Ishmael sets up an ongoing tension between the whale as malicious or as simply protecting itself. He offers readers conflicting accounts of Moby Dick and its agency, from evil to indifferent (Armstrong 107). One should then consider with some degree of suspicion his final attribution of a malignant intention to the whale. Such an evaluation should be counterbalanced by the numerous instances in which he focuses on the “whaleness” of whales in their plural variety.

Another aspect the novel emphasizes is the whales’ ability to suffer. Whalemen were aware that animals could feel pain, yet they perceived it as a necessary inconvenience. However, Melville focuses on whales’ suffering recurrently. In “The Pequod Meets the Virgin,” Ishmael foregrounds the old age and infirmity of a whale they harpoon. He dwells on the “terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight” (*MD* 267) of its agonizing struggle. The whale is also anthropomorphized as an elderly victim: “[f]or all his old age, and his one arm, and his blind eyes, he must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all” (*MD* 270). By foregrounding its pain and humanizing it, Ishmael questions whaling’s romantic nature, rather stressing the violence it implies and the hypocritical society it serves (Schultz, “Humanizing” 105). The chapter creates then a contrast between “glorying crews” (*MD* 270) and the animal’s anguish.¹²

The novel highlights a wide range of emotions among whales besides pain. Ishmael foregrounds the similarities between human and animal patterns of social behavior and affect. In “Grand Armada,” whales “serenely revelled in dalliance and delight” (*MD* 290). The focus on their joy, nine-month-long gestation, and the comparison between calves and human babies (289-90) humanizes the whales, making their behavior feel tender and familiar. “Schools and Schoolmasters” also reveals how female whales react empathetically to their companions being wounded: “her companions swim around her with every token of concern, sometimes lingering so near her and so long, as themselves to fall a prey” (*MD* 294). Ishmael also describes the animals’ rivalries and mating rituals, male whales behaving gallantly and acting like “young collegians” (*MD* 294). Once again the blurring of the human/animal divide induces readers to feel sympathy for the whales.

¹² See also Zoellner 178.

In bringing attention to the whales' agency, suffering, and emotions, Melville often resorts to anthropomorphism, associating whales with human traits. While scholars like Zoellner and Schultz suggest that this is functional to presenting sympathetic depictions of whales, it also risks reinforcing anthropocentric perspectives since it implies that animals are worthy of existing only in virtue of their "human-like" traits, obscuring differences between different life-forms. However, Marc Bekoff suggests that "[i]t may very well be that the seemingly natural human urge to impart emotions to animals ... actually reflect a very accurate way of knowing" (qtd. in Schultz, "Humanizing" 101). The skepticism toward anthropomorphism does not preclude considerations on interspecies relationality. The challenge lies in recognizing both the kinship and difference underlying human-animal relationships. In fact, Melville also highlights the whales' anatomical and sensorial differences from humans, inviting readers to imagine different modes of embodiment, including a different vision (*MD* 251-52), skin (236), and hearing (252). Melville questions the nature/culture divide by focusing on the "whaleness" of whales in all their complexity and specificity.

Species Endangerment and Ecological Degradation

Besides its attention to the subaqueous realm of whales, *Moby-Dick* appears relevant in light of its reflection on species endangerment. Contemporary environmentalist and animal activists are painfully aware of the fact that both ecosystems and species are currently under threat. The concepts of extinction and ecological degradation were already mainstream in the nineteenth century, when society was slowly awakening to the effects of industrialization. However, such phenomena were often interpreted within a theological framework, which relieved humans from responsibility over their actions (King 255). Yet, Melville and other of his contemporaries did lament humans' impact on the more-than-human realm (Szlezák 46). Ishmael often touches upon the fact that numerous animals were endangered as a consequence of human action. He compares Ahab to "the last of the Grisly Bears" (*MD* 124) that lived in Missouri. He comments on the sale of the "prairies of Illinois and Missouri" (*MD* 338). The very first lines of the novel bring attention to this very aspect, as Ishmael wonders: "[a]re the green fields gone?" (*MD* 4). His fleeting observations reflect the loss of natural areas in the antebellum period. It is the idea that nature is no longer

accessible on land that perhaps moves Ishmael to sea. He soon realizes, however, that the constraints of humanity are inescapable.

In considering animal endangerment, Ishmael focuses on whales. In “Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish?—Will He Perish?,” he wonders about the effect humans may have on whales’ dimensions and on their potential extinction. His first question leads him to consider vast scales of deep time, seeking evidence in fossils and various sources, intertwining human history with natural histories. He concludes that the whales have not changed dimensions. His second question—“whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase, and so remorseless a havoc; whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe, and then himself evaporate in the final puff” (*MD* 337-38)—is equally answered in a negative way. And while Ishmael does not fail to create a parallel between the whale’s destiny and that of buffaloes, which are bound to extinction due to “the spear of man” (*MD* 338), he dismisses the idea that hunting may cause the whales’ extinction, while admitting that it has reduced their numbers and affected their behavior. He concludes, in line with contemporary beliefs (King 256), that the whale “swam the seas before the continents broke water; he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and the Kremlin. In Noah’s flood he despised Noah’s Ark; and if ever the world is to be again flooded ... the eternal whale will still survive” (*MD* 339). Ishmael again confronts the readers with vertiginous temporal scales. While endowing whales with an immortal longevity, his comments on endangered animals and ecological degradation reveal an anxiety beneath his confidence in the more-than-human’s ability to endure anthropogenic modifications.

Reading *Moby-Dick* today from an ecocritical perspective is a sobering experience, especially when considering Ishmael’s belief that “[the whales] have two firm fortresses, which, in all human probability will for ever remain impregnable... the whale-bone whales can at last resort to their Polar citadels ... and in a charmed circle of everlasting December, bid defiance to all pursuit from man” (*MD* 338). Today the Polar citadels appear far from impregnable and the “everlasting December” not in the slightest as durable and permanent as Melville portrayed it to be, with ice caps melting at ever troubling rates. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List, five cetacean species are severely endangered, while twelve are deemed endangered. Sperm whales like Moby Dick are considered threatened

by the Endangered Species Act.¹³ The rate of threatened species is not caused by hunting alone but by the fact that their habitats are jeopardized by climate change and biodiversity loss.

Especially since the 1960s and 1970s, environmentalists started to raise awareness on whales to prevent their extinction. Whales have now become conservation symbols, and literary works like *Moby-Dick* have helped bring attention to their threatened existence. Melville's work has managed to capture the complexity of whales' life not only by providing examples of characters recognizing multispecies entanglements, but also by laying stress on the whales' material existence, including their intelligence, agency, wide range of emotions, as well as by stressing their kinship with humans. Further, *Moby-Dick* also reflects on species endangerment and on the gradual ecological degradation caused by the whaling industry and by unrestrained industrialization.

Conclusion

Moby-Dick speaks loudly to contemporary ecological anxieties. It highlights the genealogy of petro-capitalism; it dramatizes the consequences of greed, selfishness, and desires for conquest; it highlights trans-species relational entanglements; it educates readers on marine biology while stressing the limits of knowledge and encouraging to accept uncertainty; it invites readers to consider the complex realities of whales; and finally, it raises awareness on ecological degradation and species extinction.

Moby-Dick addresses both human temporalities and deep time, from a focus on human history and mythology to one on natural history. It equally engages with vast scales of space, zeroing in on the *Pequod* and its crew while revealing how the whaling system navigated in an already globally connected world. The novel encourages readers to consider great scales of time and space, which is exactly the kind of effort required in the Anthropocene. If the novel does not lend solutions to current issues, it offers the possibility to better grasp society's relationship to current ecological networks. Reading *Moby-Dick* in the Anthropocene then means looking back at the history of industrialization and forward at potential loss and extinction, but, most of all, at

¹³ <https://iucn-csg.org/status-of-the-worlds-cetaceans/>

the present, where the opportunity lies to revise current practices, and recognize, as Ishmael does, that it is best “to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in” (MD 20).

This chapter has been adapted into its current form from a lecture I gave on ecocritical readings of Moby-Dick for Professor Giorgio Mariani’s course on Melville’s work. It is after that lecture that he suggested to me the idea of editing a collection of “lectures” on Melville together with Giacomo. It seems appropriate, then, that this contribution finds its place in a volume that has turned, unbeknownst to him, into a celebration of Giorgio Mariani’s career, his valuable contribution to Melvillian studies, and his role in the lives of each and every author in this volume. Personally, I cannot but be grateful for the continued guidance, insight, and kindness he has offered me through all my studies, from my BA up to the conclusion of my PhD, which has coincided with the year of his retirement. I can only be glad to have been accompanied by him up to the last year of my formative journey and have the chance, in turn, to celebrate his outstanding achievements as he finally gets to enjoy his well-earned retirement.

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4. “Unfortunate Beings”? Melville and Disability

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Giorgio Mariani gave me my first opportunity to teach a full class in the context of a course for MA students on *The Confidence-Man* he was teaching at the time. I was fresh from my PhD, short of confidence, and full of stage fright. The course was held in Aula VII of Villa Mirafiori where, some ten years before, I had attended my first class of American literature with Giorgio. I remember (and remembered) that class clear as day. I had returned to university as an older student with an idea of majoring in Spanish, so I had no particular expectations for that course. I was working, too, at the time, so I doubted that I could attend regularly. But after that first day, I made sure I never missed one of his classes. All this passed through my mind while I was standing by the blackboard in Aula VII, about to teach myself with a trembling voice. In that dear place (and physical places will have a significant role in what follows), everything seemed to come full circle, although I couldn't know then, whether that was an ending, or a new beginning.

I had just started working on disability at the time, a sort of spin-off of my dissertation on embodiment in Melville that Giorgio had directed. With his peculiar way of always putting me to the test, he encouraged me to follow my intuition. It actually seemed an apt topic for a lecture on Melville's novel of distrust. As any of his readers know, Herman Melville was keenly interested in bodily and cognitive difference.¹ To use a phrase coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a pioneer in the field of literary disability studies, we might say

¹ For a more comprehensive catalog of Melville's fascination with "human variation and mutability," see Otter 7.

that his works are populated by a myriad of “extraordinary bodies.”² Not only Ahab, the vengeful protagonist of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and one of the most famous disabled characters in world literature. From the one-legged cock Pedro in *Typee* (1846),³ through the one-eyed surgeon Cuticle in *White-Jacket* (1850), to the enigmatic scrivener Bartleby, diversely diagnosed through the years with autism, anorexia, depression, schizophrenia,⁴ or the handsome stutterer Billy Budd, the list of characters and situations that variously explore physical, sensory, and cognitive variation is long and variegated. *The Confidence-Man* (1857), with its multiple disabled characters (of which more later), is increasingly being considered the key text to explore disability in Melville,⁵ almost to overtake the privileged place that *Moby-Dick*, or more precisely, Ahab, has long occupied in the field.

Ahab’s tragic, majestic disability is of course hard to beat, and it is only natural that it has taken up most of the critical attention for years. Both his missing and his prosthetic leg have been variously read in symbolic or figurative terms. Yet disability studies scholars look at both (also) literally, as the material site of a disabling condition with discursive, cultural, and political implications. In other words, they aim to unveil the complex processes and cultural practices through which meanings become attached to bodily or cognitive difference.⁶ One of the purposes of the field indeed is, as Garland-Thomson put

² I am referring to the title of her seminal book, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, first published in 1997.

³ Giorgio Mariani has noted that Pedro, a veritable “‘scapecock,’” appears a classical scapegoat in the sense theorized by René Girard, “both despised as revered” and “marked by a physical defect readable as the external sign of some mysterious sin” (48). In Mariani’s powerful reading, Girardian scapegoating elucidates the sacrificial logic behind the violence in *Moby-Dick*.

⁴ For a more exhaustive catalog of Bartleby’s diagnoses and the relevant sources see Martínez Benedí and Savarese, *Herman Melville and Neurodiversity* 1.

⁵ Samuel Otter, the editor of a special issue of *Leviathan* on Melville and disability, showed surprise at “the degree of interest in *The Confidence-Man*” in the response to the call for essays. “[A] book,” he wrote in 2006, “which may come to play a role in literary studies of disability similar to the indispensable role that *Moby-Dick* has played in questions of politics” (11).

⁶ In addition to Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies*, other foundational texts of the field are: David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), Lennard Davis’s *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (2002); Tobin Siebers’s “Disability in Theory: From Social Constructivism to the New Materialism of the Body,” and, later, Michael Davidson’s *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (2008), to name only a few.

it, to reframe "'disability' as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 5). To say that disability is socially constructed, however, does not mean to discount or dismiss its material or physical significance, including limitation, debility, and pain.⁷ But one thing is the physical or objective difference and another the social or cultural processes that, erecting physical or immaterial barriers, or attaching negative meanings to physical difference, create the disability. This assumption challenges the idea of disability as an absolute or stable condition. Disability is not a necessary consequence of difference, but is conversely subject to contingency; highly dependent on the existence or absence of environmental and psychological barriers and defined in relation to changing ideas of "normalcy."⁸

Analyzing cultural and literary representations of disability against their socio-cultural background, then, disability literary critics expose the ways in which such representations create, support, and/or perpetuate dominant normative (or ableist) narratives, but also explore instances in which representation actually destabilizes the normative construction of difference. Indeed, as Garland-Thomson writes, the literary representation of disability "can be both oppressive and liberating" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 9). In the case of Melville, critics have

⁷ Tobin Siebers argued against a too Foucauldian, constructivist notion of disability: "Disability scholars have begun to insist," he writes, "that strong constructionism either fails to account for the difficult physical realities faced by people with disabilities or presents their body in ways that are conventional, conformist, and unrecognizable to them. These include the habits of privileging performativity over corporeality, favoring pleasure to pain, and describing social success in terms of intellectual achievement, bodily adaptability, and active political participation. The disabled body seems difficult for the theory of social construction to absorb: disability is at once its best example and a significant counterexample" (740). For Siebers, the greatest stake in disability studies is "to find ways to represent pain and to resist current models that blunt the political effectiveness of these representations" (743).

⁸ Of course, the idea of "norm" or "normalcy" (i.e. the "unmarked body") is also a construct, and a fairly recent one at that, as Lennard Davis has convincingly shown ("Constructing Normalcy"). Along the same lines, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson gave currency to the term "normate" to convey the idea of normalcy as an idealized construct: Normate is the "constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8)—that is, to designate those who do not conform as "disabled," and thus deviant, diverse, an inferior "Other." Incidentally, this category of the normate is usually also white, male, heterosexual—and, paradoxically, a minority.

mainly focused on his treatment of Ahab's disability—and their verdict tends to be negative. The prevailing view sees Ahab as reduced to his ivory leg, which is shown to be the source and nourishment of his megalomaniacal hatred of the white whale.⁹ The captain is thus deprived of any subjectivity detached from his disabled body—from his fundamental Otherness. "How could Ahab operate effectively," asks Garland-Thomson, "if the reader were allowed to see him as an ordinary fellow instead of as an icon of monomaniacal revenge—if his disability lost its transcendental meaning?" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 11). Similarly linking amputation and monomania (a link that the novel fosters throughout), disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder lamented that "Ahab's crippling accident and subsequent prosthetic alteration bequeath to him a static identity" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 120) that results in stigma and pathologization.

Yet Melville's engagement with disability, in *Moby-Dick* and elsewhere, is much more complex than that. The critical fixation on Ahab as a character, and on the disability-insanity duo he embodies, has resulted in the relative neglect of the many ways in which Melville looks at disability *literally*, as a dynamic social, relational phenomenon rather than a static private condition, as Melville and disability scholars have begun to note. Building on their work, in what follows I resist the totalizing, and reductive, vision of Ahab's identity as static in order to offer a more rounded outline of Melville's treatment of disability. And while Ahab will continue to be at the center of my discussion, my method will entail a move away from exquisitely characterological aspects. Rather than isolating disability as a private trait, that is, I aim to emphasize the kind of relationality it stimulates in different spaces. In order to arrive at a more dynamic image of Ahab, however, we need to make a little detour, with flashbacks and flashforwards, through different physical places (public spaces, secluded spaces, accessible spaces) that clarify Melville's prescient, though contradictory, treatment of the disabled body.

⁹ A few months after I submitted this essay, David Haven Blake's *The Prosthetic Arts of Moby-Dick* was published. Acutely complicating the connection between disability and monomania, Blake sees Ahab's dismemberment as the source of (individual and collective) injury that functions as the basis for consensus and appeal of his tyrannical sway over the crew. "Ahab's wounds," writes Blake, "become the source of personal power and communal aggrievement" (2).

Flashforward: The *Fidèle*

Let me start this journey or circumnavigation through Melville's locales of disability with what, for me, was the starting point, although it represents one of the final stages in Melville's career: the Mississippi steamboat on which *The Confidence-Man* (1857) is set. The *Fidèle*, as we shall see, is a public space where disability is constantly displayed, questioned, and produced.

Melville's last long novel is one of his most perplexing and ambiguous works, eliciting a number of contradictory critical readings. "A novel it is not!" wrote an anonymous contemporary reviewer of a work that is best described as a succession of episodic encounters held together by a number of characters which, according to an established but not unanimous line of criticism, are all avatars of the same confidence man of the title.¹⁰ On one April 1st (April Fools' Day!) the *Fidèle* hosts what seems a procession of swindlers or con-men apparently intent on duping so many gullible characters who, at first resisting the charms of the confidence man (or men), almost invariably end up yielding to his persuasive verbosity. Their dialogues stage fiduciary transactions and philosophical disquisitions around the ideas of "trust" and "philanthropy," "charity" and "confidence." Until relatively recently, according to Ellen Samuels, the critical attention on the novel focused on Melville's critique of American politics and finance capitalism, the contemporary changing class structure, as well as on the emergence of the "con man" or swindler as the exquisitely American trickster of the time (61). Conversely, little attention was given to the role of disability despite the "convention of cripples," in the words of Mitchell and Snyder, that the novel stages ("Masquerades of Impairment" 38).

Things have changed immensely in the last fifteen to twenty years. *The Confidence-Man* has become a favorite of critics interested in the historical and cultural significance of disability. As a number of them have observed, the novel thematizes the display of disability in public that was common currency in mid-nineteenth-century US, just before

¹⁰ The so-called "standard line" or "single con-man reading" assumes that many of the characters who populate the *Fidèle* are actually "avatars" of one ubiquitous confidence man, usually taken to be the Devil himself. I do not endorse nor contest the premise, but concur with critics, like Philip Drew, who have observed the absence of unequivocal textual evidence. See his "Appearance and Reality in Melville's *The Confidence-Man*" (1964).

the so-called “ugly laws” (on which more later) banned people with physical disabilities from the public sphere in postbellum America. Poised in the transition between hypervisibility and the invisibility of disability in public, the novel captures the association between disability and deception (or, suspicion) in a moment where such hypervisibility resulted in a proliferation of “professional beggars” who often feigned disability in search of benevolence and alms (Furui 55).¹¹ The disabled body thus became a site of permanent scrutiny. At the same time, as Mitchell and Snyder point out, in this same historical period the perception of the integration and care of disabled people began to change. From a familial and/or community responsibility, disability turned to be managed by private charity organizations and federal agencies. Consequently, the disabled began to be officially classified and categorized according to “objectifying taxonomies of the body” and subjected to “detection strategies” to police the authenticity of their ailments (“Masquerades of Impairment” 35).

The “convention of cripples” aboard the *Fidèle* is then less a catalog or freak-show than a lucid commentary on disability in antebellum America. The steamboat amounts to an open public space,¹² where (fake and genuine) cripples are under constant scrutiny as they ask for (or tout) charity. The historical situatedness of the novel clarifies, as Yoshiaki Furui writes, Melville’s critique of the very notion of disability, “whose definitional contours in legal language were yet to be mapped out at the time of its composition but were to be increasingly demarcated in the postbellum era and remain a much-contested issue in our time” (55). *The Confidence-Man*, in short, challenges the very idea of disability as a static or fixed category and instead reveals (and feasts on) its fluid instability.

In this sense, the novel enacts a significant departure from the traditional literary representation of disability, as described by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder in their seminal *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000). Paradoxically, they observe, the social invisibility of people with disabilities goes hand in hand with the perpetual circulation of imag-

¹¹ Yoshiaki Furui, whose study of the *Fidèle* as a public space is exhaustive and minute, borrows the idea of “hypervisibility” from Susan Schweik.

¹² Although, as Furui has convincingly argued, the riverboat, with its structural, urban-like porousness and its lack of central authority (as he points out, the captain never appears in the novel [56]), “can become public or private depending on circumstances” (59).

es of disabled people in visual and written form. Disability, that is, "pervades literary narrative" (47), frequently functioning as the motor or "impetus to narrate a story in the first place" (10). They envision and conceptualize disability as a sort of prosthesis indeed, or crutch, "upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight" (49). As they put it later, physical or cognitive difference marks a character "in need of narrative attention" that works as a kind of "discursive rehabilitation" ("Masquerades of Impairment" 37). Crucially, they add, disability normally functions either as "a stock feature of characterization" or as a "metaphorical device," lending a "distinctive idiosyncrasy" (47) to a single character that, because of their physical or cognitive difference, "stands out against an otherwise anonymous backdrop of homogeneous, non-disabled bodies" ("Masquerades of Impairment" 38). The exceptionality of disability in literary representation, they claim, "reinforces our sense of disability as an isolated bodily deficiency or personal misfortune" ("Masquerades of Impairment" 37) rather than as a social construct.

Yet, as Mitchell and Snyder themselves acknowledge, this is not the case in *The Confidence-Man*, where Melville presents an assembly of variously disabled and, crucially, "functionally analogous characters" (Ngai 51) who occupy a shared narrative space. To wit: a deaf-mute; a "grotesque negro cripple" (CM 10) and suspected impostor named Black Guinea; a man on a wooden leg (12); the coughing "old miser" (72); a sick old man (77); the "invalid Titan" (88); and Thomas Fry, a "soldier of fortune" with "interwoven paralyzed legs" (93). Far from exceptionality or extraordinariness, then, none of the characters stands out on account of their disability. Narrative attention is thus diffused, shifting from the disabled characters (and their physical difference) to the web of human relations and social interpretation of disability itself—to the *process* through which the meaning of disability is constructed in the public square.

The novel begins with quite an ordinary man dressed in cream-colors as he boards the steamboat *Fidèle*. His initially "innocent," "harmless" appearance however becomes more and more "[obnoxious]" (4) as it becomes clear that the man is a deaf-mute—an "intruder" in the community of the able-bodied. Interestingly, the deaf-mute is always defined through the eyes and bodies of others. When he first appears aboard the riverboat, it is indeed through an embodied reaction, the

"shrugged shoulders, titters, whispers, wonderings of the crowd" (3) that we learn that the man is "in the extremest sense of the word, a stranger" (3). Later, when the character's sensory disability becomes apparent, Melville is careful to detail how the deaf-mute is described and defined, this time verbally, by the crowd:

"Odd fish!"
 "Poor fellow!"
 "Who can he be?"
 "Caspar Hauser."
 "Bless my soul!"
 ...
 "Humbug"
 "Singular innocence"
 "Means something"
 "Spirit-rapper"
 "Moon-calf"
 "Piteous"
 "Trying to enlist interest"
 "Beware of him"
 ... (7)

Wavering between pity and suspicion, the crowd strives to nail down the meaning of disability in order to contain difference into a recognizable form. Melville compellingly registers the interpretive or categorizing impulse that the sight of physical difference stimulates in those who, all too snugly, consider themselves "normal." Disability is constructed in a social and contested process that remains external to the single individual, from which the disabled is forever excluded. As the narrator tells us: "happily oblivious of all gossip ... the deaf and mute stranger still tranquilly slept" (8).

Even as it capitalizes on the contemporary figure of the disability con, the novel reproduces the social and relational processes through which disability is constantly narrativized, questioned, and produced from the normative point of view of the outsider. Let me briefly mention, to conclude, two (parallel, yet opposing) examples where the disabled body poses an interpretive conundrum in public space: Black Guinea and Thomas Fry. We encounter the former early in the novel (for some, he is the first avatar of the confidence man), a "grotesque negro cripple" (10) and yet another instance of the disabled beggar. The scene depicts a (quite problematic) "game of charity" (12)

that sees the white crowd pitching coins (and not only) into the black boy's mouth,¹³ until a "wooden-legged man" (12) accuses him of being a sham: "a white operator, betwisted and painted up for a decoy" (14). The allegation halts the "pitch-penny game" (10) and the interest of the crowd of "playful almoners" (10) turns to the examination of the authenticity of Guinea's disability (and race!).¹⁴ The episode registers the public scrutiny of the disabled body I was mentioning before. But interestingly, the question is never resolved: we can never be sure whether Black Guinea's disability is fake or genuine. As Furui observes, the narrator keeps referring to him as a "cripple," emphasizing his "deformity" and "indigence" (CM 10). His linguistically loaded presentation of the character is however "deconstructed" by the accusation of fakery leveled by the wooden-legged man "which, at the same time as the narrator seeks to anchor the character's identity, constantly unmoors it" (Furui 62).

The novel persistently resists giving disability fixed meaning. Just as unmoored, although in an opposite way, is the identity of Thomas Fry, a "singular character in a grimy old regimental coat ... with interwoven paralyzed legs, stiff as icicles, suspended between rude crutches, while the whole rigid body ... swung mechanically faithful to the motion of the boat" (CM 93). Another professional beggar, the authenticity of his ailment is, unlike Black Guinea's, never questioned. The fakery in this case pertains to his storytelling (Furui 63). We first learn his true story: locked up in prison as a witness, "the wet and the damp struck into [his] bones" (CM 96) till he lost the use of his legs. But shortly after we see him posing as a veteran of the Mexican War, thus resignifying his own disability in a way more likely to elicit sympathy and benevolence. Disability in public, Melville is saying through Fry's fake story, is tolerated only when palatable for the society of "normates"; it needs to be domesticated, that is, or recast "into a model which can be socially recognized and compensated" (Samuels 74)—that is, "worthy" (a term that recurs throughout the novel) of charity. And yet, this

¹³ Susan Ryan has discussed how an apparently innocent charity game actually represents charitable giving as "public humiliation" with sexual undertones (698).

¹⁴ Discussing the intersections between disability and race, Ryan, who recognizes in Black Guinea's performance reminiscences of a minstrelsy show, points to the unsettling significance of the wooden-leg man accusations. If, she maintains, Black Guinea is in blackface, the problem is that it "disrupts the prescribed hierarchies of benevolence in which donors are supposed to hold more social power than the supplicants" (702).

worthiness is immediately deconstructed. Fry is the only character in the novel that openly lies about his disability and, although one of the passengers threatens to expose the “[rascal’s]” “wanton lies” (CM 97), we are led to forgive his peccadillo and sympathize with him. Is it bodily difference or the story that difference tells that prevails?

Aboard the *Fidèle*, disability is at once a deserving object of charity and a source of distrust and suspicion. With its medley of variously disabled characters, all of whom share the same narrative space, none of whom stands out from the rest on account of their physical difference, Melville perceptively points to the contingency of disability. Our attention is directed to the fluidity of the social relations and practices that yield variable or unstable interpretations of the disabled body: a body that, the *Fidèle* shows, stimulates narrativization. Disability has actually little to do with bodily difference, Melville seems to be saying. Or, as the cosmopolitan, one of the novel’s most enigmatic characters, quips: “You can conclude nothing absolute from the human form” (CM 226).

Flashback: Hooloomooloo

Years before *The Confidence-Man*, Melville had already congregated a “convention of cripples”—not on a ship but on an entire island this time. Now we enter a space that rather than public is exquisitely secluded. In *Mardi* (1849), Melville’s unsuccessful attempt at allegorical romance, the protagonist Taji, a whaleship deserter in the South Seas, is joined by King Media, the philosopher Babbalanja and others in an exploration of the archipelago of Mardi, in quest of beautiful Yillah, but, as Newton Arvin wrote, “also for the sake of touching at one quite independently allegorical island after another” (73). One of which is Hooloomooloo, or the “Isle of Cripples” (M 569).

Less remarkable than the existence of an island entirely populated by “cripples” is the story of “how they came to club” (569), which Melville is careful to detail at the beginning of the chapter. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Averse to the barbarous custom of destroying at birth all infants not symmetrically formed; but equally desirous of removing from their sight those unfortunate beings; the islanders of a neighboring group had long ago established an asylum for cripples; where they lived, sub-

ject to their own regulations; ruled by a king of their own election; in short, forming a distinct class of beings by themselves.

One only restriction was placed upon them: on no account must they quit the isle assigned them. And to the surrounding islanders, so unpleasant the sight of a distorted mortal, that a stranger landing at Hooloomooloo was deemed a prodigy. Wherefore, respecting any knowledge of aught beyond them, the cripples were well nigh as isolated, as if Hooloomooloo was the only terra-firma extant. (569)

The islanders are not native, then (not originally, anyway), but were there driven, in a sort of forced exile, by those who wanted to "[remove] from their sight those unfortunate beings." Less than twenty years after the publication of *Mardi*, the aforementioned "unsightly beggar ordinances" or "ugly laws" were passed, first in San Francisco (crucially, only two years after the end of the Civil War), then in other American cities, as Susan Schweik has shown. The ordinances, to which Schweik often refers in the singular—"ugly law"—to underscore a unified or shared project of ostracism across cities (3), might as well have been written by the inhabitants of the unnamed neighboring island. Consider the ordinance of Chicago:

Any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, *so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object*, or an improper person to be allowed in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares, or public places in this city, shall not therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under the penalty of a fine of \$1 [about \$20 today] for each offense. (Chicago City Code, 1881, qtd. in Schweik 1, my emphasis)

Palpable in the wording, like in the spirit that brought Hooloomooloo into existence, is "a judgment about *bodily aesthetics* and the use of law to *repress the visibility of human diversity*" (Schweik 3, my emphasis). As Jacobus TenBroek put it, "the actual physical limitations resulting from the disability more often than not play little role in determining whether the physically disabled are allowed to move about in the public spaces" (qtd. in Schweik 21). In other words, the discriminant (both in Hooloomooloo and in US cities) is less physical ability (whatever meaning we want to give the term) than is unsightliness (a term itself anything but objective). Like with the episode of the deaf-mute above, it lies, that is, less in an inherent quality of the

disabled body than in an external condition: the “unpleasantness” (Melville’s term) for those who deem themselves “normal.” Melville seems to have grasped very well that, as Stuart Murray succinctly put it, “disability disturbs” (qtd. in Schweik 4).¹⁵ And he not only anticipates the ugly laws but imagines other possibilities for the banned beyond mere exclusion. If the *Fidèle* is a public space pre-ugly-laws, then the Hooloomooloo “asylum” is akin to a secluded haven for the outlawed—and it looks very much like a democratic kingdom.

“Landing,” the narrator says, “we were surrounded by a heterogeneous mob; and thus escorted, took our way inland, toward the abode of their lord, King Yoky.” His reaction, “What a scene!” (M 570) betrays the normative conception of disability as a sort of Barnum-like spectacle:

Here, helping himself along with two crotched roots, hobbled a dwarf without legs; another stalked before, one arm fixed in the air, like a lightning rod; a third, more active than any, seal-like, flirted a pair of flippers, and went skipping along; a fourth hopped on a solitary pin, at every bound, spinning round like a top, to gaze; while still another, furnished with feelers or fins, rolled himself up in a ball, bowling over the ground in advance.

With curious instinct, the blind stuck close to our side; with their chattering finger, the deaf and dumb described angles, obtuse and acute in the air; and like stones rolling down rocky ravines, scores of stammerers stuttered. Discord wedded deformity. All asses’ brays were now harmonious memories; all Calibans, as angels. (570)

As Ralph Savarese and I have written elsewhere, there is no dismissing the pejorative language and freak-show air of the passage (*Herman Melville and Neurodiversity* 128, 130).¹⁶ The scene reproduces the pathologizing cataloguing impulse that, like with the deaf-mute aboard the *Fidèle*, insists on labeling difference. And yet, in some respects the episode is remarkably progressive. First, there emerges a sort of recognition of ability and the plain fact of doing things *differently*. Although we are told that King Yoky was “sadly lacking ... in all the requisites of an efficient ruler”—he was deaf and dumb and “save arms, minus

¹⁵ The rest of the quote is: because it offers a “double movement: a seemingly anomalous and deviant version of humanity that nevertheless focuses all too uncomfortably for many on the central issues of the human condition.”

¹⁶ The gist of my discussion of the Hooloomooloo chapter has appeared in our *Herman Melville and Neurodiversity*. I thank my co-author, Ralph Savarese, for letting me use and re-elaborate our previous material here.

every thing but an indispensable trunk and head"—we are also told that "he was competent" (M 570). Yet there is something more than a patronizing acknowledgement of competence. As the King "fell to gossiping with his fingers" (570), the narrator/protagonist Taji notes with interest "the rapidity with which motion was translated into sound; and the simultaneousness with which meaning made its way through four successive channels to the mind—hand, sight, voice, and tympanum" (570). Not mere recognition, then, but a sort of appreciation of the sensuous and synesthetic beauty of sign language. An appreciation, we might say borrowing from Michael Davidson, of "disability aesthetics"—or the aesthetic innovations (think of all the sensory modalities involved in the very idea of hearing a hand!) that may emerge not in spite of, but rather *because of* bodily or cognitive difference.

King Yoky, in contrast, is "horrified" (570) by the sight of his (able-bodied) visitors and calls them "frights" and "monsters" and demands that they "speak" (571), as if the scrutiny and suspicion we have seen aboard the *Fidèle* was now directed to the able-bodied. In fact, from the beginning, the staring that produces enfreakment is two-way. "For every stare we gave them," the narrator reports after his first glance at the islanders, "three stares they gave us" (570). The remark reverses the customary direction of the stare: "The history of disabled people in the Western world is in part the history of being on display, of being visually conspicuous," writes Garland-Thomson in "Staring at the Other." In the Mardian isle, "normalcy" is just as "hideous" and "visually conspicuous" as anything "crippled." The historian Mohi, one of Taji's fellow travelers, asks: "Are we then taken for cripples, by the very King of Cripples? My lord, are not our legs and arms all right?" (M 571). The question makes plain, again, the constructed nature of disability. It is not an innate fact. Placing the unmarked body as the exception, Hooloomooloo shows that not only the stigmatizing stare, but the entire rhetoric of disability can be used against the able-bodied. With tremendous wit, Melville dismantles the able/disabled binary. Who is "unsightly"? Melville seems to provocatively ask; who the "unfortunate being"?

Ahab: The *Samuel Enderby*

The journey through the *Fidèle* and Hooloomooloo has aimed at highlighting Melville's uneasiness with the stable categorical distinction

between the able and the disabled body. But how may this change our appreciation of Ahab, the “quintessential disabled figure in American literature,” according to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (*Extraordinary Bodies* 44)? For her, “Ahab’s amputation enslaves him in an obsessive pursuit of Moby Dick” (117) and his outrage toward the white whale that “dismasted [him]” (*MD* 163), she writes, “compensates for his vulnerability, rendering him both a sublime and a threatening version of the disabled figure” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 45). Less benevolently, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder lament the “vehement,” “unnatural insistence” (*Narrative Prosthesis* 119) on yoking Ahab’s dismemberment to his monomania, or “disability to insanity” (121). “The repaired leg,” they write, “signifies a physical and metaphysical *lack* that cements the captain’s identity as obsessive, overbearing, and overwrought” (120). Not only. Ahab’s “static identity” (121), the authors note, strikingly clashes with the novel’s universe of interpretive indeterminacy. “Ahab’s disability,” they write, “proves recalcitrant to the linguistic ambiguity that destabilizes the truth-telling systems of human knowledge addressed in the novel” (120).¹⁷

While the reductive and pathologizing view of disability that emerges from the indissoluble bond between Ahab’s amputation and his “madness maddened” (*MD* 168) is hard to dispute, I am dissatisfied with readings that insist on Ahab’s static identity as the only or predominant stance on disability in the novel.¹⁸ As I have tried to make clear, both before and after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Melville consistently views disability as contingent. Can the figure of Ahab possibly be so absolutely impervious to his creator’s insight? The problem with the static view of Ahab, it seems to me, is a fixation with character that ends up treating disability as metaphor and neglecting the many instances in which, as we have seen, Melville approaches disability it-

¹⁷ In conceptualizing the “prosthetic arts” of *Moby-Dick*, David Blake moves beyond the “centrality of Ahab’s ivory limb” to reflect on the ways in which it “provides a model for understanding other features of Melville’s book” (6). One of the aims of the book is to understand Ahab’s “prosthetization” of others to obtain political support.

¹⁸ In “Phantom Empathy: Ahab and Mirror Touch Synesthesia,” Ralph Savarese and I offer a more empathetic reading of Ahab that, however, rests on his missing leg, and show how it might be read, rather than lack, as a site of empathic and relational connections. The essay is part of the volume *Ahab Unbound: Melville and the Materialist Turn* (2022), that in different ways re-reads Ahab as a contingent figure worthy of compassion.

self, as a literal corporeal condition. There is room, I believe, for a more nuanced and complex view of Melville's treatment of disability also in *Moby-Dick*. But, as I have said, we need to move away from characterological considerations of Ahab to his surroundings, where his literal dismemberment is seen in relation. Enter space.

Let me start with the *Pequod*. Rightly contextualizing the novel in a period of an increasingly professionalized medical outlook on disability, Mitchell and Snyder observe how the captain "alters himself and the maritime world around him to better accommodate his disability" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 121). The catalog of physical alterations on the ship is quite impressive and indicative of Melville's prescience: an "auger hole" bored into the plank at either side of the quarter-deck—"His bone leg steadied in that hole; one arm elevated, and holding by a shroud; Captain Ahab stood erect" (*MD* 124); the "extra coat of sheathing in the bottom of [his whale] boat, as if to make it better withstand the pointed pressure of his ivory limb" (*MD* 230), among others.¹⁹ That Melville devotes so much space to detailing the *Pequod's* accessibility features seems to me noteworthy in its own right. Yet, for Mitchell and Snyder none of them are enough to escape the "medicalized determinism that pervades the novel" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 121). "Each of these innovations and inventions is paraded not as evidence of Ahab's resourcefulness," they maintain, "but as proof of the extent to which he will go to fulfill his 'singular' quest" (122).

Now, there would be much to discuss about the relevance of the ultimate purpose of an accommodation (as if the mere idea of accessibility were not enough); as well as about how Ahab's "resourcefulness" would make his identity less static.²⁰ For the purposes of this essay, however, I will focus on the mere existence of the accommodations themselves, which if on the one hand is indicative of Melville's prescient accessibility sensitivity, on the other can be viewed, more prosaically, as a device of narrative verisimilitude. As Mitchell and Snyder themselves concede, the physical innovations "[fend] off potential doubt that a one-legged captain could function in such a precarious environment" (121). Interestingly, however, and surprisingly absent

¹⁹ To see the full catalog, see Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis* 121-22.

²⁰ I am uncomfortable, in general, with the celebration of terms such as "resourcefulness" and "resilience," and struggle to see how they serve purposes other than a neoliberal agenda of success and meritocracy.

from Mitchell and Snyder's discussion, Melville gives us a counter-example. If for most of the narrative, that is, we encounter Ahab in an accessible environment where he is, like King Yoky, competent, what happens when he leaves his safe space, when such accommodations are missing? Enter the *Samuel Enderby*.

In Chapter 100, "Leg and Arm," the *Pequod* meets the *Samuel Enderby* from London, a whaleship whose captain, Captain Boomer, is himself a casualty of Moby Dick, to whom he lost an arm. The episode gives us the chance to compare two very different responses to acquired disability (amputation). Famously, Captain Boomer is nothing like Ahab: "No more White Whales for me: I've lowered for him once, and that has satisfied me" (MD 441). The disability/insanity pairing does not apply here. Even more interestingly, however, the chapter gives us the chance to compare (however fleetingly) the two ships.

Upon their encounter, and as soon as Ahab learns that the English ship, indeed, "[hath] seen the White Whale" (436), he rushes to the other vessel:

[Ahab] and his crew were dropped to the water, and were soon alongside of the stranger. But here a curious difficulty presented itself. In the excitement of the moment, Ahab had forgotten that since the loss of his leg he had never once stepped on board of any vessel at sea but his own, and then it was always by an ingenious and very handy mechanical contrivance peculiar to the *Pequod*, and a thing not to be rigged and shipped in any other vessel at a moment's warning. Now, it is no very easy matter for anybody—except those who are almost hourly used to it, like whalemens—to clamber up a ship's side from a boat on the open sea; ... So, deprived of one leg, and the strange ship of course being altogether unsupplied with the kindly invention, Ahab now found himself abjectly reduced to a clumsy landsman again; hopelessly eyeing the uncertain changeable height he could hardly hope to attain. (436-37)

This is the first time in the novel in which we see Ahab abandoning the safe space of the accessible *Pequod* and, for the first time, Ahab's physical difference—his prosthetic leg—becomes a disability. As Melville makes explicit, Ahab's difficulty stems not (or not only) from his physical limitation ("deprived of one leg"), but rather, crucially, from the fact that the *Samuel Enderby* was "altogether unsupplied with the kindly invention." (Note the copulative conjunction "and" that places both corporeal and spatial limitation at the same level.) The captain of

the *Pequod* is of course "irritated" and "exasperated" by the "untoward circumstance," especially, we are told, "by the sight of two officers of the strange ship, leaning over the side ... and swinging to him a pair of tastefully-ornamented man-ropes; for at first they did not seem to bethink them that a one-legged man must be too much of a cripple to use their sea bannisters" (437). The difficulty is overcome eventually, but only when Captain Boomer (a fellow amputee himself, mind you!) realizes Ahab's plight and concocts an alternative device or accommodation to facilitate accessibility:

[The] strange captain, observing at a glance how affairs stood, cried out "I see, I see!—avast heaving there! Jump, boys, and swing over the cutting-tackle!"

As good luck would have it, they had had a whale alongside a day or two previous, and the greatest tackles were still aloft, and the massive curved blubber-hook, now clean and dry, was still attached to the end. This was quickly lowered to Ahab, who at once comprehending it all, slid his solitary thigh into the curve of the hook ... and then giving the word, held himself fast, and at the same time also helped to hoist his own weight by pulling hand-over-hand upon one of the running parts of the tackle. Soon he was carefully swung inside the high bulwarks, and gently landed upon the capstan head. (437)

The episode aboard the *Samuel Enderby* makes the contingency of disability apparent. Very much like a proto-disability activist, Melville is careful to draw our attention to the environmental barriers that turn the otherwise perfectly competent captain of the *Pequod* into "too much of a cripple." Notice, too, that when using the improvised accommodation, Ahab is anything but passively hoisted. Conversely, Melville underlines the captain's physicality: we can almost feel his firm hold of the tackle, the motion of his arms ("hand-over-hand") as he actively climbs his way up to the vessel. Even more interestingly, the episode that for the first time highlights Ahab's disability (putting him out of his safe space) throws him, paradoxically, into a state of normalcy. Consider Melville's exact words: "Ahab now found himself abjectly reduced to a clumsy landsman"—an everyman, anybody, that is, the norm. When in an accessible space, Melville intimates, Ahab, missing leg and all, is more capable, more skillful, than a two-legged landsman. With a single brushstroke, Melville blurs the boundaries between the disabled and the "nor-

mate," the cripple and the landsman, disrupting the very category he had just erected.

Surely this episode does not blot out the maligned association between disability and insanity Ahab does embody, nor does it necessarily resolve Melville's "conspicuously divided" (Savarese 18) stance on disability. Yet this swift circumnavigation of Melville's sites of inquiry of corporeal difference bespeaks a disposition toward contingency, instability, and relationality that makes it hard to label his stance as "static."

Let me return to that space where my passion for American literature and Herman Melville started: Aula VII of Villa Mirafiori. That place where, thanks to Giorgio, I had my first teaching experience. My lecture back then was but a tentative, rough version of what is here presented. But back then I tried, I don't know how successfully, to honor one of Giorgio's most precious teachings, which I had learnt precisely in that room: the importance, the power, and the pleasure of close-reading. As I looked at Giorgio's students in that same Aula VII, I realized that they, just like myself years before, were, decidedly, fortunate beings.

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5. “Is It Possible, Thought I, that the Days of Romance Are Revived?”

Fragments from a Chivalric Melville

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1839 is the year of Herman Melville’s literary debut: on May 4 and 18 he published two short stories in the form of letters (signed by the cryptic pseudonym L.A.V.) in the *Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser*, the local weekly of Lansingburgh, a town near Albany, in the state of New York. These two first writings were subsequently entitled “Fragments from a Writing Desk,” a denomination that seems to refer to their fragmentary and not-yet-completed nature, as the continuous form “writing” may point to the somewhat immature cypher of this first Melvillian prose. Perhaps because of their experimental intent, these texts have received less critical attention than other works: scholars seem to have been unanimous in generally excluding them from the Melvillian canon because they were considered “high-flow silliness” (Mumford 37).

In line with this interpretation, one of the most accredited critical horizons sets Melville’s artistic birth in 1844, when he began writing his first novel *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, published in 1846—and it should be noted that it was Melville himself who stated, in a famous letter to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, that his *Künstlerroman* began in 1844, thus excluding what he had written before that year:

My development has been all within a few years past. I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian Pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould. So I. Until I was twenty-five [in 1844], I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. (*Correspondence* 193)

Melville himself denies any connection between the “development” in “English soil” of the ancient “seed” and its very first “bulb,” the two installments in the *Lansingburgh* newspaper from 1839.

And yet some scholars, while adopting the prevailing critical line disregarding the “Fragments,” have identified certain key traits of Melville’s subsequent intellectual and literary development in his very early prose. While Lewis Mumford declares that the “Fragments” “are full of hints about his reading and his preparation for authorship” (38), Bryan Collier Short highlights how these works represent for Melville “a halting but crucial step toward freedom. For his later career, that step is, like the sea to Ishmael, not without meaning” (19).¹ For both scholars, Melville’s experiments pivot around the construction of a liberated, independent authorial voice.

Against this interpretive background, the “Fragments” appear as a clumsy but meaningful enterprise, one that can be particularly useful to retrace Melville’s creative parable and to understand the intellectual soil in which it blossomed. The emphasis on the formative nature of the “Fragments” propels a critical reflection not only on the text and the embryonic presence of some of the key characters of Melville’s prose, but also on the context of its production, a moment when Melville seemed to be an author in search of authority—a key point on which I will return soon. There is a sort of textual tension at play, because both the form (the tentative style) and the plot (the protagonist’s search) give the impression of a work that is “halting,” uncertain, and precisely for this reason crucial in the pursuit of a register, a style, an authorial voice. As John Bryant points out, “uncertainty” is a profitable hermeneutic lens with which the “Fragments” can be read and interpreted: these writings are “too astonishing to be dismissed as juvenilia”; indeed, their “narrator gives us a glimpse of Herman as an untried adolescent male, threatening to expire from love’s ‘uncertainty,’ and as a young man stuck in a suburban village too small for his expansive desire and well-formed intellect, the Fragments more importantly re-

¹ To quote some Italian studies, Ruggiero Bianchi points out that the “Fragments” inaugurate that taste for the blending of genres and styles which would later become a conscious choice in Melville’s mature works while also anticipating his characteristic tendency toward digressions that appear inconclusive and non-functional (XVI). Furthermore, according to Paolo Simonetti, the “Fragments” should be read as a laboratory, as a prelude and initial spark of Melville’s subsequent career, but also as a fundamental step in illuminating the darkness of the ‘pyramid’ in which the young Melville long remained “seminal” (15).

veal a kind of deeply psychological and metaphysical and yet starkly realistic writing" (435).

This chapter intends to investigate the possibility that the "Fragments" are a threshold on the rhetorical construction of Melville's language: not an unfortunate exception to his later production but a laboratory (therefore by definition a testing ground) that introduces the reader to the literary experiments of the more mature Melville. In other words, the "Fragments" can be seen as a site of uncertainty in which the young Melville tries to find his authorial self. In this sense, these works—in particular "Fragment no. 2" on which I will focus—are intentionally devised as an artistic search, symbolized in the text by the quest carried out by the narrator. The narrator's enterprise transcodifies the author's research, it is the fictional frame and the narrative mechanism of the story that, thus, seem to take on the characteristics of a chivalric romance (although it is a short story in prose and also in the epistolary form, subject to several generic influences).² This interpretation of the "Fragments" as chivalric romance may suggest a reading of Melville's first writings through the lens of some of the Italian chivalric poems, such as Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1516) and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581). Indeed, the investigation at their center turns out to be a particularly effective critical category for Melville's early prose, both to examine its extradiegetic context and to interpret its text. In particular, by resorting to the narrative code of the quest as developed by Sergio Zatti in his studies on the *Furioso* and the *Liberata*, I will also try to trace some correspondences between the authors under analysis, testing a possible shared *intentio auctoris* to construct their own authorial and authoritative figure, understood as an act of overcoming an initial state of vulnerability, because all these authors were, or felt to be, in need of legitimation.

² Simonetti highlights how the "Fragments" are subjected to the double mediation of the epistolary form and of the anonymity—the latter would be the reason for their posthumous attribution. In this sense, these texts are obscured by a double screen from the very beginning: on the one hand, there is the narrative device of the epistolary form, much in vogue in the nineteenth century not only as a means of publishing anonymously but also as a deliberate poetic choice; on the other, the filter of posthumous attribution, which, although it seems to imply Melville's refusal of authorship of the work, nevertheless suggests the author's desire—perhaps unconscious or simply vain—to preserve the clippings containing the texts and thereby indirectly safeguard their attribution to him (12).

From a textual point of view, however, the adoption of the chivalric romance as a reading paradigm is motivated not only by the “Fragments” construction, centered as it is on the narrator’s quest (L.A.V., sender of the letter and autodiegetic narrator of the story), but also by the use of a series of tropes typical of the chivalric genre: the pursuit of a girl, the overcoming of challenges, the forest, and the enchanted castle as settings. Ultimately, Melville’s pseudo-chivalric instance could point the way to an evolution of the genre and its recodification in a political, historical, cultural, and even geographical context profoundly different from Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Along these lines, chivalric literature could be considered as an archetype of the representation of the search, of the quest precisely, whose fundamental trait is the dialectic established between the literal search for a person or an object (for instance, Angelica in the *Furioso*, the unnamed girl in the “Fragments”) and its transformation into “a cognitive investigation [in which t]he ancient movement of the *quête* is intellectualized and gradually assumes ethical and epistemological dimensions. Here the goal of ‘acquisition’ is no longer an evasive object but rather a problematic truth” (Zatti 44). Problematising further the understanding of the quest beyond this model, Melville’s epic-chivalric example broadens its scope to a meta-literary and perhaps existential reflection.

Therefore, through the lens of the chivalric code, I propose a two-fold aim: on the one hand the requalification of the “Fragments” as an attempt to forge the Melvillian style, thus placing them in continuity with the author’s subsequent literary production; on the other hand, the consideration of the potential of the epic-chivalric genre beyond its traditional context, that is, transposed into the United States, in the early 1800s. The background has certainly changed but is influenced by a certain political and national turmoil that is in some way comparable to the Italian situation in the sixteenth century. Similarly to Italy, the United States of the 1800s was, indeed, a nation made of independent and competing entities—consider that the US was a very young nation on the verge of a civil war, in this sense—and viewed as a political laboratory.³ In this reality at once foreign and similar to Renaissance Italy, the chivalric paradigm seems to have evolved into a

³ Consider, for instance, Thomas Jefferson’s fondness for Italy and for the Italian Renaissance, with particular interest in Niccolò Machiavelli’s political theories such as his definition of “liberty.” See Monticello Research Institute, monticello.org.

renewed form with a more complex register. But what does the model of the quest represent and imply in the American nineteenth century? Does the chivalric configuration become a narrative archetype with an intrinsic value or is its *raison d'être* necessarily linked to the cultural situation, to the space-time, in which it reached its peak? Melville himself asks this very question: "is it possible, thought I, that the days of romance are revived?" (197).

One essential issue comes to the fore, and it is the very critical viability of reading the literary genre of the chivalric romance—those prose or verse narratives popular in the courts of early modern Europe recounting the heroic deeds of knights-errant—as a code: a model for communicating a set of cultural values and socio-political anxieties by using genre-specific topoi and modes of storytelling. Shifting the paradigm of chivalric romance from literary genre to code implies raising questions about its trans-historical trajectory and inquiring into the dynamics that its recodified version may entail. According to Zatti, the chivalric romance has always been subject to recodifying tensions (16), and, in this sense, its transposition into the American nineteenth century may represent a further aesthetic and moral stage. With their mixing of codes and styles (the epistolary form, the chivalric romance, the publication in installments, the anonymity of the author), the "Fragments" develop the theme of uncertainty as a wide artistic horizon along which the narrator can wander like a medieval knight. The fact that the mode of writing is hybrid builds into the uncertainty out of which the construction of the story and, more crucially, of the narrator's (and the writer's) self may emerge. This is the quest at the core of the "Fragments," one that, as William Gilman and Dorothee Metlitsky Finkelstein argue, is the first variation on the theme of frustrated quests in Melville's production (Gilman 121; Finkelstein 31). This is so because, as we will see, L.A.V.'s quest will not be successful: the narrator will not conquer the lady he pursues. And yet, I argue, Melville's quest will be so.

The Context: "Things Unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme"

The political proximity between Italy and the United States is one of the aspects investigated by Dennis Berthold in his study on Melville and Italy, in which he underlines how the absence of a legendary past pushed the United States to draw on the Italian historical heritage as

a source of inspiration for republican initiatives. As regards the specific case of Melville, Berthold suggests that: "Beginning with his third novel, *Mardi* (1849), Melville mined Italian art, history, and politics as a fictional and poetic resource. Every one of his subsequent works overflows with allusions and metaphors drawn from his developing knowledge of Italy, from its current political struggles back to the Renaissance and beyond" (5). We know therefore that ten years after the publication of the "Fragments," Melville's references to Italian culture would become more explicit and recursive and his knowledge of the subject also involved the historical period of the Renaissance.

Other important aspects of Melville's intellectual and literary relationship with Italy can be found in the considerable number of studies on his bibliographical sources,⁴ which highlight the presence of Italian works in his library. Furthermore, in 1857 the author of *Moby-Dick* took a trip to Italy that would prove important for his future poetic production. In his diary, he notes some destinations that are particularly significant for the intertwining of his prose and the epic-chivalric theme that I mean to investigate; Melville visited Sorrento, the birthplace of Torquato Tasso, then his Roman home, and finally his "prison" in Ferrara. Hennig Cohen sees in Melville's interest in Tasso a communion of spirit and destiny, in particular in Tasso's parable of initial success followed by a "pathetic decline," in which the American writer may have recognized himself (256).⁵ It is also known that Melville owned a *Jerusalem Delivered* and, therefore, that he read or, at least, knew Tasso's poem (257). Another particularly indicative detail of Melville's intellectual involvement with epic poems is the note he left on his copy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (an edition of 1836), in which, next to the invocation to the Muse in the first Book, he reports the names "Ariosto and Tasso" (Parker 65).⁶ The passage reads:

⁴ In this regard, see Parker 98, in which the scholar notices Melville's interest in two short stories by Giovanni Boccaccio, which he read in John Dryden's translation and reworking "Sigismonda and Guiscardo" and "Cimon and Iphigenia." Dennis Berthold also focuses on late medieval, Renaissance Italian works that would have influenced Melville's intellect, particularly the political theories of Niccolò Machiavelli and Dante's cultural and religious allusions in the *Commedia* (see Berthold). An exhaustive list of Melville's sources is included in Bercaw.

⁵ Further evidence of Melville's admiration for Tasso can be found in his copy of *Germany* by Madame de Staël, in which he underlines a passage which deals, in sympathetic tones, with the story of Tasso's internment (*Melville's Print Collection Online*).

⁶ See also the digitalized copy of Melville's original on <https://melvillemarginalia>.

That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (I, 14-16)

What strikes the critical imagination is the third verse, in which there is the opening towards a still unexplored future; confronting "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" is an artistic undertaking and finding the form, the voice, the authority to do so is a search—put another way, a quest. In reading Milton addressing the "Heav'nly Muse," Melville may have thought of Tasso's preface, because it too invokes the classical authority of the Muse who

su nel cielo infra i beati cori
 hai di stelle immortali aurea corona,
 tu spira al petto mio celesti ardori. (I, 2)

(but far in heaven among the blessed choirs
 wreath deathless stars into a golden crown,
 breathe into my heart the fire of heavenly love) (I, 2)⁷

However, it is worth noting how Tasso's poem opens with a verb in the first-person singular, "I sing," and only afterwards is the Muse's intercession introduced. In a way perhaps more curious or less immediate, in the critical comparison Melville includes Ariosto too; the proem of the *Furioso* centers on the first-person singular of the author/narrator who does not invoke any help (except that of the very human Alessandra Benucci) and therefore gathers the scope of the work around the sole authorial intention—a stylistic choice that insinuates, perhaps, the full legitimacy of the man as an author. Ariosto, indeed, uses the expressions "I speake," and "I haue promist to fulfill," and, in doing so, he announces, as Milton would do after him, that his narration is a quest never attempted before:

Dirò d'Orlando in un medesimo tratto
 Cosa non detta in prosa mai, né in rima. (I, 2)

(I will no lesse Orlandos acts declare,
 A tale in prose ne verse yet sung or sayd) (I, 2)⁸

org/Viewer.aspx?did=107&pid=36066. Accessed 20 Feb. 2026.

⁷ The English translations of *Jerusalem Delivered* are taken from the 2000 edition by Anthony Esolen (Johns Hopkins UP).

⁸ The English translations of *Orlando Furioso* are taken from the 1607 edition by John

Melville brings three staples of the epic poem into dialogue, creating an interaction based, in my opinion, on the agency of the narrator within the textual ecology ("canto," "dirò") and that of the author in the extra-textual world; these lines may have spurred Melville's reflection on the author's role and his authority.

However, despite the centrality of the first person of the author/poet, it is undeniable that for Ariosto and Tasso the role of the artist was connected to an explicitly subordinate political position at court. As Lisa Regan has noted, Ariosto's social and economic stability also passed through his literary works which, for this reason, could not be separated from formal references and praise towards his patron, Isabella D'Este (51). Regan focuses her analysis of the *Furioso* on the textual references to the author's position of vulnerability, a condition that the poet shares with his patron, as a noblewoman: "Because Ariosto's own position, and that of his peers, was as vulnerable as that of the noble ladies, one can find hints of identification with these women. ... All of Ariosto's writing, therefore, was an effort to stabilize his position, and to impress his patrons into remunerating him as a poet rather than a bureaucrat" (52). Ariosto depicts himself as a vulnerable author, "in constant need of praise" and legitimation (Regan 52), whose work, however, simultaneously actualizes a sort of self-affirmation—note, for instance, not only the affirmative of the verbal forms in the first-person singular, but also the reference to the influence of poets on the definition of the posthumous destiny of historical figures in canto XXXV, stanza 26.⁹

It is perhaps precisely the agency in the diegesis as a reaction to the extra-textual vulnerability, or the authorial construction that originates from a socially (and, in Melville's case, culturally) weak position and proceeds by trial and error, that brings Melville closer to the quests of epic-chivalric authors. Melville's vulnerability as a budding writer resided in his young age and his unconventional education; a condition that made his programmatic search for authorial voice particularly challenging. Mumford is convinced that Melville prepared

Harington, available at the University of Michigan Library, Digital Collections: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A21106.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

⁹ "Non fu sì santo né benigno Augusto / come la tuba di Virgilio suona. / L'aver avuto in poesia buon gusto / la proscrizione iniqua gli perdona." ("Augustus Cesar was not such a saint / As Virgil maketh him by his description/ His loue of learning seus th that complaint/ That men might iustly make of his proscription").

himself for authorship, a practice particularly useful for him who “resembled a deep well: he had to pump all sorts of muddy water and stale slush to the surface before the crystal liquid began to run. He was fortunate, however, in belonging to a social class that had libraries” (38). Although the authorship/authority issue is especially problematic given Melville’s choice to publish the “Fragments” anonymously, nevertheless these texts portray the author’s symbolic errancy and existential trials in the first years of his career.

It is legitimate to ask, however, whether and to what extent the American writer knew the texts of Ariosto and Tasso before publishing the “Fragments” in 1839.¹⁰ Upon his father’s death in 1832, Melville was forced to abandon school at the age of thirteen to become a clerk at the New York State Bank in Albany; from this moment on, until his departure for sea in 1841, he had to take on various jobs, all with little success. From these events derives his economically and culturally vulnerable condition (especially compared to other contemporary authors) which however did not prevent him from approaching and then involving himself in the intellectual circle of Albany, enrolling in the “Ciceronian Debating Society” first (in 1836), and becoming president of the “Philo Logos Debating Society” later (in 1838) (Gunn 208). It is reasonable to assume that these environments exposed the young Melville to the literary canon of his time: in 1835, for example, he attended a series of lectures given by Westerlo Woodworth on American poetry and, the following year, one given by Simeon De Witt Bloodgood on American literature (Parker 39). According to the newspaper *The Zodiac*, in his lectures Bloodgood introduced the work of Timothy Dwight, author of *The Conquest of Canaan*, considered the first American epic poem (Perry 5). The discussion of this work could hardly ignore an introduction to the tradition of the genre, especially considering that the production of both Ariosto and Tasso was systematized only a few years later (in 1846) in *Stories from the Italian Poets: with Lives of the Writers*, by Leigh Hunt.

Although my research into Melville’s sources has not revealed any clear evidence that Melville knew Ariosto and Tasso as early as

¹⁰ Bryant lists some possible sources for Melville’s literary debut: “Apart from the measured lines of Shakespeare and Milton, the oratorical periods of Edmund Burke and Henry Clay, the empyrean of Coleridge, the social constraints of Cooper, and the orientalism of Byron, there was the homegrown Gothicism of Edgar Allan Poe” (435).

the 1830s, it nevertheless seems philologically possible that he did. In light of this conclusion, the interpretation of the chivalric tropes of the “Fragments” through the lens of the quest presents itself as a pretty solid key to interpret the narrative choices made by Melville in his very first work. The “Fragments” thus take the literary form of a metaphor for narration as an enterprise, especially for a vulnerable author in need of legitimation, and of the authorial construction as an almost mystical errancy within the fields of stylistic uncertainty.

The Text: “An Expedition, so Peculiar and Suspicious”

As discussed above, “Fragment No. 2” is particularly interesting for this reflection on Melville’s chivalric romance, because it contains a series of textual examples (both word choices and narrative mechanisms) that, in particular, reveal Ariosto’s influence on the style of Melville’s young prose. Seduced by an unknown girl who leaves him a note signed with the Italian word “Inamorata,”¹¹ the protagonist L.A.V. decides to follow her, immediately asking himself: “Is it possible, thought I, that the days of romance are revived?” A question that is however followed by a peremptory: “No, ‘The days of chivalry are over!’ says Burke” (197). Despite the statement that the age of chivalry is now over, L.A.V. follows the Inamorata, of whom he knows nothing (“a figure effectually concealed in the ample folds of a cloak”), along the bed of a river, over a bumpy path not without second thoughts; during the chase the girl remains silent and inscrutable while invariably keeping a certain distance from the narrator, sometimes slowing down to wait for him, other times speeding up her pace:

At last perfectly breathless, I fell into a walk; which, my mysterious fugitive perceiving, she likewise lessened her pace, so as to keep herself still in sight, although at too great a distance to permit me to address her. (“Fragments” 197)

¹¹ The term “inamorata” is introduced right at the beginning of the story and, even if in the feminine, it seems to refer to the proem of the *Orlando innamorato* by Matteo Maria Boiardo (the chivalric poem preceding and inspiring Ariosto’s *Furioso*), which in the second stanza of canto I, reads: “Non vi par già, Signor, meraviglioso / Odir cantar de Orlando innamorato” (“Don’t think it strange, my lords, to hear / Orland innamorato sung”). The English translation is taken from the 2004 edition by Charles Stanley Ross (Parlor Press).

Interpreting her elusive nature with the words of Zatti, the Inamorata can be seen as the personification of the “lack” that is the founding principle and the driving force of the chivalric quest: indeed, the Inamorata as lack develops through the temporary filling of voids, their subsequent re-presentation, and an always frustrated tension towards the construction of a harmonious order (70). In so doing, the chivalric quest channels the protagonist’s desires towards a coherent object (and objective) which must be always unfulfilled to remain functional to the narrative economy by propelling its main mechanism, the quest. In other words, the quest must remain an open search.

For this reason, L.A.V.’s attempts to approach her are vain: the Inamorata cannot be reached but only chased and, in this sense, she is at the center not only of the quest but also of the story; being the lack that the narrator tries to overcome, she is also at the center of his life. Quoting Zatti once again, the girl in “Fragment no. 2” embodies the technique of “the deferral,” understood as “simply the prolongation of the unfulfilled narrative ... of the various quests” (32). L.A.V.’s success (reaching the girl, discovering what this chase is about) is always deferred. Trying to reach the Inamorata nevertheless, L.A.V. takes off some of the clothes that weigh him down, in order to follow her more easily: “inwardly resolving that I would come at the bottom of the mystery, I desperately flung the mantle from my shoulders, and dashing my beaver to the ground, gave chase in good earnest to the tantalizing stranger” (“Fragments” 198). This gesture recalls in its own way the stripping of Orlando in the grip of madness and seems to signal a key passage of the quest, as an expression of “the drama of the cognitive process”—a specifically Ariosto-esque conception of the chivalric investigation (Zatti 49). Indeed, in the *Furioso*, Orlando strips himself to signal his entry into the existential dimension of madness, with its cognitive implications, while in “Fragment no. 2” a similar though less radical act may indicate L.A.V.’s overcoming of the epistemological categories of the past, to inaugurate a new season of research. As mentioned, this is also a season of frustration, as an address that L.A.V. directs to the reader reveals (and from this extra-diegetic comment the reader realizes to be the recipient of the narrator’s letter): “plucking up my spirits, which I can assure you courteous reader, had fallen considerably below zero by the ill-success of my previous efforts,—I again rushed madly forward at the summit of my speed” (“Fragments” 198). What L.A.V. may gather from this condition is the importance of re-

maintaining uncertain when searching, the need to overcome challenges of various kinds to find, or build, one's authority.

Another literary element typical of Ariosto's rhetoric and present in the "Fragments" is his irony. Both Melville and Ariosto seem to resort to irony to stress their narrative self-consciousness and to mitigate the influences of masterpieces from the past, thus carving an agentic space for their authorial voice. In both cases, irony draws attention to the artificiality of the text (as well as of the context) and is a vehicle for dialogical reflections. In "Fragment no. 2," for instance, L.A.V. considers killing himself in a very dramatic register, but then he changes his mind recalling a chess game he still has to win:

I bethought me of putting a romantic end to my existence upon the very spot which had witnessed my discomfiture. . . . But when the first transports of my wrath had passed away, and perceiving that the waters of the river, instead of presenting an unruffled calm, as they are wont to do on so interesting an occasion, were discomposed and turbid; and remembering, that beside this, I had no other means of accomplishing my heroic purpose, except the vulgar and inelegant one, of braining myself against the stone wall which traversed the road; I sensibly determined after taking into consideration the aforementioned particulars, together with the fact that I had an unfinished game of chess to win, on which depended no inconsiderable wager, that to commit suicide under such circumstances would be highly inexpedient, and probably be attended with many inconveniencies. (199)

This passage reveals an explicit parodic intent of contemporary sentimental fiction, evident in the factitious allusions to romantic elements (Norberg 72). The story's irony suggests a reconsideration of a specific trope of the genre while also giving the author the opportunity to quote and yet distance himself and his work from a certain literary tradition. Like the use of the first-person singular, this kind of humor places the author at the center of his enterprise and is key to the development of his intellectual independence and authority.

After several unsuccessful attempts to reach the mysterious girl, L.A.V. and the Inamorata finally arrive at "a grove" ("Fragments" 200), a forest one might say in chivalric terms, where a marvelous building stands. Once he has crossed the threshold of cognitive inquiry, thus stripping himself of previous intellectual criteria, L.A.V. enters the symbolic place of wandering: the forest, which, as Zatti points out: "is

the ancient symbolic territory of disorientation and error – the wood of adventure and of the labyrinth” (17). It is in the forest that L.A.V. seems to gradually comprehend the almost metaphysical nature of his quest:

Lost in conjecture, during the whole of this eccentric ramble, as to its probable termination—the sombre gloom of these ancestral trees, gave a darkening hue to my imaginings, and I began to repent the inconsiderate haste which had hurried me on, in an expedition, so peculiar and suspicious. (“Fragments” 200)

The mystery of the girl thickens as the environment becomes more and more intricate, so much so that L.A.V. confesses, in another address to the reader, to have been so scared that he wanted to escape, but he eventually restrained himself thinking about his “romantic” enterprise:

Once, I am almost ashamed to own it to thee, gentle reader, my mind was so haunted with ghostly images, that in an agony of apprehension, I was about to turn and flee, and had actually made some preliminary movements to that effect, when my hand, accidentally straying into my bosom, gripped the billet, whose romantic summons had caused this nocturnal adventure. (200)

L.A.V. is finally led inside a building “emergent from the shades of this romantic region” (200). From the outside, the castle looks scary, especially because it seems to corroborate the mysterious halo surrounding the narrator’s quest: “it seemed to have been built with a jealous eye to concealment; and its few, but well-defended windows were sufficiently high from the ground, as effectually to baffle the prying curiosity of the inquisitive stranger” (202). From the inside, the castle is opulent, described as “a spectacle as beautiful and enchanting as any described in the Arabian Nights,” but still enigmatic, and it turns out to be inhabited by a “creature, whose loveliness was of that spiritual cast that depended upon no adventitious aid, and which as no obscurity could diminish, so, no art could heighten” (202). Crucially, this “fair enchantress” presents herself holding “a lute” (203), an instrument typically associated with medieval courts and of troubadours.

At this point, L.A.V. seems to have come one step closer to the resolution of his investigation: he thinks to be about to discover who this lady is and why he was taken to her; in the presence of this second woman, he thinks she is actually the Inamorata who sent him the note,

and, the mystery solved, he is ready to finally conquer the objective of his chase. Yet L.A.V.'s search has always been a quest, and every quest must, by definition, remain unfulfilled. The narrator exhorts the resolution of the quest: "I feel my passion is requited: but, seal it with thy own sweet voice, or I shall expire in uncertainty!" (204). Crucially, the woman remains silent, once again (as for the girl before her) proving that knowledge remains inaccessible. L.A.V. despairs, "maddened at her silence," and the story/letter ends on a note of total frustration, potentially opening up to a future search, a never-ending quest:

Frantic with the thought, I held her from me, and looking in her face, I met the same impassioned gaze; her lips moved—my senses ached with the intensity with which I listened,—all was still,—they uttered no sound; I flung her from me, even though she clung to my vesture, and with a wild cry of agony I burst from the apartment!—She was dumb! Great God, she was dumb! DUMB AND DEAF! (204)

"Fragment no. 2," therefore, culminates in an open ending, which reaffirms the value of the quest as a cognitive tool in itself, beyond the achievement of the pursued object and, thus, regardless of its success. The quest must necessarily self-generate, never concluding and, in this case, it seems to go beyond the diegetic dimension, overflowing into the extra-diegetic one. With Zatti, one may argue that the obstinately silent female figures embody the double failing register of the quest, the material and the intellectual: "the fruit is no less bitter when the search takes place on the level of intellectual assessment rather than on that of material appropriation" (55). The story ends with an exclamation in capital letters, signaling the ultimate frustration for the impossibility to conquer the Inamorata and solve the mystery.

The "Fragments" can thus be seen as a projection of Melville's anxieties with respect to his own still fragmentary authorial construction. In the coincidence between the narrator's inquiry and the author's inquiry—the two dimensions connected by the condition of shared "lack," which pushes both towards inquiry—, Melville seems to identify himself not as a knight errant ("The days of chivalry are over!") but rather as a wandering author. Through this self-perception as still in progress, Melville re-signifies the logic and the expressive code of chivalric romance in a new context: the quest is unfulfilled and, therefore, remains a quest, leaving L.A.V. wandering in the uncertainty of the search. The interesting point is that, on the contrary, Melville's

quest as an author seems to be successful because it allowed him to write his story and, thus, to achieve his objective. More to the point, Melville's quest is successful precisely because it retains its traits of uncertainty in building the authority for a future writer; it remains open to a future development. Put in other terms, it is a successful quest because, in remaining so, it also functions as something else: the foundation for Melville's subsequent narrative enterprises.

It is difficult to measure the depth of Professor Mariani's influence on my intellectual formation, for it has been woven into the very texture of my way of reading, thinking, and writing.

In my wandering—and wondering—as a young PhD student, along a quest marked by the uncertainty accompanying intellectual beginnings, he provided a guide and a compass. The forest of critical problems can be particularly daunting: the density of theoretical traditions, the weight of canonical voices, and the awareness of entering conversations long underway can produce a great sense of uncertainty. Yet Professor Mariani showed that uncertainty is not antithetical to scholarship, it is its point of departure; rather than clearing the path by simplifying complexity, he taught me how to dwell within it, pointing towards an authority not emerging from the suppression of doubt, but springing from it. Research, in his example, is not a linear progression but a never-ending quest.

Most importantly, he built an ethical dimension of academic life from which I learned that the quest for one's authorial voice is formed not in certainty, but in the sustained effort to always respond—critically and responsibly—to what one reads, to read texts (as plural and foreign as they can seem) as addressing us. Being a re-researcher, thus, means being always and forever intellectually exposed to error, revision, and change. As he knows very well, I'm not a Melvillian scholar but I was eager to be part of this book to show my gratitude for his teachings as they have defined the scholar (and the person) I hope I have become.

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6. “Rome fell flat on me”: Herman Melville, Tourist in the Eternal City

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I.

Herman Melville's 1856-57 *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant* has attracted little critical interest compared to many of his other works. And there are very good reasons for that: the text appears as little more than a personal diary, written in telegraphic prose and interspersed with laconic, terse annotations. For Robert Milder, the journal is written in “a style somewhere between a Whitmanesque catalogue and a long telegram” (23). Melville's journal, in this sense, differs remarkably from other contemporary accounts, such as Hawthorne's, for example, which extensively record the author's sightseeing activities. However, despite its conciseness, Melville's journal is a typical product of the touristic perspective of the day, as I will try to suggest in this essay.

From his earliest works to the poems of his last years, travel was a constant feature of Melville's writings which, as Peter Gibian remarked, “coincided with a great age of American travel” (21). Indeed, as Tim Youngs succinctly stated, “Melville's works depend upon travel” (242). And yet, in contrast with the early travelogues that launched his literary career, Melville's travel journals seem to have exerted more influence on his later poetry and lectures than on his prose. Focusing on the brief section devoted to his stay in Rome, I intend to examine the touristic dimension of his 1856-57 European travel. To this end, I will discuss Melville's passage on Rome from his 1857 Journal in comparison with three lectures he gave following his return from his trip. The sources of the first of these are to be found in Melville's travel to the Eternal City: “Statues in Rome” (delivered at least sixteen times between November 23, 1857, and February 23, 1858). The second lecture

focuses on his travels in the South Seas, and the third is concerned with travel as a more general phenomenon: "The South Seas," and "Traveling" (this last delivered only three times, between November 7, 1859, and February 14, 1860).¹

Melville had long desired to visit Rome. An entry in his first journal, recording his 1849-50 travel to England, notes his disappointment when he realized he would not be able to go there on that occasion: "Bad news enough — I shall not see Rome — I'm floored —" (*Journals*, "Journal 1849-50" 20). A fascination with Italy, Dennis Berthold recalls, had intrigued Melville ever since the early stages of his career: "Italy was always with Melville, not just the Italy of tour guides and travel narratives, art museums and history books, but an imagined Italy constructed from his omnivorous reading and vitally cosmopolitan cultural surround" (4).

He finally accomplished his long-anticipated visit to Italy during his second European tour, when he traveled through the country from Sicily to the Alps in two months, from February 13 to April 15, 1857. His visit to Italy was part of a longer journey through the Levant, the Mediterranean, and parts of central Europe. Unlike his 1849 journey—which he undertook at the age of thirty, full of expectations and in good physical and moral health—the 1856-57 trip was carried out in a despondent mood and in poor health. Strongly urged by his family and physician, Melville's journey was financially supported by his father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw, who feared that Melville had overworked himself to the point of suffering a nervous breakdown and believed that he needed a journey to recuperate.²

In addition to the comparatively lackluster reception of *Moby-Dick* by both readers and critics, Melville's reputation—after his initial success with the South Seas novels *Typee* and *Omoo*—had suffered further significant blows with the publication of *Mardi* and, above all, *Pierre*;

¹ The lectures were not published during Melville's life, and no manuscript survived. The texts of these lectures were reconstructed through surviving contemporary newspaper reports. The exact titles also cannot be determined, since there are different variants mentioned by newspapers. The title of the third lecture was probably longer, "Travel: Its Pains, Pleasures and Profits," although, as I said, everything about these texts is conjectural and tentative. The reconstructed texts are now available in Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860* 398-409 ("Statues in Rome"); 410-20 ("The South Seas"); 421-23 ("Traveling: Its Pleasures, Pains, and Profits").

² See Melville, *Correspondence* 297.

or, *The Ambiguities*. As Milder noted, at the time Melville "was laden with the baggage of an irresolvable spiritual crisis and of a quarrel with his American audience, and therefore with America itself, which had led him to question man and the course of history" (22). Thus, it was a dejected and physically precarious Melville who set sail for Europe on October 11, 1856.

Two weeks after leaving New York, Melville landed in Glasgow. From there, he visited Edinburgh, Newcastle upon Tyne, and Lancaster, before reaching Southport and Liverpool, where he met his long-time friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who since 1853 had served as US consul in Liverpool, a position he would hold until the end of August 1857 (Hawthorne, *French and Italian Notebooks* 908). When they met, Hawthorne found his friend in relatively good condition, though he observed that Melville "did not anticipate much pleasure in his rambles, for the spirit of adventure is gone out of him. He certainly is much overshadowed since I saw him last" (Hawthorne, *English Notebooks* 437).

From Liverpool, Melville sailed to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, stopping at Gibraltar, Algiers, Egypt, Jerusalem, and Constantinople before reaching Italy from the South. Unlike the typical Grand Tour route, which approached the 'Italian journey' from the North, Melville—as Ralph Waldo Emerson had done before him—arrived in Messina on February 13, 1857, and then traveled North through Naples, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Padua, Venice, Milan, Turin, Genoa, before continuing to Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands, then returning to England, and finally to Liverpool, from which he sailed back to New York, arriving on May 19.

As Howard C. Horsford writes in the Historical Note to The Northwestern-Newberry Edition of Melville's *Journals*, "[i]n much of what Melville saw and noticed, his experience did not differ remarkably from that of many other travelers, lay and clerical" (186). Keeping a journal of the transatlantic passage and European tour was indeed characteristic of travelers of the time. And yet, Melville's 1856-57 journal does not seem to have any direct bearing on his fiction. The journey took place at a moment when he was beginning to focus primarily on poetry.

Among his major poetical works, the later, long poem *Clarel* (1876) is heavily indebted to the Palestinian sections of the journal. And so too is his latest collection of poems *Timoleon*, privately published by Melville only a few months before his death in 1891, which contains a section titled "Fruit of Travel Long Ago," several poems of which

seem to be a direct outcome of his journey in the Mediterranean many years earlier. Curiously, here Melville seems to reverse the chronological order of his journey, as if he were retracing the steps of civilization backward. The places he had visited are mostly presented in a mythical, almost transhistorical perspective, as icons of Western civilization. And yet, the figure of the tourist makes an appearance here too: the short poem "The Attic Landscape" opens with these lines: "Tourist, spare the avid glance / That greedy roves the sights to see" (*Published Poems* 300), which also appears to voice a quest for an anti-touristic experience, as if Melville were here lamenting the pervasive touristic attitude of the times. Likewise, in his earlier collection *John Marr and Other Sailors*, also privately published in very limited numbers in 1888, we find the poem "To Ned," where the author nostalgically asks himself whether the modern traveler, the tourist, will still be able to enjoy the Marquesan islands in the same way he and 'Ned' had enjoyed the place in their youth (*Published Poems* 237-38).

But some years earlier, some time after his 1856-57 journey, Melville wrote another poem that is much more directly linked to the discourse of tourism: "An Afternoon in Naples in the Time of Bomba," on which he worked for many years without ever managing to complete it and which was not published until long after the author's death, in 1924. Clearly evocative of his stay in the city, this poem describes Naples as "The Siren's seat for pleasurists lies" (*Napoli al tempo di Re Bomba* 71). In other words, Naples is presented here as a typical tourist destination, visited by a narrator who is himself, in turn, a tourist figure, ostensibly striving to gain access to the city's inner life.

Aside from these cases—and quite surprisingly, given the vogue of the time—this tour does not appear to have directly affected his creative writings. By contrast, his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was at the time spending nearly five years in Europe, kept very detailed, lengthy journals, from which he derived first a collection of sketches about England titled *Our Old Home*, and then his well-known romance *The Marble Faun*, set in Italy, largely in Rome, where the Hawthornes spent two extended stays, the first from the end of January to the end of May 1858; and the second from October 1858 to May 1859. And yet, paradoxically, many of the places that Melville visited during his 1856-57 trip are mentioned in some of his earlier works, such as the "Cheopian Pyramid" in *Pierre* (P 343); "St. Peter's grand dome" that the narrator of *Mardi* sees "soar ... far aloft" (M 515); or "Rome's accursed

Campagna" in *Moby-Dick* (MD 424); or also the "theatre of San Carlo" in *The Piazza Tales* (PT 12). All iconic cultural landmarks as well as renowned tourist destinations which Melville would only later see and visit in person, but whose metaphorical power had exerted a profound influence on his imagination.

Although long coveted, Melville's stay in Rome was relatively brief by the standards of the time: less than a month, from February 25 to March 21, 1857. His journal records that his initial impressions of the Eternal City were mixed to say the least. Upon arrival, he wrote: "At daybreak were on the Alban mount. At 10 A.M. were in Rome. First letter from home. Stopped at hotel de Minerva. In square is obelisk on elephant. Walked to Capitol. Took view from tower. Whether it is having come from the East, or chafed mood, or what, but Rome fell flat on me. Oppressively flat" (*Journals* 105-06). Like many other tourists today as then, upon entering the Eternal City Melville experienced a sense of disappointment: Rome seemed at first to fall short of his long-cherished expectations.

In addition to the above-quoted passage, in the first entry written upon his arrival we also read: "Tiber a ditch ... St. Peters looks small from Tower of Capitol ... Front view disappointing ... Interior comes up to expectations. But dome not so wonderful as St. Sophia's.—exhausted at 3 p.m. Dined at 6 & to bed" (*Journals* 106). His sense of disappointment is compounded by a pronounced feeling of loneliness: "No place where lonely man will feel more lonely than in Rome (or Jerusalem)" (106).

As Melville began exploring the city, however, he was increasingly impressed by its grandeur. Not only ancient ruins appeared to him incredibly beautiful ("Went to Baths of Caracalla. — Wonderful. Massive," 106) but less ancient buildings and statuary also were exciting for him: "The four fountains — Monte Cavallo — colossal horses ... gigantic figures emblematic of gigantic Rome" (107). Even modern Rome seemed to him an offspring of antiquity, so that St. Peters "in its magnitude & colossal statuary seems an imitation of these fragments" (107). Thus, for Melville, Rome's grandiosity is typified by a continuity of history which can be easily perceived by the visitor. One of his first touristic forays into the city, on March 3, was to "Palazzo Barberini to see Cenci" (108), the famous portrait of Beatrice Cenci which was at the time unanimously assumed to have been painted by Guido Reni, a copy of which plays a role in the novel Melville published five years

earlier, *Pierre*. Melville, as he records in his journal, was affected by the “[e]xpression of suffering by the mouth” of the portrait, which to him had an “appealing look of innocence” that he thought was not “caught in any copy or engraving” (108), an observation that would later find its way into *Clarel’s* Book 3 (C 3.7 16-19). And yet, tellingly, a few days earlier, on February 26, one evening, while walking around via del Corso, he had stopped in a “picture dealers’” shop, where he purchased a “[s]urprising cheap” copy of the painting “for \$ 4” (*Journals* 106)—a typical tourist souvenir.

Indeed, as many readers have noted time and again, Melville’s journal is stereotypical in several respects. Quite surprisingly, unlike other travelers of the time, he does not appear to seek the unique, or the offbeat; instead, during his visit to Rome, he follows a standard tourist circuit, recording his impressions tersely and without extended reflection. In this sense, he seems to thrive in ordinary, commonplace tourist destinations. He does all the ‘must-dos’—such as the Coliseum, the Vatican Museum, or the Villa Borghese—without much, if any, quest for off-the-beaten-track experiences, or interest in any hidden, less-known sights. Likewise, in his journal we do not find any particularly interesting or revealing reflections, considerations, or thoughts about his visit, apart from very succinct notes about where he goes and what he sees. And, as was typical of tourists of the day, Melville did not limit himself to the capital alone but also visited its surroundings. First, on March 17, he went to Frascati, traveling on the first railroad of the Papal States, which had just opened. There he spent a day visiting the Torlonia and Aldobrandini villas and saw Cicero’s summer resort at Tusculum. Then, three days later, on March 20, he went to Tivoli, where he visited the ruins of Hadrian’s villa, and was impressed by its “extent,” and by the “solemn scene” it presented (113).

Thus, on the one hand, the author was evidently fascinated by what he saw, by the artistic and historical richness of Rome; yet, at the same time, it seemed that Melville wanted to resist the classic ‘tourist gaze’ of the time.³ Precisely by visiting the mandatory destinations prescribed by tourist guides to Rome, but without indulging in any of the typical reactions of tourists (such as those which Mark Twain would mock in *The Innocents Abroad* some ten years later), Melville appears to

³ The notion of the tourist gaze was formulated by John Urry in 1990 and has since become a staple of tourism studies.

challenge, at least in part, the dominant tourist gaze of his days while simultaneously subjecting himself to some of its dictates.

Despite its relative briefness, his stay in Rome was the longest stop of his Italian journey. After that, he made short stops in Florence, Bologna ("First thing at Bologna, tried Bologna sausage, on the principle that at Rome you first go to St. Peter's," 116), Venice, Milan—where he stopped to admire da Vinci's *Last Supper*, though he found it "faded and half gone," and where he saw the Duomo, which he found "[m]ore satisfactory" even "than St. Peter's" (121). He then visited Lake Como, Novara, Turin, and Genoa, where his Italian journey ended, before he took the return route to England first and then to the United States.

The critic that has devoted the most attention to Melville's relationship with Italy is undoubtedly the above-mentioned Berthold, who published a landmark book on the role of the Italian Risorgimento in Melville's thought and work. As he writes, "Herman Melville, more than any American writer of the antebellum period, alluded so frequently and knowledgeably to Italy" (xi). According to Berthold, a historical contingency symbolically links the fates of the two countries: the Risorgimento in the case of Italy and the Civil War in that of the United States.

William L. Vance's *America's Rome*, which Berthold quotes, had already noted how "representations of Rome [were working in the US] as a kind of running commentary on the changes that America itself was undergoing. Once more, in representing Rome the Americans represented—and sometimes discovered—themselves" (qtd. in Berthold 5). Building on this critical stance, Berthold expands and deepens Vance's perspective in relation to Melville's work. According to Berthold,

Melville's Italy, then, is not so much a place as it is a state of mind, or, better, a constellation of texts, artifacts, and ideologies gathered and mediated by an aggressively acquisitive intellectual culture, the aspiring American Renaissance that agglomerates, like Whitman in "Song of Myself," all it sees and touches into an ostensibly new, inchoate, dynamic, national identity. (4)

Berthold reads the image of Italy in Melville in historical and cultural terms. He does not aim to compare the image of Italy that emerges from Melville's works with the historical reality of Italy at the time, but rather to understand why Melville was so obsessed with the country, and what function it played in his works and in the cultural, political,

and social landscape of antebellum America. In other words, as Berthold himself states, he seeks to investigate Melville's Italy as "a cultural construction, one produced in America for Americans, satisfying American needs and desires in the turbulent and uncertain decades surrounding the Civil War" (4).

In so doing, Berthold follows the perspective Milder had opened some ten years earlier, when the latter observed how "the great influence of Melville's travels was upon his idea of history and America's place in history, and consequently upon his stance as a writer as he struggled to redefine his subject matter and his relationship to a prospective audience" (22). Yet, this viewpoint inevitably tends to subsume Melville's touristic practice within a broader cultural and historical framework, thereby devaluing the specificity of his experience as a tourist. By contrast, in this essay I want to reconsider the importance of Melville's 1856-57 journal in relation to the touristic logics of the time. While it is undoubtedly true that Melville's travels as a whole cannot always be understood in touristic terms, it is equally true that the journey he undertook in 1856-57 was an eminently touristic one.

II.

If, on the one hand, Melville's journey to Europe and the Levant did not have any traceable effect on his later fiction, it is chiefly, as noted above, because Melville was at the time shifting his attention from fiction to poetry. Among his major works, *Clarel* is quite overtly influenced by Melville's journal, but it is perhaps not the best specimen of his writing in which to search for and track down the impact of touristic discourse. Instead, we need to consider three other texts of a different kind: the three lectures that Melville gave after his 1856-57 tour, the first of which was unquestionably a direct outcome of his stay in Rome during his Mediterranean tour.

Upon his return to the United States, Melville once again found himself facing difficult financial conditions. Before and during his journey, he had hoped to secure some kind of political appointment in the public administration, which, however, never materialized. On the advice of friends and relatives, he began thinking of another possible source of income besides writing, one that was quite popular at the time: lecturing. Drawing on his recent travel experience, in the fall of 1857 he began lecturing on the sculptures he had seen in Rome.

"Between November of 1857 and February of 1858," Merton M. Sealts, Jr. writes, "Melville lectured in sixteen cities and towns" (517), mostly along the eastern seaboard, from New York to Montreal, but also westward as far as Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Detroit, and southward into Tennessee. As Sealts observes, Melville generally received favorable reports—more enthusiastic in the East, with some reservations in the West and South.

It was probably because of this feedback that, for his second season of lecturing in 1858-59, Melville decided to present another lecture—sometimes in combination with the first—revisiting his experiences as 'the man who lived among the cannibals' in the South Sea Islands, a topic he believed would be more entertaining and palatable to a popular audience. This second season revealed a more marked difference in reception: in the East, the lecture was generally held in high esteem; in the West, its reception was at best mixed and at worst very poor (526-28). For the third season, in 1859-60, Melville wrote a third lecture, the text of which has only been very partially and tentatively reconstructed. He was able to arrange only three readings, all held in the East, and these were barely reported by the press. This marked the end of his experience as a lecturer.

Despite the fact that all three lectures deal with Melville's travel experiences, these reconstructed texts have never been read in relation to the touristic discourse of the time. Yet, in their appeal to a general audience, they clearly aim at gratifying a pleasure-seeking public and at stimulating the desire for exotic, far-away destinations. Taken together, these three lectures represent an attempt to combine Melville's personal experiences abroad with the new and increasingly popular touristic craze that was booming during his lifetime.

Indeed, the opening sentence of the first lecture, "Statues in Rome," is an appeal to ordinary people to enjoy the pleasures of travel, including those of art and museum-going. Melville is resolute in stating that "[a]rt strikes a chord in the lowest as well as in the highest; the rude and uncultivated feel its influence as well as the polite and polished. It is a spirit that pervades all classes" (*PT* 398). By inviting an audience composed of largely everyday people to enjoy the sculptures of Rome, he is implicitly addressing them as potential tourists, or at least as armchair tourists. In fact, transatlantic tourism was beginning to expand during those years. While it is true that it boomed only after the Civil War, it is also the case that in the 1850s transatlantic travel was already enjoy-

ing growing popularity. According to contemporary statistics, between 20,000 and 30,000 American tourists traveled to Europe each year. Melville's own voyage had itself been a typically touristic venture.⁴

Melville was therefore fully aware of the touristic import of his first lecture, as well as of the other two. He introduces himself not as an expert but as an ordinary observer, as a tourist enjoying Roman art: "I, who am neither critic nor connoisseur, thought fit to introduce some familiar remarks upon the sculptures in Rome, a subject which otherwise might be thought to lie peculiarly within the province of persons of a kind of cultivation to which I make no pretension" (399). He describes his experience as that of a visitor overwhelmed and saturated by the artistic richness of the Eternal City. His perspective is that of a common person encountering foreign works of art: "I shall speak of the impressions produced upon my mind as one who looks upon a work of art as he would upon a violet or a cloud" (399). In this sense, he appears to fully embrace a tourist gaze: "My object is to paint the appearance of Roman statuary objectively and afterward to speculate upon the emotions and pleasure that appearance is apt to excite in the human breast" (399).

According to Sealts, Melville's lecture was on the whole well received, despite occasional complaints about the choice of the topic which some listeners found too scholarly for a general audience. For Sealts, the author's intent in delivering this lecture was evident: "ancient civilization, creative and seminal, knew how to value its art and artists; nineteenth-century civilization, pragmatic and derivative, ignores art, preferring to exalt the ephemeral machines and buildings constructed by modern technicians" (518). Reading the lecture primarily along these lines connects it to the history of civilizations; emphasizing instead its relationship to emerging tourist culture has the advantage of situating Melville more firmly within his own historical moment.

Melville's choice of topic for his second season of lecturing, "The South Seas," can similarly be seen as an effort to revive and capitalize on a subject that had proven popular at the beginning of his career, and on a region enveloped in exotic allure that appealed to the prospective tourists of his day. His hope that such places might remain "uncontaminated by the contact of civilization" and "unspoiled

⁴ See on this Dulles.

in their simplicity, beauty, and purity" is coupled with his awareness that "the result of civilization, at the Sandwich Islands and elsewhere, is found productive to the civilizers, destructive to the civilized" (PT 420). While this observation may be read as a critique of progress and its costs—particularly the loss of natural resources and indigenous communities—it also functions as an appeal to the growing number of travelers who, for the first time in history, could afford to travel for pleasure alone.

Even more explicit, in this sense, is the title Melville chose for his third and final lecture: "Traveling: Its Pleasures, Pains, and Profits." Here the allusion to the discourse of tourism is unmistakable, as travel is explicitly linked to pleasure, gain, and discomfort. Since, as noted above, the text of this lecture is the most fragmentary of the three—amounting to just three pages—we must speculate about its content more than we do for the others. Nevertheless, its general tone seems fairly reliable. Given Melville's personality, it is very unlikely that he spoke in unqualified praise of tourism as a purely middle-class pastime. Yet this third lecture contains a series of reflections on travel that recall those made by Mark Twain at the conclusion of his well-known *The Innocents Abroad*. Like Twain, though some ten years earlier, Melville appears well aware that even travel undertaken for pleasure can have unpredictable and profoundly positive effects on the traveler.

Indeed, this lecture amounts to nothing less than a eulogy of travel itself: "Travel to a large and generous nature is as a new birth. Its legitimate tendency is to teach profound personal humility, while it enlarges the sphere of comprehensive benevolence till it includes the whole human race" (PT 423). Melville thus appears cognizant of the inevitability of the new touristic forms of traveling which, in his view, are ultimately beneficial. Tourism at that time was still restricted to a limited number of people and was far from being a mass phenomenon; yet many of the traits that would later characterize modern tourism were already perceptible to acute social observers such as Melville. His own experience is emblematic of the tensions inherent in the nascent touristic industry, as both his early travels to the South Seas and his middle-aged Mediterranean tour suggest. As he states in concluding his final lecture, "The sight of novel objects, the acquirement of novel ideas, the breaking up of old prejudices, the enlargement of heart and mind,—are the proper fruit of rightly undertaken travel" (423).

The first time I read Melville was when I was a kid and my father gave me an abridged edition of Moby-Dick with the story of Ahab's vengeful quest. I still have a vivid memory of the striking, dramatic image on the cover of that book. Then, I read it again for my first-year university exam of American literature. The following year, one day, my professor, Alessandro Portelli, posted a notice on the door of his office which read something like: "room 7, next week – Prof. Giorgio Mariani – Rutgers University, lecturing on Moby-Dick." I had no idea who this guy was, but, having known Prof. Portelli for a while at that point, I felt urged to go to...a lecture that would change my life forever and set me on the professional path I eventually followed.

Giorgio, who back then was an assistant professor at Rutgers University, gave the most engaging, stimulating, theoretically sound and critically inspiring lecture I have ever heard, not only as a student but in my entire career. I remember him guiding us through complex critical arguments with the passion of a dedicated teacher.

Right after the lecture, as we were climbing the stairs to Portelli's office amid a horde of other students who all had urgent questions for him, I ran after Giorgio, peppering him with enquiries on Melville, Moby-Dick, and especially the critical stances he had been discussing.

That day made all the difference for me, and I'll never be grateful enough to Giorgio for that lecture and the discussion that followed. I assume, however, that this experience has been shared by many, since Giorgio has been a committed mentor and a dedicated teacher who has helped generations of young scholars enjoy Melville and use his texts as a prism through which to read and interpret the manifold expressions of American culture.

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7. Universal Distrust: Melville's *The Confidence-Man* and Emersonian Philosophy

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One great blemish on the popular mind of America
and the prolific parent of an innumerable brood of evils,
is Universal Distrust
Charles Dickens

Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), the last novel to be published in his lifetime,¹ was long overlooked by readers and dismissed by critics. Its humorous, allegorical, and satirical tone, the rapid introduction and disappearance of numerous characters—often within the span of one short chapter—and the narrator's deliberate choice of not offering any insight into the characters' minds are some of the elements that contributed to the critical and commercial failure of the book. By 1856, Melville had written ten books of fiction in as many years, however the poor sales of earlier works such as *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *Israel Potter* (1855), and *The Piazza Tales* (1856) might have led him to conceive *The Confidence-Man* as his final published novel. As Thomas Dumm observes, Melville "seems to have written it as much for himself and his small group of loyal readers as for a general public" (312).

Whether envisioned as a personal intellectual endeavor or as a cultural product awaiting appreciative readers, Melville's "problem novel," as John Bryant describes it ("Problem Novel" 316), began to

¹ Here, and elsewhere in this article, I use the term "novel" for the sake of simplicity. However, as John Bryant has argued, it might be more accurate to describe Melville's text as "prose fiction," given his choice to integrate in this rich and complex narrative typical elements of the novel, anatomy, allegory, satire, and comedy ("Problem Novel" 316).

awaken critical interest in the second half of the twentieth century, with Richard Chase's 1949 essay marking a turning point in its re-evaluation.² This shift occurred during a period of dramatic change in Melville's literary reputation. From the 1920s onwards, his oeuvre "went from obscure to canonized, from derided for opacity and even insanity to celebrated for edgy modernism and sophisticated social criticism" (Sachs 315). This process, known as the Melville Revival,³ secured Melville's place within the American—and Western—literary canon. According to Bryant, Melville's enduring legacy lies in his ability to "expose the perpetual needs, conflicts, and nature of self, art, and democracy in our lives" ("Persistence" 10). The continued relevance of certain texts is a fascinating and complex phenomenon shaped by multiple factors. In general, great works of art that engage with fundamental human concerns possess a remarkable capacity to transcend the specificities of time and place, speaking anew to different communities and interpreters. Melville's writings are no exception. His lasting cultural significance also derives from what Giorgio Mariani, in *Allegorie impossibili*—a revision of his doctoral dissertation, which Agostino Lombardo described as "the first truly organic history of Melville criticism in the United States and in Europe" (253)—defines as "the plurality of discourses that render any definitive allegorization highly unstable—indeed, practically impossible" (41). It is precisely this openness, this resistance to closure, that allows Melville's works to remain continually meaningful to diverse readers across time and space.

To contemporary readers, Melville's *The Confidence-Man*, set on April Fools' Day on a Mississippi riverboat bound for New Orleans and centered on the exploits of a con man,⁴ may well appear as "the prescient summa of our post-truth world" (Simonetti 117). This "comedy ... of action" (CM 71),⁵ in which the shape-shifting title character moves from one encounter to the next, deceiving his fellow passengers

² See Chase.

³ For a short yet detailed account of the Melville Revival, see Marovitz.

⁴ While the titular confidence man seems to appear as various different characters, "many critics prefer to read the various con men as one Protean, supernatural, even Satanic con man in disguise" even though "only ironic hints, not conclusive evidence, support this" (Bryant, "Problem Novel" 316).

⁵ All quotations from *The Confidence-Man* are from the Northwestern-Newberry edition of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Vol. 10). All other citations from Melville are taken from the same edition, abbreviated as *WHM* and followed by volume and page number.

and seeking their confidence “either in the form of money or companionship” (Simonetti 117), has even been described by Philip Roth, in an e-mail to *The New Yorker*, as “the relevant book about Trump’s American forebear” (Thurman). Like Donald Trump—whose 2016 election, together with the Brexit vote, prompted the Oxford Dictionaries to select “post-truth” as its Word of the Year—Melville’s protagonist is more than a liar. Ordinary liars acknowledge that truth exists and deliberately choose to distort it (Bufacchi 349); by contrast, the confidence man at the center of this book seems to be moved by the same intent used by those who employ the strategy of post-truth, which is to “undermine the theoretical infrastructure that makes it possible to have a conversation about the truth” (Bufacchi 349). In Melville’s “most prophetically postmodern” (Milder 39) book, truth is already in crisis. Every encounter between the confidence man and the passengers aboard the Mississippi riverboat becomes a test between deception and sincerity, charity and exploitation, good and evil.

It is within this intricate moral and epistemological web that Melville’s critique of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalist ideals becomes most apparent. If Emerson envisions self-reliance and individual intuition as infallible compasses for moral clarity and intellectual honesty, Melville exposes their darker side—the ease with which self-trust turns into self-delusion, and the transcendental faith in human goodness which dissolves amid the duplicities of a capitalist and deceitful society. In this sense, *The Confidence-Man* not only anticipates the logic of post-truth but also exposes a profound philosophical confrontation between optimism and skepticism, between Melville and Emerson as “respective spokesmen of the Everlasting Nay and the Everlasting Yea” (Rose 250).

The Floating World of *The Confidence-Man*

Before examining in greater depth Melville’s response to Emerson and, more broadly, to Transcendentalism in *The Confidence-Man*, it is useful to first consider the novel’s overall structure and design. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a work that asks us to question how trust in people, in truth, and even in narrative itself can survive in a world of masks, monetary exchanges, and hidden meanings, does not unfold in a straightforward plot, nor does it invite a single, definitive interpretation. The action revolves around a series of brief encounters aboard the

Fidèle,⁶ as the confidence man, shifting from one disguise to the next, repeatedly tests and deceives the ship's passengers.

In the first part of the book (Chapters 1–25), the confidence man appears in seven disguises. The first of these figures is the deaf-mute introduced in Chapter 1, who writes on a slate a series of biblical maxims on charity—"thinketh no evil," "believeth all things," "never faileth." Opposite these affirmations hangs the barber's sign bluntly declaring "No Trust" (CM 5). Between these two messages—the call to faith and the warning of deceit—the moral drama of *The Confidence-Man* starts to unfold. Soon another incarnation of the confidence man appears: Black Guinea, "a grotesque negro cripple" (CM 10), who solicits alms from the passengers. Predictably, his requests are met with skepticism, as some of the passengers doubt the authenticity of his condition. The ensuing conversation between two of them underscores a central theme of the novel: while charity and appearances are one thing, truth and facts are quite another (CM 14) and therefore no one and no thing can be fully trusted.

In Chapters 4 and 5 another avatar becomes the subject of the action: John Ringman, "the man with the weed," whose black crepe suggests that he is in mourning. Ringman first approaches a merchant, skillfully earning his trust by claiming they had once been in business together. Having established this connection, he then manipulates the merchant's sympathy by recounting a series of personal misfortunes and appealing to his supposed "friend" for financial help. Soon after, Ringman strikes up a conversation with a young student reading Tacitus, whom the confidence man believes to be "moral poison" (CM 26). Ringman—a con man turned moralist—criticizes Tacitus's cynicism, which he believes to be socially destructive. "A heretic, [with] not one iota of confidence in his kind" should not be taught in universities, and readers should turn instead to "serene and cheery books, fitted to inspire love and trust" (CM 27). In a clearly ironic move, Melville—writing a book that is anything but serene or cheery—puts front and center the tension between truth and deceit, skepticism and confidence, exposing how narrative itself, whether in the form of everyday storytelling or great literature, can serve as an instrument of manipulation.

⁶ The riverboat's French name, *Fidèle*, may be translated as "faithful," "accurate," or "believer."

The story proceeds with yet another manifestation of the confidence man. Chapters 6–8 are focused on “the man in gray” asking for donations to the Seminole Widow and Orphan Asylum. His appeals are met with understandable distrust evident in an exchange between him and one of the passengers who succinctly encapsulates the pervasiveness of the sentiment in a reply that reminds the confidence man that everyone is a performer, because “to do, is to act; so all doers are actors” (CM 31). However, not all the passengers are as cynical as the “wooden-legged man” who so caustically rejects the ideas of the “man in gray.” Many fall prey to his schemes, and he succeeds in collecting generous contributions for his supposed charitable cause.

In Chapters 9–13 the confidence man reappears as the president of the Black Rapids Coal Company trying to get people to invest in his enterprise. Among the people he meets is the same collegian who earlier carried the Tacitus volume. The two, while discussing investing opportunities, also touch upon the “gloomy souls” who “whether in stocks, politics, bread-stuffs, morals, metaphysics, religion—be it what it may—trump up their black panics in the naturally-quiet brightness” (CM 48). Interestingly, according to the confidence man, these “ravens at second hand” usually get their “sulk” from “some of those old plays” seen on the stage, or “some of those old books [found] up in garrets” (CM 49). Through this exchange, Melville once again asks his readers to reflect on the power of culture and literature to shape, and often distort, the public’s capacity for belief. After witnessing the confidence man successfully convincing people to invest in his company, the reader is taken out of the plot by a narrative voice which emerges in Chapter 14, the first of three chapters devoted to the nature of fiction and functioning as metacritical commentary. As Gary Lindberg notes, Chapters 14, 33, and 44 are at “once technical discussions of genre and epistemological comments on the narrative world itself. In stylizing his own fictive gestures and making us self-conscious about predication, belief, and interpretation, Melville is defining the mimetic mode of this novel” (28). In the first of these chapters, Melville—assuming the role of a confidence man himself—turns the reader’s attention to the problem of inconsistency. Questioning the expectation that fiction should faithfully mirror life, he reminds us that “no one man can be coextensive with *what is*” (CM 70), therefore arguing that lived experience cannot serve as the ultimate measure of a story’s plausibility and claiming for himself as a writer a “fidelity to the actual radical discontinuity and plurality of the self” (Tanner 36).

Soon, the narrative resumes with the appearance of another confidence man: the herb doctor, who sells his “Omni-Balsamic Rein-vigorator” and tries to convince the passengers that the sick should find comfort in trust: “weakness, is it not the time for confidence? Yes, when through weakness everything bids despair, then is the time to get strength by confidence” (CM 80). More so than the others though, the herb doctor and his remedies are questioned by several other characters. His most formidable opponent, Pitch the Missourian, appears in Chapter 21 and bluntly dismisses the doctor’s appeals: “I have confidence in distrust; more particularly as applied to you and your herbs” (CM 108). Pitch is, however, accosted by another incarnation of the confidence man, the Philosophical Intelligence Officer, who engages him in a lengthy debate on the value of confidence and ultimately persuades him to hire a boy to assist with his business.

By Chapter 24, Pitch meets yet another manifestation of the confidence man: Frank Goodman, the cosmopolitan, who will be the final embodiment of the knave. He describes himself as a “warm and confiding” man, who as a true “citizen of the world ... return[s] good for ill” (CM 133). Urging the Missourian to “mix in, and do like others,” he reminds him that “life is a picnic *en costume*; one must take a part, assume a character, stand ready in a sensible way to play the fool” (CM 133). The cosmopolitan then meets another passenger, Charles Arnold Noble, with whom he talks extensively on a number of topics ranging from Indian hating to the reliability of the press. Though their subjects vary, each ultimately circles back to the same preoccupation with confidence—or the lack of it—culminating, predictably, in the cosmopolitan’s request for money.

In Chapter 36, the cosmopolitan is approached by Mark Winsome, a mystic widely read as a parody of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his disciple Egbert, whom many critics believe to be modeled on Henry David Thoreau. Their conversation on philosophy unfolds across several chapters, during which Winsome and Egbert elaborate on their philosophical vision, which the cosmopolitan finds inhuman in its abstraction and its refusal to place confidence in ordinary human beings.

The plot begins to draw to a close in Chapter 42, when the cosmopolitan encounters one of his final victims: the barber, whose skepticism has been evident since the novel’s opening through his sign reading “No Trust.” The cosmopolitan urges him to place greater faith in his clients and persuades him to sign an agreement to remove the sign,

promising to reimburse any losses incurred through misplaced confidence. When the barber, certain of the result, immediately demands fifty dollars, the cosmopolitan deplores his attitude and walks away without paying for his shave.

In Chapter 45, the final chapter of the novel, the cosmopolitan engages an old man in yet another discussion of trust and confidence. By this point, readers—uncertain of what they have been reading, skeptical of the narrative itself, and wary of the (mis)uses of truth and trust—are left with the narrator's final, unsettling remark: "something further may follow of this Masquerade" (CM 251).

The New Astrea—Emigrated—Vanished—Gone: Confidence and Truth in Melville's Vision

Upon finishing the novel, readers are prompted to reflect on what can at times be a frustrating experience. Trying to trace who is who, picking up the scattered hints about the characters' identity that Melville leaves here and there, all the while attempting to understand the meaning of the impossibly complicated and yet very thin plot line, is a task whose reward lies in getting a sense of Melville's very own way of perceiving and writing about the bewildering complexity of modernity. In this sense, readers can come to appreciate the novel's disorienting form when seen as a deliberate aesthetics of uncertainty.

Aboard the *Fidèle*, there is "no figure of recognized authority" (Lindberg 24); the narrator himself "remains utterly detached from the action" (Bryant, "Problem Novel" 316), and his "abdication of authorial responsibility" leaves the reader in a "quagmire of speculation on motives and meanings" (Bryant, "Melville's Comic Debate" 157). As Joseph Urbas notes, like the narrator and the characters, the reader too is "torn between two diametrically opposed tendencies: belief—*confidence*—on one side, and skepticism on the other" ("The Confidence-Man" 417). As an early *Athenaeum* reviewer described it in 1857, this "morality enacted by masqued players" (qtd. in Bryant, "Problem Novel" 332), centered on a character who "exists at the limits of identity" and who "represents the point at which being someone ... merges with, because it depends upon, the state of being no one in particular" (Cole 390), is inevitably disorienting for any reader who approaches it seeking for univocal meaning. Although some grounding can come from Melville's choice to preserve the three unities of time, place, and action, this sta-

bility is jeopardized by an “essentially dramatic” technique made up of “stage-like” dialogues often “presented with no more than a cursory identification of the speaker” (Dubler 307-08), as well as by a quite radical “suppression of portraiture” (Tichi 641) that offers readers little access to the characters’ interiority. These formal features contribute to making *The Confidence-Man* not merely a narrative of deception and disguise, but a dramatization of the multiple crises—epistemological, moral, and social—that define the modern world.

As the narrator reminds us in Chapter 33, one of the three metanarrative chapters addressing the relationship between fiction and reality, readers often seek in fiction even “more reality, than real life itself can show” because they believe that “as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie” (CM 183). Melville’s satire accomplishes precisely this. Indeed, the microcosm aboard the *Fidèle* allows the author to explore, as D. Graham Burnett argues, “what America offers to the problems of thought and being,” namely “space, movement, destabilized social hierarchies, perpetual and sequential opportunities for self-invention” (West and Burnett 103).

A novel about appearances, where the stability of subjectivity is questioned and where the crisis of knowledge emerges in full force, *The Confidence-Man* can be read as Melville’s attempt to find meaning within the shifting moral and social terrain of nineteenth-century America. Nathaniel Hawthorne perceptively captured the epistemological darkness in which Melville found himself when, in a diary entry from 1856, he observed that his friend “can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief” (163). It is precisely this tension between faith and skepticism that finds expression in *The Confidence-Man*, where trust is at once indispensable and absurd, and where “belief is possible ... [but] disbelief is inevitable” (Bryant, “Melville’s Comic Debate” 157).

As James Duban and William J. Scheick aptly observe, the theological breach between faith and skepticism “corresponds with the epistemological lacuna between appearance and reality” (309), a gap that becomes the novel’s central concern. For Melville, this vision of reality ultimately leads to the bleak realization that “knowledge is an impossible ideal, and confidence in others a hopeless, if necessary, delusion” (Cole 385). Yet, in the modern world of shifting appearances, distrust emerges as a method of inquiry (West and Burnett 105)—a means of discerning, however provisionally, what might *pass for* truth. Looking for any means that could shed light on reality, Melville uses ambiguity

as a mode of revelation, hoping to catch a glimpse of “the depths ... boiling up to the surface” and finding in these moments the “ultimate goal of art” (Cawelti 280). As Giorgio Mariani remarks, throughout his life Melville saw writers as “truth tellers” entrusted with the paradoxical task of communicating truth through fiction (*Allegorie impossibili* 58). For Melville, in “this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands” revealing herself “only by cunning glimpses,” “covertly, and in snatches” in the works of those who have mastered the “great Art of Telling the Truth” (WHM 9: 244). In *The Confidence-Man*, he does precisely so; through irony and disguise, he offers readers fleeting but profound glimpses of the truth he seeks to bring to the surface.

Men Who Dive: Melville and Emersonian Transcendentalism

In his search for those “glimpses” of truth, Melville probably sees himself part of what he calls “the whole corps of thought-divers,” those writers who, “since the world began, have been diving and coming up again with bloodshot eyes” (WHM 14: 121). The phrase, drawn from an 1849 letter to Evert Duyckinck in which Melville reflects on Ralph Waldo Emerson, is symptomatic of his complicated relationship with the sage of Concord. If Melville, like Emily Dickinson, looked for ways to tell the truth—slant or otherwise—Emerson, in his lectures and essays, often conceived of truth as self-evident, or at least as something that could be perceived with intuition. This difference, though hardly the only one dividing them, exemplifies the contrast between two of the most representative voices of their time. Indeed, Melville and Emerson have usually been read antithetically, with critics highlighting the opposition between Melville’s dark skepticism and Emerson’s more pervasive optimism.

Although the two never met⁷—and Melville himself admits in the aforementioned letter that, before hearing Emerson lecture, he had

⁷ As Merton M. Sealts, Jr. has demonstrated, Melville is not mentioned by Emerson in any of his writing (public or private) although “he did own a copy of *Typee* in the revised edition published in 1846 by the New York firm of Wiley & Putnam” (254). Melville, on the other hand, heard Emerson lecture at least once, read his essays while staying with the Hawthornes in 1850 (while he was working on *Moby-Dick*), and owned no fewer than four books by Emerson: “*Poems*, given him in 1859; *Essays*

"only glanced at a book of his once in Putnam's store" (*WHM* 14: 121)—Emerson's thought is a crucial, although contested, presence in *The Confidence-Man*. Through the figure of the mystic Mark Winsome,⁸ Melville tackles many of the issues of Transcendentalism he found most troubling and exposes how, within the context of a deceitful society where everyone attempts to trick others in order to gain some advantage (monetary or ideological), the transcendental potential of human nature and the concept of self-reliance that Emerson preached were too abstract, impossible to put into practice, and easy to be misinterpreted and misused. To fully understand Melville's caricature of Emerson and of Transcendentalism in the novel, it is interesting to consider what he wrote about his contemporary.⁹ His first impression is recorded in his March 3, 1849 letter to Duyckinck which he wrote after attending Emerson's lecture on February 5 (Sealts 255), when the Concord philosopher was at the Freeman Place Chapel on Beacon Street delivering a lecture part of his "Mind and Manners in the Nineteenth Century" series. First delivered in London in 1848, Emerson repeated five of the original six lectures of the series in Boston and it is likely that on February 5, Melville heard him deliver "Natural Aristocracy."¹⁰

Like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, Emerson believed in the idea of "natural aristocracy" where "aristocracy"—interpreted in the ancient, Greek sense of *hoi aristoi* (the best)—describes a rule by those considered superior not because of wealth or birth, but because of their virtue, talent, and wisdom. While Melville was probably sitting in the audience, Emerson proceeded to note that this is but an ideal model because, as George Kateb succinctly puts it, he believed that real aristoc-

and *Essays: Second Series*, bought in 1862; and *The Conduct of Life*, picked up at second hand in 1870" (Sealts 254).

⁸ In an extremely detailed and convincing essay, Egbert S. Oliver explains how Melville modelled Winsome after Emerson: "Eyes, hair, height, build, posture, dignity, temperateness, coolness, and the combination of shrewdness and mysticalness—all are particularly similar in the mystic and in Emerson" (62).

⁹ For a thorough (yet not so updated) list of the critical works on Melville and Emerson, see the Appendix "The Emerson-Melville Relationship: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography" in Michael McLoughlin's *Dead Letters to the New World: Melville, Emerson, and American Transcendentalism*.

¹⁰ Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson believe that Emerson delivered the series in this order: "The Powers and Laws of Thought" on 15 January, "The Relation of Intellect to Natural Science" on 22 January, "The Tendencies and Duties of Men of Thought" on 29 January, "Natural Aristocracy" on 5 February, and either "Politics and Socialism" or "Poetry and Eloquence" on 12 February (129).

racies have been traditionally based on "an enforced and artificial hierarchy" (75). Even more dangerously, Emerson remarks that in a time "so acquiescent and traditionary," people are "in danger of forgetting so simple a fact as that the basis of all aristocracy must be truth,—the doing what elsewhere is pretended to be done" (*Complete Works* 10: 39). Emerson too, as Melville did, embarked on his personal quest for truth and he thought that its relentless pursuit should lead politics and steer national interests. At the apex of the society, he envisioned men that he described in terms strikingly similar to those Melville used to portray Frank Goodman, *The Confidence-Man's* cosmopolitan:

I wish catholic men, who by their science and skill are at home in every latitude and longitude, who carry the world in their thoughts; men of universal politics, who are interested in things in proportion to their truth and magnitude; who [...] dare trust their inspiration for their welcome; who would find their fellows in persons of real elevation of whatever kind of speculative or practical ability. (*Complete Works* 10: 39)

A cosmopolitan, a catholic man; who, being such, ties himself to no narrow tailor or teacher, but federates, in heart as in costume, something of the various gallantries of men under various suns. Oh, one roams not over the gallant globe in vain. Bred by it, is a fraternal and fusing feeling. No man is a stranger. You accost anybody. Warm and confiding, you wait not for measured advances. And though, indeed, mine, in this instance, have met with no very hilarious encouragement, yet the principle of a true citizen of the world is still to return good for ill. (CM 133)

Both "catholic" in its original sense of "universal" (the word is a combination of the Greek words *kata* "about, in respect of" and *holos* "whole"), the leaders Emerson wishes to see leading society and the protagonist of the second section of *The Confidence-Man* are "cosmopolitans" and as such "at home in every latitude and longitude." Crucially, Emerson's catholic men are moved by "truth and magnitude" and carry out their duty to the community "trust[ing] their inspiration." Truth and Trust, two key terms in Melville's novel, are predictably not to be taken at face value in the case of Frank Goodman. His tendency to "accost anybody" is not a symptom of his fraternal nature, but rather a strategy he employs to expand the pool of potential victims who might erroneously trust him as he works his talents to bend the truth to his advantage. Before providing the reader with a proper caricature of Emerson, Melville seems to willingly misinterpret and distort

his ideas to sketch his final confidence man in order to show how the philosophy of Transcendentalism, with its upsurge of possibility and emphasis on intuition, can easily be manipulated by those seeking to assert their will upon others.

However, to consider the relationship between the two and their respective vision of the world as completely antithetical would be an oversimplification. On the personal level, Melville seemed to appreciate and respect Emerson's genius, while having concerns about Waldo the man.¹¹ In the aforementioned letter, Melville describes Emerson as "more than a brilliant fellow," "an uncommon man" who, despite having the reputation of being "full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish" turned out to be, to his surprise, "quite intelligible" (*WHM* 14: 121). What he did not appreciate of this "Plato who talks thro' his nose" was that he seemed one of those people who, "had he lived in those days when the world was made, ... might have offered some valuable suggestions" (*WHM* 14: 121-22). With his emphasis on self-reliance and the assertive tone of his lectures, Emerson appeared—both to Melville and, in all likelihood to twenty-first-century readers—to be too enamored of self-evident truths and too hasty in advancing philosophical claims that seemed not to fully account for the complexities of the modern world. The idea that Emerson might be too arrogant in his assertions because of a somewhat inflated sense of self-confidence is recurrent in Melville's commentary on the sage of Concord. As William Braswell has noted, in his own copy of *Essays: Second Series*, bought in 1862, Melville remarked that Emerson's "gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name" (331).

What irritated him the most, however, was Emerson's seeming reluctance to accept and come to terms with evil. Reading in "Considerations by the Way" that Emerson believed the "first lesson of history" to be "the good of evil" (*Complete Works* 6: 253), an exasperated Melville wrote on the margin: "he still bethinks himself of his optimism—

¹¹ In the letter to Duyckinck, Melville writes to his friend: "You complain that Emerson tho' a denizen of the land of gingerbread, is above munching a plain cake in company of jolly fellows, & swiging off his ale like you & me. Ah, my dear sir, that's his misfortune, not his fault. His belly, sir, is in his chest, & his brains descend down into his neck, & offer an obstacle to a draught of ale or a mouthful of cake" (*WHM* 14: 121).

he must make that good somehow against the eternal hell itself" (Braswell 330). Certainly, although John B. Williams is right in stressing the fact that all those who limit themselves to contrasting Emerson's optimism with Melville's pessimism "may have underestimated both the comprehensiveness of Emerson's view of man, which makes room for the skepticism of Montaigne, and the capacity of Melville to create in his divided world of the mind an image of almost perfect spirituality" (183), Melville did seem to perceive this marked difference between his and Emerson's outlook on the world.

In the satirical prose of *The Confidence-Man*, transcendentalism is caricatured just like its most prominent voice. As Michael McLoughlin points out, through Winsome and Egbert, Melville mocks "the cold intellectuality of the metaphysic and ethic of Transcendentalism" (McLoughlin 129). In his essays, Emerson wrote about several concepts that did not align with Melville's epistemological turmoil, such as his idea that the world possesses a self-regulatory nature, which ultimately serves to rectify any evil act: "every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty" (*Collected Works* 2: 60). Equally irreconcilable was Emerson's conviction that appearance and reality ultimately coincide, that the Over-Soul "confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains everyone to pass for what he is" (*Collected Works* 2: 60), and that "no man can violate his nature" (*Collected Works* 2: 34).

Melville, by contrast, sought to expose the fragility of such moral and metaphysical assurance throughout his production, and nowhere more powerfully than in *The Confidence-Man*. In a world where masks proliferate and motives continually shift, moral order breaks down and in its place all that is left is ambiguity and performance. As Warwick Wadlington puts it, "a more unteleological fiction could not be imagined" (164), for in Melville's novel the Emersonian belief in an underlying harmony or providential design collapses. Emerson's optimism, "however quaint [it] may appear"—to Melville and to us—is rooted in a "metaphysical scheme" that regards "reality itself" as inherently good (Urbas, *Emerson's Metaphysics* 204), a philosophical premise that Melville, grappling with existential doubt, could never share. This ontological divide, grounded in radically distinct positions concerning the knowability and benevolence of the world, is memorably captured by Lewis Mumford, who sees "Emerson [as] the perpetual passenger who stayed below in bad weather, trusting that the captain would take

care of the ship [and] Melville [as] the sailor who climbed aloft, and knew that the captain was sometimes drunk and that the best of ships might go down" (95). *The Confidence-Man* thus stands as the fullest expression of Melville's conviction that truth and trust are volatile, mutable concepts, forever contingent on the intentions of those who wield them, and perilous to those who receive them.

In other words, reading The Confidence-Man is a bewildering experience, it is as unsettling as it is illuminating, and I remember feeling that unease vividly the first time I read it. It was during the spring–summer semester of 2017 when, as a master's student at Sapienza–Università di Roma, I took Giorgio Mariani's seminar on Melville, which included The Confidence-Man as one of the main texts. After spending six months in Germany where I had mostly studied Emerson's writings, I read The Confidence-Man and was frankly appalled by the chaos and doubt that pervade its every page. I liked nineteenth-century literature because it gave me comfort. Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, and Whitman—revolutionary and contradictory as they were—still seemed to offer order, coherence, and the promise of definitive answers. Melville, instead, threw me off balance. I did not expect a nineteenth-century writer to be so modern, and I did not need postmodern doubt peering into the perfectly plausible truth and seemingly stable world of the nineteenth-century.

*And yet Giorgio Mariani made me appreciate a writer whose m.o. I never expected to like. Like many other readers, I too became "captivated by [Melville's] stories, his narrative techniques, and the way in which they raise unavoidable questions about the meaning of history and life" (Mariani, Leggere Melville 8) and that happened not because of Melville's undeniable craft but because of Mariani's passion and commitment to teaching. In 1993, in the afterword to *Allegorie impossibili* (Mariani's first book on Melville), Agostino Lombardo noted Mariani's "cognitive passion, with which he invests, nourishes, and substantiates his subject matter" (253), a passion that remained undiminished almost twenty-five years later, when I first met him in the "Aula 7" of Villa Mirafiori.*

Like many others before me, I had the pleasure and the privilege of learning about American literature from an educator whose generosity of spirit and critical acumen continue to inspire me, and who gave all his students the tools to use literature not only to learn and reflect upon the past, but as an index to what he recently called the "wrenching inconsistency of the modern world" (Mariani, Introduction 15).

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8. The (Universal) Squeeze of the Hand: Towards the Existential Ethics of Herman Melville

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The convergence of ethics and seafaring in discussions of Herman Melville—and in the work of Giorgio Mariani, one of the most perceptive contemporary readers of Melville’s anatomy of war and violence—evokes intense emotions in me. On the one hand, as a literary scholar and professional skeptic, I find it difficult to trust structures traditionally perceived as stable and immutable. On the other hand, as an ocean-going captain, I know that the *sine qua non* of safe sailing is precisely the opposite: one must cease doubting the purpose of structures, both discursive ones (such as the chain of command) and physical ones, like the ship’s beams—beams against which we sometimes bump our heads, yet which we nevertheless maintain meticulously lest they rot and compromise the vessel’s integrity. This tension between skepticism and necessity may serve as a productive starting point for reflections on values, the acceptance or rejection of which defines the uniqueness of human functioning both in the space of the “inhuman sea” and on apparently “solid” land. Such reflections become particularly pertinent once we recognize that the solidity of the land—*terra firma*, as fixed in the phraseologies of many languages—is itself repeatedly called into question by a basic human experience: each of us must devise strategies for coping with the fluidity of everyday life, striving to ensure that the sense of purpose guiding our existence does not dissolve into the paradox of nonsense.

Yet, as we also know, the systematic construction of an ordered vision of the world—one capable not only of accounting for its atmospheric changeability but also of providing a stable foundation for an ethics free from prior assumptions—is no simple task. This difficulty may lie at the root of the ethical inconsistencies of modern humanity, which struggles to cope with the fluidity of existence. Fluidity is the

tangible experience of sailors and landlubbers alike, although the latter are more easily deceived into believing that the four elements are essentially *docile*. Yet when the earth quakes, when hurricanes wreak havoc, or when uncontrollable wildfire reduces everything it touches to ashes, the elements remind us—often painfully—of their uncontrollable power. The Ocean, needless to say, has never left us any doubt as to whether we can truly “rule and subdue it”: the inability to attune ourselves to its rhythms calls our very survival into question.

The ‘elemental’ analogy, however, may be taken further. When inherited ‘truths’ to which we have grown accustomed—and reckless enough to take for granted—prove fallacious, we awaken to the unpleasant realization that we have been guilty of complacency or hubris. In such moments, it becomes clear that our own lack of critical attention may have placed us in danger and, more importantly, may have caused others pain or harm. Intellectual slothfulness—manifest in uncritical adherence to what Wittgenstein calls the “old lines of thought”—gradually desensitizes us to suffering.¹ We become “comfortably numb,” thereby inviting the daemon of eternal return to replay the familiar scenarios of plagues, pestilences, and wars that history has witnessed time and again.²

Every Atom Belonging to Me...

To break this vicious circle, however, a zetetic thinker must accept the risk inherent in friendship. Only within the Buberian *I-Thou* relationship can a compassionate audience emerge and gradually become a community of active interlocutors. Such partners in dialogue recognize the limitations of language and share the intuition that, in order to overcome aporias, language must sometimes be used against itself. Critical interlocutors—much like the advanced readers of Melville who, confronted with the “bizarre” “Etymology” and the no less unconventional “Extracts” preceding the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, may or may not

¹ “Es ist sehr schwer, Gedankenbahnen zu beschreiben, wo schon viel Fahrgeleise sind – ob deine eigenen oder andere – und nicht in eins der ausgefahrenen Geleise zu kommen. Es ist schwer: *nur wenig* von einem alten Gedankengeleise abzuweichen” (Wittgenstein, *Zettel* sec. 349).

² For a broader reflection on the ethical consequences of intellectual complacency and the responsibility to maintain what might be called a “vigilant state of crisis,” see Jędrzejko, “The Day After.”

heed the narrator's advice to the sub-sub-librarian to abandon the mirage of certainty—must decide whether to relinquish the hubris of inherited orders, however comfortable those structures may feel. They may instead choose to embrace the liminality of the human condition, a condition fundamentally shared with everyone else—all the “poor devils” of the world. *May*, because... after all, “who aint a slave?” (*MD* 6).

It is for this reason that I share my own lived experiences in friendship. I wage my own war on war, arguing that the experience of the sea leads to an ethics rooted not in theological or philosophical first principles but in an immanent, experiential solidarity among human beings—what Ishmael calls the “squeeze of the hand.” The primary audience for these remarks—those unable to accept uncritically the claim that certain values lie beyond questioning and those willing to listen intently to Others—are, by definition, my friends. My *lector in fabula* is therefore a searching reader, a brave doubter, yet one who participates in the world and seeks attunement to its rhythms at the most fundamental level. My brief discourse is thus intended especially for those irritated by the sighs of the “old guard” endlessly repeating that “the world was better once”; for those who refuse to accept “transcendent” moral imperatives merely because religious authority claims that they derive from the Decalogue; and for those whose distrust of “time-honored tradition” stems from their recognition that its language often proves inadequate to the problems we face today—problems that this very tradition may, in no small measure, have helped to create.

We must, however, begin with an unambiguous clarification of concepts: what is “traditional” does not have to mean “obsolete,” and what is “new” does not have to mean “shallow, flat, or worthless.” The practice of university life worldwide demonstrates that when representatives of the older generation recognize in their younger counterparts serious partners for creative discussion and active creators of new axiological spaces, students are far more likely to discover the potential of the vast experience accumulated by their mentors who remain at their disposal. Although different generations may describe the world in generation-specific languages, creative conversation requires each party to learn the other's idiom willingly—and thereby appreciate its episteme. Otherwise, things fall apart: the “old,” fearing redundancy, may attempt to compensate for their growing sense of inadequacy by practicing condescension toward the “young,” while the “young” may feel justified in consigning the former to the annals of history. The fun-

damental assumption of my reflections is therefore the mutuality of the will not merely to hear the Other out, but to listen to them intently—as Thoreau might listen to a friend across Walden Pond—a will without which pregnant dialogue dissolves into a barren monologue. The examples used herein are rooted in a dialogic space familiar to every thinking and sensitive person irrespective of age, color, or gender: the space of literature, which has withstood the test of time and, despite the ongoing evolution of interpretive perspectives, continues to inspire us to see ourselves in the mirror of the Other. After all, if “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,”³ why would anyone wish to wage war—metaphorical or actual—on anyone or anything save for war itself? And yet we do, ceaselessly feeding the Nietzschean daemon.⁴

Humankind Aboard

The *Pequod* of *Moby-Dick* carries the whole of humankind aboard: sailors of every race, religion, and nation labor together to keep the ship going. Melville’s whaling vessel thus becomes a microcosm of the world itself, a fragile structure whose survival depends on the ability of radically different individuals to cooperate in the face of the same elemental forces. As Giorgio Mariani aptly observes,

[t]he novel’s global interests can be observed right from its first sentences, where the reader is introduced to the odd compiler of the “Etymology”: “The pale Usher—threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now. He was ever dusting his old lexicons and grammars, with a queer handkerchief, mockingly embellished with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world. He loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his mortality.” ... If we compare the pale Usher’s hankie to Barlow’s triumphant white banner of peace, we can begin to get a sense of the extent to which, despite their shared epic ambitions, the two texts [*The Columbiad* and *Moby-Dick*] are driven by different cultural persuasions. The “gay” colors of these national flags are neither transcended by nor easily reconciled with the implied whiteness of the background. If anything, the latter seems to anticipate that “dumb blankness, full of meaning” ... to which Ishmael dedicates one

³ Whitman, “*Song of Myself*” sec. 1.

⁴ The phrase alludes to Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous thought experiment of the “eternal recurrence,” formulated in sec. 341 (“The Greatest Weight”) of *The Gay Science*.

of the greatest chapters of the novel. There, Ishmael observes that his “white-lead chapter about whiteness is but a white flag hung out from a craven soul.” ... Furthermore, Ishmael submits that “the concrete of all colors” ... is at one with the “visible absence of color,” ... thus retrospectively explaining why there is something fake (“mocking”) about the flags’ gay colors. When, in this crucial chapter, he refers to the “theory of natural philosophies” that “every stately or lovely emblazoning colors” are only “allurements cover[ing] nothing but the charnel-house within,” ... Ishmael is speaking of “deified Nature absolutely paint[ing] like the harlot,” but he could well be referring to the flags “emblazoning” the Usher’s handkerchief, which now stand revealed as so many futile attempts at covering up the void on which the image of a nation erects itself. ... [T]he flags’ national colors violate the whiteness of the background, but to the extent that whiteness signifies “the heartless void and immensities of the universe,” ... there is hardly anything peaceful about the flags’ white background. Whiteness is constructed by Ishmael as the sign of a primordial violence done to man (“Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright” . . .), that ends up justifying “the fiery hunt” for Moby Dick. ... Ahab’s world is unequivocally one of war, where appeasement is not an option. Ishmael, on his part, may crave peace, but his imagination, too, is obsessed with violence. As revealed by his vision of “one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life,” Ishmael’s island of tranquility is surrounded by “the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.” (Mariani 106-07)

No doubt: bearing in mind that between 1819 and 1851 several military conflicts took place within the United States—most notably wars involving Indigenous nations, territorial disputes, and international tensions that ultimately led to the Mexican–American War—and remembering that only ten years after the publication of *Moby-Dick* the long-simmering internal conflict exploded into the Civil War, peace could at best be imagined as a state for which one might long, yet whose practical realization appeared elusive enough for violence to be rationalized as a “primordial” principle of the world’s dynamics. Furthermore, the author of *Waging War on War* is right to argue that Melville’s “anatomy of violence is enhanced by his sophisticated understanding of the sacrificial dynamics human beings mobilize in order to rationalize their recourse to violence” (Mariani 108). As the scholar continues,

[This] is what makes Melville's approach to the question of violence especially valuable: his realization that—to resort to the terms employed by Kenneth Burke in *The Rhetoric of Religion*—in their effort to construct a peaceful Order, human beings “redeem” themselves by creating a “Cult of the Kill” that needs to feed itself on a victim. Melville is distressed by man's readiness to engage in wars and kills, but he is perhaps even more perplexed by the vicious circularity of “Cain's ring,” where peace always hangs on victimization, and violence resurfaces precisely when one had hoped to be rid of it. (108)

Much as Mariani's Girardian reading of violence in numerous texts by Melville (which, incidentally, may also be applied to many other works representing Romantic “Messianism” across the literatures of the West) is indubitably substantiated,⁵ the writer's evolving understanding of war and peace, when traced across his oeuvre, reveals itself as a function of the trajectory of his lifelong search for a “first philosophy,” one that would require no premises adopted *a priori*. Changing and transmuting, Melville's understanding of violence seems to elude immobilization within the confines of a single metaphysical model: the “sacrificial dynamics” detectable in many of his works ultimately yield to his deification “of the inhuman sea” (as in the poem “Pebbles,” *Published Poems* 249), in which all differentiation dissolves. His atheist existentialism reaches its peak during what might be called his “Schopenhauerian” period, yet it surfaces much earlier, informing numerous key passages of his sea-bound novels and appearing both in his explorations of alternatives to monotheistic religions and in insights derived from the immediacy of direct, non-verbal experience—particularly the concentration of the self in the face of the uncontrollability of the elements. Let us state the obvious: unlike their counterparts on land, the sailors of the *Pequod*, different as they are, understand that *they cannot afford to wage wars upon one another*. Fooled by the misleading “solidity of land,” humankind—the crew of the world—finds it easy to forget that reality is never solid, surrendering to desire and seeking redemption in the death of the scapegoat; yet ultimately, unless they awaken from this illusion, their ship—the complex structure that guarantees their survival—must inevitably sink.

⁵ René Girard develops the theory of sacrificial violence and the scapegoat mechanism most fully in *The Scapegoat*, where he argues that social communities often stabilize themselves through the collective victimization of a chosen individual or group.

In a sense, Melville's lifelong "quarrel with God" (Thompson 25) parallels that of any skeptic. For someone who can accept the ethical principles articulated by institutional religions on faith, the sublimation of specific moral guidelines—guidelines that would apply tangibly in the realm of seafaring and less tangibly beyond it—into broader ethical imperatives is a relatively straightforward task. One could plausibly assert that within the metanarratives of their respective traditions a practicing Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or meditating Buddhist might readily find convincing premises not to pollute oceans or lands, not to sail under the influence of intoxicants, and not to refuse assistance to those in need—and many indeed do. In such cases, the ethical paradigms of friendship become embedded within the broader ethical paradigms of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, or Buddhism, constituting particular instances of a larger, though not universal, episteme. Interestingly, the same structural logic applies to non-religious worldviews as well—those grounded, for example, in agnostic, Marxist, postmodern, or even "quantum" ethical metanarratives.

The common element of all these worldviews—religious or secular—is that their adoption requires the suspension of disbelief in the explanatory power of their foundational metanarratives. What differentiates them is whether faith is placed in the transcendental universality of the adopted episteme or in the immanence of the relationships observed within the world itself. In any case, a deep understanding of one's place in the universe entails acquiring the ability to perceive reality as an ordered whole, within which actions harmful to another person, the environment, or oneself—actions traditionally labeled unethical—must appear illogical. This element of my argument seems to reverberate constantly in Melville's writings. His philosophically oriented works may be read as a series of attempts to discover an "order" grounded precisely in the instability of all orders and in the fluidity of reality—an order that might remain credible without requiring the construction of a separate, faith-dependent theodicy or any other foundational discourse designed to incorporate evil into the logic of the universe in order to justify the purpose of human existence.

Melville: Toward Fluidity

Raised within the ideological framework of strict Dutch Calvinism, grounded in the doctrines articulated by the Synod of Dordrecht, Mel-

ville first encountered the world through a theological system in which humanity is fallen, human nature entirely corrupted by sin, only some are predestined for salvation, divine election is unconditional, Christ's sacrifice is reserved for the chosen, salvific grace is irresistible, and the Elect—saints from the beginning of time—will persevere in salvation both in life and beyond. Yet the tragic death of the future writer's beloved father—who, dying as an insane bankrupt, would according to Calvinist dogma have been predestined to damnation—shattered the child's inherited sense of order. A succession of traumatic experiences followed this blow: the firsthand observation of the role religion played in the subjugation of the colonized Pacific islands during the nineteenth century, and the cynical invocation of Christian commandments of love and charity within the brutal discipline of a warship. These experiences ensured that Melville would never again place uncritical trust in proclaimed truths. All of his biographers agree that throughout both his youth and his adult life he approached any "order" requiring the suspension of disbelief—any "traditional" discourse—with persistent critical suspicion.

This was aptly captured by Melville's friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, the distinguished American writer who at the time served as U.S. consul in Liverpool, in his description of a conversation they had in Southport:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me ... that he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated"; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us. (Hawthorne 432–33)

Annihilation, as Hawthorne describes it, becomes a kind of *nihil-ation* in the philosophical sense. Unable to accept on faith any order dictated by religions grounded in the notion of the "immortal soul"—much less those that would condemn a beloved person to eternal damnation or permit entire nations to be deprived of freedom and

dignity—Melville comes to terms with the prospect of his own posthumous non-being by exploring the limits of imagination. This existential stance leads him to the questions about essence and existence that permeate all of his works and shape his continuous search for an order in which the real does not have to be “taken on faith.”

In his writings—especially those set in a maritime context—Melville the philosopher either avoids the language of scientific categories or turns it against itself. Rather than explaining his insights discursively, he attempts to communicate non-verbal observations by emulating unmediated experience and exposing both his characters and his readers to it. This strategy reflects his conviction that the artist, while rejecting the hypocrisies of artifice, must function as a visionary who teaches others how to see and who, in the name of humanity, bears the responsibility of conveying “true thoughts.” Yet the “truth” experienced by Melville the sailor—one that “lies in things,” that “is silent,” and that ultimately resists articulation—cannot be expressed directly. The distinctiveness of Melville the thinker therefore lies in his conscious use of artistic form to reveal to a receptive reader that which remains otherwise ineffable.⁶ Unable to state the truth of being outright, the writer either appeals to the reader’s apperceptions or confronts the audience with aporias.

The clearest example of such a strategy is perhaps *Moby-Dick*. The great white whale constantly eludes Ahab, who believes that, in order to impose order upon his fractured world, he must determine whether the cause of his multifaceted mutilation is blind chance (which would call into question the divine justice he already doubts), the deliberate action of forces more powerful than the whale itself (which would require adopting Job’s stance—something of which the captain is incapable), or whether beyond the pasteboard mask of all existing beings lies an undifferentiated nothingness: positive-nothingness, nothingness-endowed-with-a-plus-sign.

Ahab hopes that his doubts will disperse if he can strike through the mask—if he can pin the animal down with a harpoon. Yet his initial conviction gradually weakens as he discards, one after another, the allegedly fixed reference points by which he has hitherto navigated

⁶ I discuss these questions in detail in Jędrzejko, “‘The Justest of All Views’: Traveling to *Mardi* and Beyond with Agnes D. Cannon,” reprinted in a revised version as chapter 3 in the monograph *Melville’s (Dis)Orders: Four Transatlantic Dialogues on Essence, Existence, and the Truth of Things* (Jędrzejko and Matteson).

both sea and land: the stars measurable by the quadrant, the chart of whale migrations, and even his pipe, a synecdoche of private space. All achievements of rational science and all the routines of daily life are thus reduced to naught as superfluous, for they do nothing to help locate the ever-elusive whale, which slips away together with Ahab's possibility of "fitting"—or perhaps "appending"—meaning to the disorder in which he is mired. When the reduction of all discursivity leaves him with nothing but his ill-conceived purpose—although he recognizes that he has leapt into an "ill faith"—Ahab has nothing else to cling to. He confronts the white whale and enters a space of ineffability, leaving his observers with aporias.

Parallel to the captain's quest runs that of the narrator, who asks the reader to call him Ishmael but earlier introduces himself as a commentator on the work of a sub-sub-librarian—the least important of all librarians—whose *idée fixe*, indeed his life's goal, is to seek and discover the ultimate meaning of "whale-ness" in all existing books, "sacred and profane." Yet with every new text the "poor devil of a Sub-Sub" reads, his awareness expands: the linguistic image of the whale does not bring him any closer to the "essence" of the whale's essence. This "essence," like any other "essence," is called into "existence" only within an inherited system of signs and is therefore subject to infinite semiosis. Signs lead to other signs, while the postulated "meaning of the whale" continually recedes and can never be definitively grasped.

The essence of the whale—beyond distinctions, beyond language—cannot be pinned down or immobilized: neither harpoon nor pen can enable their users to achieve such a goal. The whale, as the Sub-Sub will eventually understand, must remain "unpainted to the last" (*MD* 267).

The same disconcerting experience becomes the reader's own. With each successive chapter of *Moby-Dick* the reader hopes ultimately to understand, the certainty of ever closing the voluminous tome with the satisfaction of having captured some unequivocal meaning between its covers gradually fades. As frustration grows, the reader begins to realize that *Moby-Dick* cannot ultimately be "grasped"; the fluid meaning of the novel cannot be immobilized. Fluidity thus becomes the reader's tangible experience: a world previously ordered by the conventions of novel-writing and by interpretive strategies learned at school suddenly appears disturbingly alien.

To regain a sense of security, the reader must "suspend disbelief" and either—despite visible cracks and illogicalities in inherited sys-

tems of reference—trust some reading convention, or revise their understanding of reality and accept the fluidity of meaning as a constant process. Alternatively, the reader may close the book in frustration and never return to it, dismissing the text as poorly written, “heavy,” or even senseless. In this way the experience of existential anxiety—arising from the impossibility of establishing a universal meaning of reality enclosed in, and constructed through, language—becomes the reader’s own. The reader gradually realizes that the great whale has swum far beyond the covers of the novel.

Although the heavy volume still lies in the reader’s hands, leaving no doubt about its material presence, nothing definitive can be said about its meaning: it cannot be pinned down. As a component of the world whose relations we perceive through language—understood as an ordered system of symbolic dependencies—the book forces us to confront the fluidity of reality itself, a condition Melville renders experientially palpable by situating his narrative within the elemental fluidity of the ocean.

By subjecting his characters to existential crises, Melville-the-writer creates a “textual tool” through which he attempts to share with the reader his own experience of the essential fluidity of a seemingly differentiated world that ultimately lies beyond vocabulary. He conveys his disquieting “true thought”—the tangible truth about the human condition—by engaging the reader in an authentic encounter with an ambigrammatic text that ultimately reveals itself as a silent *entity*. Fascinating and terrifying in its inexpressibility and omnipresence, fluidity becomes the impulse generating Melville’s existentialist discourse and at the same time manifests itself as a form of *being that defies differentiation—an undifferentiation* into which that discourse ultimately dissolves.

Thus the writer’s lived experience of land and sea—mediated through the *fictional experience* of his literary characters—energizes the *lived experience* of the reader as well, enabling them to reach a level of attunement to Melville’s language at which his prose ceases to appear as an artistic end in itself and instead emerges as a bridge between (silent) *being* and (discursive) *existence*, between the writer’s lived reality and their own. The vividness of this shared experience allows an empathetic reader to identify non-discursively their own understanding of the world with Herman Melville’s tragic, yet ultimately hopeful, vision.

If we accept, along with Melville, that fluidity is the defining feature of the human condition and that *meanings* are inherently *processual*; if it becomes impossible to believe in any “Truth” without the shadow

of doubt; if inherited systems of value repeatedly prove inadequate because they do not allow us either to pose or to answer questions concerning the foundations of axiology itself (including the foundations of ethical attitudes), then the task of revising our knowledge of the world becomes urgent—quite literally a matter of life and death. Let us not forget that Ishmael survives the sinking of the *Pequod* “alone, to tell us”: without the narrator’s survival there could be no narration. To *survive-in-text*, the narrator must *cling to text*. The lifebuoy-coffin—an ambigrammatic structure in which the binary of life and death collapses—bears upon its planks nothing less than an entire theory of the universe transcribed from Queequeg’s body. We need structures to hold on to if we are to survive in the all-nullifying liquidity. The question, then, is *which* structures are capable of sustaining that survival.

Fluidity and the Ethics of Seafaring

The answer to this question becomes particularly visible in the lived experience of seafaring, where the fluidity of existence ceases to be a metaphor and becomes an immediate condition of survival. When we board a yacht that is about to set sail, we are usually aware that, until the vessel reaches the next port, we will not have the option of withdrawing from or abandoning the voyage. The first time we do so, strong and conflicting emotions churn within us: the thrill of discovery contends with fear, while ambition clashes with the instinct for safety. When the sea is calm, we quickly regain our composure. But when the wind rises and the gentle swell of the ocean transmogrifies into watery mountains, their tousled white crests towering above the spreaders, we suddenly find ourselves nervously observing the watchmate’s behavior.

Our “natural” need for independence and our aversion to hierarchical authority—so typical on land—gradually diminish at sea. Deep down, we begin to feel relieved that someone stands “above us,” and we willingly suspend our doubts about that person’s competence. We trust the officer because our sense of security depends upon that trust. If the watch mate continues to crack jokes, a cigarette still lit despite the tons of water falling on their head as we clumsily steer the yacht, if they keep smiling while sipping hot coffee miraculously unadulterated by the salt of the ocean spray—we accept that everything is as it should be. More or less consciously, we come to terms with the fact that the officer perceives order where we see none, and this realization

becomes the antidote to our fear. Gradually we begin to understand why the mate had earlier ordered us to secure the loose spinnaker pole while the sea was still calm and nothing—in our view—had yet indicated a change of weather: in a gale, securing it could easily cost someone blood. Suddenly we discover that we appreciate orders whose sense we had not initially grasped. We even begin to feel ashamed that we had doubted our mate's intentions, silently accusing the officer of letting power go to their head. We are surprised at how easily we now submit to this authority, how much we trust it, and how strong our faith becomes in the truths that flow from the officer's mouth.

Soon we ourselves begin to assume officer roles. We undergo training and accumulate experience; gradually, our understanding of order changes. Yet we continue to cherish the awareness that, in an emergency, the Old Man—irrespective of age or gender—will come on deck and, if we hesitate about how to proceed, issue the necessary orders. We are grateful for their presence: it calms us, yet at the same time reminds us how much experience we still have to gain. Our respect for the superior grows and solidifies—as if in defiance of the overwhelming fluidity surrounding us. And when we look at our younger crewmates, we do so with warm understanding, recognizing in them the sailors we ourselves once were.

However, when we ourselves become captains, emergencies leave us without any instance to which we might refer. There is no one from whom we can expect help, guidance, or ready solutions: we are left only with the belief that our experience, our training, and our intuition—tested on many seas—will dictate the right decisions. Whether we are religious or not, when we call MAYDAY we pray that someone hears our call. We beg H₂O—suddenly personified as “the Ocean”—to calm itself and allow everyone to survive; we desire a miracle and believe that it might come true. In such moments we conjure a special, intensely personal religion—one that sharpens our vigilance and allows us, against all odds, to discern order within the destructive chaos of the elements. We believe in the officers, trusting that they will not fail; we believe in the crew, trusting that they will carry out every order; we believe in the ship, trusting that it will withstand the massive blows of the waves and the lashing of the wind. Suddenly, we become absolute believers, calling a transcendent order of the world—*hic et nunc*—into existence.⁷

⁷ A more extensive philosophical discussion of these issues appears in chapter 5, “In

Although such “transcendence” is short-lived and dissolves once the crisis abates, something nonetheless remains. Remembering how desperately we once wished for rescue—and how profoundly grateful we were when that rescue came—we come to understand that we can never afford to be deaf to a MAYDAY or a PAN-PAN. To ignore such a call would undermine our trust in ourselves and ultimately harm us. We place our own lives at risk in order to save others because doing so sustains our own sense of safety—and this process requires neither transcendence nor any elaborate theodicy. Thus the processual foundation of ethics, beautifully metaphorized by Melville’s Ishmael, is friendship: a form of love that anchors our faith in the order of the world despite its undeniable and unstoppable fluidity. This is the philosophy of the universal “squeeze of the hand,” with one’s own hand and the hands of others immersed in the same vat of slowly melting, “homogeneous” spermaceti:

Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness. (*MD* 416)

Melville’s urge may thus be interpreted as the result of a necessary leap of faith: a gesture whose obviousness becomes strikingly clear at sea, yet whose sharpness dissolves once we return to the apparent “solidity” of land-locked structures. Melville’s apotheosis of the ocean—at which he arrives as a mature and experienced man—ultimately affirms faith in what is local and immanent, yet capable of becoming the foundation of all axiology. Healed of his existential hurt, in his already quoted poem “Pebbles” he “lauds” the “inhuman sea.” No “sacrificial” interpretation of the logic of the universe is required any longer.

Search of the Garden of the Isles,” in Jędrzejko, Fabjański, and Kubok, *Atmospheric Health, Nature, and Well-being: Towards a Philosophy of the Garden*.

Melville's leap of faith is therefore a gesture of trust in the reality of being that requires no theodicy. Such trust becomes possible only within the space in which the subject who performs this gesture exists—that is, within local, immanent reality. Likewise, the personification of things becomes possible only in such a differentiating, discursive locality; only there can the Ocean be apotheosized as a “separate” entity. At the same time, this gesture affirms that the only reality available to us is that of perfectly imperfect, ever-changing locality—the only space in which the distinction between the “real” and the “unreal” may even be posed. Within such an understanding—existing amidst the fluid “inhuman” essence that continually differentiates itself into impermanent entities—a human being can, and must, construct a stable ethic of friendship and brotherhood in order to live. Ishmael expresses this truth with disarming simplicity:

What of it, if some old hunks of a sea-captain orders me to get a broom and sweep down the decks? What does that indignity amount to, weighed, I mean, in the scales of the New Testament? Do you think the archangel Gabriel thinks anything the less of me, because I promptly and respectfully obey that old hunks in that particular instance? Who aint a slave? Tell me that. Well, then, however the old sea-captains may order me about—however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other's shoulder-blades, and be content. (*MD* 6)

Instead of a Conclusion

In this ironic yet profoundly humane recognition that the “universal thump” is passed round to all alike, Melville reduces metaphysical speculation to a simple insight: that the human condition—whether lived at sea or on land—binds us together in the same precarious service. Clearly, such a universal thump that bruises us without limits requires a universal handshake among all the wronged. There is no doubt: the basic ethical imperative that arises from the experience of the human condition is the imperative of the solidity of friendship, the one value that, to a sailor, requires no “first philosophy,” yet remains capable of filling existence with meaning.

To keep afloat, humanity—the multilingual, multiethnic, multi-religious crew of the *Pequod*—must be *compassionate humanity*, which observation equates the ethics of seafaring with the ethics warranting survival in all fluid contexts. In the face of the violent reality of the ebbs and flows of our existence, the “solid” in “solidarity” becomes the only trustworthy solid to which we may cling: *solidarity saves lives*. A sailor who understands the sea has no other option but to be a friend—attuned to the elements, to animate and inanimate Nature, to the Other, and to the whole ship’s company, he or she has a much higher chance of survival. The well-being of such a “society afloat” depends on the mutuality of compassion among its members-at-sea, which stems from the most profound understanding of one’s individual responsibility for the ship that carries everyone and for everyone on board. “All hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content.” A sailor aboard the ship of the world who understands this is, ultimately, a friend to themselves. After all, “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

Simple as that.

“Tappi.” That is what Giorgio once called the three of us—Djelal Kadir, himself, and me—when we met in Italy in 2011 during the Melville conference he organized at Sapienza University of Rome. In Italian, tappo may be used jokingly of a person of short stature, but above all it means a cork: small, perhaps, yet resilient, flexible, and capable of keeping the spirit of an entire precious bottle from evaporating. Giorgio said it with that heart-warming smile of his, clearly amused by the image: three little corks floating stubbornly on the immense ocean of transnational American Studies. I still smile at the simile, and I suspect Djelal would too. None of us are particularly imposing figures physically, it is true. But Giorgio’s metaphor carried a deeper meaning—one I have always cherished. Corks float. They refuse to sink. Small though they may be, they survive storms that would drown heavier things. Vivitur parvo bene, as the Latin proverb reminds us: one can live quite well with little. And with us—little guys though we were—things, through collaboration, somehow flourished. Giorgio understands that perfectly—and so does Djelal. And so do I.

Thinking about that moment today, I realize that the image of the three tappi captures something essential about Giorgio’s philosophy of life and scholarship. Friendship, solidarity, loyalty—these are never abstract words for him; they are lived principles. And perhaps this is why writing about my friendship

with Giorgio today cannot be separated from the troubled political atmosphere in which we all find ourselves. We inhabit a time when truth is increasingly treated as negotiable and violence is trivialized by those who wield power. In the age of Donald Trump and his loud acolytes—figures such as J. D. Vance or Pete Hegseth—the world sometimes feels as if it has misplaced its moral compass altogether. Wars are justified with disturbing ease, people die in numbers that quickly become statistics, and the language of politics grows disturbingly indifferent to human suffering. Giorgio has always despised this kind of moral laziness. His work—his reflections on war, power, culture, and responsibility—remains guided by a simple but demanding conviction: that scholarship must remain inseparable from an ethical commitment to justice and peace.

*To our common friends today it is clear that we share that conviction. Only some of them, however, know that my friendship with Giorgio began years earlier, when I first heard him speak at the ASA Annual Meeting in Oakland in 2006—and I remember that moment vividly. At the time I was still a young scholar—perhaps, truth be told, a somewhat snotty kid. Although I was already serving as the founding co-editor of *Review of International American Studies*, I was still trying to find my place within the discipline. When I heard Giorgio speak, his English positively astonished me. For a moment I even wondered whether he might not actually be a New Yorker with an Italian name. Yet what impressed me even more than his flawless accent was the depth of his thought, the richness of his rhetoric, and the calm authority with which he spoke. In a room filled with the acknowledged gurus of American Studies, Giorgio's voice stood out—not because he attempted to dominate the room, but because the clarity of his thinking and the sharpness of his argument made everyone listen. From that first meeting at the Oakland roundtable that I chaired, he treated me with a generosity and respect I will never forget. At the time he knew me only by name—as the editor of the then-budding *RIAS*—yet he extended to me a collegial trust that young scholars rarely experience.*

Long before he became President of the International American Studies Association, he had consistently supported both my work and the journal. Among the many initiatives that remain particularly close to my heart—including conferences, congresses, and public statements—one stands out as proof of what the friendship of two people can do to make the world a better place: the joint doctoral program linking Sapienza University of Rome and the University of Silesia in Katowice. Projects like this do not arise by accident. They require patience, persistence, and—above all—the willingness to imagine intellectual cooperation beyond the narrow horizons of national academic

systems. Today both universities, together with a growing community of doctoral candidates representing countries across the world, reap the fruits of this shared dream. Each year we celebrate the rise of a new scholarly voice. There are few things more fulfilling than the two of us could imagine.

What began as a moment of intellectual admiration (on my part) and generous tutorship (on Giorgio's) gradually grew into something much more durable: a friendship grounded not only in shared scholarly interests but also in a common belief that academic work should build bridges against political and economic odds. Giorgio and I believed deeply in that vision, and we worked tirelessly to make it real, exchanging hundreds of emails and telephone conversations—often in the small hours of the morning. And, curiously enough, he still refuses to hate me. That is probably because, just as he always hoped, the program allowed young scholars to move intellectually across the lingering shadows of the Iron Curtain and physically between Rome and Katowice, discovering that scholarship thrives precisely where linguistic, cultural, and methodological differences are no longer treated as obstacles but as invitations to dialogue. In this sense, the Sapienza–Silesia initiative became much more than an administrative arrangement: it was an experiment in transnational intellectual community, reflecting Giorgio's conviction that hemispheric and transoceanic American Studies, perhaps more than any other field, must remain open to the plurality of perspectives through which America is read and interpreted around the world. In this way, our discipline has quietly cross-pollinated European humanities more broadly.

Looking back today, I realize that this shared work mirrors, in its own modest way, the very argument I advance in the lecture to which these words are appended. In the world of Herman Melville, survival at sea depends not on abstract doctrines but on the solidarity of those who share the same fragile vessel. The ship remains afloat only if its crew members trust one another and accept responsibility not merely for themselves but for everyone on board. In our own academic lives—less dramatic, perhaps, but not entirely free of storms—the principle is much the same. Intellectual communities survive only where cooperation replaces rivalry and where friendship becomes the quiet infrastructure of shared work. It is precisely this ethos that Giorgio helps bring into existence through the Sapienza–Silesia program: a space in which younger scholars move between Rome and Katowice, between languages, traditions, and perspectives, discovering that scholarship is not a solitary performance but a collaborative voyage.

And finally, there is something quietly beautiful in the fact that the two editors of this volume, Giacomo Traina and Giulia Magro, are themselves

graduates of that very program. When I see their work today, I cannot help thinking that this is how academic life should function. We begin our journeys as students—impatient, uncertain, often convinced that we already understand more than we actually do—and we are fortunate if we encounter mentors who treat us with generosity, intellectual honesty, and genuine curiosity about the questions we bring with us. Giorgio has always understood that scholarship is not simply the accumulation of knowledge but the creation of spaces in which others may grow. Programs, institutions, journals, and conferences he supports are not bureaucratic structures; in his view they are living environments of dialogue where younger scholars test their ideas, refine their thinking, and discover their own voices.

Seen from this perspective, the presence of Giacomo and Giulia at the helm of this volume is not merely symbolic. It is a sign that the intellectual community Giorgio has helped cultivate continues to evolve and renew itself. Younger scholars step forward with their own energy, their own questions, and their own courage—but they do so within intellectual spaces that Giorgio, through friendship and shared work, has helped bring into existence. And that, perhaps, is the most meaningful form of scholarly continuity one can hope for.

It may be unnecessary to write it, but for my part I remain grateful—to Giorgio the scholar, Giorgio the colleague, and Giorgio the friend. Looking back at the years of collaboration, arguments, shared labor, and more than a few storms weathered together, I realize how fortunate I am to have sailed part of this voyage in his company—and how grateful I remain that the voyage continues. If we should ever find ourselves again floating together as stubborn little tappi on the vast ocean of American Studies, I would count myself lucky to share that sea with him.

And perhaps this brings us back—quietly but inevitably—to the Melvillean universe that frames the lecture to which these lines are appended. In Melville's world, survival is never the achievement of isolated heroes; it is the fragile and beautiful result of solidarity among those who find themselves aboard the same ocean-tossed vessel. The philosophy that emerges from such experience is disarmingly simple: in a fluid and unpredictable world, the most reliable structure we possess may prove to be nothing more—and nothing less—than the friendship that binds us to one another. As Ishmael reminds us in one of the most generous passages of *Moby-Dick*, the ultimate gesture of such solidarity may simply be the universal squeeze of the hand—the quiet acknowledgment that we remain, after all, fellow sailors on the same uncertain sea.

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