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Industry of Blood: Extractivism and Animal Agency in *Moby-Dick*

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Introduction

Some works of art will never cease to resonate with the foundational architecture of the human condition, regardless of their origin. They manage to transcend their temporal and spatial context of production, becoming universally recognized as timeless examples of human capacity to create something that reaches far beyond themselves. In his literary production, Herman Melville crafted one of such artifacts, which has become one of the most important stories in global imaginery, a text which has excited the imagination of the general public and puzzled academics for almost two centuries. To confront and work on *Moby-Dick* means to measure oneself against that huge and incommensurable vastness of a text that has never ceased to amaze and terrify the deepest parts of the human soul. Indeed, the "grand hooded phantom"[1] that inhabits this story world truly swims before you during your exploration, and still has the power to shake the inner foundations of heart and mind alike.

Melville's text has been read in a variety of ways: politically, allegorically, philosophically, as well as for its peculiar narrative choices, to name but a few examples. As I mentioned above, however, artworks such as *Moby-Dick* never truly exhaust their intrinsic potential to spark newer and productive interpretations and reflections. This means that even in our contemporaneity, in a world radically different from Melville's one, his masterpiece still has the capacity to tell us something about ourselves and the present we live in. Such has been the case with my second reading of the text, many years after my first approach; the textual ocean that the Pequod[2] sails during its voyage appeared to me more rich and mysterious than ever, even as it rolled on "as it rolled five thousand years ago."[3] In this respect, knowledge has obviously moved and changed a lot since mid-nineteenth century, the period of its publication; *Moby-Dick*, however, is capable

[1] Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*. Penguin Classics, 2003, p. 8.
[2] The name of the whaleship Pequod will appear in roman type in this work, just as in Melville's text, while other, non-fictional ships will appear with their names in italics.
[3] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 624.

of encompassing those changes in its depths and be read in always new, unexpected ways. This is precisely what this work sets out to do, namely to read Melville's text with contemporary eyes, and see how these new perspectives resonate with the text, rather than simply commenting about it.

Before moving on to detail my reading of *Moby-Dick*, I would like to quickly summarize what brought me to this interpretation of the novel, and why I decided to ground it on the theories of twenty and twenty-first century thinkers. One of the aspects that sincerely surprises me the most about *Moby-Dick*'s general perception remains the fact that Melville's novel exists in most people's minds as a classic story of exotic sea adventures. Indeed, the voyage covers more than half of the world's watery surface and occupies the majority of the narration. The American protagonist encounters distant and peculiar human beings as well as wild species of marine life. After my last encounter with the text, however, I was left with a completely different impression. To me, it has been a rather appalling journey, driven by blood, fire and madness, as well as a tremendous descent into the most unknown parts of the ocean and the human soul. To better express the sensation I am referring to, I think Melville's own words are much more apt for the task. In one letter addressed to his close friend and poet Sarah Morewood, he describes his upcoming novel, just a few weeks away from publication, as follows: "it is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships' cables and hawsers. A Polar wind blows through it, and birds of prey hover over it."[4] Melville uses this rather spectral image to warn his correspondent about the daring, unconventional, and dark nature of the book – which was largely unappreciated during his lifetime. This vivid metaphor perfectly conveys my reading experience, maturated in a literary environment which I found complex, rough, harsh and uncompromising, albeit never unwelcoming. It is precisely in this intricate environment, I would argue, that lies the extraordinary potential for new understandings of the world and ourselves. Within the obscure mixture of elements that constitute the novel, I was struck by realizing how much of the huge heterogeneity of the themes addressed in the narration resonate with contemporary concerns. Indeed, *Moby-Dick* speaks of energy, ecologies, human-nonhuman relations and in general about

[4] Davis, Merrell R. and William H. Gilman, ed. *The Letters of Herman Melville*. Yale University Press, 1960, p. 138.

topics that are still incredibly relevant in the twenty-first century. Even more fascinating is the fact that connecting each and every one of these themes is the mysterious and awesome figure of the whale.

To pursue this line of inquiry, I decided to focus my work on what I argue to be the main tension at the very core of *Moby-Dick*: the whale as divided between its systematic reduction to an energy commodity for US national progress and its elusive agency as a biological subject. In order to better understand the centrality of this matter, which I experienced while reading the novel, I will ground my work in an ecocritical and neo-materialist perspectives, which also allow me to frame *Moby-Dick* within our contemporary world and concerns. My work is based on two distinct yet interrelated approaches which reflects the two poles of the tension highlighted above, each based on one specific theoretical contribution.

For the analysis of the first side of this tension, my discourse will rely mainly on scholar Matthew S. Henry's concept of 'extractive fictions'. I will show how this framework is reflected in the extreme lucidity with which Melville describes the obnoxious practice of nineteenth century whaling in its most gruesome and minute detail, often problematizing it in terms of human and non-human costs. I intend to apply Henry's work on the American whale fishery thoroughly described by Melville because of its importance within nineteenth century American energy economy and ultimately highlight the link between energy production and cultural identity. This will allow me to frame this industry not just as a picturesque hunt of times past, but as a capitalist extractive infrastructure based on the subjugation of territories as well as human and non-human bodies, reduced to disregarded 'sacrifice areas' in the name of progress. Just as the frontier in those same years, in fact, the American whaler becomes a vital yet perhaps less celebrated crucible for meaning-production and national narratives, and the whale had a fundamental role in this process.

In the second part of my discourse, I will examine the potential of literature to produce new ways of understanding the interrelation between culture and nature in order to provide a valid counternarrative to this anthropocentric perception of the whale, trying to focus on the non-human animal presence within the text as untied to any economic or symbolic meaning, and thus interrogating the possibility for non-human animal agency to manifest in literature. To do so, I will base this

part of my analysis on Ann-Sofie Lönngren's methodology of 'following' the non-human animal in the text, which allows to develop a reading of the animal which highlights its ontological alterity as well as its biological and textual resistance.

This work is the result of juxtaposing these two conflicting aspects that coexist within Melville's novel. Rejecting the apparent dichotomy between the two and instead exploring the productive outcomes that derive from this friction can reveal new formulations of meaning, illuminating our place in the world, especially in relation to the non-human at a time of paramount urgency. Among the numerous existing ecocritical approaches that have been applied to Melville's *oeuvre*, I realized that the lesser-known but still very relevant contributions of Henry and Lönngren on the debate on extractivism and animality had not yet been linked to Melville's work, and particularly to *Moby-Dick*. Furthermore, these contributions seemed to fit well with the text, as they seemed to help frame a reading of the novel based on the multifaceted representation of the whale within the text that had not yet been fully explored, but that I perceived to be central in Melville's pages.

To develop my argument, I start by revisiting some of the key academic contributions that have influenced Melville's criticism in the direction that guided my work. In Chapter I, I summarize some of the leading scholarship on this topic, in order to place my work within this line of enquiry and to show how my argument develops some of the earlier scholarship available on the subject. Initially, I present an overview of Melville's criticism, from its first 'revivals' up to the seminal works by Charles Olson and Robert Zoellner, which contributed to revaluating the role of whaling and the animal other as central ecocritical themes in *Moby-Dick*, moving all the way up to the twenty-first century new materialist turn in Melville scholarship. I then shed light on the fundamental role the ocean had in Melville's production, specifically in the way it shaped the emergence of global capital and fostered American imperialism in a frontier-like framework. I move on describing in depth the definition of extraction according to Matthew S. Henry, and how this practice is reflected and problematized through narratives. In order to effectively apply Henry's theory to the context of nineteenth century whaling, I will link his discourse to John Levi Barnard's work on 'animal capital', which illuminates on the ways in which the rise of the American nation has always relied on the systematic commodification of non-human animals, both materially and

symbolically. Lastly, I structure a theoretical framework that attempts to detach the non-human animal from these anthropocentric practices. I start with Hubert Zapf's formulation of literature as a regenerative counter-discourse in terms of cultural ecology, before introducing Ann-Sofie Lönngren's specific strategy in this matter, which permits to trace the actual animal beyond the metaphor. In this chapter, I aim at building the theoretical basis upon which I will structure my argument.

Chapter II is grounded on the bloody, 'industrial' part depicted in Melville's novel. Here, the focus is on the whaling industry intended as great infrastructure of extractive capital, with the ultimate aim at framing *Moby-Dick* as an example of 'extractive fiction'. The chapter opens with an historical overview of US whaling from its growth into the first great global energy industry to its progressive decline, highlighting the paramount importance it had for national empowerment. I then ground the focus aboard of the very site of production of such industry, i.e. the American whaleship, developing an ecological and material analysis of the forces that alimented its functioning, from the calories necessary to sustain men's labor to the mechanized process of dismantling the non-human animal's body into its marketable components. After exposing the more practical aspects of this industry, I show how this practice was reflected in a widespread culture of labor and consumption intended by scholar Macarena Gomez-Barris as "the extractive view", which, in its broader sense of application, inevitably translates into ravenous global imperialism. Indeed, the culture of whaling was fundamental for the functioning of this system. I then move towards the closure of the chapter analyzing the human figure at the center of the complex machinery of whaling, i.e. the American whaleman. I expose the contradictory ways in which this figure was socially perceived, from the patriotic bringer of light to the degraded laborer exposed to death and defilements. Before concluding, I draw a parallelism with the figure of the Appalachian coal miner examined by Henry in his work, so that to highlight even more the correspondence of Melville's text with this type of narrative.

With a swift turn in perspective, Chapter III explores the possibility for the non-human animal to find a place of resistance in an environment in which it is systematically reduced to something else. In order to expose the enormous

meaning potential of the whale, I start the chapter by highlighting many symbolical readings that have been attached to the whale in general and to Moby Dick himself in particular, with the final intent of deconstructing the symbolic overload that burdens this being. I then move on to highlight various ways in which the animal might resist the hold of anthropocentric understanding within Melville's text. One such way is undoubtedly expressed through the whale's physical presence, which defies scientific categorization, as well as its immense raw power, which constantly threatens the lives of its hunters. I then move deeper into the exploration of the non-human animal subjectivity, questioning whether this perspective is even accessible in the first place. In this section emerges one crucial point in animal studies, i.e. the complex role of human language, an extremely powerful tool that nevertheless might not be enough to grant access to the human observer. Finally, through Lönngren I explore an opening towards a more emphatic interspecies relationality with the non-human animal derived from a progressive loss of control on part of the human, whereby the limits of anthropocentric discourse force the human narrator to step aside and let the non-human animal other manifest itself through its ungraspable presence.

In conclusion, I would like to spend a few words to thank the scholars that supported me in the drafting stages of this work. I am grateful to Professors Giorgio Mariani and Pilar Martínez Benedí for their kind guidance during my first steps in working on an author such as Melville, as well as for their precious help in providing me with useful critical readings that have been essential for approaching his masterpiece. I would also like to thank Professor Elisa Bordin for spurring me to work on such an insightful topic, as well as for following me in each stage of this work in a stimulating and productive conversation. Last but not least, my gratitude goes to Professor Sara Culeddu for having expanded my understanding of the power of texts with her inspiring teachings on animality in literature, which I am glad I was able to put to good use in this work.

Chapter I

A Sea of Perspectives: *Moby-Dick* as a Vessel of Meaning(s)

Moby-Dick; or, The Whale, published in 1851, is considered Herman Melville's epic masterpiece as well as perhaps the most notable achievement within North American literary tradition – the quintessential 'Great American Novel'. Superficially, the novel consists in the sailor Ishmael's narrative of the maniacal quest of Ahab, mad captain of the Pequod, for vengeance against Moby Dick, the giant white sperm whale that took off his leg on the ship's previous voyage. Despite being often addressed as an exotic story of adventure, *Moby-Dick* is composed of radically different parts. Most notably, it contains a deep and encyclopedic account of nineteenth-century whaling and cetology, often taking the shape of a natural history treaty. The novel's extreme heterogeneity sparked many reflections and interpretations throughout the decades and all around the world: it has been called an elegy to democracy, a tract on the nature of religion, an investigation of man's relationship to the natural world, and a conflict between the eternal forces of good and evil.[5]

Although all these interpretations are not misled and undoubtedly do justice to Melville's masterpiece, I would argue that one important consideration has long been overlooked, i.e. the fact that *Moby-Dick* – as the second part of the title suggests – is a book first and foremost about *The Whale*. To put it bluntly, scholar Richard Ellis defines Melville's epic narrative as "the most powerful parable ever written of the eternal conflict between man and beast."[6] Indeed, the reflection of this everlasting conflict can be found in the contradictory ways that the novel

[5] Ellis, Richard. *The Great Sperm Whale: A Natural History of the Ocean's Most Magnificent and Mysterious Creature*. University of Kansas Press, 2011, p. 8.
[6] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 237.

portraits its non-human protagonist. The aim of this first chapter is to provide an overview of numerous scholarly approaches that will help to address the way this specific conflictual nature emerges in Melville's text, as well as to lay the theoretical foundations of my argument before engaging with the novel.

1.1 – The Many Lives of Herman Melville

One of the aspects that one must come to terms with when approaching Melville and his magnum opus *Moby-Dick* is to navigate the oceanic amount of scholarly literature that has been produced about it. The novel itself needs very little in terms of presentation, but the infinite ways in which the story of the hunt for the White Whale has been read, interpreted, and analyzed undoubtedly does. As many critics point out, "first and foremost, it is important to bear in mind that, unsurprisingly, Melville's texts (although perhaps only in hindsight) have always served specific ideological interests in the academic discourse of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."[7] In order to explore the huge variety of approaches that have touched Melville and his whale over the decades, then, an exposition of the main critical contributions must be provided. It is although impossible, and outside the scope of this work, to analyze every possible interpretation and current of thought that has been applied to Melville's masterpiece. Indeed – just as the man who wrote it – the novel itself has lived so many lives that it rapidly transcended its national boundaries, to the point that its perception has been progressively engraved into the level of myth.[8]

At the time of his death, in 1891, Herman Melville passed away without receiving remarkable critical praise nor particular commercial fortune. His name wouldn't near any of the giants of the American literary canon until decades later. As Giles Gunn states, "in his own time, his writing was recognized as exotic, demanding, ambitious, curious, and sometimes evocative but was greeted with a

[7] Pfailer, Martina. "Between Man and Place: insegnare *Moby-Dick* nel contesto della globalizzazione": Global Melville. Giorgio Mariani e Sonia Di Loreto (a cura di). *Ácoma*, 2, 2012, p. 27; my trans.

[8] For an exhaustive account on the evolution of Melville criticism through the years, see the works by Giorgio Mariani: *Allegorie Impossibili. Storia e Strategie della Critica Melvilliana* (2006), *Leggere Melville* (2013), and *Melville: Guida a* Moby-Dick (2022).

mixture of interest, perplexity, dismay, and hostility."[9] For many years, Melville was in fact considered and remembered just as a writer of exotic adventures set in the South Seas, rich in description and engaging for the land-based readership thanks to the fact that he heavily borrowed from his own experience as a sailor – both in the mercantile fleet and on various whaling voyages made at young age – as well as on several peculiar 'sojourns' in the Pacific. Indeed, between 1842 and 1844, Melville (a schoolteacher from New York) subsequentially found himself deserter of ships, captive among the cannibals in the Marquesas Islands, convict and then fugitive in Tahiti, potato farmer on the near island of Moorea, and store clerk in Honolulu, just to name a few. From these and other adventures, Melville took inspiration for his first sea novels: *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847). As will be more thoroughly exposed in the next section, Melville's experience at sea enriched and expanded his perception of the world and – most importantly – of his country. Although initially regarded "as an able story teller of strange, sensational, somewhat primitive tales" by the American audience, his works nevertheless resulted in poor commercial success and "Melville's reputation during his lifetime followed a downward curve from a sense of early promise and rich potential to a perception of later confusion, incoherence, and eventual inconsequence"[10], mostly due to a too-encompassing tendency towards morbidness and an excessive inclination on metaphysics in his texts.

Melville's figure underwent the first phases of its revival only starting from the 1920s and 1940s. Historians of American literary and cultural history were now rediscovering his works in a time of profound cultural and political turmoil, in which his writings now seemed to resonate and ultimately have a potential for defining American national identity in the wake of WWI. Accordingly, "Melville's art not only provided insights into a world grown treacherous, ambiguous, unstable, brutal, and unjust but also offered psychological, mythic, ideological, social, ethical, epistemological, linguistic, and metaphysical strategies for coping with, even successfully surviving, such a world."[11] From this point, then, Melville would be rapidly consecrated among the greatest figures of the American literary

[9] Gunn, Giles B. *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*. Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 8.
[10] Gunn, *Guide*, p. 9.
[11] Gunn, *Guide*, p. 11.

pantheon; his texts now rediscovered through always newer lenses, and it is safe to say that this process has continued well beyond those years and never ceased to this day.

To develop my argument, I start by presenting some of the key scholarly contributors that have helped Melville's criticism to move from a purely biographical or symbolic reading to a more material, technical, and ecological approach. The first of these works is undoubtedly Charles Olson's seminal book *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) in which the author introduces the concept of *Moby-Dick* being composed of two, radically opposite, books. On the one hand, the novel contains a thorough and meticulous account of the nineteen century US whale fishery and its importance for providing "the light of American and European communities"[12] in those years. This first part, however, coexists and both clashes and mingle with a second "book" in which Melville – drawing heavily from Shakespeare and Carlyle – crafts a bleak and harrowing sea-narrative that revolves around Ahab's tragic figure and his monomaniac hunt for the White Whale. Ahab's character, above all, is put in a new light: the commander of the Pequod figures not only as a dictator, but he also embodies the typically American drive to exercise "lordship over nature"[13] through force. Although the theme of the perpetual struggle between man and nature has been largely addressed as one of the core philosophical explorations of Melville's novel, it is precisely the content of the first book – the 'industrial' aspect of it all – that has been for the most part overlooked, as Olson puts it: "I am interested in a Melville who decided sometime in 1850 to write a book about the whaling industry and what happened to a man in command of one of the most successful machines Americans had perfected up to that time – the whaleship."[14] This perspective is essential to my work as it stresses not only the importance of the cultural inclination and conquering impetus towards the non-human,[15] but also the fact that this impetus is manifested by concentrating all the space and technological power of the ship (and the whole fishery at large) against it.

[12] Olson, Charles. *Call Me Ishmael*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 12.
[13] Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, p. 13.
[14] Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, p. 12.
[15] The term 'non-human' in this work refers to all other-than-human forces, including non-human animals, plants and vegetations, as well as inorganic forces such as the wind or sea.

Many commentators, regardless of the approach, have explored the peculiarity of the contrast at the heart of Melville's novel, i.e. the two seemingly incompatible parts that compose it. With his work titled *The Whale: In Search of the Giants of the Sea* (2010), scholar Philip Hoare elaborated on the structural double nature of *Moby-Dick*, focusing in turn on the sources that most influenced Melville in the writing of his novel. Melville conducted his meticulous research of scientific facts about the cetology of the sperm whale drawing mainly from Thomas Beale's *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale*, published in its first edition in 1835. Beale was a physician who spent two years of service aboard British whaling vessels; this allowed him to observe directly the social behavior of cetaceans in their natural habitat and the industrial practices employed for their hunt. His text has the analytical accuracy of a science treaty, and it is considered the first pioneering and scientifically based study on the sperm whale. As I said, Melville deeply used Beale's work to build the solid encyclopedic structure on cetology of his novel, with the same meticulousness and attention he dedicated to the more 'literary' inspirations for his tale, indeed, as Hoare points out: "if *Moby-Dick* owed its metaphysics to Nathaniel Hawthorne, then it owed its facts to Thomas Beale."[16] Hoare's work resonates with Olson's interest in addressing the centrality of the American whale fishery that sparkled Melville for the telling of his epic; however, he adopts an even deeper historical perspective as he explicitly juxtapose the whaling industry with the nineteen-century US slaving system, defining them as "both expressions of antebellum America; both doomed by their reliance on unsustainable resources, human and cetacean."[17] As I will more thoroughly expose in the following chapter, the whaling industry – the same way as slavery – had a prominent role in the economic development of American empire across eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hoare's work is hence functional to my argument on extraction as it shows how the oily, grimy labor of whaling was the substrate out of which Melville, chapter after chapter, forged his immaculate yet blasphemous creation, and – through the whale – questioned the future of his nation and its myth.[18]

[16] Hoare, Philip. *The Whale: In Search of the Giants of the Sea.* HarperCollins e-books, 2010, p. 202.
[17] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 90.
[18] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 37.

Another pivotal contribution which historically paved the way to early animal-oriented readings of *Moby-Dick* is Robert Zoellner's *The Salt-Sea Mastodon* (1973). With this book, Melville's critique takes a decisive step towards ecocriticism, as the author tries to depart from previous interpretations that reinforced the reading of the whale as symbol of ultimate evil or metaphysical abstraction, just as in Ahab's eyes. Zoellner, in fact, tries to emphasize the whale's physicality and shorten the perceptive gap between man and cetacean, in a process of "humanizing of leviathan"[19]. In a similar way to Olson's work, Zoellner centers his analysis on a specific tension manifested in Melville's text, in which the author identifies two opposite readings of the whale. On the one hand, there is Ahab's whale, "a quasi-mythic affirmation of a transcendental reality behind the visible cosmos", something that "resides outside space and time", terrible and malign. Whether "principal or agent, the visible manifestation of an overkill, megaton God", this whale "is emblematic of nature, but he [Moby Dick] is not *part* of nature."[20] Opposite to this vision is Ishamel's whale, interpreted through naturalistic lenses, in which the novel's narrator goes deep down in analyzing the whale's body – especially in the process of trying out its parts – and in this way he develops an "emphatic identification" with it, ultimately "projecting his own humanity out upon that alien *other*, that inconceivable and unimaginable *not-me* which is Leviathan."[21] From this perspective, "whales are actually much more similar to humans than one might expect, they are infused with human characteristics and therefore tasked to represent traits of human life and predicament that are not seen elsewhere in the text."[22] As a matter of fact, the only scenes of tenderness or familiar love in the book are associated to whale mothers and cubs, shortly before the beginning of the usual butchery. In this way, the whale in Melville's text departs form the idea of being an "alien *other*" and becomes a familiar figure. As many scholars have by now recognized, this analysis remains clearly rooted in anthropocentrism; however, "the most relevant aspect of Zoeller's interpretation is his effort to remove the strictly mythic, supernatural aura previously attributed to

[19] Zoellner, Robert. *The Salt-Sea Mastodon: A Reading of* Moby-Dick. University of California Press, 1973, p. 166.
[20] Zoellner, *The Salt-sea Mastodon*, pp. 149-50, emphasis in text.
[21] Zoellner, *The Salt-sea Mastodon*, p. 169, emphasis in text.
[22] Brazzale, Giulia. *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick. M.A. thesis, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2023, p. 9.

the White Whale (and by reflection all whales)" by critics up to that moment. As a result, his work "opens up the possibility of reading whales no longer as simple vessels for ideas, but as real-life animals that are kindred to humans, and therefore to reflect on the feelings of empathy and compassion we as readers are compelled to feel towards them."[23]

Within the contemporary scholarly landscape – and in a way developing from theories such as Zoellner's – one fundamental contribution in Melville studies is represented by a series of new perspectives that are all incorporated in the 'new materialist turn'. Introduced by Samuel Otter in his *Melville's Anatomies* (1999), this new focus on the materiality of the body in Melville's texts has shown how characters and events can be read as part of a complex web of material relations that goes beyond allegorical interpretations. According to this vision, the human body represents a material structure influenced by equally material environments.[24] Otter's work has the merit of opening up a materialist perspective which later developed into two directions: "classical Marxist theories of labor" on the one hand, and "materialist models of psychology" on the other.[25] As an example, in their volume titled *Ahab Unbound: Melville and the Materialist Turn*, Meredith Farmer and Jonathan D. S. Schroeder use this new materialism in order to rethink the figure of Ahab as a mutilated body in pain, suffering from mental disorders and working under poor labor conditions, opening up this set of theories to new contemporary interpretations, such as "posthumanism, political theory, and disability studies".[26] These perspectives, however, move well beyond just the human body; in Philip Armstrong's reading, for example, the Pequod itself becomes more than just the setting of the novel, and takes the shape of a complex network of material "actants – animal, human and technological –"[27] like harpoons, lines, oil, bone, wind, and sea that constantly mediates the interdependence between human and non-human agencies. What emerges from these interpretations, therefore, is a material continuum that binds together man and nature – human

[23] Brazzale, *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick, pp. 10-11.
[24] Farmer, Meredith, and Jonathan D. S. Schroeder, ed. *Ahab Unbound: Melville and the Materialist Turn*. University of Minnesota Press, 2022, p. 12.
[25] Farmer, *Ahab Unbound*, p. 2.
[26] Farmer, *Ahab Unbound*, p. 3.
[27] Armstrong, Philip. "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example." *Textual Practice*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2005, p. 117.

and non-human – in a profound interdependence, destabilizing human's pretense of technological and ontological superiority. Under this light, *Moby-Dick* portrays not only the extreme reach and implications of human passion for mastery, but it is also an exploration of the collapse of said passion when faced with the recalcitrant and unavoidable vitality of non-human matter. To sum up, then, these new materialist readings are fundamental for my discourse because they do not deny, but rather celebrate non-human agents in Melville's work, in an attempt to distance themselves from anthropocentric, allegorical readings of his oeuvre.[28]

Those I have presented are just few of the infinite approaches through which Melville's work has been constantly reinterpreted and reanalyzed. They stand out because they have been instrumental in creating the foundations upon which other scholars would build and expand Melville scholarship in new directions. In the vast sea of contributors that have worked on Melville and his masterpiece, they offer a useful introduction that allows me to set the stage before going deeper in developing the theoretical framework of my argument.

1.2 – The Ocean as (trans)National Frontier

Before focusing on the main theoretical contributors upon which I will base my analysis, I believe it is important to address the prominent role of the ocean both in Melville's time and within the context of contemporary American cultural studies. This will allow me to illuminate how ocean space was – and still is – central on a geographical, political, economic and cultural level, as well as pivotal for Melville himself in the development of his worldview. Indeed, as many biographers and literary critics emphasize, Herman Melville was a whaleman before he was a writer, and his books could never have been quite the same had such not been the case.[29]

Like many aspects of the world, the ocean exists in human perception in mediated form, more often than not it does so through narrations; this was the case even in Melville's time. The ocean, however, has the peculiarity of being far from

[28] Brazzale, *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick, p. 22.
[29] Heflin, Wilson. *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2004, p. xxiv.

accessible to most people; as a result, it is usually invested with an aura of exoticness, unfamiliarity, and otherness. By the mid-nineteen century, sea writing could already count on a vast tradition of authors that attempted to witness and translate that wild inexplicable otherness in the form of literary text.[30] Before the diffusion of the sea novel, the ocean was narrated in a variety of literary expressions, such as first-person narratives of working sailors, ballads, chanteys, religious tracts, pirate tales, colonial accounts of events such as storms or shipwrecks, as well as North African captivity.[31] Between the eighteen and nineteen centuries, however, the sea started to inhabit the space of the novel, from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Walter Scott's *The Pirate* (1821) and in the maritime fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, such as *The Pilot* (1824), *The Red Rover* (1827), and *The Water-Witch* (1830). The peculiarity of the genre of sea writing lies in the intrinsic novelty of the experience it represents: the facts of nautical life conveyed by sea literature would be new, if not inaccessible, to most land-based readers. For this reason, the specificity of the details of nautical verisimilitude is central to the structure of the works. In sea literature, in other words, fact and fancy (or truth and imagination) are not just formal categories, but instead are the source of productive tensions that animate the genre.[32] Most influential for this tradition as a whole and for Melville in particular has been Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), an account of his personal experience as a common sailor in which the sea is portrayed as a place of labor, as well as of contemplation, spurring an increasing interest in the actual facts of life at sea, rather than merely in its romance. In a way, the constant attrition between these different forms mirrors the chaotic complexity of the experience at sea, which potentially ranges between heavy labors conditions, dreadful life-or-death situations and ethereal stillness of dreamy scenarios. Melville was specifically interested in stretching the codes of this literary genre to their furthest limits of

[30] The tradition of maritime writing was subjected to the same general division that interested most of the American literary production in that specific period of time, that is, the distinction between the genres of 'narrative' (intended as factual accounts) and 'romance' (the form of the American novel made popular by writers such as Cooper and Hawthorne). In the mid-nineteen century, the sea writing tradition nevertheless saw many successful adaptations in both forms.

[31] Blum, Hester, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss. "Melville and the Novel of the Sea." *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*. Ed. Leonard Cassuto. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 153.

[32] Blum, "Melville and the Novel of the Sea", p. 152.

experimentation in order to narrate what could hardly be put into language: the ocean and the creatures that inhabit it, whether they be native (the sperm whale) or alien (the human).

The ocean, however, serves not just as the background in which Melville transposes his themes and reflections, but rather represents the very foundation upon which he builds his story worlds, as if land did not offer a substratum solid enough to sustain them. Like mentioned above, the ocean completely revolutionized Melville's perception of the world and its boundaries, consequently providing him with a privileged perspective with which interrogate and redefine the concepts of space and nationality. Indeed, as many critics have pointed out, the sea is a medium inherently resistant to inscription and other forms of fixity or possession. In its vastness and motility, the ocean opens up to possibility on a planetary scale, and yet it also presents the risks of chartlessness or dispersion.[33] Because of such intrinsic characteristics, the oceanic space allowed Melville to challenge and go beyond the very idea of nationality, just when the US was strongly building its national identity and at the same time expanding its physical boundaries. As scholar Hester Blum contends, "Melville's work exemplifies oceanic ways of being: he is invested in modes of thinking and writing that are unbounded by expected affiliations, forms, nations, mores, or doctrines."[34] In other words, from his vast experience at sea, Melville managed to transcend and redefine his idea of Americanness in a framework of internationalism or even postnationalism. This view is most eloquently made explicit in a passage from his novel *Redburn* (1849) in which, referring to the nature of the American national character, he writes: "[w]e are not a nation, so much as a world; for unless we claim the world for our sire […], we are without father or mother. […] We are the heirs of all time, and with all nations we divide our inheritance."[35] Melville here is trying to emphasize the intrinsic ethnical heterogeneity at the base of American identity, which in the sea finds its most evident way of manifestation beyond the confinements of national borders. Incidentally, it is not strange that this passage is taken from a

[33] Blum, Hester. "Melville and Oceanic Studies." *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. Robert S. Levine, ed. Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 23.
[34] Blum, "Melville and Oceanic Studies", p. 24.
[35] Melville, Herman. *Redburn : His First Voyage*. Floating Press, The, 2011, p. 169.

scene set in the Liverpool docks, a major seaport in one of the most powerful maritime economies in the nineteenth-century world. Moreover, Blum argues:

> The seaman is literally outlandish: as the agent of nautical trade, transportation, and popular imagination, he experiences firsthand the dissolution of national affiliation in the space and time of the sea. As the first global travelers, mariners were imagined free from many of the constraints of social and political life – yet they faced hostile environmental conditions as well as repressive hierarchical structures aboard ship, neither of which could be mediated by the protections of statehood or citizenship.[36]

In line with this reasoning, other scholars, like Timothy Marr, have defined Melville's sailors as a "community of castaways"[37] whose origins have blended together and progressively faded in the sea. In *Moby-Dick*, this idea of transnationality is perfectly embodied by the diversified crew of the Pequod, as it is composed of seamen from every region and continent, that together incarnate the multiethnic American impetus of economic and territorial expansion. Unlike many Americans of his time, in fact, Melville refused to repress his exposure to the enigma of human variety. Instead, he actively celebrated it as a fresh and original dimension of a new world literature that lay claim to a more global genealogy.[38]

From this perspective, the ocean stands out as an intricate space of circulation that deconstructs the pretense of national belonging on an economic, cultural, social and political level; it is therefore no coincidence that Melville's texts have been constantly reread from the standpoint of numerous contemporary discourses such as global studies and political economy, drawing a parallelism between the vision of the ocean in Melville's time and its role today. As an example, scholar Robert T. Tally defines *Moby-Dick* as a postnational epic, as he observes that

> the whaling industry itself makes for a proleptic figure of the postmodern or multinational industry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A predecessor of the oil industry, which may be the very model of postmodern corporate subjectivity, whaling is among the first truly multinational businesses. Take the multinational labor force; it is not only that the crew is made up of individuals from all regions of the globe, […] they are a world federation of modern industrial workers. They owe allegiance to no nationality. […] The crew members are themselves

[36] Blum, "Melville and Oceanic Studies", p. 24.
[37] Marr, Timothy. "Melville's Planetary Compass." *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. Robert S. Levine, ed. Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 187.
[38] Gunn, *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, p. 135.

> emblematic of a global industry. Certainly Melville could have populated the *Pequod* with Americans, even with people from the various regions of the United States, but Melville insists the multinational character of the industry, and hence of his own literary project.[39]

According to this interpretation, what bounds together the crew of the Pequod, then, is not nationality, but rather the logic of global capital; in doing so, Melville frames a radically different worldview compared to the rest of his contemporaries. The dominant force in mid-nineteenth-century American civilization was a type of nationalism that was embodied in literature and culture in the form of national narrative, the fact that the 'nation' was not a culturally consolidated power in the minds of Americans actually strengthened the force of such a narrative, which after all becomes a means of shaping and empowering the national image. Through the ocean, Melville attempted to draw a literary cartography of the emergent, postnational world system as an implicit, and sometimes explicit, critique of the national narrative of his own era. It is for this reason that, as many scholars of globalization argue, Melville's transoceanic frame resonates so strongly with the contemporary negotiations of 'national' and 'transnational' literature as increasingly interdependent (inter)textual encounters in a globalized world.[40]

The interest in global studies in Melville's works represents just one example of a broader tendency in which the contemporary humanities scholarship is giving more and more attention to the role of the sea. Indeed, many critics have been trying to emphasize the fundamental role the maritime world had in the development of modern society and at the same time how it affected the expansion of western culture and its literary production. In his seminal article "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies", Steven Mentz describes a new maritime turn in the humanities that speaks to a series of modern discourses, including globalization, postcolonialism, environmentalism, ecocriticism, and the history of science and technology, where each of these concerns influences multiple disciplines, and each connects directly to the oceans.[41] Mentz's work does not only focus on the

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[39] Tally, Robert T. *Melville, Mapping and Globalization: Literary Cartography in the American Baroque*
Writer. Continuum, 2009, p. 133.
[40] Pfailer, "Between Man and Place", p. 27; my trans.
[41] Mentz, Steven. "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature." *Literature Compass*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2009, pp. 997, 1000.

paramount importance that transoceanic travel and commerce had in revolutionizing the perception of the world in modern western societies, but in so doing, it especially uses this discourse as an example in order to highlight "the cultural meaning of oceans themselves."[42] In other words, the ocean ceases to be an empty space that connects different empires and becomes an active, ungovernable agent in itself.

As a matter of fact, in early modern literary culture, land and sea were at a symbolic opposition: if land was "orderly and human", the sea stood out as "chaotic and divine",[43] a space intrinsically inhospitable and foreign. Despite this division has long inhabited western cultural production, the new maritime turn tries to bridge this gap and defines the ocean as a 'socially constructed' place that then goes on to shape social relations, on land and at sea. In short, the ocean is not merely a space used *by* society; it is one component of the space *of* society.[44] This perspective, then, highlights the sea as a complex extraterritorial entity that challenges land-based modalities of thought built on national boundaries and territorial possession, forcing what other contemporary scholars have in turn defined as "oceanic thinking", in which cultural, social and commercial relations are interwoven on a planetary scale. Indeed, the scholarly benefits of this perspective for many contemporary fields hinge precisely on its unfamiliarity, and on the shock of novelty that comes from jolting one's mental habits and practices into a new structure.[45] As outlined above, Melville first-handedly understood this riveting potential; for him and other early modern literary authors – from Shakespeare to Milton – the sea served precisely as this other space, a way to refigure traditional formulations about human beings in the world[46] – and also, I would add, about the non-human. To sum up, the ocean has become of prominent interest in many contemporary scholarly discourses as it has been recognized – now as in Melville's time – as the quintessential laboratory for formulating new horizons of meaning. In its ultimate space of unfamiliarity and fluidity, the sea still offers limitless potential for challenging deep-rooted paradigms and fixed

[42] Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies", p. 999.
[43] Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies", p. 1001.
[44] Steinberg, Philip E. *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 20; emphasis in text.
[45] Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies", p. 998.
[46] Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies", p. 1002.

cultural meanings. Indeed, by casting adrift our critical position from land- and nation-based perspectives, oceanic studies help us to develop other possible ways of understanding questions of affiliation, citizenship, economic exchange, mobility, rights, and sovereignty,[47] as well as a new consideration of the natural environment as a substantial partner in the creation of cultural meaning.

Among these diversified perspectives, there is one that particularly stands out as it is undoubtedly one of the most covered by critical attention. I believe it is appropriate to address it separately since I find it of particular interest for the development of my argument and moreover serves me as a bridge for the next section. As mentioned above, through his maritime experience, Melville managed to transgress the national boundaries of his thinking, although remaining deeply rooted in the cultural context of his country of origin in that specific period of time, that is to say the United States of the mid-nineteenth century. Among many of the widely mentioned land-based constructions that Melville questioned and problematized in his oeuvre, one that inevitably stands out as most prominent is the aspect of American empire. When thinking of the US geopolitical context of that period, the image that immediately comes to mind is perhaps the one epitomized by John Gast's painting *American Progress* (1872), which allegorically depicts the territorial and economic policies of that time in the shape of manifest destiny.[48] In this representation, we see the relentless westward expansion that was structured around an enormous institutional as well as popular project of settler colonialism that aimed at annexing more and more territory under the US national sovereignty. This effort was sustained by a powerful rhetoric that saw in the promise of bringing civilization to what was perceived as a savage wilderness an effective way for ultimately 'conquer' the west. The most notorious episodes are considered to be the Louisiana Purchase (1803) and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848) with which the United States more than doubled their territorial

[47] Blum, "Melville and Oceanic Studies", p. 24.

[48] 'Manifest destiny' is the term that in 19th-century America represented the unquestionable expansionist belief that guided American settlers in their westward expansion across North America. This belief is deeply rooted in American exceptionalism, romantic nationalism, and white chauvinism. Historically, it is now considered as one of the earlier expressions of American imperialism, causing many forced displacements of indigenous groups and the extermination of huge portions of wildlife to such a degree that many historical commentators have advocated the prospect of both genocide and ecocide.

expansion. This endeavor, however, was not carried out only through singular, huge acquisitions of land, but was in fact a progressive and constant process that saw the participation of a great number of people.

Melville perfectly understood, as others did, that the ocean was part and parcel of this national project. As Olson points out, Melville "was long-eyed enough to understand the Pacific as part of our geography, another West, prefigured in the Plains, antithetical."[49] Accordingly, in the mythologized rhetoric of the frontier, space becomes the quintessential feature of American national character. It is no mystery, then, that the sea represents for Melville that incommensurable vastness that, in comparison, the American continental west was already starting to lose. In this sense, the ocean – like the plains – is related to freedom, heroism, individual uniqueness, and in that most decisively shapes the idealized American character.[50] In this perspective, whaling is not just a profession, but it rather becomes another form of extraterritorial imperialism that sees the ocean as another space to be colonized and exploited, in this case, through the whale. As a result, the hunters went after it. And it led them into all the oceans, thus giving whaling its leading role in transforming the Pacific into an "American lake."[51] Indeed, many critics now unanimously consider America's expansion in the region from 1784 to 1861 as part of the nation's frontier experience, arguing that the same agents were at work on this maritime frontier as on the frontier on land.[52] In this way, whalers became maritime pioneers, mirroring and exporting the intentions of their fellow settlers on land, as they were the first ones to reach and subsequently establish the American presence in farther and farther regions of their watery world. As I will more thoroughly expose later in my work, the sea ultimately reflected the frontier experience also for its importance in providing natural resources that were fundamental for empowering the American nation, just as the west attracted many interests with its abundance of precious metals, coal, water, timber, fur, soil, and not much later, petroleum.

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[49] Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, pp. 12-13.
[50] Hamilton, William. "Melville and the Sea." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 62, no. 4, 1979, p. 420.
[51] Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, p. 19.
[52] Kauanui, J. Kēhaulani. "Imperial Ocean: The Pacific as a Critical Site for American Studies." *American Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2015, p. 627.

In this section I have presented how the ocean in *Moby-Dick* serves not just as the material backdrop for whale hunting or metaphysical meditations, but it instead represents a powerful force capable of deconstructing subjectivities and nationalities alike, ultimately forcing them to confront a planetary dimension that resists the controlling logic of territorial ownership or extractive capital. Indeed, now more than ever, the sea has abruptly returned to the eyes of the world in its utmost importance, while renewed imperialist interests over a single strip of sea in the Middle East have reminded the entire world of the ever-present central role that the sea plays in shaping every aspect of human life, far and wide on a global scale.

1.3 – Extractive Fictions and Animal Capital

In his book titled *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (2001), Philip E. Steinberg examines the role of the sea from the perspective of territorial political economy, maintaining that, historically, a large portion of human-marine interactions have always been based on a logic of extraction. As he points out: "the ocean is perceived as akin to other resource-rich spaces", and later adds that "in recent decades there have been dramatic increases in the rates of extraction of both nonliving and living resources from marine environments."[53] This is a tendency that goes way back in the history of human relations with the sea. As I will thoroughly expose, the American exploitation of the sea dates its origins even before the very foundation of the nation. Melville, remarkably, chose to narrate it in *Moby-Dick* at a time when this machine was at its peak in terms of efficiency and reach. In this section, I will present a number of approaches that examine and problematize these extractive practices by focusing on the ways in which the literary medium attempts to narrate them.

For this part of my analysis, I will rely mainly on the theories of scholar Matthew S. Henry, exposed in his book titled *Hydronarratives: Water, Environmental Justice, and a Just Transition* (2022). As the title suggests, Henry's formulation is centered around the element of water, which, due to various

[53] Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, p. 11.

contexts of other resources extraction, becomes a major element of systemic disruption and social injustice. Henry's work actually examines a great number of case studies, from the infamous management of the water resources in Flint, Michigan[54], to the consequences of coal mining in the regions of central Appalachia, to name a few examples. Henry explores how writers, artists, and activists have creatively responded to intensifying water crises in the United States and argues that narrative and storytelling are critical to environmental and social justice advocacy. After exposing the core points of Henry's argument, I will show how it can be translated and applied to a completely different set of circumstances, i.e. from natural resources to the non-human animal in *Moby-Dick*, and point out how both the extractive logic at the base and the ultimate consequences on the human and the environment remain the same.

At the beginning of his work, Henry gives a clear and direct definition of the concept of extraction, namely "capitalism's fundamental logic of withdrawal – of value, nutrients, energy, labor, time – from people, lands, culture, lifeforms, the elements, without corresponding deposit or reinvestment (except as externalities of nonvalue in the form of pollution, waste, climate change, illness, and death)."[55] From this definition, it appears clear that the logic at the base requires the presence of determined environments from which a lot can be taken without worrying about compensate what is being brought away. This reasoning is the foundation of the typical, unquestionable capitalist belief of infinite resource

[54] The water crisis in Flint, Michigan began in 2014, when, due to an ongoing financial crisis, the city switched its drinking water supply from Detroit's system to the Flint River in a cost-saving move. Inadequate anti-corrosion treatments and testing of the water followed, resulting in a series of major water quality and health issues for Flint residents – issues that were chronically ignored and overlooked. Later studies would reveal the presence of massive amounts of lead into the city's drinking water system, which exposed thousands of residents – particularly children – to severe neurological damage, as well as a severe outbreak of Legionnaires' disease. The Michigan Civil Rights Commission, a state-established body, concluded that the poor governmental response to the Flint crisis was a 'result of systemic racism.' The majority of the city's residents are in fact Black, and about one-third of the population lives below the poverty line. The crisis exposed the link between water injustice, racial discrimination, and class inequality. It was ultimately the determined, relentless efforts of the Flint community – with the support of doctors, scientists, journalists, and citizen activists – that shined a light on the city's severe mismanagement of its drinking water. This forced a reckoning over how such a scandal could have been allowed to happen. Only in July 2025, after many years of struggle, was the pipe replacement program completed; the slow pace of progress and the long years of advocacy it took to ensure the city upheld its commitments remained however emblematic symptoms of huge environmental injustice.

[55] Henry, Matthew S. "Extractive Fictions and Postextraction Futurisms: Energy and Environmental Injustice in Appalachia." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2019, p. 404.

reliance. This framework, consequently, assumes the presence of certain areas designated to suffer the consequences of such practices, to put it in Henry's words: "the extractive logics of a capitalist system has always relied on the differentiation of human value such that some groups are rendered necessarily disposable as a precondition for accumulation."[56] On a practical level, such logics cause the emergence of what Henry defines as "sacrifice areas", i.e. "communities or regions considered expendable in pursuit of some exclusionary notion of a greater good. This we might call the expendability thesis of capitalism."[57] As Henry demonstrates, these sacrifice areas more often than not coincide with racialized non-white communities or low-income working-class groups. Wealth inequality and racial difference are, in fact, both ways through which human expendability has always been expressed. By extension, these structural divisions need to be constantly mediated by narratives that reiterate this rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion, defining which lives are deemed valuable and which are not, in order to maintain the paradigm of infinite progress and exploitation.

In order to start analyzing possible ways that can offer an alternative to this practice, Henry proceeds to explore a series of "reparation-based theories of justice such as reparation ecology", based on a more equal and sustainable redistribution of wealth, as well as "the recovery and regeneration of degraded ecosystems."[58] Without going deeper in this part of Henry's work, I will focus on the fact that, despite the encouraging expansion of just transition discourse and policy proposals, the planning and implementation of a just transition necessitates more than thoughtful policy design – it demands new narratives.[59] Indeed, the intrinsic potential offered by alternative forms of imagination and new formulations of meaning represents the common thread of this work. Many explorations in literary and cultural studies in different fields have shown how environmental and cultural narratives are shaped by and constructed across language, text, and media and have the potential to engage the imaginative and sensory capacities of readers and viewers, shaping the way they think and act.[60] To effectively sum up this discourse,

[56] Henry, Matthew S. *Hydronarratives: Water, Environmental Justice, and a Just Transition*. University of Nebraska Press, 2022, p. 4.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 7.
[59] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 11.
[60] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 12.

Henry invokes literary critic Frederic Jameson's famous assertion that "it seems to be easier for us to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations."[61] It is precisely in response to this imaginative failure, Henry argues, that "we need new stories, new narratives, and new counternarratives for a just transition."[62] Henry focuses his work on one specific kind of such counternarratives, examining those stories that address contexts of extraction and their consequences, which he defines as "extractive fictions" and describing them as:

> literature and other cultural forms that render visible the socioecological impacts of extractive capitalism and problematize extraction as a cultural practice. […] In doing so, they lay bare the epistemological failures of extractive capitalism, a mode of accumulation based on the large-scale withdrawal and processing of natural resources.[63]

What is more, this kind of narrative stands out because they expose the fact that the logic of extraction is not merely an economic practice, but it is deeply rooted at a cultural level. Indeed, the violence that renders environments and communities extractible starts precisely from a perceptional level; it is a consuming gaze, a worldview, highlighting the deep interrelation that exists between energy economy and cultural ideology.

From a theoretical perspective, Henry's thesis situates within the vast field of the environmental humanities, an interdisciplinary field of study that critiques the epistemological dualisms of anthropocentrism (nature/culture, human/non-human, ecology/economy) that support many of the social ideologies like colonialism, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy, which drive our current environmental crises. The rise of this discipline has given the opportunity to rethink what it means to be human and to challenge the concept of the Anthropocene, as it overemphasizes human agency at the species level while ignoring human difference, non-human agency, and the differentiation of human value within the parameters of capitalism.[64] More specifically, Henry's work is

[61] Jameson, Fredric. *The Seeds of Time*. Columbia University Press, 1994, p. xii.
[62] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 12.
[63] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", pp. 402-403.
[64] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 12.

grounded on "energy humanities", a subfield that explores the extent to which energy has played a critical role in shaping existing social structures, lived and material infrastructures, and even cultural practices. And how human's relation with energy is critical to the functioning of modernity and its capitalist underpinnings that preach endlessly upward economic growth and ever-improving living conditions.[65]

From what has been so far presented, many reasons for ascribing *Moby-Dick* to the genre of extractive fiction might already appear clear: I have previously mentioned how a great part of Melville's novel is dedicated to expose the visceral business of whaling, problematizing the functioning and the impacts of what another captain in Melville's production, *Benito Cereno*'s Amasa Delano,[66] proudly called "the machinery of civilization"[67] and its costs in terms of human as well as non-human blood. In order to better substantiate the application of Henry's theories to the novel, however, I believe it is appropriate to connect his discourse to the work of literary scholar John Levi Barnard, which will permit me to transfer the extraction discourse from the element of water to the non-human animal that inhabits it.

In his work, Barnard takes up the concept of "animal capital" from scholar Nicole Shukin (2009), who defines it as a product of a double process: one the one hand, it consists of the rendering of animal bodies into marketable commodities, while at the same time occurs a related process of figurative rendering, through which animal life becomes a symbolic resource of the nation.[68] Barnard's aim is to expose the huge economic and emblematic role that various maritime species had in the consolidation of American geopolitical power. To do so, he starts by focusing on one of the most iconic examples of foundational narratives in the US literary

[65] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 406.
[66] Amasa Delano (1763-1823) was a real American sea captain and trader who led many maritime voyages around the world, during one of these adventures occurred a notorious encounter with a group of shipwrecked slaves. This episode later became the inspiration for Melville's short novel *Benito Cereno*, published in 1855. In this fictional work, Delano finds himself in the middle of a covert slave uprising aboard a Spanish ship that – after many hours of mockery – he will ultimately help to suppress. Delano's figure represents the white master's colonial gaze on Black people as well as the naive impossibility of seeing the world outside of such paradigm.
[67] Delano, Amasa. *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising 3 Voyages Round the World ; Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands*. Boston: House, 1817, p. 70.
[68] Barnard, John Levi. "The Cod and the Whale: Melville in the Time of Extinction." *American Literature*, vol. 89, no. 4, 2017, p. 853.

canon, i.e. John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624). In his colonial report, Smith dedicates a lot of attention to the seemingly inexhaustible abundance of the Atlantic cod off the coastal waters of New England, to the point that he goes on to liken the cod to gold and the ocean to a mine, hinting at the fact that the cod offered potential colonizers a source not only of subsistence but of wealth.[69] This juxtaposition clearly evidences the 'extractive view' that guided western expansionistic aims at that time. Smith's text had a fundamental role in fostering the British colonial project of the American continent, and narrating the New World as a virgin place of extraordinary abundance was part and parcel of this project. Indeed, just as the material bodies of the fish could fertilize New England's fields (given their abundance), so would their monetary value catalyze New England's emergence as a force within the Atlantic economy, empowering the English – and later the Americans – as imperial players within the geopolitical dynamics of the New World. As a matter of fact, the codfish was integral to the regime of cheap food that fueled the slave labor system that in turn provided the agricultural raw materials for industrialization. The largest markets for New England cod were the slave plantations of the Caribbean and, later and to a lesser degree, of the southern United States.[70] Ironically, the cod at the same time became a symbolic referent for progress in the region: being elevated to a mythic status, it came to represent the humble origins of free democratic institutions of New England and Massachusetts, another founding myth, evidencing the figurative reduction of the animal as functional as its physical equivalent. New England made its initial fortune out of the Atlantic cod, however, in terms of national importance the transition from cod to whale corresponds to two distinct yet related historical movements: from subsistence to profit-driven resource extraction and from settler colonialism to global imperial expansion.[71] Barnard identifies the commodification and consumption of both species as constitutive elements of an "extinction-producing economy",[72] showing that this productive system is supported by an ideological one that figures the ocean – as Smith made explicit in early New England – as a mine from which to

[69] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 852.
[70] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 859.
[71] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 858.
[72] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 853.

extract and accumulate capital resources. In this way, the cod and the whale are of a piece: both made of flesh as gold and foundational to an imperial history driven by an extractive logic.[73]

Because extractive fictions are preoccupied with energy at the point of extraction, Henry argues, they permit readers insight into the uniquely local dimensions of extractive capitalism, and as such are well positioned to problematize extraction as a cultural, rather than merely economic, practice.[74] Indeed, Melville gives us the most direct perspective, as he nails us aboard the Pequod, making us spectators and participants in the deadly and horrendous business of whaling: from the dangers of the chase to the process of extracting oil from the whale's head and then boiling its meat and blubber in great cauldrons which flames are kindled by the whale's very waste parts. As the try-pots were heated, the flames were in fact fed with slivers of blubber called 'cracklings'; thus the whale cooked itself.[75] As Barnard and other critics have largely pointed out, no American writer of his era did more to make readers aware of brutality and extermination, bringing before them the 'meat' – mutilated, bleeding, dead, rotting – that constituted the unseen backdrop of the celebrated glories of progress. Focusing on Melville's rendering of the literal and figurative 'meat' of modernity situates his body of work within a longer history of extraction and consumption.[76] What is more is the fact that Melville was well aware of the planetary implications of this process, helping us to see that the localized hunt cannot be separated from the global systems that both demand and justify it; that extinctions of individual species occur not in isolation but in relation to the traffic in animal commodities that drives them; and conversely, that these larger political and economic systems cannot be dissociated from the localized acts of killing and consuming that sustain them.[77]

In this broad context of production of animal capital, then, the non-human animal is no subject, but rather an objectified assemblage of matter – bone, oil, meat, blubber, spermaceti – to be extracted and consumed on a global market. The

[73] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 858.
[74] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 406
[75] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 130.
[76] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 854.
[77] *Ibid*.

body of the whale becomes the very site of production before being transferred to the ship's try-works, as differential value is assigned to its various parts already in the stage of cutting-in with knives and spades, separating value from waste at the level of tissue. Decapitated, stripped, and desecrated, what's left of the whale's body, which is most of it, is set adrift on the sea.[78] In Henry's perspective, the body of the whale can thus be read as a mobile 'sacrifice area', as it is made expendable in order to provide fuel to illuminate the western world and lubricate the machineries of industrialization. In order to bring these precious substances on the world market, the whaling fleet spread across the globe and pounced on the non-human animal with "steel, iron, and fire in order to butcher it and transform its body into value on the spot"[79] in a refined mechanized process. The cost of this machinery, however, does not fall only on the non-human animal, as Melville is equally attentive in describing the price of whale oil in terms of human lives, not only in the precarious labor conditions of whaling, but in a much broader logic of extinction. Indeed, in more than one occasion, *Moby-Dick* addresses human-animals relations in terms of deep time and geological scope, in which Melville – through Ishmael's metaphysical reflections – places the industry of whaling within a deeper history of planetary change and species extinction. More than a century before the formulation of the concept of the Anthropocene[80], Melville provokingly addresses the possibility of a world emptied of the human by his own hand, inscribing humans as environmental agents and the economy they aliment as a geological force, one that may render the future devoid of humans and non-human animals alike.[81] In this way, the threat of extinction posed to the whale by the hunter backfires on him. By extension, in the image of the whale that burns its own body in the try-works lies the perfect metaphor for extractive capitalism that self-consumes its foundations in order to expand itself.

[78] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 868.
[79] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 857.
[80] The debate on the Anthropocene has broadened significantly over the last few decades, gaining prominence both within and beyond the scholarly community. For an overview of this topic, see Paul J. Crutzen. *Benvenuti nell'Antropocene! L'uomo ha cambiato il clima, la Terra entra in una nuova era* (2005); Emilio Padoa-Schioppa. *Antropocene: una nuova epoca per la Terra, una sfida per l'umanità* (2021); Kohei Saito. *Il capitale nell'Antropocene* (2023).
[81] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", pp. 864-65.

From what has been so far presented, then, I believe that Melville's novel can be read as one of Henry's extractive fictions, as not only it deeply problematizes the ideological basis of the whaling industry as well as its direct implications in its context of enactment, but it also exposes the long-term dangers and contradictions of a global economic system which sees bodies as commodity and is based on the unsustainable exploitation of lives, both human and non-human.

1.4 – Beyond Anthropocentrism and in Search of Animal Agency

Moby-Dick plunges us deep in the meticulous account of the industry of whaling, thoroughly describing every passage of the butchering process that reduces the mighty leviathan into its commodified and marketable version. Along the same line, one specific whale – which in turn becomes representative of the whole species and, ultimately, of nature – is reduced into an enormous vessel of meanings; upon him have been poured every kind of symbol signifying inhuman evil and ultimate universal mystery, so much so that one may question whether Moby Dick is in fact a whale, after all, or maybe a supernatural metaphor of "uncommon magnitude and malignity".[82] The novel, however, at the same time does something radically opposite, de facto debunking its own representation of the animal. As a matter of fact, Melville's literary leviathan appears to resist any attempt of being caged both physically and metaphorically, ultimately eluding Ahab as well as Ishmael's grasp, despite all their efforts to respectively slain and comprehend it. Indeed, the whale seems to remain unknowable for the human, ever present in its "own absolute body"[83] throughout the whole length of the book, and yet perennially out of reach for anthropocentric understanding. After having exposed the role of the non-human animal in its commodified form, I will attempt a drastic turn in perspective: in this section, I will frame a theoretical path that focuses on the novel's effort to depict the animal presence in the text as unbound from and resistant to any symbolic or extractive interpretation, exploring its role as an active, autonomous

[82] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 194.
[83] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 285.

agent and, finally, interrogating the possibility for non-human animal agency to manifest in literature.

Before addressing specific theories that focus on animal-oriented readings of literary texts, I think it is appropriate to examine more broadly the contribution that literature can offer in producing a different kind of knowledge that goes beyond the anthropocentric paradigm. According to scholar Hubert Zapf, nature and culture are two realms that are deeply interrelated and mutually dependent on each other. What is more, literature represents a powerful environment that has the ability to mediate between the two. Zapf theorizes a "cultural ecology of literature" which positions in between anthropocentric cultural studies and radical ecocriticism, and affirms that "imaginative literature deals with the basic relation between culture and nature in particularly multifaceted, self-reflexive, and transformative ways, producing an 'ecological' dimension of discourse precisely on account of its semantic openness, imaginative intensity, and aesthetic complexity."[84] In short, at the basis of this perspective there is an idea of literature that contains a generative potential within cultural discourses, ultimately opening the possibilities to new imaginative landscapes. To extend this point, Zapf translates the concept of sustainability from biology to literature, maintaining that

> Literature is described as a transformative force of language and discourse, which combines civilizational critique with cultural self-renewal in ways that turn literary texts into forms of sustainable textuality. Literature uses the resources of language, imagination, and discourse for the creation of long-term, self-reflexive models of ecosemiotic complexity. If sustainability in a *biological* sense means the ways in which living systems remain alive and productive over time, then the cultural ecosystem of literature fulfills a similar function of sustainable productivity within cultural discourses.[85]

In this sense, literature is not merely a reflection of its cultural landscape of origin, but it rather operates like an ecological force within the larger system of cultural discourses. On the one hand, it individuates and gives rise to hidden conflicts, contradictions, traumas, and structures of modern life and civilization, while at the same time providing constant creative renewal of language, perception,

[84] Zapf, Hubert. *Literature as Cultural Ecology*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p. 4.
[85] *Ibid*.

imagination, and communication. In this sense, the literary medium involves "a form of textual energy, a vital movement of acting and reacting between signifiers, bodies, minds, selves, environments, and, pervading them all, the fundamental interaction between culture and nature."[86] In other words, literature is capable of questioning the main assumptions of prevailing systems of interpretation while at the same time allowing an imaginative space of exploration to those dimensions and subjectivities neglected by those systems, like, in the case of my work, the non-human animal. To provide an example, in this sense the White Whale becomes the recipient of an ideological counter-discourse that debunks Ahab's – and by extension human – hubris of domination over creation, and thus resists such perspectives functional for its subjugation.

According to this perspective, literature intended as an ecocultural environment would appear to serve as a place of liberation for the non-human animal, the same way it served the same purpose for other oppressed categories – like in the instances of narratives that question social, gendered or racial constructs, just to provide an example. But how does the non-human animal exist within the literary text? Does it have a space? What are its functions? How does it cohabit the story world with the human? Is it a peaceful or conflictual relationship? All these questions ultimately condense in one fundamental query: how to read literary non-human animals? Or, more precisely, how to read them beyond our own perspective, that is to say the human? In these terms, however, the issue may quickly appear paradoxical at the very beginning, since literature consists in an environment made of language – the quintessential trait that has always defined the human, especially in opposition to the animal – in which words allow the expression of human imagination. Yet, literature is full of animals, always has been: from Genesis (the creation of the fauna of the world and the serpent) to *Moby-Dick* itself (the monster, the leviathan, the whale), the non-human animal has always inhabited the literary text. In the majority of cases, however, it did so in order to produce meaning first and foremost for us, the human. They became symbols and metaphors, gradually losing meaning as actual beings and ultimately disappearing behind what they allegedly represented.

[86] Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, p. 28.

There are, however, other reading strategies that can offer a valid counternarrative to this intrinsically anthropocentric perspective, trying to focus on the non-human animal presence within the literary text as untied to any metaphorical or symbolical meaning, and thus allowing them to have a voice and exist as themselves. In her book titled *Following the Animal: Power, Agency, and Human-Animal Transformations in Modern, Northern-European Literature* Swedish scholar Ann-Sofie Lönngren maintains that, since Aristotle, there has always been "a hierarchical relationship between the categories 'human' and 'animal'"[87], in which the former has always prevailed on the latter in terms of importance. This hegemonic view of Man as the center of the universe has been defined as anthropocentrism, and sees at its very foundations the fact that the disparity between the human and the non-human animals is hierarchically measured around factors of power and agency. In literature, these presumptions end up rendering "'the actual animal' passive, silent, hollow, and invisible, and at the same time reproduce and further contribute to notions of human uniqueness, significance, and complexity"[88]. Lönngren challenges this worldview taking inspiration from the work of famous philosopher and literary critic Jaques Derrida, who examines the fluidity between the concepts of following and being (in contact with) the animal. Starting from a reflection on Creation narrated in Genesis, Derrida provocatively ponders: "Who was born first, before the names? Which one saw the other come to this place so long ago? Who will have been the first occupant, and thus the master? Who the subject? Who has remained the despot, for so long now?"[89] To extend this point, Derrida goes on presenting an even more radical change in perspective, as he introduces the concept of "animal gaze", whit which he inverts the point of observation. Derrida uses as an example the awkward intimacy that generates while being looked at by his cat in an ordinary moment of nakedness. In the exploration of this feeling, he maintains:

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[87] Lönngren, Ann-Sofie. *Following the Animal: Power, Agency and Human-Animal Transformations in Modern, Northern-European Literature*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 2015, p. 17.

[88] Lönngren, Ann-Sofie. "Metaphor, Metonymy, More-Than-Anthropocentric. The Animal That Therefore I Read (and Follow)." *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*. McHugh, et al. Ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 40.

[89] Derrida, Jacques, and David Wills. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 369-418, p. 387.

> I am here thinking of those seeing eyes, […] looking at the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself. And in these moments of nakedness, under the gaze of the animal, everything can happen to me.[90]

In this perspective, it is Man who discovers himself naked and defined under the gaze of the non-human animal, in a way that rearranges conventional relationships of power. Furthermore, considering the fact that humans are also animals, Derrida proposes a different, non-hierarchical way of reasoning, in which the boundaries between human and animal become blurred, and one could easily wonder who is really following whom. Indeed, this relationship structure questions the oppressive concepts of naming, taming and subduing in favor of the idea of contact zones "based on interchangeability, interconnectedness, and a common history of development".[91] With respect to this, Lönngren argues that in order to effectively produce what is called a more-than-anthropocentric reading of literary animals, it is necessary to question the centrality of the human and consequently debunk this relationship of power, whereby "'following', in that it entails an imperative for the reader to give up, to give away, some of the control of the process of formulating meaning in literary texts, presents itself as an apt tool for making visible such more-than-human aspects"[92]. In other words, the production of what can be defined as more-than-anthropocentric knowledge ultimately requires us first and foremost to distance ourselves from the paradigms that have always shaped our interpretation of the world and take the other's perspective, and in so doing perform an exercise of empathy.

In order to elaborate her theory, Lönngren proposes to depart from the consolidated "symptomatic tradition" of literary interpretation, which has always perceived the text as hiding its 'true' meaning in its depths, and that it therefore needs to be interpreted, primarily (although not always) with a focus on the metaphor, the literary figure which, through the workings of distance and substitution, displays something in order to enlighten something else. This tradition founds its origins in the age-old influence of the principles of Biblical

[90] Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am", p. 381.
[91] Lönngren, *Following the Animal*, p. 42.
[92] Lönngren, "Metaphor, Metonymy", p. 45.

hermeneutics, which has progressively become Western history's standard of textual interpretation.[93] The reader therefore approaches the literary text with suspicion, keen to unravel the textual 'true' meaning that inevitably resides underneath layers and layers of symbolic material. Conversely, Lönngren favors what has been defined as "surface readings", building from various literary critics that already in the second half of the twentieth century started to address the limits and tensions of a 'paranoid' way of interpretation, like for instance in the works of Susan Sontag and Eve K. Sedgwick.[94] This strategy stems from a view of literature as a surface which is not related vertically to a depth, but, rather, horizontally to that which is beside. Thus, literature can be treated much like a map over which the reader can take different trajectories.[95] As far as the literary non-human animal is concerned, this reading practice allows it to emerge as 'actual animal' in a way that does not serve any functional meaning for the human. To provide an example, Lönngren addresses the potential of metonymy for serving this specific counter-discourse. Indeed, while metaphor has been accused of substituting and usurping the animal, metonymy is understood as a call for self-signification, connection, recognition, relation, and correspondence.[96] The two strategies highlight the intrinsic bipolar tension that characterizes the formulation of symbolic meaning in language, which is based on the continuous interdependence between referents. Lönngren also notices, however, that the fact that "there seems to be a history of having metaphorical readings serving anthropocentrism does not mean that there cannot be such things as anti-anthropocentric metaphors, nor that the metonymy cannot be read in anthropocentric ways."[97]

The central aspect of this approach, therefore, remains focused at the level of power relationships. Lönngren reprises the concept of "literary animal agency", first elaborated by Susan McHugh, which implies a disconnect between agency and

[93] Lönngren, "Metaphor, Metonymy", p. 39.
[94] Already in the mid-sixties, Sontag pointed out the intrinsic aggressivity in seeing the literary text as an object that hides its true meaning and that the reader would consequently need to outsmart. Sedgwick elaborated on this discourse in the nineties and suggested to replace 'paranoid' approaches to literary texts with 'reparative' readings, which are based on mutual trust of reader and text alike and allow the building of new possibilities of meaning.
[95] Lönngren, "Metaphor, Metonymy", p. 41.
[96] *Ibid*.
[97] Lönngren, "Metaphor, Metonymy", p. 44.

subjectivity, as it detaches from the anthropomorphic idea of the self. Utilizing this perspective means that the non-human animal's activities can be accounted for as meaning-productive, as well as capable of producing both narrative and material transformations. Indeed, they transport to language, breath into language, the vitality of another life, another form of expression.[98] Moreover, it is not just about the fact of being able to produce meaning, but it is about concentrating upon moments at which animals might 'mean' something *else* – in the sense that animals might intend, signify, design or cause something beyond the meanings superimposed on them by humans.[99] In this sense, the animal textual agency leaves 'traces' that the reader must "follow" in order to give in some of that control in formulating meaning and consequently undermine human taken for granted exceptionalism. This reading practice is, in sum, based on a relationship of constant negotiation between different forces within the text. As I mentioned above, literature remains an environment intrinsically anthropocentric, in which the dominant perspective will inevitably remain anchored to human subjectivity. At the same time, however "following" also serves the purpose of questioning that very perspective and consequently the given assumptions underlying the production of knowledge in that particular environment. Through this process, the reader is provided with tools for navigating the fictional, cartographic landscape in ways that, potentially, contradict, undermine, and go beyond the anthropocentric paradigm.[100]

As I will extensively elaborate in the final chapter of this work, there are many aspects in *Moby-Dick* for which we may attempt to inscribe Ishmael and his reading of the whale to this critical approach. Indeed, despite all his efforts, he more than once recognizes the whale as ultimately unknowable, a being that will remain "unpainted to the last"[101], showing a strong epistemological resistance to any categorization. Indeed, Moby Dick's "irreducible co-agency"[102] rivals the human actors in the narrative, in a way that is incomprehensible to them, so that the only way to rationalize it is to attribute him human characterization or

[98] Lönngren, *Following the Animal*, p. 27.
[99] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 94.
[100] Lönngren, *Following the Animal*, p. 29.
[101] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 289.
[102] Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, p. 110.

supernatural features, as non-human agency is completely unthinkable when so much thought and money has been invested in maintaining a clear distinction between humans and animals. Here is where Melville's work markedly departs from his contemporaries: he insistently juxtaposes and expands on a number of views on non-human agency, and in doing so multiplies it infinitely, creating a whale which differs completely from other fictional animals of his time.[103]

[103] Brazzale, *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick, p. 24.

Chapter II

Moby-Dick: Extractive Industry Between Energy and Culture

In this chapter I will deepen my analysis on the 'industrial' aspect of Melville's novel, with the aim of framing it as an example of extractive fiction as theorized by Henry. To do so, I will analyze the whaling industry from various points of view and the way they resonate with the text. First, I will highlight the economic importance whaling had for empowering the United States, depicting it as the first great US experiment of global extractive capitalism. I will then move on by focusing on the immense and multifaceted power generated by the whaling industry, on the one hand in mere energetic and economic terms; on the other, considering whaling as a vast cultural formation that contributed to the reinforcement of national identity. Finally, I will focus on the human figure and its prominent role within this enormous machinery, exploring the connection that exists between the concepts of energy production, human cost and cultural identity. Each section of this chapter highlights how Melville exposes inequality, extinction, human and non-human suffering of extractive capitalism in his time. These are what Henry refers to as "externalities": the "inbuilt 'remainders' of extractive economies, those ravaged landscapes and dilapidated communities left behind by an ever-itinerant instantiation of frontier capitalism."[104] While Henry grounds his work on water extraction and injustice in the contemporary US, I believe the aftermaths Henry points out are typical of extractive economies in general and can be usefully applied to Melville's novel and the whaling industry it extensively depicts.

[104] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 404.

2.1 – The Whale Fisheries in American Energy Economy

In order to effectively apply the theoretical approach of extractive fictions to *Moby-Dick*, it is first and foremost important to provide historical and macroeconomic context of the grimy industrial practice at the center of Melville's tale and, later on, the way whaling resonated at a broader cultural level. It must be remembered that before the discovery of petroleum outside Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859, whale oil, sperm oil, spermaceti wax and other processed animal fats where in fact the primary energy sources used for illuminating cities as well as lubricants for the gears of the industrialized world. As I will expose later in this chapter, these products were not all regarded in the same way, both on an economic and cultural level. This section is dedicated to the history and evolution of the American whale fishery and its role within American energy economy, from the first attempts of coastal pursuits of whales aboard of fragile canoes up to the mid-nineteenth century global machine capable of registering millions of dollars in annual profits.

"The mighty whales which swim in a sea of water, and have a sea of oil swimming in them"[105] recites one of the oldest 'extracts' that we find before entering the threshold of Ishmael's narrative, addressing the early human interest in the substance contained in cetaceans.[106] Indeed, humankind launched itself after the whale from time immemorial, as vividly epitomized by one later episode in which a "lance-head of stone" is found ulcerated in the flesh of a freshly killed whale: "who had darted that stone lance? And when? It might have been darted by some Nor' West Indian long before America was discovered"[107], Ishmael rightly ponders. Most historical accounts of whaling in the North American continent consider as a symbolical as well as geographical starting place the island of Nantucket, situated off the coast of Massachusetts, less than thirty miles south of Cape Cod. This small island was and, in some part, still is invested with a mythical and reverential notoriety, as – allegedly – its shores were the place in which the

[105] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. xli.
[106] 'Etymology' and 'Extracts' are the two introductory framing sections that open *Moby-Dick*. The first consists of a linguistic breakdown of the word 'whale' across over a dozen classical and international languages. The second features a massive compilation of literary and historical quotes about whales and leviathans. They both serve the purpose of establishing the epic, mysterious, and universal cultural presence of the whale before the actual beginning of the narration.
[107] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 392.

first dead whale on American soil was stranded, and whence the seeds of the future global industry of whaling took root. For these reasons, the island acquired a sort of primeval aura: "where else from Nantucket did those aboriginal whalemen, the Red-Men, first sally out in canoes to give chase to the Leviathan?"[108] Ishmael himself seems raptured by that aura, as he emphasizes: "for my mind was made up to sail in no other than a Nantucket craft, because there was a fine, boisterous, something about everything connected with that famous old island, which amazingly pleased me."[109] Indeed, in Melville's novel, the figure of the whaleman becomes more often than not a substitute for the Nantucketer and vice versa, as if place and profession were inseparable from each other and mutually self-explanatory.

From these early steps, at first mostly dedicated to the taking of drift whales cast ashore by the sea, the practice of hunting whales in the waters off Nantucket became more common, also given the abundance of these animals in the area, mainly Greenland right whales. Since whales were so plentiful, the practice consisted of brief hunting trips not far from the coast aboard small boats loaded with harpoons; the killed whale would then be towed to the shore and there processed in the try-works. A lookout was kept from a prominent place on the land, and when a whale was seen the boats were sent out in pursuit. The practice gradually spread and developed in other American coastal settlements, to the point that whaling was recognized as a regular vocation in the Connecticut and New York colonies, and with the early years of the eighteenth-century Nantucket rapidly became the foremost whaling station.[110]

In 1712 we find the first recorded kill of a specimen of sperm whale, which, differently to the other hunted whales, swims in deeper waters. From this moment the industry developed greatly, as the people of Nantucket began to build crafts of increased size capable of sailing farther and storing more tons of oil and blubber. These vessels were fitted out for cruises of six weeks' duration, the blubber being stripped off, stored aboard in hogsheads and brought back to the trying out works

[108] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 9.
[109] *Ibid*.
[110] Jenkins, J. Travis. *A History of the Whale Fisheries: From the Basque Fisheries of the Tenth Century to the Hunting of the Finner Whale at the Present Date*. H.F. & G. Witherby. 1921, p. 224. This text was kindly provided by Giorgio Mariani.

on shore. During the first half of the eighteenth-century, the shore fishery reached its maximum development, the whales near the coast becoming gradually scarcer and scarcer owing to over-fishing. The introduction of sperm oil, so superior to all other oils, was a great stimulus to the development of the industry.[111]

Around 1750, two inventions irreversibly revolutionized the American whaling industry: the development of onboard try-works and the invention of the spermaceti candle, which burned without producing smoke. With the development of try-works on board the whaleships, the crew could now process the animals wherever they caught them and thus remain at sea until their holds were filled.[112] The voyages could now last three or more years. This development led to groundbreaking turns in the business of whaling. As a result, offshore areas and later the North Atlantic soon saw the depletion of their whale populations. It was in this period of expansion of the industry that the whalemen became ocean pioneers and reached deeper waters in search of the sperm whale: Bahamas, West Indies, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Sea, Azores, Cape Verde Islands, Guinea and the coast of Africa, all the way down to the coast of Brazil towards the end of the century.

With the development of whaling following the enterprise of the deep-sea whalers, the export trade in whale products grew rapidly, given that the whalers obtained far more supplies than were required to meet the limited colonial demand.[113] Such commerce brought an enormous amount of capital into the colonies' treasuries. This momentous development is even more evident when we look at the rapid exponential growth of the numbers of the whaling fleet, which counted just six crafts in 1715, twenty in 1730 (just in the island of Nantucket), while in 1774 the entire colonial fleet consisted of 360 vessels employing some 9,000 men.[114] Indeed, just before the Revolution broke out, the American whale fishery was very prosperous. The annual production from 1771 to 1775 was estimated at not less than forty-five thousand barrels of sperm oil,[115] eight

[111] Jenkins, *A History of the Whale Fisheries*, p. 225.
[112] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 229.
[113] Jenkins, *A History of the Whale Fisheries*, p. 226.
[114] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 231.
[115] One barrel approximately corresponds between 30 and 33 gallons (about 170 liters). 252 gallons to the ton, or almost eight barrels. Estimates for the average sperm whale ran between 25 and 40 barrels per whale, although some whales exceeded this by three or even four times.

thousand five hundred barrels of whale oil, and seventy-five thousand pounds of bone.[116] These quotas however were destined to drop radically during the revolutionary war, as British sanctions, military hostilities and commercial interdictions caused a great deal of suffering to the business of whaling, bringing it on the verge of extinction. When war broke out one hundred and fifty vessels were fishing from Nantucket. In 1784 only two or three odd ships remained.[117] The recovery was initially slow, but the gears of the business rapidly returned operational, and the century neared its end with the first American whaler entering the new and prosperous Pacific grounds in 1791, opening a new enormous part of the watery globe to the hunt for the great sperm whale.

The nineteenth century saw the whaling business reach its peak in terms of territorial and economic expansion. Despite another downfall caused by the War of 1812 against the British, the industry rapidly recovered and entered a period of unmatched prosperity, based partly on the growth of population and economic activity at home, and partly on the needs of the British market for American oils. It was the beginning of the industrial revolution, and the new machinery needed lubricants.[118] In 1820, the rich Japan grounds were discovered, and in the next two years, more than thirty whalers were already hunting there.[119] The fishery rapidly spread its activity across the Pacific and Indian oceans: the coasts of Zanzibar, the islands of the Seychelles, the coasts of Chile and Peru, the icy coasts of Kamchatka, and even the mouth of the Red Sea were explored by the far-ranging whalers. In 1848, an American whaler sailed through the Behring Strait, thus establishing the Arctic as the last great whaling ground to be discovered.

In a clear imperialist fashion, it was obvious that the Americans regarded the whole world as their private whaling preserve. In this system the industry grew prosperous and rich: from 1835 to 1860 the whaling fleet averaged six hundred vessels annually with an aggregate tonnage of 190,500. The annual imports

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[116] Jenkins, *A History of the Whale Fisheries*, p. 229.
[117] Jenkins, *A History of the Whale Fisheries*, p. 230.
[118] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 232.
[119] In the first half of the nineteenth century, international maritime law regarding American whaling ships relied on the principle of freedom of the seas, the lack of global environmental treaties, and unwritten customary practices. New England fleets operated freely on the high seas – considered *res communis*, or an area open to all – where no nation could claim exclusive jurisdiction or interfere with fishing.

averaged 117,950 barrels of sperm oil, 25,913 barrels of whale oil, and 2,323,512 pounds of bone, for a total annual value of over eight million dollars. By 1846, one of the most profitable years, there were a total of 735 ships, brigs, schooners, and barks flying the flags of American owners, with an aggregate weight of 233,189 tons and a book value of over $21 million, while the whole business interests connected with the trade were estimated at seventy million dollars, giving employment to 70,000 people.[120] The whalers cruised the waters of the world, from the poles to the equator, slaughtering every whale they could find, until their holds were filled with the thick oil, and their clothes, decks, and rigging reeked of the smoky smell of the trypot fires. The ships returned to their home ports and unloaded. As soon as they could, they made for the whaling grounds again.[121]

In his youth, Herman Melville had been a small gear in this enormous machinery, witnessing first handedly its scope in terms of human and economic investment. As he writes in *Moby-Dick*:

> side by side the world-wandering whale ships lay silent and safely moored at last; while from others came a sound of carpenters and coopers, with blended noises of fire and forges to melt the pitch, all betokening that new cruises were on the start; that the most perilous and long voyage ended, only begins a second, and a second ended, only begins a third, and so on, for ever and for aye.[122]

Whaling is a machinery that never stops, a business that knows but brief cessation, just for the time necessary to cash in from one voyage and sign the papers to equip the next one. In this sense, it is perfectly representative of the insatiable extractive logic at the base of the capitalist paradigm. Fittingly, Melville describes the sea as the whaler's "own special plantation. There is his home; there lies his business, which a Noah's flood would not interrupt" (Figure 1).[123]

[120] Jenkins, *A History of the Whale Fisheries*, p. 235.
[121] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 231.
[122] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 66.
[123] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 70.



Figure 1: Colorized image of whaling ships at the dock with casks of whale oil (New Bedford Whaling Historical Park).

The richness generated by the whaling industry manifested in a number of aspects of society. On land, such new prosperity was especially evident in one city, New Bedford, that during the nineteenth century rose to challenge Nantucket's supremacy in the business, becoming the new capital of the whaling empire. By the time Melville arrived there, New Bedford was the new center of an unparalleled boom. In the 1840s, three hundred whaleships – more than half of the American fleet – sailed from its port, often returning with two or three thousand barrels of oil and profits running into hundreds of thousands of dollars.[124] As the capital of this world-reaching new economy, New Bedford became the richest city in America, vivid and explicit synecdoche of the entire modern world's reliance on the products of the whale. In *Moby-Dick*, this is evident in Ishmael's words when, amazed while walking the city's streets he shows awareness of that prosperity's origin:

[124] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 90.

> New Bedford is a queer place. […] The town itself is perhaps the dearest place to live in, in all New England. It is a land of oil, […] nowhere in all America will you find more patrician-like houses; parks and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford. Whence came they? How planted upon this once scraggy scoria of a country?
>
> Go and gaze upon the iron emblematical harpoons round yonder lofty mansion, and your question will be answered. Yes; all these brave houses and flowery gardens came from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans. One and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea.[125]

As already mentioned, New Bedford represents just the most overt example of the huge role that the whaling industry had in the US national economy. As a matter of fact, the whole modern world and the capitalist system that sustains it relied on the products obtained through whaling in order to function and expand under a general confidence of perennial economic and social progress.

The promise of good fortune attracted many, and the streets of New Bedford and other whaling ports started hosting people coming from the most disparate places: indigenous islanders from the tropics as well as citizens of other American states, like "Vermonters and New Hampshire men, all athirst for gain and glory in the fishery. […] fellows who have felled forests, and now seek to drop the axe and snatch the whale-lance,"[126] substituting timber with whale oil as a more profitable resource through which making a living. Many New England boys, fired up by the heroism and glory it offered, volunteered for the chase. While their peers went to California in search of gold or the Dakota plains for buffalo, they found another wilderness: whaling was – again – the Wild West of the sea.[127]

With the exception of the two major slowdowns forced by the Revolution and the War of 1812, whaling prospered for more than a century, entering the first phases of its decline only at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. Although the discovery of petroleum undoubtedly represented a pivotal turn in the history of energy production, it would be too simplistic to ascribe the end of the fishery exclusively to the implementation of its derivatives. The decline of whaling is to be attributed, instead, to a variety of factors of different origins, that all more or less contributed to supersede sperm oil as prominent energy source

[125] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 37.
[126] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 34.
[127] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 90.

in those years. First of these reasons – and maybe the most obvious – was the fact that by the end of the century, almost all the known stocks of right whales and bowheads had been severely depleted. The only whales consistently hunted were the sperm whales, and even these were getting harder and harder to find.[128] One important fact is that sperm whales had nearly no predation threats for millions of years before humans were able to enter their habitat,[129] thus provoking a change in their behavior and forcing them to 'adapt'. The great hunting grounds, once so prosperous with the whale, were then almost depleted, and the whalers needed to push their square-rigged vessels to increasingly remote corners of the globe in order to find them; longer the voyage, higher the costs, while the promise of an economic return grew fainter. The cumulative slaughter of various whale species, particularly the sperm whale, did contribute to the decline of the industry, so much so that Ishmael himself wonders "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".[130] To make the point even more clear for the land-based reader, Ishmael goes on and likens the whale to the buffalo, "which, not forty years ago, overspread by tens of thousands the prairies of Illinois and Missouri, […] where now the polite broker sells you land at a dollar an inch".[131]

Despite relying heavily on whale products for decades, global industrial transformation accelerated so fast that it ironically ended up contributing to the decline of the whale fishery. As with so many aspects of 19th-century life, the industrial revolution intervened in the history of whaling, and old procedures were overtaken by technological advances. Steam whalers replaced the square riggers, and then other vegetable oils and kerosene began to seep into the lighting and lubricating industries.[132] At the same time, many investors and industrialists started to favor the implementation of petroleum derivatives. As a result, whale oil, which had defined the industry and been responsible for the making of history, fortunes, and literature – and the unmaking of thousands of whales – was

[128] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 235.
[129] King, Richard J. *Ahab's Rolling Sea A Natural History of* Moby-Dick. The University of Chicago Press, 2019, p. 254.
[130] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 501.
[131] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 501-2.
[132] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 235.

becoming an anachronism.[133] While collecting oil from the whale grew more and more expensive, petroleum became a rather cheaper substitute. Another age was about to begin. The black-gold spurt that gushed from the ground like a whale's spout signaled the end of the sperm whale fishery – and the beginning of another elemental plunder (Figure 2).[134]



Figure 2: "Grand Ball Given by the Whales in Honor of the Discovery of the Oil Wells in Pennsylvania." Drawing appeared in *Vanity Fair* on April 20, 1861 (Energy History, Yale.edu).

Amongst other reasons for whaling's decline there is, of course, the outbreak of the Civil War, which inevitably impacted on the amounts of capital destined for the industry, together with the fact that many whaleships were scuttled or attacked by Confederate raiders. But before that, another major blow to the price of oil was struck by the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California in 1848. The sudden influx of gold into the money supply reinvigorated the American economy. Moreover, the news of gold in those newly annexed territories generated a

[133] *Ibid*.
[134] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 107.

migration of hundreds of thousands of people seeking their fortune in what will be defined as the California Gold Rush. In those years it was customary for the Pacific whalers to touch at a Pacific port to refit (mainly in San Francisco), and during the gold boom whole crews of whalers deserted – sometimes captains as well – so that shipping on a whaler came to be recognized as a cheap means of reaching the goldfields from the eastern states.[135]

In mid-19th century, then, the whale as economic resource was weighed against other newer forms of capital resources and, surprisingly, was found to be no longer remunerative: from a high of $1.77 per gallon in 1855, sperm oil fell to 40 cents in 1896.[136] Investors were then unwilling to spend money on this unremunerative industry. About a century later its momentous beginnings, the fishery was in decline. Fortunes were made and lost; cities rose and fell; men lived and died, all for the magical substance in the head of the whale.[137] It functioned as the US's first imperialistic enterprise, allowing the nation to export its culture and ideas and to set the stage for the global production economy of the subsequent modern petroleum industry. In final analysis, then, what really disincentivized the slaughtering of the sperm whale and its reduction to commodified products were the same market laws that so profoundly justified its slaughter in the first place, as soon as other, more profitable resources were found to be extracted according to the same capitalist logic of subtraction without the preoccupation of reinvesting in those new depleted ecosystems.

2.2 – The Metabolism of a Whaleship

After presenting the broad context of the industry and its vastness in terms of capital and geographical scope, I narrow now the focus of this chapter on the single site of production of that "wild business"[138] of whaling; this will allow me to address the localized technical process of extraction and its direct socioecological implications on the humans and non-humans involved. At the same time, I will

[135] Jenkins, *A History of the Whale Fisheries*, p. 242.
[136] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 236.
[137] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 237.
[138] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 77.

also provide a deep exploration of all the forces that intervened and mingled into the functioning of that complex and clockwork machinery of production which was the American whaleship.

From the point of view of practical production efficiency, the economy of whaling rested, as does all economic activity, on an ecology of production that translated nature's energies into both a usable good and marketable commodity.[139] In other words, the business of whaling was the business of tapping into, organizing, and attempting to control nature's multiple unruly, scarce, and sometimes contested energy resources, including its wind power, ocean currents, cordwood, food calories for years at a time, and wood fuel to boil whale blubber and cook meals – as well as the prime movers (i.e., seamen and sails) that animated the industry. It must be remembered that power in this earlier modern world derived primarily from the muscles of the men, women, and beasts of burden, and energy derived from food, trees, and other limited organic resources such as whales.[140] The whale oil that lit up the trans-Atlantic world thus depended on the energies of both humans and nature.

Consumers who bought that oil at the marketplace and burned it in their lamps knew this commodity mostly through its use and market value, but what they bought and consumed was the finished product of an entire ecology of production that had been called into existence in order to produce and carry that oil to the market. In this respect, the economy of whaling is reflected in the thesis that, drawing on world-systems theory, maintains that "capitalism is a world-ecology (as opposed to a world-economy), i.e. a process of environment making dependent on the (un)availability of 'cheap nature,' or 'cheap labor, food, energy, and raw materials.'"[141] The way all these energies were combined and managed goes to form an equation that scholar Bob Johnson calls "the metabolism of a whaleship."[142] Throughout this section, I will highlight the role of these different forces and their importance for the various operations of the industry.

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[139] Johnson, Bob. "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil: Energy and the Ecology of Production on an Early American Whale Ship." *IA, the Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology*, vol. 40, no. 1/2, 2014, p. 33.
[140] *Ibid*.
[141] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 403.
[142] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 37.

In order to understand all the factors at work in the functioning of a whaling vessel, we must start with the preparations that precede the voyage. The procedure that involves the equipment of a whaling cruise in fact interested many sectors of society. Shipowners reached far and wide in order to provide and guarantee all the supplies for years of sailing around the world: they had to repair, refit, and reprovision their ships, which provided work and income for the shipwrights, chandlers, coopers, rope makers, carpenters, and blacksmiths, and ready markets for the farmers and greengrocers.[143] Entire whaling towns benefitted greatly from the work necessary to maintain their vast armadas of ships. The scale of these investments goes beyond just the main owners of the vessels, "the other shares being held by a crowd of old annuitants; widows, fatherless children, and chancery wards; each owning about the value of a timber head, or a foot of plank, or a nail or two in the ship."[144] Paradoxically, many of these widows and orphans were made such because their husbands or fathers perished while working on those same vessels. To make the point clearer, however, Ishmael explains: "people in Nantucket invest their money in whaling vessels, the same way that you do yours in approved state stocks bringing good interests."[145] As mentioned above, in these whaling cities the profession mingled with almost every aspect of society.

After leaving port, the whalers had to make their way to the remote hunting grounds, sailing for months and months (sometimes even a year) before encountering a whale. It must be considered that whaleships were less fast than common merchant vessels, since they carried less sail. More canvas meant more men aloft, and the whalers needed as many hands as possible for the boats. These crafts were constructed more for durability and storage, rather than speed. A typical whaler was 100 to 150 feet long [30 to 45 meters] and was especially broad in the beam to accommodate the fixtures of whaling: heavy brick try-works on deck, iron cauldrons, cooling tanks, davits for the boats, and, of course, the space required to perform the trying out of the whale (Figure 3).[146]

[143] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 244.
[144] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 81.
[145] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 81-82.
[146] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, pp. 250-51.



Figure 3: The whaleship *Wanderer* of New Bedford with the four whaleboats hanging from their davits (kuloluna.com).

Navigation was one of the most prominent aspects in terms of energy management. The raw power necessary for making the ship's actual voyage was channeled from the undomesticated flows of wind and oceanic currents. The peculiarity of these energy sources is that they are inexhaustible and at the same time come for free for the far-ranging whalers; on the other hand, they are not negotiable. Unlike electricity, in fact, the wind did not arrive in a steady flow. It could present itself in the shape of a calm, a breeze, a gale, or even a typhoon. All too frequently, ships and crews proved no match for the excess energy of the wind. At the same time, its cessation was equally treacherous since it translated into total absence of energy. Time and space, in other words, did not readily submit themselves to human discipline in the pre-industrial world of the whaler.[147] In order to at least partially domesticate these forces for the purpose of business and travel, ships followed well-sailed routes shaped by global wind and oceanic patterns, so that whether they aimed for Cape Horn and the Pacific or the southern Atlantic, they did so by snatching their power from a mapped global system of churning winds and ocean currents that they commanded only in part.[148]

The other prime movers of this industry, equally important to wind and sea, were the sailors' muscles. Contrary to the former, these could be coordinated, disciplined, and organized to more complex forms of labor. To do so, however, these men needed sustenance. Since they would spend years at sea without the certainty of making port, whaleships had to be stocked with an enormous quantity of cheap calories in order to fuel men's muscles. These essential energy sources generally consisted of dried meat and cod, beans, hard biscuits, rice, cornmeal, and water. From both an ecological and economic standpoint, we might say that the business of whaling was, at least in part, the business of coaxing men to convert cheap and accessible food calories into the rarer calories of whale oil.[149]

Food was regarded as much more than just raw energy; as a matter of fact, it shaped the politics and economics of whaling. To the investor, it was always an overhead cost that cut into the profits of a whaling voyage. To master and crew, it was a fixed symbol of power and hierarchy as well as a constant reminder of the

[147] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 38.
[148] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" pp. 37-38.
[149] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 39.

fragile interconnections of energy, life, and labor.[150] Most of the time, the crew's rations aboard a whaleship ranged from bad to disgusting, so much so that the desire for more and better food was the primary motivation for desertion.[151] Indeed, in the world of the whaler, to turn food into work depended, specifically, on the ship master's ability to manage sailors' stomachs and thus discipline their bodies. In managing these intimate spaces of power, masters had to measure out the relative importance of vital aspects of the business: the energy budget of the ship, the financial budget of the ship, and the sailors' feelings of exploitation.[152] Because the responsibility of feeding the crew fell to the ship's stakeholders who had every incentive to minimize labor costs, sailors' meals always consisted of the least costly combination of calories that would keep men alive and active. One of the most common was lobscouse, a stew made of hard biscuits that had been soaked in the greasy water left over after boiling the salted meat.[153] The whalemen's diet varied when they managed to get fresh fruit and vegetables from islands or ports, as well as fresh meat from wild pigs, goats, fish and even tortoises. Animals would be brought on board and kept during the voyage, often with the purpose of multiplying the ship's food supplies through breeding. Indeed, the dietary needs of the whalers resulted in many isolated islands – and ecosystems – to be forcibly integrated into the global marketplace of great empires during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because such variety was rarely available, sailors more often than not ate the meat of the whales they butchered. Although it may appear "outlandish" – as Ishmael points out – that "mortal man should feed upon the creature that feeds his lamp,"[154] in the perspective of an all-devouring extractive economy is just another way of consuming it. In short, it is clear how food – though of essential prominence in the ecology of whaling – was pretty much the means to ultimately drive the prime movers of this business, i.e. extracting energy from the human engine so vital for the industry. For reasons of cohesiveness, however, the commodification of human labor force will be much more thoroughly explored in the final section of this chapter (2.4).

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[150] *Ibid*.
[151] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 176.
[152] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 41.
[153] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 248.
[154] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 325.

Central in this equation and second only to the wind in terms of raw power was the mighty whale itself. As a prodigious repository of nature's energy – and for this highly prized in the pre-industrial world – the whale also became synonym with the very idea of power itself. Under more practical terms, whales are excellent stores of energy; the sperm whale in particular resides at the very top of the oceanic food chain. The way to think about it from an ecological vantage point is that the sperm whale, a toothed carnivore with an appetite for medium-sized squid, both capitalizes on and organizes the labor performed by phytoplankton, Zooplankton, krill, small fish, and squid themselves, each of which have already worked hard hours to harvest the sun and the ocean's diffuse energies.[155] In other words, the whale concentrates in its body all ocean's scattered energy; it was thus on this energy vessel that the industry preyed upon.

During the entire voyage – and long before reaching the remote hunting grounds – sailors were stationed on the top of the ship's masts scanning the landscape for whales. The lookouts remained aloft for hours, months and years, having the crucial role that would declare the beginning of the hunt. On this single first act depended much of the fortune of the cruise, and Melville is strikingly clear in describing how the greedy thirst of this economy was particularly reflected on the lookouts: "if, after a three, four, or five years' voyage [the ship] is drawing nigh home with anything empty in her – say, an empty vial even – then, her mast-heads are kept manned to the last; and not till her skysail-poles sail in among the spires of the port, does she altogether relinquish the hope of capturing one whale more."[156]

A typical sperm whale chase began when the lookouts aloft first saw a dense, white, vapory jet, shooting obliquely forward and upward to a height of eight or twelve feet [three or four meters], expanding as it rose like a whiff of tobacco smoke, forming a fine contrast to the field of blue water below it.[157] The sighting would be announced to the rest of the crew by shouting the signal "there she blows!"[158] After ascertain the direction, the whale boats were lowered in pursuit, each carrying six men: four oarsmen, a headsman, and the boat steerer/harpooner.

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[155] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 42.
[156] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 167.
[157] Wilson. *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, p. 50.
[158] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 253.

The chase was a frantic, highly synchronized, and incredibly dangerous operation, described by former whaler John Ross Browne as "a severe trial of skill and muscle"[159]. If the ship consisted in the general site of production of this economy, the whaleboat was its precision instrument; swift and fragile but equipped for enduring the frenzy of the hunt, they were among the most graceful and utilitarian boats ever designed.[160] When within range of the whale, the boatsteerer leaves the oar, switches places with the headsman and darts the harpoon on the animal, while other times this task belongs to the bow oarsman, who was also the harpooner. The harpoon was the emblematic tool of this industry; its function was that of fastening the prey to the boat, but not of killing it. The most common during Melville's time was the double-barbed Temple iron, bearing the name of its inventor;[161] it consisted of a pointed head that was held in the forward position by a wooden shear pin that broke off when withdrawal forces were applied. This rotated the head 90 degrees in the flesh of the whale, forming a T shape that would not pull out because the flattened surfaces were pulling against the meat or blubber.[162] The iron was fastened to the shaft of the harpoon by a line that was bent to the heavy manila rope coiled in the boat.

Instantly after the dart, the crew would row backward to avoid the whale's thrashing tail and snapping jaw. If the iron was well placed – the ideal spot was in the flank, forward of the hump – the boat was fast to the whale, and the injured animal took off. Sometimes the whale sounded, taking out the line at such speed that the line smoked as it ran out, and the loggerhead had to be doused with water to keep it from bursting into flames. Since no line can reach the dive capacity of a sperm whale, in such cases another 200-fathom line might be bent to the first, and then another. More often, the whale swam at the surface, towing the boat through the waves at a violent speed. Taken by exhaustion, the whale would sooner or later

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[159] Browne, J. Ross. *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise with Notes of a Sojourn on the Island of Zanzibar, to Which Is Appended a Brief History of the Whale Fishery, Its Past and Present Condition*. Harper & Bros, 1846, p. 116.

[160] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 253.

[161] Harpooners and blacksmiths had plenty of time on board the whalers and in port to work on harpoon design, and all sorts of elaborate heads with toggles, barbs, and swivels were tried. With the aim of optimizing the job, some creative whalemen even tried to design a poison-headed iron that would fasten to and kill the whale simultaneously. It would be equipped with vials containing prussic acid, one drop of which is lethal enough to kill a man. Maybe for this reason there is no trace of their employment – at least in the American fishery.

[162] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 253.

surface to breathe, it was in this occasion that the men proceeded to stab the animal with repeated strikes, causing severe blood loss that gradually drained it of its strength. This was the most dangerous phase of the conflict; the chief officer in command exchanges places with the harpooner, having the role of plunging the whale-lance, known in the fishery as the 'killing iron', into the 'life' of the whale – that is, a vital artery, the lungs, or the heart.[163] The lance is longer than the harpoon, it had a leaf-shaped, scalpel-sharp head. It was rarely darted, usually it was used to stab and penetrate the flesh of the whale in search of its vitals. To kill a whale in one single blow was the ambition of all skilled whalemen, as well as a measure of their manhood (Figure 4). In his account of his experience as a whaleman, Browne thoroughly describes the death throes of a whale:

> I can not conceive any thing more strikingly awful than the butchery of this tremendous leviathan of the deep. Foaming and breaching, he plunged from wave to wave, flinging high in the air torrents of blood and spray. The sea around was literally a sea of blood. At one moment his head was poised in the air; the next, he buried himself in the gory sea, carrying down in his vast wake a whirlpool of foam and slime. But this respite was short. He rose again, rushing furiously upon his enemies; but a slight prick of a lance drove him back with mingled fury and terror. Whichever way he turned, the barbed irons goaded him to desperation. Now and again intensity of agony would cause him to lash the waters with his huge flukes, till the very ocean appeared to heave and tremble at his power. Tossing, struggling, dashing over and over in his agony, he spouted up the last of his heart's blood. Half an hour before he was free as the wave, sporting in all the pride of gigantic strength and unrivaled power. He now lay a lifeless mass: his head toward the sun, his tremendous body heaving to the swell, and his destroyers proudly cheering over their victory![164]

Despite the horror of the scene, it was unanimously recognized in the industry that it was at this point that the true despicable operation began, as the enormous corpse of the whale needed to be transformed into its marketable products.

[163] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 254.
[164] Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, pp. 296-97.



Figure 4: Illustrative lithograph part of a series published by Charles Taber & Co. titled *Sperm whaling no. 2 The Capture*, 1862 (The Old Print Shop).

After an exhausting chase and a laborious conflict, the boat crews had now to tow the 50-ton deadweight to the ship, which for this next phase takes the shape of a floating abattoir, as the whole crew is involved in the procedures of cutting-in and trying out their game. The whale was made fast to the ship by lashing heavy chains through its head and around its flukes. The first part of the whale to be brought aboard was the lower jaw, ripped from the head and laid aside to be dealt with later. Then the whale was decapitated.[165] On the larboard or port side a section of the bulwark was removed, allowing a narrow cutting stage to be lowered, like a window-cleaner's platform, from which the mates, experts at the task, sliced at the whale with sharp spades. Other men dangled from ropes like mountaineers, hacking away to bring lumps of flesh and bone on deck, while their mates clambered over the slippery skin wearing crampon-spiked boots to carry out their delicate, brutal task. A hole was cut in the animal's side and a massive iron hook which swung from the main mast was inserted in the first piece of flesh to come off (Figure 5). The whale was rotated in the water as the hook was pulled by a heavy windlass actioned by the strong backs of the men, thus the skin of the animal was peeled and hoisted like a bleeding 'blanket', divesting

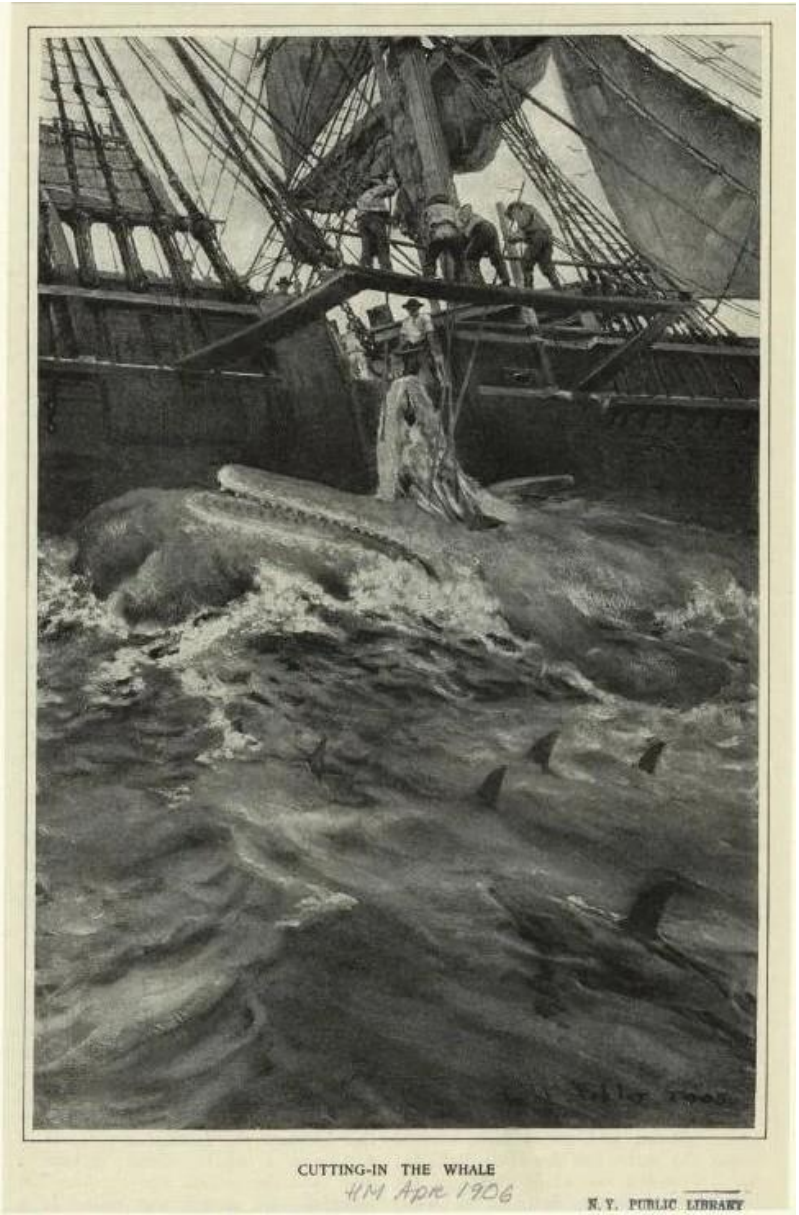

Figure 5: Cutting-in the whale (Costello Historical Essays).

[165] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 257.

the whale of what had given it warmth.[166] During the entire process, sharks swarmed the corpse and wreaked havoc on the outer layer of blubber so precious for the whalers. In this operation, the corpse of the whale is both consumed and at the same time becomes the very site of production; as several men are mechanically organized to work its enormous mass with no less voracious malice than the sharks beneath them, *de facto* creating a sort of predatory rivalry.

The enormous spiral of blubber was cut into huge chunks and passed down in the stifling blubber room. Here these were reduced into more manageable portions by half-naked sailors working in scarce visibility with sharpened steel spades, often slicing off their own toes and fingers, so that the blood of the whale and that of the men blended in the darkness. These smaller and therefore easier to melt pieces were then hauled back up top and tipped into cast-iron try-pots set into brick ovens so that the blubber may be rendered into oil (Figure 6). This operation required not only the careful attention of several men but also enormous quantities of fuel to maintain the fires at the proper temperature during the long days of rendering. The fuel used in the early stages of this process was firewood picked up from islands and the mainland.[167] After being started with wood, the flames

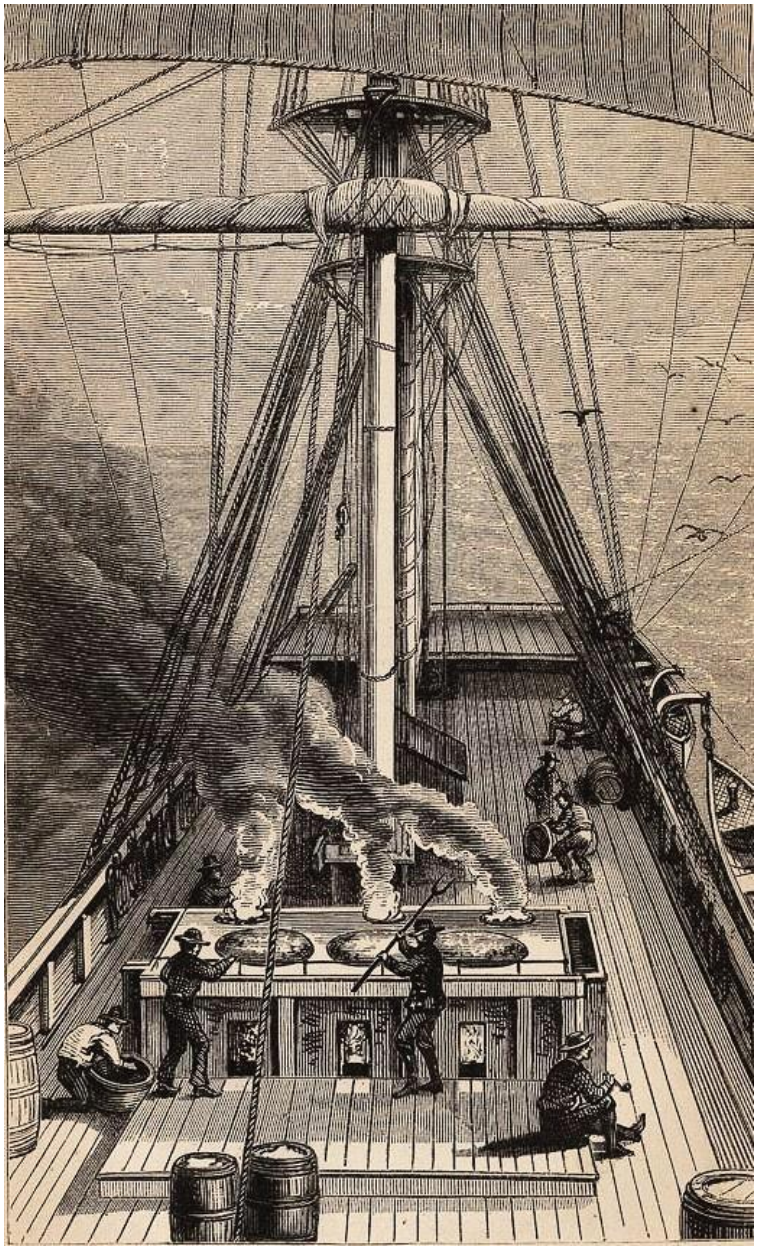

Figure 6: Trying out the whale (Lost Christchurch).

[166] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 125.
[167] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 43.

were kept fed by the unmelted skin of the whale (the dried 'cracklings'), so that, "once ignited, the whale supplies his own fuel and burns by his own body,"[168] under a perfect logic of cost-saving efficiency. Robert Tally elaborates on this point:

> The industry operates in a way quite distinct from traditional national industries. Melville's whale fishery is an industry that involves a sort of 'flexible production.' In fact, it entails the full circuit of capitalist production – production, distribution, consumption – as well as the related processes of extracting raw materials, refining and packaging, storing and transporting the products, and so on. Much is made of the ship's transformation into a factory in the try-works, but factory-production is but one aspect of the industry as Melville describes it. Whale oil is both the product of and the fuel for its own production.[169]

Manning the try-works was considered by far as the most degrading part of the whaleman's job. For days, the decks, bulwarks, railing, as well as the crew were covered with a lurid layer of oil, slime and blood, while the air was thick with the dense dark smoke rising from the pots.

As the oil was separated from the blubber, it was carefully ladled into a copper cooling tank. Here it rested before being casked into the hold, "where once again leviathan returns to his native profundities, sliding along beneath the surface as before; but, alas! never more to rise and blow."[170] On the other hand, regarding the extraction of the spermaceti from the head, a much more direct method was used than the multistep process of turning blubber into oil. Because the spermaceti already was oil, the whalers only had to remove it from the whale and cask it. A hole was cut in the outer fabric of the whale's severed head, and a man lowered a bucket into it on a long pole, then turned it over to another man on deck, who would empty the bucket into a waiting tub.[171]

When the horrific operation was concluded, an ink stamp in the shape of a whale was put to record in the ship logbook, on the side were indicated the number of barrels of oil obtained from the whale (Figure 7). This last act sanctioned that the body of the whale had formally completed its transition to a mass-market commodity.[172] A 'good' week was one that saw the hunters catch – and process –

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[168] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 462.
[169] Tally, *Melville, Mapping and Globalization*, p. 133.
[170] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 467.
[171] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 263.
[172] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 44.

nine or even twelve whales. What was left of the carcass, which was most of it, went to waste, chucked over the side to be gnawed by sharks and pecked by birds flocking to the scene.

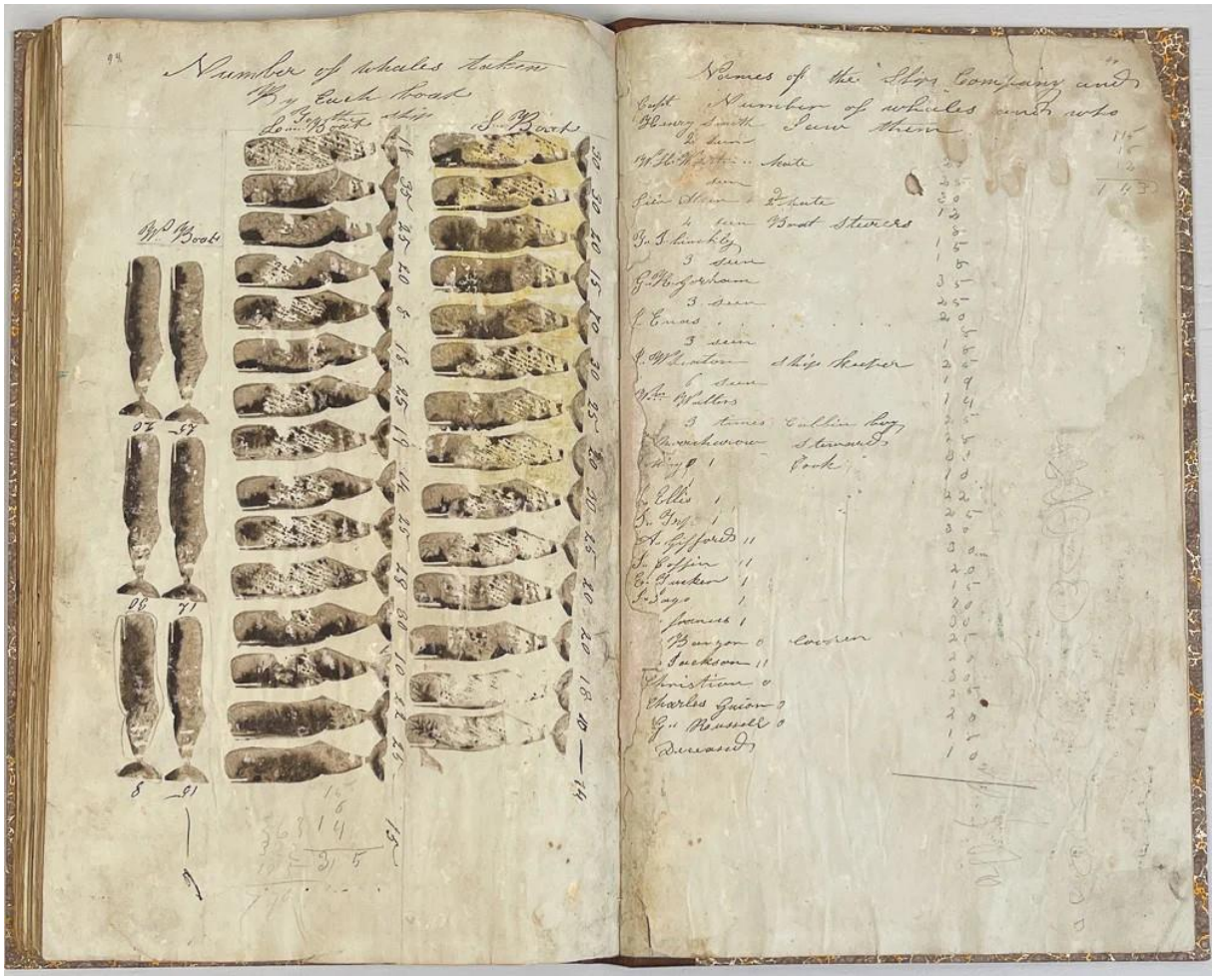

Figure 7: Whaling logbook with whale-stamps and barrel equivalents registering the progress of the voyage (Paul Madden Antiquities).

At the end of this bloody cycle of production, the only thing that remained was to clean up all the mess, thus turning the ship back into its original form. This task was equally laborious as the others, since the entire ship would be scrubbed down; to do so, a strong lye was made from the cinders and ashes of the trying out process. However, the pernicious odor of smoked blubber could never really be removed, and for days the ship and the men usually stank like the disused try-works.

To sum up, the intricate metabolism of this industry fed on the energies derived from muscle and food, wind and ship, sea and whale, all organized to sustain the remunerative global market for whale products. The thirst for oil, however, is never really appeased, so that – at sea as on land – this machinery but briefly

stops, and what is generated is a never-ending cycle of extraction, as Ishmael gloomily warns:

> But mark: aloft there, at the three mast heads, stand three men intent on spying out more whales. […] Many is the time, when, after the severest uninterrupted labors, which know no night; continuing straight through for ninety-six hours; when from the boat, where they have swelled their wrists with all day rowing on the Line, – they only step to the deck to carry vast chains, and heave the heavy windlass, and cut and slash, yea, and in their very sweatings to be smoked and burned anew by the combined fires of the equatorial sun and the equatorial try-works; when, on the heel of all this, they have finally bestirred themselves to cleanse the ship, […] many is the time the poor fellows, just buttoning the necks of their clean frocks, are startled by the cry of 'There she blows!' and away they fly to fight another whale, and go through the whole weary thing again.[173]

2.3 – The Extractive View: Oil, Light and the Culture of Whaling

The vast ecology of production that was necessary in order to light up the western world and extract a vast profit in oil inevitably left a deep material and cultural imprint on the modern world of the whaler – not only for the people directly involved with it, but in society at large. In other words, whaling was not just about financing, costs, profits, labor, and energy; indeed, its rooted cultural and social implications were equally important for the growth and maintenance of this business. In this respect, Henry argues that "the energy humanities have been critical for understanding how energy has influenced our relationships to our bodies, molded human social relations, and impacted the imperatives of even those varied activities we group together under the term 'culture.'"[174] Together, all these aspects can be addressed as whaling's culture of production – that is, the cultural assumptions and practices concerning labor and nature that structured the economics of the whaling industry and that made whale oil both an affordable mass market commodity and a lucrative investment for capital.[175] This section is focused on showing how the sociocultural implications of whaling are deeply connected

[173] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 469.
[174] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 16.
[175] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 33.

with the finished product of this industry, and that they undoubtedly contributed greatly to propping up the market value of this profitable commodity.

For the centuries that characterized the fortune of the industry, millions of tons of whales were reduced to their components for the lights, machines, wars, fashions, and tables of the world. Indeed, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whale products found an extraordinary variety of applications, so much so that modern western societies almost entirely depended on cetaceans. Whale oil was used to lubricate machinery and to provide illumination by burning it in lamps; in addition, it was also used to manufacture soaps, paint, and varnish, as well as textiles and rope. Spermaceti could be refined into a lubricant that was ideal for precision machinery, such as sewing machines and watches. Indeed, the machine tools that made the growth of industry possible in the United States were lubricated, and essentially made possible, by oil derived from spermaceti (Figure 8). In his wax form, it was instead used for high-quality candle manufacture.

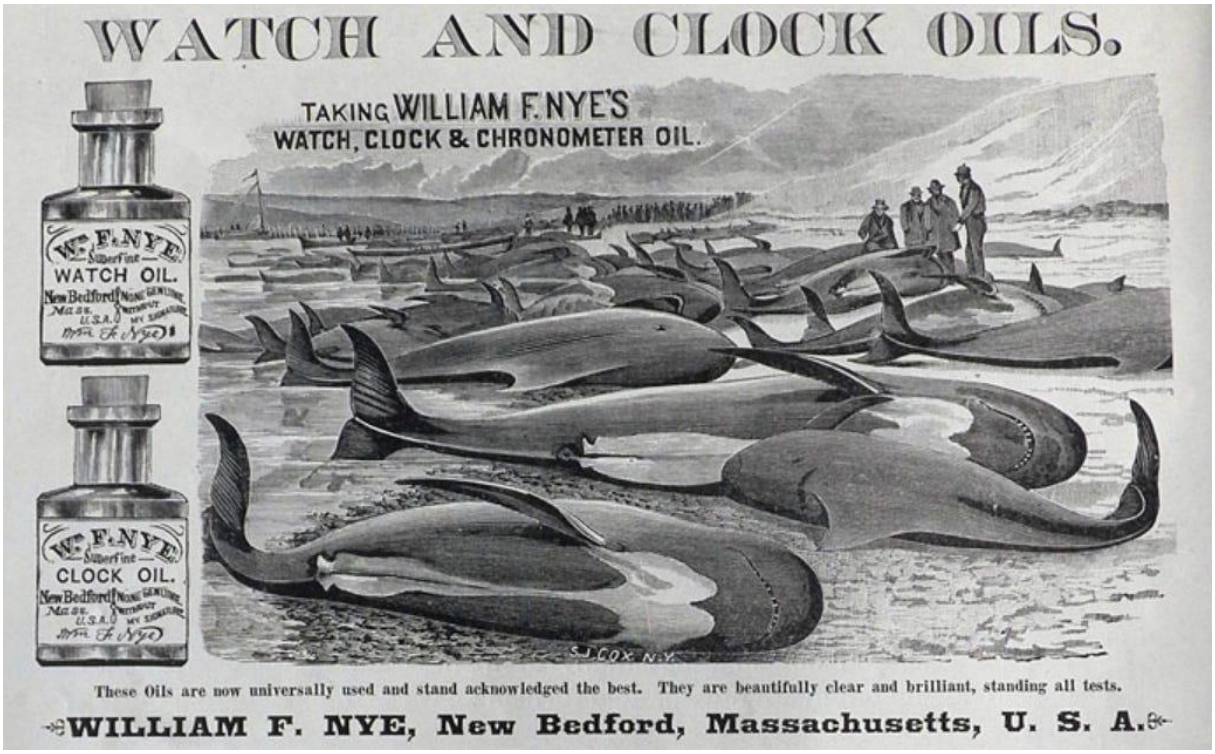

Figure 8: Advertisement for W.F. Nye oil business, based in New Bedford. Specialized in lubricating oils for delicate machinery: watches, clocks, chronometers, and later, sewing machines, typewriters, bicycles and electrical instruments (Nye Lubricants).

The bones and teeth of various species of whales were also used in a number of products. Baleen (a hard material arrayed in large plates in the mouths of some species of whales) or whalebone was mostly used in the manufacture of corsets, collar stays, buggy whips, and toys. Its remarkable flexibility even led to its use as the springs in early typewriters. The teeth of other whales, such as the sperm whale, would be used as ivory in such products as chess pieces, piano keys, or the handles of walking sticks.[176] All these products clearly manifested the huge reliance of the modern industrialized world on the whale. Moreover, they often were an indicator of status, prestige and luxury amongst the emergent American bourgeoisie (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Advertisement for prestigious corsets, made with whalebone from the arctic region, the ideal material for controlling the feminine figure. On the wrapping of the box is stamped the praise "A woman has an awful lot to thank a whale for" (Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum).

These components, however, were not at all equally regarded on the market; it was the mysterious head matter of the sperm whale that made it the primary object of this globe-girdling enterprise. The spermaceti was the *ne plus ultra* of this business, the pot of liquid gold that attracted the whalers to the edges of the world. The amber liquid that hardened into white wax as it was exposed to air was indeed worth risking life and limb – and sometimes boat and ship – to the whaler. Kept free from contamination by other oils, sperm oil was

[176] McNamara, Robert. "Objects Made From the Whaling Industry." ThoughtCo, thoughtco.com/products-produced-from-whales-1774070.

worth from three to five times as much as whale oil, which was rendered out of the blubber.[177] Indeed, in his classification of the several species of the whale, Ishmael shows how the already terrific reputation of the sperm whale is both enhanced by and inseparable from the precious oil it contains:

> he is, without doubt, the largest inhabitant of the globe; the most formidable of all whales to encounter; the most majestic in aspect; and lastly, by far the most valuable in commerce; he being the only creature from which that valuable substance, spermaceti, is obtained.[178]

For how overwhelming and incredible, in the world of the whaler the great leviathan is nevertheless ultimately perceived just as a container of energy and value. In this way, the whaling industry perfectly mirrors "the extractive view," a concept Henry borrows from scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris, which indicates the process by which, in the context of Latin America, "the (settler) colonial project renders territories and people extractible through a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence."[179] This phenomenon exists as a pervasive cultural tendency during Melville's time regarding the whale. As mentioned before, the economy of whaling rested on precise functional representations of the non-human animals upon which it preyed. As an emblematical case, take the episode in which, targeting an ill, old sperm whale bull Stubbs, the Pequod's second mate, urges the oarsmen under his command into the chase: "he's a hundred barreler – don't lose him now – don't, oh, don't! […] Don't ye love sperm? There goes three thousand dollars, men! – a bank! – a whole bank! The bank of England!"[180] This passage eloquently shows how the whale is regarded as nothing more than its marketable equivalent well before being actually casked into the ship's hold. The non-human animal does not exist in the eyes of its hunters and for the industry that employs them.

The 'extractive view' results even more violently manifested into whaling's unwritten rule of "Fast-Fish" and "Loose-Fish." According to such logic, applied mostly when two or more ships contended the same group of whales, "a Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it", while "a Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody who

[177] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 263.
[178] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 149.
[179] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 19.
[180] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 387.

can soonest catch it."[181] Browne mentions the practice in the account of his whaling voyage: "the first fast harpoon, if still attached to the line in the boat, forms an indisputable right to the whole whale; but if the line be cut or broken, and the last save the loose whale, then the oil is equally shared, or the claimant yields his right by courtesy, or for a suitable consideration.[182] Often, however, the trouble of negotiating ownership over a killed whale was avoided by planting a waifing pole in its body, generally recognized as a symbol of possession; this allowed the boat crews to keep hunting other whales and return later to claim their game. This practice often resulted in a frenetic rush to kill the greatest number of whales as quickly as possible and then retrieve them afterwards. Given the arbitrariness of the rule, together with the fact that such disputes mostly happened in the middle of the ocean, its details were often malleable. What was indelible, however, was the fact that property logic was aggressively applied to the whale in such a deliberate way that Ishmael ponders how "possession is half of the law, regardless of how the thing came into possession. But often possession is the whole of the law."[183] His reflection then grows cynic upon realizing how much of the world's functioning is actually based on ravenous, predatory logics just as 'Fast-Fish' and 'Loose-Fish':

> What are the sinews and souls of Russian serfs and Republican slaves but Fast-Fish, whereof possession is the whole of the law? […] What to that redoubted harpooner, [England], is poor Ireland, but a Fast-Fish? What to that apostolic lancer, [the US], is Texas but a Fast-Fish? […] But if the doctrine of Fast-Fish be pretty generally applicable, the kindred doctrine of Loose-Fish is still more widely so. That is internationally and universally applicable. What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish? […] What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What all men's minds and opinions but Loose-Fish? […] What is the great globe itself but a Loose-Fish?[184]

It appears clear how this informal whaling rule, representative here of the 'extractive view' that guides the industry, translates into the basics of all imperialist and colonial enterprises when applied on a global scale; highlighting

[181] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 433.
[182] Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, p. 53.
[183] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 434.
[184] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 435.

once again, through Ishmael's keen reflection, how the extraction of resources and the subjugation of subaltern entities are mutually dependent practices.

In the context of Melville's present, and thus also in his *Moby-Dick*, the physical and symbolical vector that carries this cultural impulse results in the American whaleship. In this respect, in his work Stephen Mentz argues that the early modern ship "should be understood as a cultural icon," equating its impactful role to the one of printed books as both "information-moving devices capable of spreading culture and colonies alike around the globe."[185] In the grim story world of Melville's novel, the ship aboard which we find ourselves trapped in is the melancholy Pequod, "a rare old craft" governed by a feverish madman and its lust for conquer over nature. Ominously, the ship bears the name of a decimated tribe of Massachusetts Indians. It is a vessel "with an old-fashioned claw-footed look about her. Long seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of all four oceans."[186] What is more, the ship has been 'decorated' with emblems derived from its many years of service in the fishery, giving it a sort of uncanny and exotic look: "she was apparelled like any barbaric Ethiopian emperor, his neck heavy with pendants of polished ivory. She was a thing of trophies. A cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies. All round, her unpanelled, open bulwarks were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long sharp teeth of the sperm whale, inserted there for pins, to fasten her old hempen thews and tendons to."[187] The vicious appearance of the ship speaks eloquently about the nature of its mission – not just Ahab's though, but rather its forefront role as operator in the voracious industry of whaling. Barnard elaborates on this crucial point:

> Through this layering of human history and nonhuman bodies, the ship registers the destruction of cultures and ecosystems that has attended the extractive and expansive course of US empire, as well as the impulse to historiographical appropriation, through which the 'vanishing Indian,' like the disappearing buffalo, could be naturalized and assimilated to a narrative of American progress. Here both the whale (through its

[185] Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies", p. 1000.
[186] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 77.
[187] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 78.

> bones) and the Indian (through its name) are enlisted as symbolic allies in their own eradication, just as the whale's body provides fuel for its own fire.[188]

In line with this reasoning, in more than one occasion the whaleship is compared in size and shape to the great leviathan itself. With their sturdy and compact configuration, square-rigged vessels resembled the large and blunt front of the sperm whale. This resemblance goes beyond mere technical reasons; as the machine that enacts the physical and symbolic destruction of the whale, the ship likens its body to that of its prey. By endowing the hull with "thews and tendons," the text in fact figures the ship as a sort of bionic creature, enabling it to rival the sperm whale as the world's largest living predator in its own environment. As a result, by absorbing the whale's physical features, the factory ship completely swallows the non-human animal, leaving no trace of its existence in the marketable form of oil.

As exposed in the previous chapter of this work, reducing the non-human animal into the form of quantifiable animal capital entails a two-way process: it reduces the animal to mere economic terms while simultaneously relying on a figurative and symbolic rendering. In the case of the whale, no other symbol was more powerful in legitimizing its destruction than the crusade-like quest to light up the world. Under this perspective, the business of whaling was intended as the quest of supplying fuel to illuminate homes and public spaces across the nation. However, the whale oil hunt – and in particular the sperm whale hunt – was predicated on the assumption that all light is not equal, that burning cow fat in a candle or firewood in the hearth is of a different order than burning the wax from the casing of a whale's head or the oil from its blubber.[189] The luminosity produced by these latter categories was deemed of a far superior category and thus indicator of a higher social status.

To show the extent of these categorizations, the very unit of luminous flux, the lumen – which quantifies the perceived power of visible light emitted by a source – was measured from a pure white spermaceti candle, one candlepower being equivalent to the burning of one hundred and twenty grains of wax per hour. As it

[188] Barnard, "The Cod and the Whale", p. 859.
[189] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 36.

did not freeze, sperm oil could even be used in lamps during the winter.[190] The product's boosters claimed proudly that it gave off a 'soft, easy expanding light' and a 'sweetness of scent' that set it apart from all other illuminants on the market."[191] For these reasons, sperm oil was the most precious of fuels used in the most important of social functions (like powering lighthouses, conducting public business, and entertaining in homes of the notable). Illustrative of the reach of this discourse is a statement from former US president John Adams; while being ambassador to Great Britain before serving as president he recorded in his diary a conversation about spermaceti he had with the British Prime Minister William Pitt. Adams, keen to promote the New England whaling industry, was trying to convince the British to import spermaceti sold by American whalers, which the British could use to fuel streetlamps. The British, however, were not interested. In his diary, Adams wrote that he told Pitt that "'the fat of the spermaceti whale gives the clearest and most beautiful flame of any substance that is known in nature, and we are surprised you prefer darkness, and consequent robberies, burglaries, and murders in your streets to receiving as a remittance our spermaceti oil.'"[192] According to this vision, to oppose whaling and its quest for light, then, means to refuse the natural progress of society and ultimately surrender to an anachronistic state of savagery, barbarousness, and civil degradation. In the face of such powerful rhetoric, a world without whaling simply appears unthinkable, and in the same way any perception on the whale that considers it as anything but fuel. Besides, sailors, investors, and consumers alike typically understood the whale within the conventional framework of conquest and progress that gave ideological legitimacy to the subjugation and industrialization of nature. As the ultimate result, neither the symbolic whale nor the biological whale survives: they both disappear into the actual whale oil that people bought and sold on the market. For whalers knew the whale most intimately through its disembodiment and its fleshing out into commodity.[193]

This represents just one of the most blatant examples of how, through the same 'extractive view', the cultural foundation of whaling in modern society was

[190] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 81.
[191] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 36.
[192] McNamara, "Objects Made From the Whaling Industry."
[193] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 43.

extremely vital for its economic thriving. In this regard, we find a direct parallel with Henry's theory, as he argues that "extractive fictions represent a critical means of delineating energy's embeddedness within the cultural imagination of modernity."[194] To sustain his work, Henry analyses the aesthetic and discursive legacies of petroleum and other fossil fuels in contemporary cultural representations; Melville's text does the same regarding the substance extracted from the whale that fueled his time.

At the same time, however, Melville also exposes the despicable cost of such practices, showing the hidden implications behind the celebrated glories of progress; in one striking case, he does so by subverting the same powerful metaphor of light. During one of the many hunting scenes of the novel, the Pequod's men give chase to an elderly exemplar of sperm whale, wizened and blinded by old age and mutilated by others that had tried to hunt it before. Its physical exhaustion together with its total blindness make it a hapless target, and its slaughtering something "horribly pitiable to see." Nevertheless, Ishmael adds: "pity there was none. For 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 merrymakings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach *unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all*.[195] In this passage emerges all the irreducible hypocrisy of the hunt and the reasons that sustains it. Ishmael exposes a rhetorical short circuit that lays bare the glorifying discourse about the sacred hunt for light, which here transforms into an element of contradiction. The image of the churches here becomes an empty, blasphemous referent, emblematical of a false preachment. In this way, it mirrors a broader framework meant to problematize the entire narrative in support of the whaling industry. The hypocrisy of such narratives and their consequences, as I will subsequently show, impact most gravely on human and non-human actors involved, that is to say the whaleman and – most importantly – the whale.

In final analysis, it is appropriate to highlight how the culture of whaling ultimately impacted the market value of whale oil. The exchange value of whale oil was, like all commodities, determined by the cultural context in which it was

[194] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 406.
[195] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 391, my emphasis.

produced, traded, and consumed. In this case, exchange value was structured by an industrializing commercial culture that not only widely tolerated, and even endorsed, the degradation of labor and the environment but that had also developed few social or political mechanisms for protecting the ecological basis on which its industries depended. Indeed, good profits and a mass market in light went hand in hand with a careless disregard for the energies of both people and nature.[196] The fundamental cultural assumption that sustained the whole business was that the whale was regarded as a free energy resource to be exploited. Along the same line, the human component of this industry was – as I will show – an equally expendable and exploitable source of power. The market value of whale oil was a cultural product structured both by the political institutions fostering such a market and by the historically specific perceptions that Americans had developed for measuring the value of manual labor, of capital investments, and, of course, of the natural resources that made up the ecological infrastructure of commodity production. According to Henry, in fact, the socioecological impacts of these economic practices are symptomatic of the "extractive logics of a capitalist system animated by social ideologies of human and ecosystem expendability."[197] The exchange value of whale oil was, in other words, a dense, unpacked signifier that reflected the culture of its time and place, and that worked, like all commodities, to distill in opaque form the dominant values of the societies involved in its exchange.[198]

2.4 – The Whaleman: Filthy Butcher or National Hero?

The vast culture of whaling inevitably left an important mark on the general perception of the people directly involved in the industry, both during their time and for many years ahead. Before shifting the focus of my work on the multifaceted way Melville's novel addresses the non-human animal, it is appropriate to analyze in depth its human protagonist, i.e. the nineteenth century American whaleman, as he himself appears under various and often contradictory lights throughout the

[196] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 35.
[197] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 17.
[198] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 45.

text. Indeed, the whaling worker ultimately stands out as a highly ambiguous figure in *Moby-Dick*, and what is more, it resonates with Henry's work in multiple ways. This section is dedicated to examining these different natures.

The whaleman was the subject of a highly oxymoronic set of perspectives in the eyes of American land-based society. He had, on the one hand, the essential and highly regarded role of providing the literal enlightenment of the modern world, thus qualifying as one of the most important figures of progress. At the same time, his direct involvement in the noxious practices of the whaling profession caused him to be seen as an uncivilized, filthy brute. Scholar Philip Armstrong elaborates on this double nature:

> The whaleman stood with one foot on either side of these many faultlines. He was praised as a harbinger of American values and vilified for his immoral relationship with the "innocent savages" of the Pacific. He was both a romantic adventurer into wild space and a prototype of the industrial laborer, farmer, and meat processor. His experience routinely alternated between dangerous encounters with the vast materiality of the living animal and its reduction to dead and partial resources, a commodity to be measured by the barrel, reified by the factory ship's technological procedures and its specialization of labor.[199]

The vast distance between these various perspectives contributed to the complex mythification of the whaler as an exotic figure, in both positive and negative ways. Undoubtedly, Melville gives abundant space to the exploration of a great number of such readings throughout the whole length of *Moby-Dick*.

In order to start to unravel this intricate complexity, we shall begin with the more ennobling interpretations of this character. In her work on the importance of transoceanic travel for the formulation of modernity, literary scholar Margaret Cohen argues that the sailor was, among other things, "a hero of practical reason in a space of dynamic, incomplete, expanding knowledge," and, to put it more precisely, a distinguished intelligent individual who excelled in action and thrives in "zones of great unpredictability but also discovery, profit, and innovation."[200] In other words, the seaman incarnated both the exotic inaccessibility of far

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[199] Armstrong, Philip. "'Leviathan Is a Skein of Networks': Translations of Nature and Culture in *Moby-Dick*." *ELH*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2004, p. 1040.
[200] Cohen, Margaret. "Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe." *PMLA*, vol. 125, no. 3, 2010, p. 660.

adventures and at the same time the modern impetus of exploration and civilization. It has been already addressed how the whalers were among the most far reaching and daring oceanic explorers and pioneers, contributing greatly to the opening of new routes for commerce and other enterprises. Along the same lines, Ishmael often reminds his readers of the honor and merit associated with the profession of whaling, in this way elevating the grimy and bloody work of the fishery to something nobler. This rhetoric emerges most overtly in Chapter 24 – *The Advocate*, in which the narrator proclaims that, despite all the defamatory narrations on the "butchering sort of business" in which he and his comrades are engaged, still, "all the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn round the globe, burn, as before so many shrines, to our glory!".[201]

Ishmael, however, does not stop at the already powerful metaphor of light; he instead goes on to list all the various enterprises carried out by his predecessors. The whalemen of the past had been, respectively, explorers: "for many years past the whale-ship has been the pioneer in ferreting out the remotest and least known parts of the earth. She has explored seas and archipelagoes which had no chart, where no Cook or Vancouver[202] had never sailed."[203] They had been trade pioneers: "until the whale fishery rounded Cape Horn, no commerce but colonial was carried on between Europe and the long line of the opulent Spanish provinces of the Pacific coast."[204] And liberators:

> it was the whaleman who first broke through the jealous policy of the Spanish crown, it might be distinctly shown how form those whalemen at last eventuated the liberation of Peru, Chili, and Bolivia from the yoke of old Spain, and the establishment of the eternal democracy in those parts.[205]

They had even been missionaries: "the uncounted isles of all Polynesia confess the same truth, and do commercial homage to the whale-ship, that cleared the way for the missionary and the merchant, and in many cases carried the primitive

[201] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 118-119.
[202] James Cook (1728 – 1779) and George Vancouver (1757 – 1798) were famous British naval officers and explorers. They led important expeditions that mapped huge parts of the Pacific Ocean, North America's northwest coast, and Antarctica during the late 18th century.
[203] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 120.
[204] *Ibid*.
[205] *Ibid*.

missionaries to their first destinations."[206] The list goes on including the resonance whaling finds even in the American founding fathers, the scriptures and, finally, the stars[207]. Given this vast and noble tradition, then, Ishmael proudly declares – slightly resonating with Melville's own experience – "a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard."[208]

The elevation of whaling to something greater than a sanguinary energy industry is also realized by the employment of a solemn war semantic in many instances throughout the narration.[209] This appears clear already in the two chapters dedicated to the presentation of the Pequod's commanding officers, both titled *Knights and Squires*.[210] Moreover, in more than one occasion the whalers are described looking at their precious game as a "long line of man-of-war's men about to throw themselves on board an enemy's ship.[211] In another passage, Ishamel is addressing the notorious horrific danger intrinsic to whaling and the consequent discredit that comes with it; in order to defuse this bad vision, he compares the perilous lives of the whalers to the ones of troopers, arguing: "what disordered slippery decks of a whale-ship are comparable to the unspeakable carrion of those battlefields from which so many soldiers return to drink in all ladies' plaudits?"[212] Ishmael here is denouncing the unjust perception that invest whalemen, claiming that they too should be celebrated in the same manner of those men at arms who put their lives in service of their homeland.

In one of the most eloquent of these instances, the whalers and their long voyages are compared to the "crusaders of old times," who traversed "two thousand miles of land to fight for their holy sepulchre."[213] In creating this simile, the picture is that of a perpetual holy war, a cause which is just and must therefore be carried

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[206] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 121.
[207] In the same chapter Ishmael points out a line of ancestry that connects Benjamin Franklin with an old family of Nantucket settlers and harpooners. He also addresses the Book of Job as "the first written account on our Leviathan." Finally, the skies glorify the whaler trough the constellation of Cetus, located in the southern celestial hemisphere.
[208] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 122.
[209] War rhetoric has always been employed to reinforce celebrative compositions such as anthems and poems. Indeed, especially during early-to-mid 19th century, war vocabulary relied on romanticized idioms of chivalry, divine right, and patriotic duty. Statehood and affiliated endeavors would be aestheticized through elevated, epic syntax that aligned individual survival with the metaphysical rise of the national collective or ethnic homeland.
[210] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 124, 128.
[211] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 235.
[212] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 119.
[213] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 231.

out without reserve, since it is vital for the prosperity of the civilized world and its values. In this way, the whaling voyage assumes the most epic connotation, so that the Nantucketer (epitomizing here the whale hunter) becomes endowed with the same mythical aura as knights and paladins, perhaps even surpassing them in terms of courage, because he "in all seasons and all oceans declared everlasting war with the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood; most monstrous and most mountainous! That Himmalehan, salt-sea Mastodon."[214] This steel heroism is not just functional to Melville for forging the epic tone of his narrative, but – as mentioned in the previous section – it was a cultural trope well present in the minds of many actual whalers in those years and that for this reason powerfully defined the calling to the profession. Indeed, whaling was anointed as a highly patriotic activity and was therefore extremely important for the strength of young America; in this respect, Philip Hoare contends:

> The new nation seemed to prove itself by the whale. For Owen Chase, first mate of the whaleship Essex and scion of an old Nantucket family, he and his fellow whalers were crusaders 'carrying on an exterminating warfare against those leviathans of the deep'. They were knights and squires bound up in a new chivalric order; outriders of an empire, even as the whales were driven 'like the beasts of the forest, before the march of civilization into remote and more unfrequented seas'.[215]

Under this perspective, whaling was not just an energy industry for the people of the time, but it also represented the civilizing impetus of the American nation, and thus the whaleman – like the frontiersman on land – becomes the harbinger of democracy and order in an arduous, savage wilderness.

It appears clear how Ishmael's fascination for the profession of whaling is the product of several factors: from the old and epic suggestiveness of those men who first chose to challenge the ocean and its most appalling creatures, to the intrinsic promise of exotic and nameless adventures, and, ultimately, to the powerful and glorifying national rhetoric built to justify it. He is just one among many thousands that, for one reason or the other, decided to go to sea aboard a whaleship.

Despite the vast praise for whaling in the narrative, however, there seems to be an equally ever-present sentiment of disdain scattered through Ishmael's

[214] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 70.
[215] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 102.

meditations on this apparently noble profession, showing our narrator's profound awareness of the practical reality of whaling's functioning. This feeling emerges more overtly in one passage in which Ishamel celebrates the mythical origin of the practice of slaying whales. In Greek mythology, in fact, Perseus slew a Cetus (intended in ancient Greek as a large sea monster) to save Andromeda from being sacrificed to it:

> The gallant Perseus, a son of Jupiter, was the first whaleman; and to the eternal honor of our calling be it said, that the first whale attacked by our brotherhood was not killed with any *sordid* intent. Those were the knightly days of our profession, when we only bore arms to succor the distressed, and not to fill men's lamp-feeders.[216]

Here, the celebrative tone attributed to whaling is immediately undone in the same picture, since the "sordid" nature of this practice cannot be ultimately hidden or denied. What remains is a vile system of expendability and exploit based on human needs for energy and profit.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, heavily contrasting with the myth, we find a perspective connected to the more concrete aspects of the work on a whaleship. In this view, the whaleman is seen as nothing more than a filthy savage soaked in blood and slime aboard a remote floating slaughterhouse. Several evidence on this aspect of whaling has already emerged through the section dedicated to the functioning of the factory ship (2.2); the resulting stigma, however, deserves some further exploration. While elevating whaling as something "imperial",[217] Ishamel often cites this other negative vision specifically with the aim of confuting it. It is at the same time true, however, that in many instances elsewhere he also shines a light on the most questionable and ambiguous aspects of the practices of whaling. To provide an example, the long years spent butchering whales at sea end up having a profound effect on the men's temperament, turning them into sailor "savages," who "live in the varying air, and inhale its fickleness."[218] Indeed, "long exile from Christendom and civilization," Ishmael says, "inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery. Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an

[216] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 395, my emphasis.
[217] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 121.
[218] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 231.

Iroquois."[219] Thus, while the whaler became a figure of national pride for the new American republic, Melville's novel cautions us to see that this figure has two sides and that the celebration of American enterprise, industry, and the resulting empowerment is only one facet of the story. The darker side of this character might be brought on by prolonged isolation and grueling work. In line with the vilifying idea of the sailor savage, in more than one occasion Ishmael describes himself and his crewmembers as "surrounded by all manners of defilements",[220] and, while processing the whale, "every sailor [turned into] a butcher. You would have thought we were offering up ten thousand red oxen to the sea gods."[221]

This dishonorable perception was also heavily reinforced by many direct accounts of whaling voyages in those decades. In his published journal, J. Ross Browne describes the crew's living quarters in the ship's forecastle, a place

> black and slimy with filth, very small, and hot as an oven. It was filled with a compound of foul air, smoke, sea-chests, soap-kegs, greasy pans, tainted meat. […] In warm weather it was insufferably close. It would seem like an exaggeration to say, that I have seen Kentucky pig-sties not half so filthy, and in every respect preferable to this miserable hole; such, however, is the fact.[222]

To worsen even more the picture, vermin were more common on whaleships than any other vessel, probably because of the profusion of blood and oil that soaked the decks. Rats were numerous, but cockroaches were even worse. They were endemic aboard the whalers and, for many seamen, they played a much more pervasive role in daily life than the actual whales.[223]

Despite these miserable living conditions, it was the already-described processing of the whale that more than anything else degraded the men. All whaling accounts in fact converge in describing the trying-out operation as the most insufferable experience of the job; the thing that more than any other reflected the stigmatizing picture that sees the working sailor as a lurid brute. In the journal he kept during a four-year whaling voyage, William Abbe offers vivid and detailed documentation on how this process affected him and his coworkers:

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[219] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 295.
[220] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 119.
[221] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 330.
[222] Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, p. 43.
[223] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 247.

> To turn out at midnight & put on clothes soaked in raw oil – to go on deck & work for eighteen hours among blubber – slipping – & stumbling on the sloppy decks – till you are covered from crown to heal with oil . . . to dream you are under piles of blubber heaping & falling upon you till you wake up with a suffocating sense of fear & agony only to hear the eternal clank of the cutting machine & the roar of the fires under the try works . . . – to fall asleep only to dream again till you are called on deck to [cut] off the raw blubber – to handle the greasy pikes . . . – to stand under the lee of the try works – cutting up & carrying to casks the soaked & dripping case – till your eyes are filled with pain & your mouth is filled with the suffocating black smoke from the chimneys . . . – to be weary – dirty – oily – sleepy – sick – disgusted with yourself & everybody & everything. . .[224]

This record makes strikingly clear how the denigratory perception that sees the whaler as a barbarous savage was inevitably rooted in the actual labor conditions in which he operated. This allows me to finally illuminate the fundamental and irreducible truth behind any narrative whatsoever on this character, i.e. the fact that, beyond heroism or barbarousness, the whaleman was first and foremost an exploited and degraded laborer.

In order to explore the figure of the whaleman under this perspective, it is useful to first address the role of the sea worker in general – especially in terms of practical utility for empires. To do so, scholar Jason Oliver Chang borrows the term "biopower" from Michel Foucault, which indicates "a range of techniques for directing the 'performance of the body' and managing the 'state of health of a population'"[225] and transposes it to the context of the maritime labor force. Indeed, terrestrial power has always been projected to the sea; as exposed in the previous chapter (1.2), imperial powers depend in some part on the control and use of ocean space. In this framework, the bodies of working sailors become spaces of power to be managed in order to control something as unclaimable as the sea. The exceptional aspect of this discourse lies in the fact that the ocean is intrinsically resistant to our efforts to claim and surveil life upon it; for this reason, seafarers and their work mediate an empire's dependence on ocean transit and the ungovernable aquatic environment. Through biopower at sea, bodies, knowledge, technology, and authority are organized to ensure the continuous circulation of

[224] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 44.
[225] Chang, Jason Oliver. "Finding Biopower at Sea." *American Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2019, p. 858.

vessels and, in the case of the whaler, to keep the extractive machinery of the fishery operational.[226] The main issue in this whole picture is that, despite the powerful drive to exercise control over this environment, human life is extremely fragile at sea – and it is even more so when it is valued less than the profit to be gained from and through it.

In this respect, Melville's text mirrors actual accounts of many whaling voyages since it devolves a lot of space in exposing the most obnoxious aspects of the fishery; to the point that it could even be read as a sort of whaler's lament for le deplorable conditions in which he finds himself working. For example, in relation to the struggle of the chase, Ishmael denounces the ruthless exhaustion imposed on harpooners and the consequent missed darts, claiming: "no wonder that some of them actually bursts their blood-vessels in the boat; […] no wonder that to many ship owners, whaling is but a losing concern; for it is the harpooner that makes the voyage, and if you take the breath out of his body how can you expect to find it there when most wanted!"[227] Similarly, Ishmael later describes the endless days of cutting, slashing, boiling and casking as "man-killing."[228] Along the same lines, Browne describes the effects of his working cycle as follows:

> We had an average of five hours' sleep out of the twenty-four. Working incessantly in oil, which penetrated to the skin, and kept us in a most uncomfortable condition, besides being continually saturated with salt water, produced a very disagreeable effect upon those who were not accustomed to such things, by chafing the skin, and causing painful tumors to break out over the whole body. Before I had half finished my share of the labor, I heartily wished myself in the meanest dog-kennel ashore.[229]

Besides exhaustion and obnoxity, however, other perils faced the whalemen. During the chase, for example, the whistling line might take a turn around a leg or an arm, surgically severing it, or yank the man into the water. Even if the boat was not destroyed, it might be upended and its occupants dumped into the ocean. Many of the sailors could not swim, so such a plunge often spelled death.[230] There are accounts of even more macabre and terrible work-related deaths in the fishery.

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[226] *Ibid*.
[227] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 313-314.
[228] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 369.
[229] Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, p. 135.
[230] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 255.

Captain Robert Brown of the whaleship *Emerald* on December 30, 1840 reported that crewman Joseph Jackson fell into one of the trypots while boiling whale oil and lived for twelve painful hours before his death. Moreover, it was not unknown for the pots to violently explode as they did aboard the *Bowditch* on October 29, 1837.[231] With respect to such a horrible and merciless working environment thunders Ishmael's most direct and unequivocable admonition about the cost of this sanguinary industry behind its marketable product: "for God's sake, be economical with your lamps and candles! not a gallon you burn, but at least one drop of man's blood was spilled for it."[232] Thus, the blood of the whale was not the only one upon which this vast enterprise was based.

Life at sea is work, and aboard a whaleship it becomes work of the worst possible kind, precarious and deadly but unavoidable for the needs of empire. This picture evinces a biopolitical logic of the oceanic laborer. Whalemen became the human infrastructure that, through their blood, provided great functionality in the capitalist world-system by suturing governable and ungovernable spaces. As a result, the factory ship becomes in itself another 'sacrifice area' where the body of the human worker is expendable just as the whale's. Alienated, degraded and exhausted, the crewmen of the Pequod are often portrayed like "machines, dumbly moving about the deck"; "mechanical" men, governed by the "iron soul" of their despotic commander.[233] Accordingly, Ahab himself could be read along the same lines. Shortly before condemning the whole crew to the ill-fated end of his quest, during an enchanted mild morning in the Pacific, the captain ponders on the life he spent in the fishery:

> On such a day – very much such a sweetness as this – I struck my first whale – a boy-harpooner of eighteen! Forty – forty – forty years ago! – ago! Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and stormtime! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, and for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! […] and then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowering old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey. […] Why this strife of the chase? why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? how the richer or better is Ahab now?

[231] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 258.
[232] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 224.
[233] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 582, 602.

Read in this perspective, the villainous tyrant of the Pequod ceases to represent high metaphysical aspiration of dominion and monomaniac conquer. On the contrary, it appears to be just another body worn out by the industry, and that found in madness the natural consequence of a long life of exploitation and fatigue.

This systemic exploitation was permitted and sustained by a precise set of mechanisms, both cultural and economic; yet, on top of them all was the simple fact that not all people were equally valuable. Just as the whale, the whaleman was subjected to the same law of value that sees the peculiar way of organizing life (and death) according to precise market needs. Ishmael is especially keen to show us the ways this law assigns differential value to both human and non-human bodies. As a matter of fact, the early trans-Atlantic world not only sanctioned corporal punishment for sailors similar to that of slaves but it assessed the value of sailors according to a strictly hierarchical, and starkly unequal, profit-sharing arrangement.[234] This was evident even in the disparity concerning the ship's food, one of men's basic needs. Browne's account is exhaustive on this matter. In commenting on a quarrel for some scraps of food between the crew, he argues:

> I have shown that the captain paid no regard to our appeals. […] Under such circumstances, what were those who were inclined to be civilized to do? It would be unreasonable to suppose that they could quietly suffer themselves to be starved. Hunger does not pay much regard to conventional rules, especially at sea. The worst of it was, that it was only through cupidity we were denied our just rights. There was no scarcity of provision of a bad quality on board the vessel; yet, bad as it was, we were unable to obtain enough of it. The law allows a certain proportion of wholesome food to each man. It must not be supposed, however, that there is any law at sea but the captain's word.[235]

This was a period when the master's voice was law, and if a man needed a new shirt or a pair of boots, he could "either pay up or go naked." [236] These sentiments often resulted in numerous men deserting the ship at the first occasion, which in whaling could present only after years. While waiting for that chance, a diffused desire for disobedience often started to germinate. Browne describes this restlessness: "We had been driven almost to the verge of a mutiny by the harsh

[234] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 46.
[235] Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, pp. 145-146.
[236] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 242.

and brutal manner in which we were treated, and the hard fare upon which we were compelled to live. […] Bitter wrongs; the cruelties and oppressions to which we were subjected."[237] Unfortunately, there was not any assistance in favor of sailors – let alone for mutineers – even in front of the most terrible injustices; on the opposite, "consuls are, in many instances, but the aiders and abettors of the cruelties of captains."[238]

Although most of the whalemen signed aboard voluntarily, they usually did not know of the dangers and hardships that lay ahead of them, and the profit sharing that at the outset sounded so attractive often deteriorated into an enforced and dangerous risk sharing. Commercial whaling relied on what was known as the 'lay system,' a system in which investors, skilled workers, and common laborers all received a set proportion of the net profits of a voyage. Investors who risked their capital in the enterprise took the vast majority of the net profits of the whale oil collected (around 70 percent). The skilled labor on board, including the captain, the mates, and the boatsteerers, received their lays on a sliding scale: the master receiving on average a lay of approximately 1/15 lay (or 7.7 percent of net profits), the mates receiving a 1/23 to 1/57 lay (4.3 to 1.8 percent of net profits), and the boatsteerers an approximately 1/87 lay (or 1.1 percent of net profits).[239] The common sailor was exploited labor in a profitable industry. His lay typically went from 1/150 to 1/200, or even less. This system served to inextricably bind the financial fate of the crew to the success of the hunt, creating a relentless mechanism of exploitation and utilizing economic incentives to maximize productivity at sea. Moreover, greedy investors made sure to minimize labor costs and maximize their returns by subtracting what they could from the pockets of the sailors. Melville perfectly describes this subtle system during Ishmael's enrollment interview with retired captains Bildad and Peleg, the owners and investors of the Pequod. While negotiating for the young man's lye, Bildad, not satisfied with his peer's apparently too lavish offer, intervenes: "captain Peleg, thou hast a generous heart, but thou must consider the duty thou owest to the other owners of this ship – widows and orphans, many of them – and that if we too abundantly reward the

[237] Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, pp. 302-303.
[238] Browne, *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise*, p. 303.
[239] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 47.

labors of this young man, we may be taking the bread from those widows and those orphans."[240] In the sad irony of this scene emerges all the vile greediness that characterized the foundations of the industry. As already mentioned, the large majority of the voyage profits went into the pockets of these already wealthy investors. To put the blame for the sailor's misery upon the mothers and children likely widowed and orphaned by the same industry that then drinks from the blood of the working sailor is extremely and vividly representative of the general logic of extractive capital. In the end, poor Ishmael will embark on his highly anticipated whaling voyage round the world for the stipulated 1/275 lay.

Added to the sailor's distressing financial situation was the fact that, like sharecroppers in the South, he was forced to share in the risks of whaling. The lay system meant that the sailor took a profit only if the voyage was successful. On a three- or four-year voyage, a man might earn $100, but the items billed to him often exceeded this amount, so many hands returned to port not only with no spending money, but in debt. The only thing to do to work off this indebtedness was to sign on for another voyage, thus starting the insidious process all over again. What is more, if and when they made it back to port, the whalemen were set upon by all sorts of landsharks, eager to assist them in disposing of their wages by enticing them into taverns, brothels, and other iniquitous dens where they could make up for the pleasures they had been denied for the past several years.[241] Sometimes these landsharks even got them drunk and virtually press-ganged their victims, who woke to find themselves aboard an outgoing ship, unable to get off. All these factors are part and parcel of a system that bases a huge part of its profits on creating an unending cycle of exploitation and that disregards human value within its calculations, de facto creating a sort of wage slavery. In conclusion, in an age notable for its exploitation, the 'common hand' in the whaling industry was among the most exploited of workers. Poorly compensated, replaceable, and socially denigrated.[242] As is typical in the context of extractive capitalism, a significant portion of the industry's wealth stems from the fact that it sacrifices its laborers in pursuit of profits from a highly lucrative market in affordable energy.

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[240] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 86.
[241] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 243.
[242] Johnson, "A Peculiarly Valuable Oil" p. 48.

In order to ultimately link Melville's novel to the genre of extractive fictions, I would like to provide one final example that in my opinion shows a striking parallel between *Moby-Dick* and one of Henry's main case studies. In his work, Henry analyses a novel titled *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007) by American author Ann Pancake, which portrays the hard reality of coal miners in central Appalachia. I believe the miners in question reflect the figure of the whalemen explored in this chapter. The novel is widely known for its deep exploration of cultural politics and ecological impacts of mountaintop removal (MTR)[243] coal mining in the Appalachian Mountains of southern West Virginia. Drawing on interviews with survivors of MTR-related social and environmental issues, the novel follows an impoverished family of six living in a southern West Virginia landscape. Henry gives abundant space to Appalachia in his work "because of its originary status in the United States energy economy – the nation's first oil well was drilled in Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859 – and because extraction has long been central to the region's cultural imaginary."[244] From what has been presented at the beginning of this chapter (2.1), mining in Appalachia may be intended as whaling's direct heir in terms of national importance regarding the flows of capital obtained via the intensive extraction of resources. Reinforcing even more the juxtaposition between these two practices is the fact that, during the coal boom era of the 1930s through the 1950s, coal mining was increasingly framed as an essentially patriotic endeavor; hence, just like whaling, vital to the success of the nation.[245] During the second half of the twentieth century, mechanization and companies' anti-unionization efforts contributed to generate high levels of unemployment in coal countries. The large profits derived from coal mining were of course mostly destined to wealthy urban centers and companies' coffers, leaving

[243] This method was developed as an economically viable means to extract cleaner-burning, low-sulfur coal abundant in southern West Virginia. Ironically, the local environmental costs have been drastic, as MTR has been blamed for the 'decapitation' of a once lush, hospitable mountain region. The MTR process involves the literal removal of mountaintops to access hard-to-reach coal seams. Forests are clear-cut, topsoil is stripped, and underlying earth and rock are blasted intensively to remove overburden, which is then placed into a fill, an area used for waste disposal. Coal seams are then plundered using a dragline, a piece of machinery that can approach twenty stories in height. The impacts of this process are wide-ranging: illegal dumping, erosion and water contamination, increased possibility of flooding and the release of coal slurry, a toxic cocktail of chemical waste and sediments into watersheds, thus elevating stream pH to dangerous levels. Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 408.
[244] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 404.
[245] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 408.

rural communities environmentally degraded and at the same time economically dependent on coal, therefore less likely to oppose unregulated or irresponsible extraction and waste dumping activities.[246] Rich in resources yet impoverished, Appalachia gradually became one of the many 'sacrifice areas' functional to the logic of extractive capital.

Strange as This Weather Has Been does with MTR mining what *Moby-Dick* does regarding whaling. Pancake's novel is in fact focused on 'making visible' the social and ecological impacts of MTR through the employment of an environmental dystopia aesthetic on the one hand, and an intimate documentary commitment in depicting these damaged realities on the other. Indeed, by framing coal as antithetical to a greater good, Pancake writes against what sociologist Rebecca Scott has called a "culture of extraction"[247] that has long pervaded the coalfields of Appalachia.[248] In a place where the extractive economy has become synonymous with prosperity and central to regional cultural identity, coal – like whale oil – can either be told as an exemplar of a US story of progress and technological development or as a story of social injustice and conflict.

If on the one hand coal mining has been framed as patriotic and vital for the nation, it at the same time generated a powerful stigmatization of its workers – the mining counterpart of the sailor savage. Indeed, this deep-seated regional affinity for extraction is complicated by long-standing cultural stereotypes of Appalachia as a region predominately populated by hillbillies, white trash, and other poor whites, an assumption reified and reinforced in national and regional cultural representations that reproduce tropes of social backwardness and moral abjection. What is more, such "epistemologies of disgust and social distance help create the conditions of possibility for some of the most dangerous environmental exploitation in the United States and the designation of Appalachia as a 'sacrifice zone.'"[249] In other words, the combination of local cultural pride associated with coal's historical status as an important national commodity and the simultaneous stigmatization of Appalachia as culturally and socially inferior, and therefore

[246] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 409.
[247] Scott, Rebecca R. *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields*. NED-New ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 6.
[248] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 409.
[249] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 410.

expendable, contributes to ongoing environmental and economic injustices associated with extraction. In his text, Philip Hoare provides a passage which reflects this contradiction and nears the two figures even more, as he contends:

> the whaler was a kind of pirate-miner – an excavator of oceanic oil, stoking the furnace of the Industrial Revolution as much as any man digging coal out of the earth. Whale oil and whalebone were commodities for the Machine Age, and owners and captains adopted the same punitive practices employed in mills and factories, reducing pay and provisions to pursue a better profit.[250]

In this picture, the MTR miner and the nineteenth century whaler become both powerful representatives of the central paradox of extraction culture: coal (or oil)'s simultaneous fetishization by, and exploitation of, the working poor.[251]

To extend this point, Pancake's characters, like Ishmael, show a highly ambiguous relationship with the contexts of extraction which define their lives. They both exhibit a productive tension between their sense of closeness with their cultural and professional reality – rural Appalachia and the whaleship, respectively – and socially conditioned difficulties ascribing personal and environmental degradation to resource extraction. As such, these characters cannot be described as conventional environmentalists. Nevertheless, they challenge the centrality of extraction to regional and national cultural identity and the mythos of fossil fuel and whale oil development as a path to economic and social progress, thereby exposing the epistemological failures of extractive capitalism.[252]

For all the reasons presented in this chapter, I believe *Moby-Dick* can be inscribed into the genre of extractive fictions. Indeed, Melville's novel is powerfully committed to problematizing and thus dismantling the strong ideology of progress of its time and the concurrent foundational myths of extractive capital that defined it. Like the texts Henry examines, it challenges the notion that large-scale raw materials extraction is necessary for economic growth, modernization, higher living standards, and national security.[253] Moreover, it ultimately unveils the crumbling epistemological foundations that have historically undergirded the

[250] Hoare, *The Whale*, p. 91.
[251] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 410.
[252] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 404.
[253] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 405.

unchecked, often violent accumulationist tendencies of extractive capitalism.[254] Lastly, through the thorough exposition of the huge cost in blood of this ravenous system, it attempts to ultimately give voice to its degraded 'sacrifice areas', that is to say the whaleman and, if possible, the whale.

[254] Henry, "Extractive Fictions", p. 407.

Chapter III

The Whale: Literary Animal Beyond Product and Symbol

After having examined how Melville deeply problematizes the economic practices of extraction upon which his present was grounded, it is now time to focus on the other, specular way in which the whale inhabits *Moby-Dick*. The non-human animal in fact exists in the text as a sort of unreachable presence, resistant to its commodification and, most importantly, to human's efforts to conquer it, both epistemologically and symbolically. The whale undoubtedly represents the primary element upon which the novel's main tensions are manifested. This happens in a variety of ways, according to Ishmael's perspective, and not without chaotic contradictions. Indeed, in this chapter I will attempt the most challenging exercise of this work, namely to try to organize an analytical discourse around something so undefinable and elusive like the whale; an endeavor which Ishmael himself describes as "a ponderous task", virtually unachievable.[255] However, in that aspect lies precisely another way in which the resistance of the animal manifests within the text, as I will explain in more than one occasion throughout the following sections.

This last part of my work consists of an examination of the multifaceted ways in which the whale can be read within Melville's text. Following Ishmael's perceptual journey, we witness a progressive renegotiation of his capacity to apprehend these animals. Starting from the immense symbolic potential that the whale has always had in human culture, this chapter moves through the animal's physical presence and deeper subjectivity as means of resistance to those metaphorical readings, thereby highlighting its complexity before examining these

[255] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 147.

creatures in terms of power and agency – that is, as subjects in their own right within the literary medium. Although all these perspectives may appear as mutually exclusive, considering them comparatively is the only way to revolutionize our perception of the non-human other in literature and, most importantly, reminds us how a single animal might tell radically different stories.

3.1 – The Many Lives of Moby Dick

The awe-inspiring quality that has always characterized the relationship between human and whale inevitably left a deep mark in our perception of this species. Melville's novel – and, most importantly, the ways in which it has been read – had a fundamental role in the construction of our idea of this distant and unimaginable being. The mythological White Whale at the center of this story world undoubtedly reached far beyond the boundaries of its temporal and geographical origins, rooting indelibly in the cultural imagination of the whole world. So much so that many critics have largely argued that Melville created what has been regarded as "the most famous animal character in American literature"[256], and – maybe – of all time. Indeed, Melville's whale is so emblematic that it ultimately transcends the purely literary sphere; in fact, "scarcely a scientific study of sperm whales did not, sooner or later, mention Moby Dick. He is the whale which forms our popular image of his species, if not all whales."[257]

Despite and because of this tremendous reputation, Moby Dick (epitomizing here the whale as species) has been overloaded with innumerable readings and interpretations through the decades, until its figure grew so overwhelmingly hulking to the point of becoming invisible. In other words, the infinite layers of meaning that have been poured on this whale inevitably caused the actual animal to disappear, disintegrated into a multitude of symbols and interpretations. Before addressing any strategy that explores whether the literary non-human animal might possess some kind of agency, the prerequisite aim at the base of this approach is to try to recompose it. This first section will offer an overview of the

[256] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 71.
[257] Seibel, Svetlana. "The Whaleness of the Whale: Interspecies Relationality in *Moby-Dick* and *In The Heart of the Sea*." *European Journal of American Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2024, p.1.

numerous ways in which the non-human animal (specifically, the whale) has long inhabited our imagination, in order to then try to leave those projections behind.

As mentioned in the first chapter of this work, broadly speaking, the human reaches out to the animal. They are often used as screens for the projection of human interests and meanings. Indeed, the animal means what cultures mean by it: animality has always mediated the construction of humanity.[258] The mighty whale has been generating awe in the hearts of humans long before Melville's time. Indeed, since ancient times cetaceans have been regarded with a mixture of wonder and terror; reflecting upon them human's most primordial desires and anxieties, to the point that the whale is found in many cosmological and mythological traditions. They are portrayed as both fearsome monsters that swallow ships and as sacred deities that guide seafarers, symbolizing wisdom, longevity, and humanity's deep interconnectedness with the ocean.

The example that perhaps resonates the most in our Western imagination is found in Judeo-Christian tradition: the story of Jonah and the Whale from the Old Testament features this animal as an instrument of divine salvation and rebirth. Moving eastward, in the Islamic cosmography a colossal, cosmic fish or whale that swims in a vast, primordial ocean carries the Earth on his back.[259] Along the same lines, several Eastern folk religions practice in the worship of whales. In the Korean tradition the whales are the embodiments of ocean deities that bring fish and protection and save people from misfortunes, tutelary deities of the land and nation that can be also wrathful to cause violent waves and winds to defeat foreign enemies. In many Chinese cultures, whales were treated as mystical beings and were positively regarded among fishermen. In the Japanese folklore, on the contrary, the *Bake-kujira* is a vengeful ghost whale composed of skeletal bones and barnacles; followed by a host of eerie birds and strange fish, it haunts the waters near coastal whaling villages and brings ruin and tragedy to those who see it. In Māori tradition across Polynesia whales were thought of in awe, as supernatural beings direct descendants of the sea god, and often deemed sacred.[260] For this

[258] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 93.
[259] Dangers, Diem. "In the Belly of a Whale: Archetypal Monsters and Mothers in Maritime Mythology." Feathers and Folktales. feathersandfolktales.com/diemdangersblogposts/in-the-belly-of-a-whale.
[260] *Ibid*.

reason, they appear in the migration legends of many tribes. To add one more example, Vishnu, one of the main deities of the Hindu Trimurti, incarnated in a whale to sound the depths of the world in search of the sacred Vedas volumes necessary for its perpetual regeneration.[261] Ishmael himself cites the episode of this god "who, by the first of his ten earthly incarnations, has forever set apart and sanctified the whale."[262] These are just a few examples on how the whale inhabits our imaginative landscape from time immemorial and, moreover, touching the most diverse human mythologies.

The whale has thus long represented one of the most suggestive and powerful animal vessels for humans to project meaning, especially for those whose lives were in some way connected to the sea. No wonder, then, that the characters at the center of Melville's novel find themselves doing the very same thing. This aspect permeates the text to such a degree that Philip Armstrong argues: "I am not risking much contradiction if I say that the narrative, form and thematics of *Moby-Dick* are all driven by the question: what do whales mean?"[263] In this sense, the reading of the non-human animal that more than any other influenced many future interpretations is undoubtedly Ahab's, since it fundamentally relies on what humankind has always been doing: attribute functional meaning to what it could not fully grasp (or conquer). To Ahab, mutilated by the whale and driven mad by the agony that followed, Moby Dick is neither a source of oil and profit nor a dangerous specimen of marine wildlife. It instead represents but a "pasteboard mask" that hides unfathomable malignity or divine void behind its tangible yet apparent surface. While manipulating his reluctant first mate into this vision, the captain explains:

> in each event – in the living act, the undoubted deed – there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its feature from behind the unreasoning mask. 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. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.

[261] Sullivan, Bruce M., and Patricia Wong Hall. "The Whale Avatar of the Hindoos in Melville's *Moby-Dick*." *Literature & Theology*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2001, pp. 364-365.
[262] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 397.
[263] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 96.

> That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.[264]

In this perspective, the whale becomes a horrendous monster, the quintessence of evil, the literary paradigm of unknowable, cosmic malevolence that threatens mankind with its mere existence. This vision obviously finds its equivalents in many religious parallelisms, specifically in that primeval evil which has been there from the beginning. Later in the narration, Ishmael himself tries to convey to the reader all the subtle deviance of Ahab's disposition towards his foe:

> Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them. [...] Deliriously transferring its idea to the abhorred white whale, he pitted himself, all mutilated, against it. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.[265]

From this passage clearly emerges all that a single whale *can* signify, and why. Despite the tremendous importance that the animal seems to gain from this perspective, the agencies mentioned in the description are but a projection of human ones. Functional to Ahab's rageful quest aimed at conquering an unknown force that all the keenness of his intellect cannot hope to pierce – which, for this specific reason, he finds not only intolerable but insulting.

The supernatural quality of Moby Dick does not exist only in Ahab's delirious eyes, but it can be found throughout Melville's stirring narrative, especially among sailors' tales. Well before his appearance in the narrative, the White Whale swims into view as a rumor that embodies all the stories about actual fighting whales circulating in the first half of the nineteenth century:

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[264] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 178.
[265] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 200.

> Yet as of late the Sperm Whale fishery had been marked by various and not unfrequent instances of great ferocity, cunning, and malice in the monster attacked; therefore it was, that those who by accident ignorantly gave battle to Moby Dick; such hunters, perhaps, for the most part, were content to ascribe the peculiar terror he bred, more, as it were, to the perils of the Sperm Whale fishery at large, than to the individual cause.[266]

On the one hand, inscribing this behavior to other common episodes serves to give plausibility to the narration, which, it should be remembered, has amongst its main inspirations the actual and infamous sinking of the whaleship *Essex* after being struck by a giant sperm whale in 1820 (the same fate that Melville ultimately chooses for the Pequod). On the other hand, however, concentrating these tendencies on one specific whale only reinforces the already spectral reputation of terror that surrounds it, thus elevating it as the quintessential and unearthly representative of those specific ferocity, cunning and malice. Moby Dick is in fact often addressed as "one grand hooded phantom" or as a "grand god"[267] that haunts the world's oceans as well as sailors' minds. Elaborating on this latter aspect, Ishmael explains that

> some whalemen should still go further in their superstitions; declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time); that though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed; or if indeed he should ever be made to spout thick blood, such a sight would be a ghastly deception; for again in unensanguined bellows hundreds of leagues away, his unsullied jet would once more be seen.[268]

The White Whale exists in the story world of the novel as an embodiment of terror and supernatural agencies, screen for projecting fear and anxiety as well as an unreachable entity of ultimate mystery.

Moby Dick, then, is not only a myth and a monster; he is also the materialization of everything depraved and villainous. Even demented captain Ahab, his would-be conqueror, in the end cannot compete with the power of the whale. To further show the symbolic malleability that this animal can embody over time, approximately a century after its appearance (and during a time of

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[266] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 195.
[267] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 8, 597.
[268] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 198.

widespread fear and paranoia) some commentators even identified the quintessential evil nature of the whale by equating it with the greatest evil ever known, the atomic bomb:

> through Melville, Moby Dick has been absolved of mortality. Readers of *Moby-Dick* know that he swims the world unconquered, that he is ubiquitous in time and place. Yesterday he sank the Pequod, within the past few years he has breached five times, from a New Mexico desert, over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and most recently, at Bikini Atoll.[269]

In this reading, rooted in a completely different sociocultural substrate than that of its origin, Moby Dick turns into yet another powerful symbol. Indeed, the whale's leviathan-like presence is often invoked in nuclear-age commentary to represent an unstoppable, catastrophic force.

Despite this long tradition of interpretation, it should be remembered that it is primarily to Ahab that the whale is the personification of evil, "to Mankind in general, the White Whale in *Moby-Dick* must symbolize something else," and that is, according to another very common reading, "life itself with its Good and its Evil; it is the final Mystery which no man may know and no man should pursue unrelentingly."[270] In this perspective, the whale returns to its primordial embodiment of the universal unknown of creation – a cosmic wisdom that does not belong to the human. This interpretation, albeit less infamous towards the non-human animal, nevertheless ends up reducing it into a symbol anyway.

Those presented so far are just some of the most overt readings that have always accompanied the perception of Melville's whale. There is, however, another perspective within the novel that ultimately rivals Ahab's stance towards the non-human animal. One that is undoubtedly more complex and layered: what does the whale actually mean to our narrator? Indeed, Ishmael's perceptual journey towards the whale is precisely what generates and aliments the specific powerful tension in the representation of this animal within the novel. Moreover, the contradictory and multifaceted way in which Ishmael – and in turn the reader – perceives the whale can be considered as the main path that will guide my argument until the very end of this chapter.

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[269] Ellis, *The Great Sperm Whale*, p. 26.
[270] *Ibid*.

To Ishmael, at once amazed and terrified by the idea of the whale, Moby Dick represents the ultimate expression of this awe, driven by a deep eeriness he can barely put into words. Initially, he himself seems to be no less inclined in ascribing some deep symbolism to Moby Dick, being raptured by the whale's metaphysical aura. Something subtle about him seize his mind, a "vague, nameless horror concerning him, […] yet so mystical and nigh ineffable, […] an elusive something in the innermost idea of his hue"[271]. It is precisely the peculiar whiteness of the whale that appalls him the most, at such an extent that "the whale's whiteness here is a symbol of otherness so strong, so fundamental that it expels the whale from nature and hurtles him into the realm of supernatural horror, one that is ungodly and unnatural, essentially demonic."[272] To Ishmael, epistemological protagonist, it is precisely this absence of meaning, this unnamable and ungraspable *something*, that upsets the most. More precisely, this indefiniteness paradoxically translates into "a dumb blankness, full of meaning"[273], empty and thus capable of encompassing everything within itself. In other words, the intrinsic unknowable nature of the whale allows the human protagonist to ascribe to it whatsoever projection or interpretation. In doing so, however, no definitive truth about it will ever possibly emerge. This tension entails the oxymoronic nature in Ishmael's disposal towards this animal; on the one hand, the whale overwhelms the narrator with its vastness and incommensurability. On the other hand, however, this semantic magnitude renders it the quintessential elevator of any narrative. Ishmael confesses to the reader both the fatigue and honors that derive from engaging with this being:

> One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts on this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe,

[271] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 204-205.
[272] Seibel, "The Whaleness of the Whale", p. 6.
[273] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 212.

> not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk.[274]

For this ambitious narrator, then, the mighty whale becomes the ultimate topic, capable of touching all possible fields of knowledge by encompassing everything within the bottomless sea of meaning in which it dives.

The extreme porosity of signification that characterizes this animal led to interpretations of the literary whale diametrically opposed to those previously described. Amongst more recent criticism, another mode of reading animals in literature entails a more explicit rejection of humanity's taken-for-granted centrality, via the reconfiguration of its relation to the non-human. This approach may serve an epistemological project (the deconstruction of humanism), or an ethical or political one (the critique of capitalism, the advancement of environmentalism or animal advocacy).[275] Along these lines, many ecocritical readings have been advanced regarding Moby Dick and, more broadly, the whale as represented in Melville's novel. In the face of such a committed and vast effort aimed at its destruction at the hand of the human, the terrific whale assumes the symbolic role of indifferent, unsubduable Nature. Or, even more, this non-human foe also incarnates all the vengeful wrath on behalf of his entire species, systematically hunted down and butchered. The whale simultaneously becomes the ultimate punishment that falls upon humans for the unspeakable wrongs they have caused to the non-human animal. Such projection seems to emerge also in the dreadful scene in which Moby Dick throws himself against the helpless Pequod, staving in its hull and thus sinking it together with the entire crew. Ishmael describes the whale's terrible attack as driven by a rageful, unfathomable spite: "retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice were in his whole aspect."[276] For however powerful this ecocritical allegory might be, it still entails the projection of quintessentially human feelings such as revenge and wickedness, perhaps even more justified by a sense of ecological guilt, thus keeping the non-human animal enclosed in the realm of functional, anthropocentric representations.

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[274] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 497.
[275] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 93.
[276] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 622.

Another example which belongs to this current of reading can be found in the already mentioned case of Robert Zoellner's work, in which leviathan becomes a fellow being through its vulnerability. The closeness established between whales and humans in the novel serves the purpose of steering Ishmael towards a positive view of the world and of nature as benign, and does so by making something as alien and terrifying as the whale into a fraternal figure. This work criticizes earlier scholars for seeing the whale simply through Ahab's totalizing perspective. This process, however, inevitably remains grounded in a framework that sees the whale as a vessel upon which to project human feelings in order to better empathize with it. Although this type of interpretations distances from typically anthropocentric readings of the non-human animal, the formulation of ecocritical metaphors nevertheless ends up entrapping it into just another referential cage. In maintaining that the novel strips from the whale all symbolic attributions in order to reveal a 'naturalistic' picture, Zoellner inevitably imposes his own ideological projections, which are those of 1970s environmentalism.[277] Philip Armstrong expands on this matter: "just as cultural studies have denied the possibility of an ideologically innocent knowledge system, this style of animal studies insists that epistemologies concerned with non-humans will always be invested in certain ways of consuming and representing them."[278] Indeed, what brings all these readings together is the fact that, one way or another, the animal as an other-than-human subject disappears under the patina of symbolism, forced to retreat into allegory.[279]

As shown, *Moby-Dick* has more often than not been analyzed in terms of its allegorical force within which the whale becomes a grandiose symbol and a global metaphor. In his afterlives in reception, the White Whale is made to stand in associatively for an innumerable amount of referents beyond those already exposed, from America's relentless pursue of whiteness, to confederate General Robert E. Lee, or even the twenty-first century itself.[280] During the first phase of Melville's revival in the 1920s, it has been observed how "each age will find its own

[277] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 97.
[278] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 93.
[279] Seibel, "The Whaleness of the Whale", p. 6.
[280] Seibel, "The Whaleness of the Whale", p. 3.

symbols in *Moby-Dick*. Over that ocean the clouds will pass and change, and the ocean itself will mirror back those changes from its own depths."[281]

As far as the whale is concerned, the foundations of this process of perpetual change in its perception were laid already during the time Melville was writing his masterpiece. It was precisely that particular timeframe that marked a historically transitional moment between an essentialist notion of the whale as an eternal and imperishable element of the creation, and a dynamic conception of the whale as a set of diverse species found within specific parameters of geological time and geographic habitat.[282] This transition corresponds to the shift in mid-nineteenth century between an economy to which whaling is vital and an economy to which it is vestigial. Not until profit was to be made out of the very last drop of oil did it become profitable to define the whale as an elusive paragon of natural beauty. In this respect, the whale appears to be finite and replaceable as an economic resource for oil, yet infinite in meaning. As a quintessential signifier, it becomes an inexhaustible symbolic commodity.

No wonder then that *Moby-Dick*, like its sources, oscillates so vigorously between apparently opposed attitudes to the whale: wonder and contempt, mundane nonchalance and transcendent awe, humanized fellow feeling and the calculus of market value and profit.[283] Indeed, it is now unanimously recognized that "no author in the nineteenth century, or arguably ever, came even close to the level of nuance and complexity regarding the human perception and relationship with whales, as did Melville in *Moby-Dick*."[284] What is more, where Melville was especially ahead of his time was in his eagerness to reveal all facets of humanity's relationship with the whale, to describe a whale in such depth as an individual, to connect and equalize humans among non-humans, and, perhaps most significantly, in even having man *fail* before the non-human animal, both as an individual and as a species, both physically and morally.[285]

However, he did much more. As I will illustrate in the course of this chapter, Melville did not just consider everything the whale can signify *for* the human.

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[281] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, pp. 351-352.
[282] Hecht, Jamey. "Scarcity and Compensation in *Moby-Dick*." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1999, p. 114.
[283] Armstrong, "Leviathan Is a Skein of Networks", p. 1040.
[284] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 329.
[285] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 330.

Through Ishmael's multi-nuanced perspective, we instead find another, more untrod way to relate to the non-human animal in the text. One that actually attempts to see it as an "agent and actor" in the narrative, as well as "an active collaborator in the construction of meaning."[286] While we move towards this view alongside Ishmael, divesting the whale of all the layers of meaning that surmounts it represents the first step for allowing the actual animal to begin to emerge.

3.2 – The Body of the Whale as Textual Presence

The most evident way in which the non-human animal occupies the literary environment is undoubtedly through its physical presence. Indeed, when the animal appears on the page with its body, it seems to be easier for us as readers to see it more directly and detached from whatsoever symbolism. In the case of the whale, its corporeal magnitude should make the actual animal stand out even more in the text; yet, as has been shown, the opposite is true. This section explores the ways in which the whale permeates Melville's narrative through its physicality, other than with its many meanings. The body of the whale in fact represents the first contact zone through which one can begin to first-handedly approach its textual presence and, consequently, analyze how this aspect affects the manifestation of non-human agency.

In some respects, the whale is omnipresent in Melville's novel. Not only through the leaden and ominous presence of Moby Dick in every story, thought, act, omen, mysticism that guide the monomaniac captain and his crew round the world. On the contrary, the profound materiality of the whale's presence in *Moby-Dick* is quite striking; it includes minutia of whale anatomy, interpretations of their natural history, and opinions on the plausibility of arguments that prophesize extinction as a result of intense targeting by the whaling industry. In short, in *Moby-Dick*, whale flesh and whale being, from most recent encounters to fossilized remains reaching back into deep time, play a key role on several levels, and it is that intensely material, physiological presence that causes the novel to

[286] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 94.

hover on the edge between fiction and nonfiction.[287] Indeed, the long chapters dedicated to the study of cetaceans represent one of the most bewildering elements that critics have always faced while engaging with Melville's masterpiece.

In the raw context of the fishery in which the novel is set, the confrontation between man and whale was first and foremost a physical one. The tremendous awe that the whale generated in the minds and hearts of sailors mainly arose from the idea of giving chase to such an enormous and formidable adversary. As Ishmael points out: "not even at the present day has the original prestige of the Sperm Whale, as fearfully distinguished from all other species of the leviathan, died out of the minds of the whalemen *as a body*."[288] Just as this awareness ceaselessly inhabits men's thoughts, it is equally palpable in every moment of the narration; even in most serene instances of dull reflection Ishmael cannot divert his thought from this hulking and terrific presence. To certain sailors, our narrator tells us, "to chase and point lance at such an apparition as the Sperm Whale was not for mortal man. That to attempt it, would be inevitably to be torn into a quick eternity."[289] However, for how tremendous and formidable this peculiar animal might appear to those who must confront him, "they soon put an end to his peculiarities by killing him, and boiling it down into a peculiarly valuable oil."[290] Moreover, while facing such a being is "not for mortal man," creating an industry around its systematic butchering gives this practice an even more blasphemous connotation.

One of the many ways in which the body of the whale is explored within the novel is undoubtedly through its violent physical destruction. Indeed, the whale is broken down into its parts on more than one level throughout the narration. After showing how to find and capture whales, Melville's narrator physically and metaphorically dissected the sperm whale, both over the course of the novel and the course of the Pequod's voyage. Ishmael moves from Chapter 67 – *Cutting In*, on down to Chapter 103 – *Measurement of the Whale's Skeleton*. Starting from the skin of the whale, Ishmael gradually penetrates and describes every part of the leviathan's body – from the massive head to its gigantic tail, passing through its dark innards, until we find ourselves in a tropical wood where the skeleton of a

[287] Seibel, "The Whaleness of the Whale", p. 4.
[288] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 196, my emphasis.
[289] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 197.
[290] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 222.

whale is made an object of pagan worship. Throughout these portions of the novel, we see an interplay between a purely narrative style used to describe events and practices and a more essayist structure to further explore the philosophy, history, or science of the same topics.[291] Ishmael even spends the whole Chapter 55 – *Of the Monstrous Pictures of Whales* – debunking mythical representations of the whale, with the intent of representing the animal as faithfully as possible by enhancing its specific physical features. He describes a number of drawings in natural histories and related works and details why they are nothing like the whales he has known at sea or observed in the dangers of the fishery: "I shall ere long paint to you as well as one can without canvas, something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whaleman when in his own absolute body the whale is moored alongside the whale-ship so that he can be fairly stepped upon there."[292]

Although apparently chaotic and digressive, Ishmael's methodological exposition is the one typical of natural philosophers, "centered on the imaginative, careful, and exhaustive exploration of ocean life, especially whales."[293] As previously mentioned, this part of Melville's novel is anything but accessory. As a demonstration of this, physicist Harold Morowitz published an article titled "Herman Melville, Marine Biologist" (2011), in which he examines the naturalistic aspects of *Moby-Dick,* especially those instances in which the text explores the whale physically. Morowitz points out that "17 of the 135 chapters [of the novel] deal primarily with the anatomy, physiology, ecology, metabolism, and ethology of the sperm whale, *Physeter macrocephalus*, and various assorted cetaceans as well as seals, squid, sharks, albatrosses, and other marine birds."[294] The thorough attention Ishmael devotes to the naturalistic exposition of the whale, especially in terms of evolution, ecology and conservation, even brought many critics to define him a sort of "proto-Darwinian narrator."[295] In this respect, *Moby-Dick* precedes the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by 8 years. Yet on more than one occasion Melville overthrows the human within hierarchy of creation, rebalancing

[291] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 26.
[292] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 285.
[293] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 29.
[294] Morowitz, Harold J. "Herman Melville, Marine Biologist." *The Biological Bulletin (Lancaster)*, vol. 220, no. 2, 2011, p. 83.
[295] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 57.

its role in front of the whale in a context of deep time and intrinsic ecological interdependency.[296] In this way, he also distances his work from the typical 'Man vs Nature' paradigm. Moreover, he equates man and whale in front of the "horrible vulturism of earth"[297] and the "universal cannibalism of the sea"[298]. With this juxtaposition, despite all the raw power of the whale, or all the technological advancements of the human, both are ultimately the same: biological species in front of the unforgiving laws of evolution and nature.

Melville emphasizes the physical whale, the tangible, deliberate creature, for fear that Moby Dick might be thought "a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory."[299] In attempting this, Ishmael's vision privileges the experiential over the metaphorical, even as it acknowledges the limitations of experience to comprehend the sea and its creatures.[300]

"What then remains? Nothing but to take hold of the whale bodily."[301] Nowhere else in the novel this intention is manifested more practically than in Chapter 32 – *Cetology*, a major concern for legions of critics and commentators through the decades, for a number of reasons. *Cetology* is Ishmael's first natural history essay in *Moby-Dick*, the first chapter with footnotes; it generally consists of an exhaustive taxonomic treatise about the many species of whales. Remarkably, it is also the first chapter in which Ishmael as the traditional narrator seems to fade and alter. Indeed, his tone abruptly shifts from the experiencing-I of the common sailor recounting his first whaling voyage. He instead takes on the tone of the scholar who has not only suffered and survived the hardships of whaling, but who has also studied and expanded as much as he could on the world of the whale. In *Cetology*, Ishmael starts to build the factual material he had gathered to craft an epic story about the human-whale relationship that is only more extraordinary in its believability.[302] He declares that only one who has been out there killing whales himself is equipped to tell this story properly: "only in the heart of quickest perils;

[296] Sanborn, Geoffrey. "Melville and the Nonhuman World". *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. Robert S. Levine, ed. Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 13.
[297] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 336.
[298] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 299.
[299] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 223.
[300] Blum, "Melville and Oceanic Studies", p. 30.
[301] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 152.
[302] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 56.

only when within the eddyings of his angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out."[303] For Ishmael, then, only the whaleman has the privileged entitlement to narrate about this leviathan, being the only one who meets the whale in its own element. Under these terms, the true epic story of the sperm whale is to be told only by the American whaleman, its most truthful and reliable narrator.[304]

Ishmael, however, is both whale hunter and whale scholar; for this reason, *Cetology* represents the culmination of both influences. Structurally, our natural historian composes a taxonomy of whales categorized by size, as if they were "BOOKS (subdivisible into CHAPTERS)"[305]. According to this classification, then, book knowledge and experiential learning go hand in hand: "I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans," Ishmael testifies; "I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest."[306] The hunt, then, comes closest to apprehending the reality of the whale, for the hunt alone confronts the human with that dimension of the whale which escapes or defeats all other modes of cultural mediation – scientific, artistic or economic: the animal's agency, its live and embodied resistance to human plans, as signified by the risk of "being eternally stove and sunk by him."[307]

According to this reasoning, the extraordinary will that the novel attributes to the White Whale derives from his function as an incarnation of anxieties that arise from contemporary anecdotes of prodigious displays of resistance on the part of animals to human intentions. Ishmael insists that this, beyond any other factor, this is what shaped the terrible notoriety that surrounds Moby Dick, namely his "infernal aforethought of ferocity."[308] The most popular and influential of these accounts in those years came from Owen Chase's *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex* (1821), whose story furnished Melville with source material and is retold in part in *Moby-Dick*. In his account, first mate Chase relates how the Nantucket whaler was rammed twice and sunk in a seemingly premeditated attack by a sperm whale while

[303] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 495.
[304] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 56.
[305] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 148, capitalized in text.
[306] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 147.
[307] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 289.
[308] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 199.

cruising in the equatorial Pacific. Here, Chase's narrative becomes one of a series of testimonies for the historical existence of agency-bearing whales such as Moby Dick.[309]

The main way in which the non-human animal manifests its own agency is therefore by opposing that of humans. To achieve this, the whale relies on the most direct instrument at its disposal: the raw power of its body. Through his terrible physical presence, the White Whale is the quintessential embodiment of this irreducible resistance. Ishmael warns about those sailors who have witnessed it:

> judge, then, to what pitches of inflamed, distracted fury the minds of his more desperate hunters were impelled, when amid the chips of chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades, they swam out of the white curds of the whale's direful wrath into the serene, exasperating sunlight, that smiled on, as if at a birth or a bridal.[310]

Of course, endowing whales with agency was far more than unthinkable for nineteenth century whalemen, especially when so much effort was aimed at their commodifying destruction. Chase as well appears reluctant in his *Narrative* in admitting that the whale "made two several attacks upon the ship, at a short interval between them, both of which, according to their direction, were calculated to do us the most injury, […] such as indicated resentment and fury."[311] Yet – and perhaps paradoxically – the only thing these men could do seem precisely to ascribe some human attributes such as will and premeditation in order to justify their tragic demises at the hands of the non-human animals they faced.

Certainly, the most visible and threatening manifestation of the potential for non-human agency remains the body of the whale, but the chapters in *Moby-Dick* anatomizing the sperm whale further complicate the agentive effects ascribed to the animal.[312] While going deeper into the innermost part of the whale's head, Ishmael struggles to explain the vital forces that govern its entire body. Initially,

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[309] Blum, "Melville and Oceanic Studies", pp. 28-29.
[310] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 199.
[311] Chase, Owen. "Narrative of the most extraordinary and distressing shipwreck of the whale-ship Essex, of Nantucket: which was attacked and finally destroyed by a large spermaceti-whale, in the Pacific Ocean: with an account of the unparalleled sufferings of the captain and crew during a space of ninety-three days at sea, in open boats, in the years 1819 & 1820", 1821. *Electronic Texts in American Studies*. 98. Ed. Paul Royster. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, p. 37.
[312] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 105.

the animal's agency is conceived as a singular "volition" or intentionality located in the brain, to which the whole "mass of tremendous life" owes obedience. The same analytical passage however complicates this suggestion, detailing instead a profusion of "specialities and concentrations of potency" lurking in different parts of "this expansive monster."[313] Moving through the whale's spine, Ishmael seems to identify a kind of brainpower operant along the whale's entire body, locating in the *cachalot*'s signature hump "the organ of firmness and indomitableness of the Sperm Whale", thereby concluding: "that the great monster is indomitable, you will yet have reason to know."[314]

The power of the whale then cannot seem to be thoroughly explained, as if a large portion of its nature will inevitably remain shrouded in awe. As in the chapters on cetology, Melville deploys a mock expertise to undercut the authority of scientific knowledge, and thereby dislocates the humanist association between will and brainpower, speculating that the body of the whale might mobilize kinds of agency beyond the ken of anthropocentric concepts of rational intention.[315] In this respect, Ishmael's epistemological quest is carried out throughout a series of "honest wonders."[316] In other words, he aims to impress the reader with the size and power of the whale. This often requires quantifiable, accurate measurements to convey how extraordinary are the facts on their own, without embellishment. Ishmael wants his reader to know, however, that these measurements are but one facet, for the whale in its entirety will forever remain unknowable. Evidence of this is abundant within *Cetology* itself. At the very beginning of the chapter Ishmael states that to pin down the whale's nature is to try to organize "the constituents of a chaos."[317] The task thereby sounds oxymoronic already in its premise. Indeed, in addition to dismantling the possibility of understanding the world through arbitrary groupings and rigid interpretative grids, this chapter deeply questions the ability of scientific knowledge to meaningfully explain reality, especially the non-human animal. As Ishmael painfully admits in his own taxonomic treaty: "the sperm whale, scientific or poetic, lives not complete in any literature. Far above all

[313] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 370.
[314] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 383.
[315] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 106.
[316] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 240.
[317] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 145.

other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life."[318] Ishmael's attempt at defining the whale is destined to remain, by his own admission, "but a drought – nay, but the drought of a drought."[319] Just as the figurative representations of the whale ultimately fail in the same measure: "the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last."[320]

Of course, the nature of this chapter also serves a precise purpose in the economy of the narration. Ishmael's admittedly failed effort to create a draft of a whale taxonomy in *Cetology* also emphasizes the fundamental obscurity of the creatures of the ocean. This unknowability builds the significance and drama of his story.[321] Such reading, although imperfect by admission of its own author, also presents some other extra-textual perplexities. While Ishmael grants the whale the primacy of resisting any categorization, at the same time, "reading the whale, the wild animal in a variety of forms, as a text, adds all sorts of layers, too."[322] As many scholars have pointed out, however much we learn about the whale, we remain ignorant of this ultimate knowledge, for which even *Cetology* is a metonymic substitute.[323] To that end, Ismael's "BOOKS" are therefore no different than the whales intended as "lamp-feeders"[324] elsewhere in the text. All the detailed research of Ishmael-the-naturalist about the whale serves him as insulation against the dreadful knowledge which the whale bears within it, a knowledge that seems to remain inherently beyond human space. If Ishmael momentarily affects an epistemological confidence about the whale, that gesture obliges him to reduce it to its mere physicality: it is only safe to claim knowledge of the whale if one trivializes either that knowledge or the animal which is its object.[325] By transforming whales into books and chapters, Ishmael tries to translate the body of the whale in another physical (and yet metonymical) form, one that would be more manageable for the human to handle. Ishmael's digression on whales in *Cetology* returns us to the book and suggests the ways that attending

[318] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 147.
[319] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 157.
[320] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 289.
[321] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 56.
[322] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 47.
[323] Hecht, "Scarcity and Compensation in *Moby-Dick*", p. 122.
[324] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 385.
[325] Hecht, "Scarcity and Compensation in *Moby-Dick*", p. 123.

to what is on its pages involves the meanings, etymologies, circulations, and physical appearance of words; with the intent of making indeterminate material into a determinate or specific being or thing.[326] In other words, Ishmael tries to bond the physicality of the whale to that of words, with the hope of formally containing the whale, a being that intrinsically exists "in an excess of form."[327]

Ultimately, Ishmael's whale remains a book in which he writes his story as a man. When it comes to modes of relating to whales, therefore, *Moby-Dick* is polyvocal, and the tension between cetology and allegory, understanding and projection persists throughout the book.[328] The body of the whale undoubtedly can represent a means for the expression of non-human agency within said tension. But it is not only through its body that the whale is tentatively imprisoned (in the form of oil or symbol), nor, in equal measure, is it solely through its body that it resists such attempts at imprisonment. There are other, multifaceted ways in which the non-human animal's agency defies confinements and definition within Melville's text.

3.3 – Whale Ontologies: *Umwelt* and the Limits of Language

The exploration of the physical whale, however deep our narrator tries to get, ultimately results in an incomplete endeavor. Despite describing every minutia of the whale's body as well as of the whaling industry, the cetological center of the book offers no exhaustive comprehension of the whale. Ishmael eloquently admits: "dissect him how I may, then, but I go skin deep."[329] The failure of cetology then leaves the whale's most profound nature unexplored. The novel, however, deploys other ways to approach the nature of the whale; beyond the body, a deeper world.

After divesting the whale of its multifaceted projections of meaning and having examined its physicality, is there a way to reach the animal itself and 'speak' to the whale who breathes underneath? Is this type of perspective even accessible in the first place? Literary scholar Svetlana Seibel points out that when it comes to

[326] Otter, Samuel. "Reading *Moby-Dick*." *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*. Robert S. Levine, ed. Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 70.
[327] Otter, "Reading *Moby-Dick*", p. 81.
[328] Seibel, "The Whaleness of the Whale", p. 8.
[329] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 414.

epistemologies of human-animal relations, animals have long served as objects of study – in biology, zoology, medical science, anthropology, and the like – but were rarely considered to be more than that, and were even more rarely considered to be "subjects of a life" rather than objects of study.[330] This section tries to examine whether this subjectivity can be explored in the literary medium and, specifically, if such is the case in Melville's text.

In order to try to explore this possibility, I start by referring to scholar Branka Arsić's concept of "cetacean ontology", grounded in the lived experience of whales.[331] According to Arsić, the whale is depositary of a way of being that completely opposes the canonical human one, extremized by Ahab in the novel. In short, the captain's ontology "is in its essence only a version of the Western mind's mainstream narrative, told by many, from Plato via Christianity to Descartes, as a story of the purity, eternity, and self-sufficiency of the [human] soul."[332] Indeed, Ahab's self is completely enclosed in his anthropocentric perspective, to the point that another way of being – of relating to the world – that eludes his overarching knowledge is not contemplated. Arsić writes in her essay about "competing ontologies"[333] within Melville's text. The ontology that counters Ahab's will be represented by whales. Distant and inaccessible in their being. Despite all the meanings Ahab projects onto the whale to justify his spite, the true object of his hate remains its ultimate inscrutability, which enrages him far more than his own physical mutilation. Literary scholar Dean Flower elaborates on this point, stating that: "with wrinkled illegible lines on his forehead, mirror and counterpart of Ahab's furrowed brow, and his hunting charts, [Moby Dick] confronts Ahab with mystery. Or rather, he affronts him, with his awesome intelligence and utter indecipherability."[334]

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[330] Seibel, "The Whaleness of the Whale", p. 2.
[331] Arsić, Branka. "Ambiental *Cogito*: Ahab with Whales." *Ahab Unbound: Melville and the Materialist Turn*. Farmer, Meredith, and Jonathan D. S. Schroeder, ed. University of Minnesota Press, 2022, p. 76.
[332] Arsić, "Ambiental *Cogito*", p. 65.
[333] Farmer, *Ahab Unbound*, p. 14.
[334] Flower, Dean. "Vengeance on a Dumb Brute, Ahab? An Environmentalist Reading of *Moby-Dick*" *The Hudson Review*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2013, p. 147.

Philip Armstrong transfers this irreducible hostility between opposed ontologies – hence between human and non-human agencies[335] – to a broader level. Reprising the juxtaposition between whaling and slavery, Armstrong notices how both the agency of the slave and that of the whale ultimately threatened the basis of mid-nineteenth century American economy. Precisely because whaling was so functional to the reinforcement of US national power and identity (as exposed in the previous chapter of this work), Ahab's rageful indignation can be intended as a symptom of a wider, structural anxiety of American confidence. These coterminous assaults upon American confidence manifest themselves, in Melville's novel, in the threat represented by the agency of the animal. In this sense, the "retribution, swift vengeance, eternal malice"[336] ascribed to Moby Dick as he bears down upon the Pequod to bring about its destruction must be considered to derive from industrial capitalism's anxiety about non-human agency, and from a more occult sense of those non-human debts which America in 1851 could scarcely admit, let alone address.[337]

In this respect, then, the whale is far more conveniently and lucratively intended as an inferior being. As exposed previously in this work (1.4), the non-human animal has always been considered to be hierarchically inferior to the human in terms of importance, intellect, agency and power. In Melville's novel this appears most clearly in the instance in which Starbuck alone challenges Ahab on the subject of his vengeful quest. Although the first mate's protest represents the only spark of reason and sanity that opposes the captain's despotic personality, his objection is nevertheless grounded on the most common disposition towards non-human animals, as he contends: "vengeance on a dumb brute! […] that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous."[338] This affirmation is also based on naturalists' general agreement that spoke of the sperm whale as "in general harmless, only now and then individuals are found exceedingly fierce and bold."[339] This consideration only reinforces human's self-imposed entitlement to subdue and

[335] Indeed, an entity's ontological status (its nature of being) intrinsically dictates its potential for agency (its ability to act).
[336] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 622.
[337] Armstrong, "Leviathan Is a Skein of Networks", p. 1052.
[338] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 178.
[339] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 314.

utilize the non-human animal at its pleasure and convenience. Indeed, Melville's novel is very eloquent in this respect, i.e. on the ways we relate to otherness in nature. In Melville's ecology we are fatefully bound to other creatures, whom we consume, while some of whom may consume us – in which case we call them monsters.[340]

Within this tension, Starbuck condescends to the animal, as a "brute" and a "thing," capable only of "blindest instinct." But that is not what the novel tells us. Indeed, what is at stake is a perspective on the whale that represents it neither as a vacuous being nor as an evil, supernatural intelligence or symbol. Ishmael's epistemological journey brings us to consider the whale from yet another point of view: its subjectivity. To explore this possibility, we must introduce the concept of *umwelt* – or 'surrounding world.' This concept expresses an individual species' distinct perspective and way of being in the world. It was used by biologist Jacob von Uexküll to describe how individual species build and inhabit their own specific perceptual environments. *Umwelt* is now a longstanding feature of animal studies, as well as zoocentric ethology and psychology.[341] This concept has found vast application in a variety of fields, including literary criticism – especially when non-human animals are concerned. Indeed, for the purpose of my work this vision is essential to explore different possibilities for knowledge formulation that eludes anthropocentric boundaries. Specifically, "from his discussion of the animal's relationship with its environment, Von Uexküll argued that different organisms live in different perceptual worlds and that we should be more sensitive to the environmental 'carriers of significance' that differ among species and individuals."[342]

Throughout his anatomical exploration of the whale, Ishmael constantly tries to imagine its physical and sensory world. In Chapter 74 – *The Sperm Whale's Head*, he analyzes how the sperm whale's eyes are set far back on its massive head. He imagines its split field of vision (seeing two distinct images rather than one fused picture) and notes the tiny, hidden ear openings, wondering about the

[340] Flower, "Vengeance on a Dumb Brute, Ahab?", p. 141.
[341] Lewis, Liam. "Animal Umwelt and Sound Milieus in the Middle English Physiologus." *Exemplaria (Binghamton, N.Y.)*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2022, p. 27.
[342] Van Dyck, Hans. "Changing Organisms in Rapidly Changing Anthropogenic Landscapes: The Significance of the 'Umwelt'-Concept and Functional Habitat for Animal Conservation." *Evolutionary Applications*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2012, p. 146.

whale's vision and hearing. Ishmael does the same in the following chapter regarding the right whale, continuing his anatomical and sensory comparison, looking at how different species of whales experience their watery environment through variations in head structure and ear/eye placement. In Chapter 85 – *The Fountain* Ishmael tackles the mechanics and mystery of the whale's spout. He contemplates the creature's rhythm of respiration, calculating how much of its life is spent underwater versus breaking the surface for air, and muses on the vapor as a physical extension of the animal's quiet, deep-sea existence. In a provocative passage, Ishmael even identifies in the whale's need for air its exploitable weakness, thus diminishing human endeavors as vile and opportunistic: "not so much thy skill, then, O hunter, as the great necessities, that strike the victory to thee!"[343] Finally, in Chapter 86 – *The Tail*, Ishmael reflects on the whale's instrument of touch, propulsion, and diving dynamics, trying to fathom what the tactile and physical experience of a leviathan is like in the deep ocean.

Ishmael continues his exploration of the whale anatomically, while at the same time musing on the sensorial sphere of this awesome being. Unfortunately, he soon comes to realize one inevitable truth: however close to the animal he might get, these musings will remain mere projections. Scholar Liam Lewis highlights this point while at the same time exposing some interesting considerations deriving from this approach:

> the result of thinking in terms of *umwelt* is a form of subjective perception that forces us to reconsider how an animal's sensory experience of the world is always represented through a process of translation as agent-oriented, while nevertheless presuming an exterior viewer. I insist here on 'agent-oriented' rather than 'object-oriented' to emphasize the roles of individual agents, embodied consciousness, and choices (conscious or subconscious) orchestrated by sensory perception.[344]

Despite all his efforts, Ishmael will forever remain this "exterior viewer". In Melville's novel, in other words, the *umwelt* of the whale seems to remain private, inaccessible to our narrator. The whale's awesome sensorial and physical features are symptomatic of the expression of a deeper subjectivity that ultimately remains difficult to tackle. As Ishmael himself admits while closing his final dissertation:

[343] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 407.
[344] Lewis, "Animal Umwelt and Sound Milieus", p. 28.

"the more I consider this mighty tail, the more I deplore my inability to express it. At times there are gestures in it, which, though they would well grace the hand of a man, remain wholly inexplicable."[345] In this failed encounter, however, could also manifest the potential for the expression of a different kind of intelligence; a non-human subjectivity distinct from the malicious one Ahab conceives, one onto which human meanings cannot be projected. As literary scholar and linguist Jessica Norledge argues, in fact:

> the recognition of such abilities and the identification of an animal's specific perceptual cues, enables us to enrich our understanding of animal life. Moving away from the impression of animals as 'objects', *umwelt* research allows for the conceptualization of animals as conscious and active agents, appreciating their capacity for full sensory experience and cognitive reception.[346]

According to these perspectives, then, exploring the *umwelt* of non-human animals is fundamental for recognizing them as individual agents, conscious and unique. What happens, however, when that subjectivity ultimately seems to be inaccessible for the human; as is the case with Melville's text? What are the reasons of this impenetrability? And what are its consequences?

Ishmael's journey brings us to yet another dead end in understanding the whale. In this sense, the whale's *umwelt* appears to be unfamiliar at the base. As exposed elsewhere in this work (1.2), the perennial and intrinsic mysterious nature of the sea eventually enshrouds its creatures within that same aura. Ishmael is well aware of this aspect of his epistemological quest: "to landsmen in general, the native inhabitants of the seas have ever been regarded with emotions unspeakably unsocial and repelling; though we know the sea to be an everlasting terra incognita."[347] This obstacle nevertheless represents just one facet of Ishmael's failed approach. Scholar Jamey Hecht offers a useful insight on the most prominent aspect of the novel's tension, as he notices: "*Moby-Dick* is about the continual, tragic struggle between a finite human space of strictly local meanings and attachments, and an infinite, non-human universe wherein language and

[345] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 414.
[346] Norledge, Jessica. "Experiencing Dystopia Through Umwelt: Modelling the Nonhuman Animal in *Hollow Kingdom*." *English Studies*, vol. 103, no. 3, 2022, p. 391.
[347] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 298.

knowledge can never be at home."[348] We have seen how the whale in general and Moby Dick in particular may serve as metonyms for that non-human universe, but they are also the test-objects upon which human consciousness attempts to work its conquering will. Indeed, from this passage clearly emerges the main ground upon which this irreducible tension is manifested, i.e. through language.

How can the profound subjectivity of the whale be reconciled with the presence of human language, one of the most prominent marks that have been named to separate humans from animals? As mentioned in the first chapter of the present work (1.4), it is difficult to discuss animality (human or non-human) without considering the question of language, that is to say the question of how human language seems to separate irremediably humans and non-humans – especially within the literary environment. Language and animality are two opposed yet interrelated concepts. As a matter of fact, it is through language that the human subject, i.e., the *I*, is created, and it is because of language that we, *homo sapiens*, create the animal other in order to distances ourselves from it – an *other* who quintessentially does not speak.[349] In line with this framework, Brie Barron examines how language is central in constructing and representing "the human-nature entanglement", arguing that "as Melville strove to represent this entanglement, he found himself limited by language's capacity for illustrating it, and instead of writing to show such entanglement to the reader, he would have to write in the same way that such a vision would influence one's perception of the world."[350] In this sense, language serves as the primary tool separating human from the non-human. Paradoxically, since the categories of "nature" and "human" are mere linguistic constructs, they cannot be overcome without abandoning language altogether.[351] Language thus becomes both the source of this separation and the sole tool available to deconstruct it, prompting readers to re-examine the human/non-human dichotomy in *Moby-Dick*.

In a way, this reconsideration starts from Ishmael himself throughout his narration. In analyzing the passages in the novel in which Ishmael ponders about

[348] Hecht, "Scarcity and Compensation in *Moby-Dick*", p. 111.
[349] Brazzale, *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick, p. 75.
[350] Barron, Brie. "Herman Melville's Ecological Vision and the Limits of Language." *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2023, p. 1.
[351] Barron, "Herman Melville's Ecological Vision and the Limits of Language", p. 2.

the voice of the whale, it emerges how the narrator's idea about the ability of the whale to communicate quickly evolves from a traditional Western view of animals as lacking language (albeit a nuanced one), to new possibilities of communicating through something other than language, in ways that are different and possibly more profound than human language itself. The first occurrence of Ishmael mentioning the whale's voice is in Chapter 81 – *The Pequod Meets the Virgin*, in which, witnessing the killing of an old blind sperm whale, he remarks:

> It was a terrific, most pitiable, and maddening sight. The whale was now going head out, and sending his spout before him in a continual tormented jet; while his one poor fin beat his side in an agony of fright. Now to this hand, now to that. He yawned in his faltering flight, and still at every billow that he broke, he spasmodically sank in the sea, or sideways rolled towards the sky his one beating fin. So have I seen a bird with clipped wing, making affrighted broken circles in the air, vainly striving to escape the piratical hawks. But the bird has a voice, and with plaintive cries will make known her fear; but the fear of this vast dumb brute of the sea, was chained up and enchanted in him; he had no voice, save that choking respiration through his spiracle, and this made the sight of him unspeakably pitiable.[352]

In this passage, the whale is at the same time defined as "dumb brute of the sea" and all the more othered by the fact that its terror is 'unspeakable', i.e. it cannot be conveyed through words. This only reinforces the otherness of the cetacean which is, as mentioned above, *other* precisely due to its lack of language. This same passage, however, has been largely interpreted as one of many instances in which Ishmael tries to build sympathy for the butchered whale (and consequently for the whole species), thus blurring the separation between human and non-human. All the more, this episode has been commented as one example in which our human narrator "speaks for the whale's suffering because the animal cannot."[353] In this way, he advocates the whale as major sufferer and becomes the spokesperson of this subaltern "sacrifice area", to put it in line with what examined in the previous chapter of this work.

[352] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 388.
[353] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 325.

There is, however, a different way in which this powerful scene has been interpreted. One that is able to subvert the preconditions that lie at the base of those presented above. Brazzale in fact points out that

> "unspeakably" is referred not only to the whale's terror, but most importantly to the scene that Ishmael is witnessing. In so doing, the adverb not only indirectly stresses once more the inability of the whale to speak its fear, but most importantly it points to the inadequacy of the narrator's words to fully account for the pity inspired by the dying whale, anticipating the theme of the ineffectiveness of language.[354]

Under this light, what lies beyond the capacity of language and thus leaves our narrator speechless is the whale's profound subjectivity; here at the time of its death. Ishmael cannot reach it, even after his thorough exploration of the innermost part of the whale, whose bloodletting can only explain this episode at the anatomical level.

The whale seems to communicate with the world in a way which is precluded to human understanding. While musing on the whale's physical motions, Ishmael is amazed at what they could possibly signify, so much that these various churns, turns, and dives have become object of speculation among whalemen: "in an extensive herd, so remarkable, occasionally, are these mystic gestures, that I have heard hunters who have declared them akin to Free-Mason signs and symbols; that the whale, indeed, by these methods intelligently converses with the world."[355] Ishmael here refers to "sign and symbols" to describe this mysterious way of communication, thus implying nothing less than a language, albeit grounded on another signifying system. In this perspective, the whale is revealed to be anything but a "dumb brute". Instead, it even appears as a being capable of relating 'intelligently' with the world around it.

Interestingly, "modern science confirms what Melville knew empirically: the sperm whale's gigantic brain, the largest of any species on earth."[356] Therefore, it should come as no surprise to discover that this species possesses a complex communication system. Scientists did not begin to recognize the vast array of sperm whale clicks, creaks, clangs, and grunts below the water – and its potential

[354] Brazzale, *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick, p. 81.
[355] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 414.
[356] Flower, "Vengeance on a Dumb Brute, Ahab?", p. 147.

role in finding food and navigating in darkness – until over a century after *Moby-Dick*. Moreover, in recent decades biologists have identified complex intraspecies social communication and foraging behavior in the sounds of sperm whales.[357] Sperm whale experts today see that sort of whale behavior as not only evidence of higher intelligence, but indicative of culture, intended as the flow of information between animals. More specifically, they even accept the definition of culture as 'behavior patterns shared by members of a community that rely on socially learned and transmitted information.' For example, the ability to communicate is genetically inherited, but click dialects in clans of sperm whales, like a language, are more than that: sperm whale click dialects are part of their non-human culture.[358] It is sadly ironic to think that even Melville, along with all the naturalists and whalemen of his day, would have been dumbfounded to learn of the spermaceti's more significant role in underwater communication, navigation, and finding food.[359] In their historical and cultural context, instead, they unavoidably saw it as fuel and lubricant for their modern societies.

Regardless of the discoveries of modern science, many aspects of social and communicative behaviors of the sperm whale still remain shrouded in mystery.[360] Today, as in Melville's time, we still struggle against the limits of our reach in understanding the non-human other. To Ishmael, the whale is voiceless and its suffering unspeakable; yet he manages to perceive it, and, in trying to make his readers experience it as well, he realizes how language is inadequate to the task.[361] Language therefore remains the central issue in approaching the non-human animal. We have seen how language has proved to be ineffective for this task. However, Ishmael as narrator as well as us readers cannot but rely on it, being the most natural and powerful tool at human disposal. This is yet another paradoxical aspect of the epistemological journey contained in *Moby-Dick*.

To emphasize once more the prominent role of language in Ishmael's journey, I think it is useful to frame it in a broader picture. It is widely agreed amongst linguists that one of the main forces that brought to the emergence of language

[357] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 203.
[358] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 208.
[359] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 202.
[360] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 204.
[361] Brazzale, *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick, p. 82.

was – among others factors such as social organization – "the intrinsic human need to domesticate their natural ecology."[362] We have seen how this aspect is abundantly reflected in *Moby-Dick*: Ahab's monomania as well as Ishmael's epistemological impetus are direct symptoms of this primordial need. In this respect, Brie Barron incorporates language in the sphere of technology, intended under the sociological definition of "knowledge that people apply to the task of living in a physical environment."[363] Given that language serves to communicate experience and construct social and environmental boundaries, it can naturally be included in that definition – especially in the form of writing. In order to domesticate the natural world in which they were beginning to form civilizations, humanity needed to be able to give the things around them names. All language does this; to domesticate the environment does not mean to tame its physical features but to adapt it to human understanding with the technology of language.[364] In this respect, then, language is another technological means employed to subdue the non-human animal, and that for this reason can be easily paired with the whaleship and its technological power aimed at destroying the whale. Barron argues that "to write the whale is not to conquer it, but to understand it"[365], however, I believe I have abundantly shown that more often than not one practice implies the other.

Melville was nevertheless well aware that language could only get you so far. His first-person narrator painfully reaches this same conclusion after multiple and multifaceted encounters with the whale. In every case, however, he finds himself incapable of putting this awesome being into words. This brings us back to the failure of cetology: language represents human's most powerful tool to domesticate and define the world and yet it is not enough to encompass the ontological reality of the whale – its *umwelt*. In other words, Ishmael cannot turn whales into books because their being ultimately and irreducibly defies and resists human signifying systems.[366]

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[362] Barron, "Herman Melville's Ecological Vision and the Limits of Language", p. 3.
[363] *Ibid*.
[364] *Ibid*.
[365] *Ibid*.
[366] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 97.

3.4 – Following the Whale

"Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity. Then the wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk; the undeliverable, nameless perils of the whale."[367] This is how Ishmael is set to conclude *Loomings*, the first chapter of his narrative, in which he explains what brought him to leave land and sail the oceans of the world. The whale has thus always been the reason. To encounter it on its own ground, to hunt it, to dissect it, and, ultimately, to understand it. Ishmael remains an epistemological hero, a protagonist whose *agon* is always that of knowledge.[368] What then remains when, after all attempts have proven to be unsuccessful, this knowledge continues to be inaccessible? What does that leave Ishmael and, in turn, us as readers? This last section aims to expose how this irremediably failed encounter with the whale potentially translates into the ultimate manifestation of non-human animal agency in literature and, in that, opens up the possibility for formulating a more-than-anthropocentric kind of reading of the animal.

As exposed already in the previous section, the whale seems to be endowed with a specific "secret intelligence from the Deity"[369] that fills the hearts and minds of men with terror and wonder. The central question at the core of Melville's epic is therefore how (and if) humans manage to reconcile with that intelligence. Ahab, for instance, sees in that unfamiliar knowledge something he could not abide by. An unknown presence that raptures him and drives him mad with hate. This motif emerges everywhere in the text; however, he seems to address it most directly during his monologue in front of the whale's severed head, hoisted with chains and tackles against the ship's side. In this scene, Ahab feverishly converses with the blood-dripping head, appealing to that unreachable knowledge of which this animal was once repository:

> "speak, thou vast and venerable head," muttered Ahab, "which, though ungarnished with a beard, yet here and there lookest hoary with mosses; speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That

[367] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 8.
[368] Hecht, "Scarcity and Compensation in *Moby-Dick*", p. 111.
[369] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 216.

> head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world's foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou hast been where bell or diver never went; hast slept by many a sailor's side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down. Thou saw'st the locked lovers when leaping from their flaming ship: heart to heart they sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them. Thou saw'st the murdered mate when tossed by pirates from the midnight deck; for hours he fell into the deeper midnight of the insatiate maw. […] O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not a syllable is thine!"[370]

This powerful scene is very eloquent about the captain's true torment as well as about the intolerable ineffectiveness of all his technological power and spite. Ahab, the undisputable, despotic commander of the Pequod and its crew, stands atop of his prey's decapitated head. And yet, he still is not the one in control; the true object of his longing (epitomized in the novel by the White Whale's insufferable presence) is not accessible, and never will be. This, more than his monomania or his physical mutilation, is what makes Ahab's an irreducibly doomed character. The impossible reconciliation with the non-human other that eludes his all-conquering will. To that end, the agency manifested through the whale's inaccessible knowledge ultimately disrupts the typical anthropocentric hierarchical order of exceptionalism. In order to defy it, Ahab will risk everything human in himself, together with his ship and crew.

This is where Ishmael's journey differs radically from Ahab's trajectory. Indeed, in keeping with Ishmael's epistemological evolution hinted at in the previous sections, the multiple symbolic or allegorical perspectives that originate from this inaccessibility – be they trivializing or exaggerating of the non-human animal – are soon contrasted with a much more nuanced one, which questions the foundations of the epistemological certainty that sustained his journey in the first place. Whilst remaining inevitably anchored to the anthropocentric standpoint of his thinking – since we are dealing with human narratives – Ishmael recognizes in the whale and in its being something he will never be able to access: "I know

[370] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 339-340.

him not, and never will."[371] In so doing, he opens up to the possibility of interpreting whales as fully independent subjects. From this point, perhaps we can therefore attempt to read non-human animals in yet another way, i.e. as active partners in the narrative.

The focus of such an analysis is relationality in its broadest sense – the way we relate to whales, and how the fluctuating dynamics of these relations are expressed through narrative. In other words, diverse modes of eco-culturally determined relationality visible in whale narratives mirror forms of co-existence that characterize cultural and material engagement with whales.[372] All this is reflected on the concept of "interspecies relationality",[373] one of the enduring debates of our time, intended here both as a narrative theme and a reading methodology. Literary scholar Hubert Zapf elaborates on the maturation of Ishmael's perspective as opposed to Ahab's, first focusing on Moby Dick himself, while then referring to its implication on a broader level:

> In *Moby-Dick*, the narrative voice of Ishmael builds up an alternative, entirely different view to Ahab's biophobic demonization of the white whale, arising from the recognition of the human species' "Siamese connection with a plurality of other mortals" (Melville Ch 72). Through Ishmael's perspective, the white whale itself becomes the central agency of an imaginative counter-discourse that undermines and overwrites Ahab's civilizational will-to-power over the creation. Moby Dick's irreducible co-agency with the human actors in the narrative, which is conveyed in Ishmael's account of the events, undermines Ahab's civilizational hubris and turns the whale into a signifier of trans-species connectivity. The whale, as the radical other of Ahab's anthropocentric ideology, is presented, in a series of both realist and mythopoetic scenes and images, as an alter ego of the human actors, which, however, remains inaccessible to any final interpretation and instead becomes the source of a potentially infinite semiosis that resists and transcends all forms of discursive appropriation. This imaginative counter-discourse already emerges early in the novel when the narrator projects his half real, half dream-like sea journey as a journey toward his deeper self. This deeper self, however, is not a separate entity but co-exists with the whale in the shared medium of that "ungraspable phantom of life" (Melville Ch 1) which connects all beings in a

[371] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 414.
[372] Seibel, "The Whaleness of the Whale", p. 2.
[373] *Ibid*.

> continuous process of metamorphic becoming that is translated into the imaginative process of the text.[374]

According to this vision, then, the whale in Melville's text becomes much more than an antagonistic agent opposed to the human. Through Ishmael's perspective, the non-human animal embodies an equally powerful and active potential for the production of meaning within the narrative.

According to Philip Armstrong, one way to pursue this examination of the animal's meaning as something other than a mirror for human concerns is through a fundamental reconceptualization of agency. In this respect, he argues that

> many people have started to deconstruct seemingly obvious claims about the privileged status of the human, in contradistinction to the animal, as the [sole] source of agency in the world. They go on to argue that the assumption that agency – the capacity to effect change – necessarily entails a combination of rational thought and conscious intention depends in the first place upon an Enlightenment humanist paradigm within which these traits have come to define the human as such. Hence, the allegation of anthropomorphism itself derives from an anthropocentric and ethnocentric understanding about what agency can be.[375]

The possibility that agency is not the sole prerogative of the human opens an entire new array of possibilities for understanding non-human animals. Indeed, this position was for the most part always represented according to anthropocentric claims that saw whales as screens for human projections and insecurities. In this sense, Geoffrey Sanborn suggests that "animal agency – individual and collective – is not just a counter to human enterprise but a product of it."[376] Scholars such as Armstrong and Zapf, in turn, address the whale's agentive potential to 'mean something else.' Yet how else could the agency of the animal be conveyed?

In order to explore one final strategy concerning this complex matter, I think it is appropriate to return to Ann-Sofie Lönngren and Jaques Derrida and the concept of "following" the non-human animal. As already presented in the initial chapter of the present work, this perspective sees the key aspect of meaning production grounded at the level of power relations. This reading strategy aims at a thorough redefinition of "the relationship between animal life and human

[374] Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, p. 110.
[375] Armstrong, "What Animals Mean, in *Moby-Dick*, for Example", p. 95.
[376] Sanborn, "Melville and the Nonhuman World", p. 13.

systems of meaning, notions of the ontology of literary texts, and the power invested in anthropocentric worldviews."[377] In order to meet ethical demands on the production of knowledge in the humanities, Lönngren argues, "it is crucial that the complexity of literary animals is made visible in readings."[378] Via this interpretive strategy, a reading is therefore proposed wherein the human does not dominate the animal but rather 'follows' it, accepting to relinquish control over the meaning-making process.

As abundantly demonstrated in the previous sections of this chapter, Ishmael gradually maturates the resigned awareness that the whale will remain a perennial stranger to him. The quintessential other that the human cannot seemingly manage to encounter without reducing it to something else, be it in the form of casks of refined oil or a grand, powerful metaphor. The manifestation of that awareness is precisely what makes Melville's novel stand out among innumerable other animal-centered narratives. Scholar Raymond Malewitz illuminates on this point: while working on another famous example of such narratives, namely Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* (1994) – in which a huge part of the story follows the vicissitudes of an elusive she-wolf – he examines how the agency of the animal manifests in the text. I am referring to this work by this scholar since I believe his discourse is perfectly applicable to the case examined in my work. Indeed, McCarthy's wolf and Melville's whale are very similar in the way in which they represent literary non-human animals. In this respect, Malewitz contends that "the possibility of a literary animal agency comes into being when the limits of anthropocentric discourse are rendered visible."[379] Indeed, such is the case with the whale in Melville's text, despite its material and/or symbolical commodification, in its descriptions it ultimate becomes a thing that cannot be fashioned into an object to be defined by Ishmael or destroyed by Ahab. Following this line of reasoning, the whale does not correspond to any exaggerated ideal of superior being; it is neither a universal symbol of eternal mystery nor a sympathetic partner. As Ishmael's prose suggests, if the animal agency is indeed

[377] Lönngren, "Metaphor, Metonymy", p. 37.
[378] *Ibid*.
[379] Malewitz, Raymond. "Narrative Disruption as Animal Agency in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol 60, no. 3, 2014, p. 558.

"undecipherable,"[380] this unthinkable animal becomes available (if not to Ishmael, then to the reader) only as a mysterious absence cored into the anthropocentric network around it.[381]

This consideration brings us back to Lönngren and to the prominent fact that "from reading the text metaphorically toward a more literal reading not only means that the non-human agency that structures the novel is made visible but that non-human agents can carry knowledge not shared by the human characters in the novel."[382] Ishmael gradually starts to grasp this bitter reality. In Chapter 79 – *The Prairie*, he presents to his readers the whale's "broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles,"[383] shortly after, however, he confesses himself uncapable of deciphering any of them. He thereby closes the chapter teasing his readers: "I put that brow before you. Read it if you can."[384] This episode once again resonates with Lönngren's argument, which insists that the non-human animal essence "is not part of language and remains within language as a foreign presence. […] This is why it cannot be phrased but instead must be imagined and pictured, which suggests the production of a different kind of knowledge."[385] Human and non-human animals therefore inhabit two distinct realms of knowledge which are not compatible, and never will be.

The quest for the whale, then, ultimately brings Ishmael to reformulate his centrality in the grand scheme of things. The encounter with this inaccessible and incredible being shakes the epistemological ground under his feet, filling him with terror and awe: "to grope down into the bottom of the sea *after* them; to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing."[386] It is only by putting oneself at the mercy of the non-human animal that the conventional, anthropocentric scheme of meaning-formulation within the text can be disrupted. As already mentioned, "'following', in that it entails an imperative for the reader to give up, to give away, some of the control of

[380] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 333.
[381] Malewitz, "Narrative Disruption as Animal Agency", p. 556.
[382] Lönngren, *Following the Animal*, p. 29.
[383] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 379.
[384] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 380.
[385] Lönngren, *Following the Animal*, p. 123.
[386] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 147, my emphasis.

the process of formulating meaning in literary texts, presents itself as an apt tool for making visible such more-than-human aspects."[387]

Another reflection that perfectly exemplifies the fundamental exercise at issue is formulated by Edward Abbey in his famous book *Desert Solitaire* (1968). While being immersed in the harsh, rocky Utah desert, he writes

> I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself.[388]

The desire expressed here is that of stripping away human signifying habits, like personifying nature or over-defining it through science; to experience the wilderness purely as it exists. The only way to do so, or at least to try to, is renegotiating our anthropocentric stance, even if that means risking total disorientation or ego death, as represented by the image of Medusa. Indeed, this reflection is representative of Ishmael's intellectual maturation regarding the non-human world. Ahab is willing to destroy his humanity in order to defy and conquer his non-human adversary. Ishmael is ready to do the same, albeit to a different end. He understands that to comprehend the whale – even if possible – would inevitably correspond to its figurative destruction. Ishmael thereby relinquishes his humanity in the sense of stepping aside, thus putting himself *after* the non-human other in a completely different way, i.e. recognizing its inscrutable agency by giving in the exclusive human characteristic of producing knowledge as active agents in the world. This generates a picture in which power relations are redefined and are based on the exact opposite of dominance. It is important to notice that Ishmael never fully anthropomorphizes the whale, not even Moby Dick, nor does he show the world through its point of view.[389]

In conclusion, in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael does not progressively fade and disappear only as the canonical first-person narrator. Indeed, his narrating figure takes up a variety of roles and, in the process of doing so, evolves and changes throughout the narration, modifying his philosophical and epistemological perspectives to suit the

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[387] Lönngren, "Metaphor, Metonymy", p. 45.
[388] Abbey, Edward, and Peter Parnall. *Desert Solitaire a Season in the Wilderness*. McGraw Hill, 1968, p. 6.
[389] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, pp. 312-313.

new knowledge he develops as the Pequod's voyage unfolds and as his understanding of the world deepens.[390] Ishmael encounters the animal as an agentic and uncontrollable other capable of staring back at the subjectivity taking gazes on it. This fundamental aspect of his journey causes him to alter and withdraw also as the narrative voice in charge of formulating meaning and being in control. In other words, the human narrator steps aside in favor of the non-human animal that stands beside / in front of him: "Oh, man! admire and model thyself *after* the whale!"[391] In this, we can truly find the manifestation of non-human agency in literary texts. The reader finds themselves alone, as if the narrator abandoned the reins of meaning-formulation within his own narrative. This surely can be bewildering, but in there lies a precise generative potential. Ishmael's own instruments have failed him, yet he does not throw himself at the whale in rage. The only possible solution remains to give in control in favor of the non-human animal and follow it in the text, so that new horizons of meaning might be discovered. As Lönngren points out,

> when we attempt to walk in the footsteps of the other, this is simultaneously an attempt at 'becoming other', a view that certainly does not solve all the problems of anthropocentrism and the impossibility of escaping the human mind but means that new questions might be posed, in which the process of becoming human and animal is conceptualized as meaning-productive.[392]

Ishmael might not have reached his goal in comprehending the leviathans of the deep, but in his failed encounter he undoubtedly discovered the possibility to apprehend the world in a different, more encompassing way. Indeed, another kind of knowledge manifests in all its potency through the non-human animal, remaining nevertheless beyond unreachability for the human. Yet, coming to terms with that awareness allows us to consider the animal other with a different disposition, i.e. with the empathy and respect that another, equal subjectivity demands. To that end, the whale in *Moby-Dick* remains an example of the fact that the way we read and write about an animal will affect our behavior toward that animal, as the way we read and write about anything else does.

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[390] Brazzale, *The Human-Animal Continuum in* Moby-Dick, p. 78.
[391] Melville, *Moby-Dick*, p. 334, my emphasis.
[392] Lönngren, *Following the Animal*, p. 122.

Conclusion

The present work has analyzed one of the main tensions at the center of *Moby-Dick*, manifested through its radically different representations of the whale. This tension has been examined in particular through the diverse yet interrelated perspectives of extractivism and animal studies. What has emerged is a multifaceted and complex picture in which the non-human animal's role in Melville's text is not as clear as it may seem at a first reading. As a consequence, the narration in this regard may often result ambiguous and at odds with itself. The multifaceted ways in which the whale is narrated highlight our complicated relationship with the non-human world, deeply problematizing our self-assigned centrality in the natural order. In this respect, Melville's novel places itself within a context of profound and inexhaustible dialogue with reality, as Hubert Zapf argues. In his words, "there has always been an intrinsic tension between the creative energies of literary artworks and the political and cultural systems within which they are inevitably positioned."[393] My analysis follows this same line, building also on the works of Melville scholars such as Charles Olson, Robert Zoellner, Philip Hoare, Philip Armstrong, Hester Blum and Branca Arsić, whom I place alongside the works of Matthew S. Henry on extractive fiction and Ann-Sofie Lönngren on animal studies.

Chapter I has built the theoretical foundations of this work by summarizing some of the key Melville scholarship written around the question of ecocritical themes in *Moby-Dick*. I have presented an overview on the transnational nature of the ocean and its prominent role for the development of extraterritorial enterprises of extractive capital, with the aim of showing how these aspects influenced Herman Melville's literary production. I have then described the main contemporary approaches upon which I have based my analysis of the text, tying Henry's definition of extraction with the reading of the literary non-human animal

[393] Zapf, *Literature as Cultural Ecology*, p. 13.

theorized by Lönngren in order to show how they both develop the role of narratives in new directions.

Chapter II has delved into the most gruesome and bloody side of Melville's novel in order to highlight the centrality of the whaling industry and the multiple ways in which it is problematized in the narration. Building on the concepts of the 'extractive view' and 'animal capital', I have shown how *Moby-Dick* explicitly presents his reader with the dire consequences of an intricate extractive economy based on the systematic exploitation and degradation of its laborers, non-human animals, and the environment, thus framing the novel alongside other narratives aimed at exposing the aftermaths of ravenous resource extraction.

The last chapter, Chapter III, explores the ways in which Melville's text resists the dominant anthropocentric understandings of the whale as an economic and/or symbolic commodity. This is realized, mainly but not only, through the narrator's progressive failure in understanding the non-human other. As Ishmael begins the literal and metaphysical dissection of the whale, he also begins to realize that his analysis of whales might shake our presumed human exceptionalism within the very chain of being.[394] In this sense, *Moby-Dick* determinedly challenges its readers' ability to apprehend these animals, emphasizing their resistance to human signifying systems and therefore opening the possibility for another kind of understanding of the agency of non-human subjects.

The friction between these different pictures of the whale analyzed in this work has allowed me to shed some light on newer aspects of this immortal classic by putting it in dialogue with some contemporary innovative criticism. This made possible the exploration of new areas of interpretation within a boundless literary landscape through the juxtaposition of two particularly different approaches such as extractivism and animal studies. Such tension undeniably produced key conceptual insights; its inherent contradictions are generative of meaning and, perhaps most importantly, discussion at a time of renewed global challenges and concerns. Undoubtedly, this represents yet further proof of Melville's literary greatness and his capacity to encompass an immense range of themes; indeed, his works speak to our present day in rich, insightful, and deeply resonant ways.

[394] King, *Ahab's Rolling Sea*, p. 71.

To sum up, I have tried to show how in *Moby-Dick* the destructive industrial impetus described in Chapter II clashes with the opposing non-human animal's subjectivity investigated in Chapter III. The Pequod operates as an apparatus of an industry guided by a totalizing extractive logic that breaks down the body of the whale in the form of barrels of commercial value. However, this rampant "machinery of civilization" finds its absolute limit in the recalcitrant and ineludible agency of non-human beings, epitomized in the novel by the formidable White Whale. This clash is represented also trough another symbolic symmetry. On the one hand, the whaling industry is autophagic in its essence, as vividly represented in the image of the whale's skin burned as fuel in the kilns of the try-works – mirroring the way it consumes its own laborers. In other words, the extractive system systematically feeds upon its own material and human foundations just to perpetuate itself. On the other hand, the whale opposes to this destruction its radical ontological difference based on its *umwelt*. This means that the non-human animal resists not because of some kind of vengeful will, which would inevitably result in yet another anthropocentric projection. Instead, the non-human animal physical essence, its silences and biological codes are incompatible with the all-conquering technology of human profit and language alike. It could be argued that the ultimate resolution of this tension occurs in the novel's climax. In this sense, the violent destruction of the Pequod and its crew by Moby Dick may indeed be read as a sort of moral punishment: the non-human animal rebels to its pursuers and annihilates them and their extractive machine. Albeit a powerful reading, I believe the tension at issue in this work resolves elsewhere in the narration. Even more important, Ishmael's survival coincides with his final epistemological surrender. After all his failed attempts at understanding the whale, and after witnessing the terrible fate of his fellow crew members, victims of Ahab's insatiable hubris, Ishamel renounces claiming knowledge and power on the whale, and accepts to 'follow' it in reverence.

In conclusion, Henry's and Lönngren's works collide on the same fundamental aspect. At the end of it all, in order to effectively talk about reparation-based ecologies and policies, Henry argues that it is fundamental "redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations," adding that an equitable transition inevitably requires "agency and

empowerment"[395] of sacrificed realities. This point coincides with what Lönngren contends in her work regarding the non-human animal and how we relate with it, maintaining a necessary reformulation of interspecies relationships in terms of agency and power. Key for both approaches is the fundamental role of narratives in shaping our way of thinking in this regard, and, ultimately, to act accordingly. Indeed, Henry himself heavily stresses this aspect in his discourse on extractive fictions. It is imperative, then, that the non-human animal is included in this framework.

The tension between extractivism and animal studies thus resolves in an ethical contemporary appeal: in order to survive the Anthropocene, an age in which unbridled extraction has led to heavy global consequences, humanity must abandon the "Fast-Fish" logic based on claim and submission and learn to inhabit the world accepting the non-human as an equal partner within the texture of life on this planet. Although a clear and definitive outlet from the anthropocentric perspective is never fully attainable, this work has attempted to highlight the fundamental role that narratives have in that matter.

[395] Henry, *Hydronarratives*, p. 10.

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Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

Il sottoscritto Cristian Magalotti, matricola numero 874221, iscritto presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in Lingue e letterature europee, americane e postcoloniali, autore della tesi di laurea *Industry of Blood: Extractivism and Animal Agency in Moby-Dick*, relatrice Elisa Bordin, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall'art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall'art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445,

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