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MONSTROUS MECHANIZED MAN:
The Transubstantiated Laboring Body in Herman Melville's Moby-Dick

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Abstract

The mechanization of labor and its effects on the body are central concerns in Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*. In *Call Me Ishmael* Charles Olson provides an historical context for the status of whaling in the mid-19th century. Olson insists that critics have not placed enough emphasis on whaling's influence on the American economy, and reminds us that, "whaling expanded at a time when agriculture not industry was the base of labor" (18). Despite agriculture's prominence, Olson understands whaling as industrially innovative, and so reads the "whale ship as factory" (23). Correspondingly, industrial transformation requires the transformation of the laboring body. Thomas Carlyle's prescient essay "Signs of the Times" (1829) explores how mechanization extends beyond the factory, converting man and his social relations into mechanisms designed to maximize value production. On the basis of these two claims, my project will explore how whaling transforms not simply the laboring body of the crew, but also that of their captain as he, in turn, transubstantiates the crew and the vessel (the ship of state) into an instrument apt to the ends of industrial capital. Through an examination of Ahab's leg, my second chapter explores how Captain Ahab perceives that his transubstantiated leg grants him access to the metaphysical. My third chapter reveals how Ahab's body complicates his attempts to scorn his physical limitations, a scorn that highlights the absolute mixing of his body with the logic of capital. I conclude with an inquiry into Ishmael's use of free indirect discourse to argue that in choosing to listen primarily to Ahab's voice, Ishmael precludes himself from imagining any ending other than the Pequod's death.

Introduction

In the mid 19th century, the United States experienced a time of economic transformation, a development that Herbert Gutman traces in his book *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*. The titular chapter describes three periods of industrialization, and details how culture both inside and outside factories changed accordingly. Using the Lowell mill girls as a case study, Gutman illuminates how the mechanization of production in particular affected the workers. He quotes a mill girl named Ellen Collins who left the mill, “complaining about her ‘obedience to the ding-dong of the bell—just as though we were so many living machines’” (28). Surrounded by the rigorous mechanization of production, Collins felt herself to be transformed, becoming a machine.

Herman Melville sets the second section of his ‘mirror’ story “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855) in a paper mill similar to the one in which Collins worked. The narrator visits “Tartarus” to purchase envelopes (wholesale) with which to distribute his “seeds”: he is a seedsman and tacitly the writer. The story captures the anxiety Collins feels—in visiting the mill the narrator says, “machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels” (83). Working with the machines not only dehumanizes the girls but also deprives them of their voices, taking from them a primary mode of protest. Their bodies transubstantiate, enabling the machines to incorporate them. As he watches the girls and machines make the paper, the narrator describes how he, “looked from the rosy paper to the pallid cheek, but said nothing” (82). In having their bodies subsumed into the machines, the girls lose their lives—blood seeps from their bodies into the product they create. Even though the narrator witnesses

this horror he remains speechless; systemic mechanization of labor renders laborers and observers equally incapable of objection.

Melville concerns himself with the ways bodies transform when they encounter machines. *Moby-Dick* (1851) addresses this problem in greater depth, exploring the process through which bodies transubstantiate into machines in the whaling industry. Narrated by Ishmael, the novel develops an account of how Captain Ahab uses the Pequod's crew for his own end: to hunt the white whale that took his leg, a pursuit which leads only to the fragmentation of Ahab's and the crew's bodies, and ultimately to their deaths. My analysis rests on two theorists in particular: Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx. Carlyle, a contemporary with Melville, struggles with the rise of mechanization and explores how the changing processes of production affect the bodies of workers and their ways of life in his essay, "The Sign of the Times" (1829). Marx's *Capital* (1867) enables me to explore the systemic impacts of the rise of industrial capitalism, and the production of a machinic laboring class.

The structure of my project reflects the fragmented nature of the body in *Moby-Dick*. Each chapter takes up a different theoretical framework: I engage Marxism, phenomenology, existentialism, and a Marxist philosophy of language to develop an account of the relationship between labor and the body. In putting together these frameworks, my project explores the multivalenced experience of the body, and posits a possible solution to the seemingly inescapable destruction of life under developing structures of capital.

I: Ahab's Collective Body

In order to explore the experience and imperative of increasingly industrialized production in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, I will first establish my theoretical framework. In the titular chapter from his book *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*, Herbert Gutman identifies three periods through which he explores the relation between work and culture: 1815-1843, 1843-1893, and 1893-1915. He insists early in his chapter that, "the pages that follow...emphasize the frequent tension between different groups of men and women new to the machine and a changing American society" (11-12). Part of this tension to which Gutman refers comes from the instability workers felt when faced with the mechanization of industry. He gives the example of a mill superintendent who, "smashed a room full of mules with sledge hammers...On Monday morning, they were astonished to find that there was not work for them. That room is now full of ring frames run by girls" (39). People were not only replaced by machines, but also rendered homogenous as other workers easily replaced them. Gutman argues that Neil Smelzer's claim in regards to industrializing England applies just as well to industrializing America, that, "almost as a matter of fact...we associate the factory system with the decline of the family and the onset of anonymity" (41). Even those outside the factory system could not escape the alienating effects of the machine age.

Written at the outset of this process, Thomas Carlyle's "Signs of the Times" (1829) illustrates how mechanization affects those engaged in it. He identifies his time as "the Mechanical Age," arguing that "nothing is now done directly, or by hand, all is by rule and calculated contrivance" (1). Carlyle describes this time of "tension," claiming that "[mechanism] indicates a mighty change in our whole manner of existence" (3). His totalizing claim in regards to the "whole manner of existence" echoes Gutman's indication that mechanism does not confine

its effects to the factory, but extends through all social relations. Carlyle accordingly adds how mechanization transforms personal experience: “the same habit [of mechanism] regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand” (3-4). For Carlyle, mechanism dissolves the distinction between body and mind, while also controlling the way man experiences his life. Man himself becomes mechanized and so “nothing is now done...by hand,” by the body alone.

The mechanization of labor and its effects on the body are central concerns in *Moby-Dick*. In *Call Me Ishmael* Charles Olson provides the reader with helpful information regarding the status of whaling at the time the novel was written. Olson insists that critics have not placed enough emphasis on whaling’s influence on the American economy, and reminds us that, “whaling expanded at a time when agriculture not industry was the base of labor” (18). He notes that by 1844 up to \$120,000,000 was “tied up” in the whaling industry, and that whale products were the United States’ third largest export (18). Whaling’s prominent position in the American economy allows Olson to read the “whale ship as factory” (23), and the crew as workers. *Moby-Dick* explores whaling at the time of the industry’s height (18), and Carlyle’s assertion that mechanism alters the entire person leads one to question the particular ways in which whaling affects the bodies on the men aboard the Pequod.

Ahab most evidences the effects of whaling in his body; his lost leg provides only one instance of it. In ‘The Symphony,’ the final chapter before the crew encounters Moby-Dick, Ahab contemplates his body and asks, “bitter, biting mockery of gray hairs, have I lived enough joy to wear ye; and seem and feel thus intolerably old?” (406). His question demonstrates the split he experiences in himself—while he feels the way he looks, “old,” he imagines an alternate way and appearance, achieved through a life of “joy.” Ahab asks, “what is it, what nameless,

inscrutable, unearthly thing...commands me” (406), indicating his belief that the life he joylessly lived has not been of his own volition, but rather reflects an unidentifiable force. Ahab’s “it,” implies that the force could be either a personal or inanimate will, a distinction he later clarifies by asking, “Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?” (406), demonstrating his transition towards thinking of the force as a personal being. Ahab refers to himself synecdochally as his arm, which positions his question about agency as a labor issue—as a harpooner, Ahab’s arm is the most important part of his body.

Yet later in his monologue, Ahab asserts, “by heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike” (407): metaphor enables him to approach what controls him. A windlass is the barrel that revolves by means of a handle, while the handspike lets down or pulls up the anchor (442). An anchor, dropped, halts a ship; raised, grants movement. In “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” Paul Ricoeur asserts, “metaphorical meaning does not merely consist of a semantic clash but of the *new* predicative meaning which emerges from the collapse of the literal meaning” (146, emphasis his). While Ahab’s metaphor intimates that Fate controls his life, it also situates the ship, through its instruments, as Fate itself; Ahab collapses the ship and Fate to create a “new...meaning.” Through the metaphor the ship displaces God; fate is impersonal and indifferent, a mechanism rather than a thinking entity.

While Ahab claims that Fate controls the trajectory of his life, his metaphor implies that he considers labor as a mechanized form of Fate. The metaphor locates fate within the processes of labor, especially when reading the Pequod as a factory ship. Earlier in his soliloquy Ahab had claimed that the force that controls him does so by “pushing, and crowding, and jamming” (406), terms that remind the reader of intense labor. In comparing his life to the windlass, Ahab

demonstrates his internalization of whaling machinery and exemplifies Carlyle's observations about the mechanical age. Ahab's labor completely transforms his life and takes over not only his body, but his entire person—his head and heart—thus he cannot engage with his “natural lovings and longings” (406).

Mechanized labor severs Ahab from domestic life and relations, separating him “whole oceans away, from that young girl-wife I wedded past fifty, and sailed for Cape Horn the next day, leaving but one dent in my marriage pillow” (405). Ahab understands marriage through its negation, as the result of a labor choice. In telling Starbuck about his son Ahab observes, “it is his noon nap now—the boy vivaciously wakes; sits up in bed; and his mother tells him of cannibal old me; how I am abroad in the deep, but will yet come back to dance him again” (406). Ahab believes that his son thinks of him just as he would of a character in a fairy tale—a strange, “cannibal” man far away. A life of labor renders Ahab him anonymous, stripping him of his domestic relations.

However, a mechanical Fate does not affect Ahab alone: Ahab uses the collective pronoun “we” in his assertions concerning fate, thereby extending his claim to the entire crew, even as he casts the windlass as a synecdoche for the ship. If we believe with Carlyle that mechanism changes “our whole manner of existence,” we see this change as it pertains to the relations between the men of the crew. They are bound into a “we,” which undoes the distinctions between them, and transforms them into a unified force of Fate. Yet Ahab must work to achieve this binding; the crew does not automatically agree.

Ahab accomplishes the crew's transformation into a “we” in ‘The Quarter-Deck,’ where he tells them that their main goal will not be to kill whales and make a profit, but rather to hunt and kill Moby-Dick in order to extract revenge for Ahab's lost leg. Oddly, most of the crew

agree exclaiming, “a sharp eye for the White Whale; a sharp lance for Moby Dick!” (139). In distinction, Starbuck dissents. For Ahab to transform the crew as a collective agent of fate, he must involve the *entire* crew, Starbuck included. To justify himself Ahab tells Starbuck, “all visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks” (140). He pursues the logic of his simile and transforms it into a metaphor, setting up a dichotomy between the “unreasoning mask” and the “reasoning thing [that] puts forth the mouldings” (140). Ahab understands the visible world as consisting of poor representations of something greater, yet he remains uncertain about what the “reasoning thing” is; this uncertainty chiefly bothers him. To understand the world around him Ahab exclaims, “if man will strike, strike through the mask!” (140), demonstrating that his perception of the world depends on the simultaneous destruction of it.

To understand the way Ahab’s metaphor functions I return to Ricoeur, who cites Goodman’s insight that metaphors, “‘make’ and ‘remake’ reality” (152). Ahab’s metaphor renders the previously understandable material world around him inaccessible except through his metaphoric transfer, whereby some “reasoning thing” must lurk behind each object and occurrence. To experience the world in such terms Starbuck must necessarily hunt Moby Dick, or that which lurks behind him. In this new reality, Ahab can accurately exclaim that the crew is “one and all with Ahab in this matter of the whale” (140), having successfully transformed his previously dispersed crew into a unified and reliable force to hunt the whale and realize their collective fate as the Pequod; the word “matter” indicates the unification of the crew and their pursuit.

However, Melville sees the ship as a ship of the nation,¹ and so Ahab’s consolidation of the crew cannot be confined to a consideration of the ship alone. As Olson points out, “Melville

¹ Consider also Melville’s “Benito Cereno” for another exploration of the ship as nation.

raised his times up when he got them into *Moby-Dick* and they held firm in his scheme: e.g. his crew, a ‘people,’ Cloutz and Tom Paine’s people, all races and colors functioning together, a fore-castle reality of Americans not yet a dream accomplished by society” (16). Indeed, when introducing the crew at the beginning of the novel, Ishmael claims that the crew, composed of various races and nationality, are “federated along one keel” (107). Conceptualizing the Pequod as a ship of state requires that the reader examine the nation’s contemporary concerns.

During the 1840’s and prior to the publication of *Moby-Dick* (1851), the United States acquired Texas, Oregon, and California (Hietala). Expansionists of the decade aligned themselves with the founding fathers by citing Alexander Hamilton’s claim that, “a large federation of states under a strong national government was both possible and preferable to a small, divided confederation” (Hietala 177). However, expansionists adapted Hamilton’s claims to argue that not only was a large federation possible, it was “actually indispensable to the stability and security of the United States” (Hietala 178). Expansionists saw themselves working towards a new kind of empire—one that acquired land, not people. However, during the Mexican war and confronted with U.S. casualties, expansionists switched tactics and argued that the nation had a, “natural right to land not being fully utilized by its inhabitants”: Pillsbury argued that the land should be occupied and cultivated, “as the Creator designed it should be” (qtd on 194). Practically, technology reinforced Divine purpose, with the telegraph and railroad promoting unity and enabling the government of a larger territory.

Olson argues that Herman Melville saw the Pacific Ocean as, “an experience of space...twin and rival of the heartland,” accordingly, “the Pacific is...the Plains repeated” (114). Melville’s view of the ocean allows us to read the ship’s activity as an expression of national expansion. ‘Loomings’ depicts expansion as though it were an impulse inherent in man. Ishmael

describes men, “leaning on the spiles [posts]; some seated upon the pier-heads; some overlooking the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep” (18-19). Ishmael realizes the importance of bodily positions in this impulse to go to sea—the men are willing to risk their safety in the rigging if only to glimpse the ocean. Yet Ishmael distinguishes between the men who belong on the ship and those he has just described: “but these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks” (19). Landsmen have been transformed by their labor, causing them to become extensions of counters, benches, and desks. Whaling offers a new form of labor, and Ishmael asks if, “the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither?” (19). Even before the men engage in whaling, their bodies are drawn to the ships and therefore become extensions of the ships, and of the imperial purpose associated with the ship of state. Inherent desires might be thought of ‘natural’ or God-given, but Ishmael asserts that the sea draws all men to itself in a reflection of an innate expansionist urge.

In ‘The Advocate,’ Ishmael justifies the growth enabled by the whaling industry, asserting that, “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” (99). Whaling creates the charts that make imperial endeavors possible. Where expansionists thought they had a divine right to the West, *Moby-Dick* demonstrates that territorial advance grows from man; the novel’s ending problematizes the bloody truth of westward expansion, and indicated that the very technology expansionists believed would aid their cause leads to their extinction. In ‘Sunset,’ the chapter directly after ‘The Quarter Deck,’ Ahab asserts, “the path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run...Naught’s an obstacle, naught’s an angle to the iron way!” (143). He imagines taking the

railroad to sea to execute his fate: just like the handspike of fate, the railroad locks Ahab into one purpose and prohibits flexibility of action. Even the choice to call the ship the Pequod presents the problem inherent in expansion: Ishmael reminds his reader that Pequod “was the name of a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct” (69). From the outset of the narrative, the novel dooms the ship and its crew to extinction, a condemnation of their expansionist behavior.

Given that the essence of an imperial imperative was a market imperative, it proves fruitful to examine how Ahab takes control of the process of production on the Pequod. In *Capital*, Marx explains the process of production by distinguishing between two forms of capital: constant and variable. Constant capital “is turned into means of production” and includes machinery and tools necessary to that production. He argues that constant capital’s value “does not undergo any quantitative alteration of value in the process of production” (317). In contradistinction variable capital, or labor-power, “reproduces the equivalent of its own value and produces an excess, a surplus-value, which may itself vary and be more or less according to circumstances” (317). Circumstances include changes in price, which affect the value of the labor in the production process. In reference to machines, Marx asserts, “living labor must seize on these things, awaken them from the dead, change them from merely possible into real and effective use-values” (289). The transformation from constant capital into variable capital is a process—constant capital and variable capital do not exist as unchanging entities. While changing circumstances render variable capital unstable, the production process cannot achieve value apart from it.

In ‘Candles,’ Ahab disrupts the relationship between constant and variable capital. Caught in a storm, lightning strikes the three masts on the Pequod, which leads Stubb to exclaim, “our three masts will yet be as three spermaceti candles” (382). The Pequod becomes the

“candles,” themselves a figure for oil as the primary source of mid-nineteenth century light. Lit by lightning, constant capital (the vessel) becomes its product (the commodity). Care of this transformation, Ahab sees the crew and the ship despite the darkness, but does so in a way at odds with the process of production. In seeking to transform the relation between himself and the ship, Ahab grabs the links, which cast into the ocean, direct the electricity away from the ship: “hand me those main-mast links there; I would fain feel this pulse, and let mine beat against it” (382). Ahab appropriates the lightning, the essence of the product, becoming an extension of the ship through the lightning—the imagined heart of the lightning synchronizes with Ahab’s heart.

As lightning infuses Ahab’s body, he seeks to grasp what the lightning is, and utters a monologue (rather than an argument) in which he struggles for an understanding. Addressing the lightning he asserts, “there is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical” (383). Ahab’s monologue echoes the “pasteboard mask” speech he made earlier in its insistence that the physical world around him must veil a greater truth. However, here Ahab appropriates the lightning taken into his body in order to understand what hides behind it, which in turn transforms him into a pasteboard mask. Ahab imagines this “thing” as existing eternally and creatively, distinct from the world he experiences. He claims, “through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it” (383), indicating that while the lightning has infused and marked his body, this does not lead to a complete understanding of what lies behind the lightning. Through the misappropriation of the lightning, he approaches the entity that he seeks behind the mask, while remaining unable to identify its essence.

The crew finds Ahab’s absorption of the lightning horrifying. Starbuck tells Ahab to look at his boat, and there he sees, “[his] harpoon...firmly lashed in its conspicuous crotch...and from

the keen steel barb there now came a leveled flame of pale, forked fire,” likened to “a serpent’s tongue” (383). The harpoon, an instance of constant capital, is animated by the lightning rather than by the crew, and this leads to corruption—it appears as a figure of evil. Starbuck takes this as a sign that, “God is against thee, old man; forbear! ‘tis an ill voyage! ill begun, ill continued!” (383). Although the moral implication is Starbuck’s opinion, the image of the devilish harpoon can also be read as a sign of the disrupted order. Lightning animates the harpoon, excluding variable labor from the process of production. In taking the lightning into his own body, Ahab affirms the displacement of the crew.

In witnessing this displacement, Ishmael reports, “overhearing Starbuck...[the crew] raised a half-mutinous cry” (383). Despite Ahab’s despotic behavior, the word “mutiny” is hardly ever mentioned in the novel. In bypassing the crew, he endangers his accomplishment of having rendered the crew as a constant extension of the ship and his will. In their cry, the crew becomes variable and undependable. However, because the rendering of constant capital into variable capital is an ongoing and inherently unstable process, their “half-mutinous cry” is not surprising. Ahab increases the instability of the process by misappropriating constant capital as he takes the harpoon and, “[waves] it like a torch among them; swearing to transfix with it the first sailor that but cast loose a rope’s end” (383). In using a figure of constant capital against them, he causes the crew to halt their mutiny and become “petrified,” transforming them into constant capital once more, but only through force and a misappropriation of the production process.

Ahab believes that his purpose is laid on iron rails, but in reality it depends on the unstable process of transforming variable into constant capital; the volatility of the process only augments the horror of his commitment to it. *Moby-Dick* argues that only through a disruption of

the relations between people can expansionist aims be achieved—the attained goals most typically occur at the expense of those who carry them out.

II: Ahab's Leg

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty insists that, “all consciousness is consciousness of something” (xvii): consciousness, therefore, depends on the “things” that call it into being (there can be no touch without the touched). Experiences of the body fascinate Merleau-Ponty because, “existence comes into its own in the body” (166). As a result, he claims that a person, “is his body and his body is the potentiality of a certain world” (106). The body cannot be separated from the world it inhabits. The bodily potential indicates a notion of incompleteness; it indicates the way in which the world opens from it and offers the possibility that the world can be made in a different way. If one wishes to engage in the world, Merleau-Ponty argues one needs must, “bury [one's] perceptual and practical intentions in objects” (82). Consciousness depends on the objects outside of a person with which she interacts—in doing so she inhabits her body and the world in which she lives.

Using the phenomenon of the phantom limb, Merleau-Ponty indicates two “distinct layers” of bodily composition: the habit-body and the body at this moment (82). In the case of a person with a phantom leg, Merleau-Ponty claims that, “the subject appears to be unaware of the mutilation and relies on his imaginary limb as he would on a real one,” and because of this, “he has no need, when he wants to set off walking, of a clear and articulate perception of his body; it is enough for him to have it ‘at his disposal’” (81). The habit-body and the body in the moment cannot be separated from each other—they work together to insure the person's successfully mobility. The case of the phantom limb demonstrates the inextricable nature of the habit body and the body in the moment. A phantom limb resists the reality of the missing appendage and demonstrates the “*I* committed to a certain physical and inter-human world, who continues to tend towards his world despite handicaps and amputations” (81, emphasis his). Of course, a

person requires memory of such a world in order to remain committed to it. Merleau-Ponty argues that through the phantom leg, “the past which remains our true present does not leave us but remains constantly hidden behind our gaze instead of being displayed before it” (83). A phantom limb disguises memory, allowing the body to continue to operate as it did before losing the limb. Far from being artificial, the habit-body constitutes how a person perceives and acts in the world.

Merleau-Ponty also offers an account for the relation between the habit-body and the body in the moment as it might apply to the labor process. For scissors, read harpoon:

the subject, when put in front of scissors, needles, and familiar tasks, does not need to look for his hands or his fingers, because they are not objects to be discovered in objective space: bones, muscles, and nerves, but potentialities already mobilized by the perception of scissors or needle, the central end of those ‘intentional threads’ which link him to the objects given. (106)

The subject, habituated to labor, need not think about the particulars of calling his body into action, rather, his habit-body recognizes the potential in the objects placed before him and knows how to make use of them. A subject’s habit-body perceives the possibilities for various outcomes, ways to refigure the world around him. Talking about things such as needles, Marx claims, “living labor must seize on these things [and] awaken them from the dead” (289). The habit-body extends itself through the objects with which it comes into contact, and revivifies them to a productive purpose, transforming their substance. It follows that both the objects and the habit-body transubstantiate through their interaction within labor processes.

As Ahab leaves the Samuel Enderby he fractures his prosthetic leg: subsequently, he calls for the carpenter to make him a new limb. In the ‘The Carpenter,’ Ishmael describes the titular

artisan as capable of “repairing stove boats, sprung spars, reforming the shape of clumsy bladed oars, inserting bull’s eyes in the deck” (356) He transforms the world around him—as the materials are “bathed in the fire of [his] labor” (Marx 289), they transubstantiate into new products that allow others to engage with the world around them in turn. Ishmael describes the carpenter as, “a pure manipulator; his brain, if he had ever had one, must have early oozed along into the muscles of his fingers” (357). The carpenter’s habitual action comprises his consciousness—so habitual, it seems he has been reduced to “manipulator” rather than an agent in the world. Yet, when Ishmael claims the carpenter is, “no mere machine of an automaton” (358), he declares that even though the carpenter depends on his habit-body, this does not render him mechanical. In contrast to Carlyle’s assertion that labor has turned man into machine, the carpenter demonstrates the possibilities of a habit-body properly mobilized through labor: a “manipulator” consciously transforms the world around him; a machine has no agency.

Ahab commands the carpenter to fashion him a new leg after he splits his, and tells him, “it will speak thoroughly well for thy work, if, when I come to mount this leg thou makest, I shall nevertheless feel another left in the same identical place with it; that is, carpenter, my old lost leg; the flesh and blood one, I mean” (360). Ahab does not experience his phantom limb on his own—he needs the carpenter to fashion one for him. Through his habit-body, Ahab understands what a “flesh and blood” leg will feel like. However, Ahab depends on a bone leg to mediate his experience of his phantom limb, despite Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that memory causes the phantom limb to appear. Ahab’s split body expands from his body in the moment through his habit-body. He extends himself not only through his relation to the crew, but also through the objects around him.

The chapter ends with the carpenter working on the leg, and Ishmael waits until Ahab needs yet another leg to describe Ahab's relationship to it. Ahab injures his leg for a third time when he gets flung from the boat in pursuing Moby-Dick. Stubb says to Ahab, "no broken bones, sir, I hope" (417). Ahab responds with, "all splintered to pieces, Stubb!....But even with a broken bone, old Ahab is untouched; and I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, that this dead one that's lost" (417). In referring to his splintered prosthetic leg as a "broken bone," Ahab asserts that it is part of his natural body; it becomes a "quasi-present and [he] feels it" (Merleau-Ponty, 85). However, in referring to it as "dead," Ahab reveals the ambiguous relationship he has with his leg. Merleau-Ponty argues that, "the imaginary [limb] is...like repressed experience, a former present which cannot decide to recede into the past" (85). The existence of a phantom limb brings his past into his present, but if Ahab's prosthetic leg is just as much a part of him as each of his real bones, then Ahab is dismayed once more and experiences his trauma afresh.

In joining his body with a dead bone, Ahab becomes monstrous. David McNally, in his book *Monsters of the Market*, traces monster stories that coincide with the rise of capitalism. His first chapter, titled 'Dissecting the Laboring Body,' details the history of grave robbing and human dissection in early 18th century England. The Enlightenment desire for reason and empirical evidence led to human dissection in the name of scientific advancement, and this usually targeted the bodies of the poor (20-23). McNally reads *Frankenstein* (1818) through the sustained dismemberments associated with the terror of the French Revolution, and illuminates Shelley's sense of her monster's antecedents. He argues that Shelley, "imaginatively reconstructs the process by which the working class was created: first dissected (separated from the land and their communities), then reassembled as a frightening collective entity" (95). In addition to the separation from land, "the rise of capitalism involved an unrelenting commodification of the

laboring body and its powers” (23). Shelley’s monster demonstrates the inherent instability of the divided laboring body. Through his bone leg, Ahab becomes an assemblage in some sense resembling the monster. His labor, hunting Moby-Dick, dissects him.

Perhaps what makes Ahab even more frightening than Frankenstein’s creature, however, is the way Ahab achieves wholeness. When Ahab splinters his leg the first time, “he bade [the carpenter] without delay set about making a new leg, and directed the mates to see him supplied with all the studs and joists of jaw-ivory (Sperm Whale) which had thus far been accumulated on the voyage” (356). While Ahab lost his leg in whaling, he insures that his new leg will be a product of that labor, and Ishmael’s use of parenthesis makes certain the reader understands Ahab’s desire to become that which he hunts. Yet the very solution Ahab finds to fix his body, labor, is the same means that fractured his body, which demonstrates the instability of his remedy.

Ahab commodifies his body through labor, but in using a bone leg, also becomes a commodity. In *Capital*, Marx describes a commodity as an object that “satisfies human needs” (125), and through human labor, has use and exchange value. Marx argues that through the optic of the fetish, commodities are misrecognized as, “[reflecting] the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves” (165): Marx therefore explores the reifying process by which relations become things, and persons (or their labor) are excised from things, at least in the realm of appearance (166). In transforming his body into a commodity, Ahab further removes himself from social relations, and relates to his body as an object.

Ahab’s request that the carpenter make him a new leg leads Ishmael to recount the earlier history of Ahab’s leg, prior to their sailing. Ishmael states that Ahab, “had been found one night

prone upon the ground, and insensible, by some unknown, and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin” (354-355). Ahab’s prosthetic leg subsumes his body, effectively fetishizing his body. While commodities are congealed labor power, we relate to them as though the traits created by human labor are inherent in the objects themselves. Thus, humans are subsumed into objects, just as Ahab’s prosthetic leg subsumes his body. When Marx details the extraordinary process of the fetishism through which the commodity materializes, he says that to analyze a commodity is to, “[bring] out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (163). Ahab’s experience of his prosthetic leg accordingly does not remain contained to his body, but infuses it (and him) with metaphysical and theological aspirations.

While previously Ishmael had seemed uncertain about the significance of Ahab’s leg piercing his body, he subsequently presents Ahab’s argument for how his prosthetic leg allows him to commune with the gods. The strangeness of the problem of transubstantiation requires that I quote at length to demonstrate the extent to which Ishmael struggles. Ishmael states:²

Nor, at the time, had it failed to enter his monomaniac mind, that all the anguish of that then present suffering was but the direct issue of former woe; and he too plainly seemed to see, that as the most poisonous reptile of the marsh perpetuates his kind as inevitably as the sweetest songster of the grove; so, equally with every felicity, all miserable events do naturally beget their like. Yea, more than equally, thought Ahab; since both the ancestry and posterity of Grief go further than the ancestry and posterity of Joy. For, not to hint of this: that it is an inference from certain canonic teachings, that while some

² A careful reader will note Ishmael’s insistence that he knows what Ahab “thought,” a problem I will address in chapter four.

natural enjoyments here shall have no children born to them for the other world, but, on the contrary, shall be followed by the joy-childlessness of all hell's despair; whereas, some guilty mortal miseries shall still fertilely beget to themselves an eternally progressive progeny of griefs beyond the grave; not at all to hint of this, there still seems an inequality in the deeper analysis of the thing. For, thought Ahab, while even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them, but, at bottom, all heartwoes, a mystic significance, and, in some men, an archangelic grandeur; so do their diligent tracings-out not belie the obvious deduction. To trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries, carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods; so that, in the face of all the glad, hay-making suns, and soft-cymballing, round harvest-moons, we must needs give in to this: that the gods themselves are not for ever glad. The ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers. (355)

Ahab's mention of "the most poisonous reptile of the marsh" inevitably causes the reader to lodge "marsh" and "grove" in the Garden of Eden, and to anticipate the fall of man. So framed, his pain serves in a grand narrative that explains the origins of suffering, making it seem as though his suffering is not contained by his life, but extends through prior millennia. Ahab seeks a yet longer reach, establishing a genealogy for suffering in asserting that, "both the ancestry and posterity of Grief go further than the ancestry and posterity of Joy." Ahab posits that his grief predates the fall of man, being coterminous with the birth of sin and death itself, when Satan in his apostasy denied God and fell from heaven.

Ahab stresses the disparity between suffering and joy. He insists that while some "enjoyments" are followed by "all hell's despair," the "guilty mortal miseries" of life produce "a

progeny of griefs” in the afterlife. As a consequence, most behaviors lead to suffering, rather than to joy: eternal joy is more difficult to achieve than eternal grief. Even when a person does experience joy, Ahab says that it has an “unsignifying pettiness,” and therefore that it does not provide the person with any meaning through which to understand himself or the world around him. In contrast, for Ahab, grief gives a person access to a “mystic significance,” that which lurks beyond the physical world he inhabits. Such a position valorizes suffering over joy because to suffer it is to gain access to that which lurks behind the “pasteboard masks.” As a result, Ahab identifies more with his suffering than anything else he experiences.

Ahab specifies that for “some men,” suffering brings an “archangelic grandeur,”—it elevates them to the status of the highest angel. Given Ahab’s celebration of suffering, one may assume that he counts himself among the elevated. Yet he takes this identification with suffering further, asserting that, “to trail the genealogies of these high mortal miseries, carries us at last among the sourceless primogenitures of the gods.” Positioned by pain among the gods, Ahab communes with those gods, reading his own pained and scarred face as marked from birth with a divine signature: he insists “the ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man, is but the stamp of sorrow in the signers”: it follows that on his own scarred brow, the “slender, rod-like mark, lividly whitish” (108) indicates a genealogical tie, through suffering, to the suffering of the gods.

Through Ahab’s bodily experience of commodity production, he explores a reality beyond the physical realm and positions himself within it. I return to Marx’s claim that commodities abound in “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.” The mystery of commodities comes from the fact that, “the commodity-form and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this” (165). While at first, Ahab’s leg

seems to be that which allows him functional use of his body, the moment at which his body becomes one with the commodity (the whale bone as *his* bone) reveals the leg's strangeness. Through a contemplation of his material leg, Ahab ponders the theological complexities of grief, which he reaches for because his commodified leg has no "connection with [its] physical nature." Ahab's leg allows him to wrestle with the elusive nature of the value of commodities, and with value's elusive position within the complex process of production that envelops him.

While Ahab's leg grants him metaphysical understanding, each of his legs seems to be insufficient in some way. Ahab loses his flesh leg to Moby-Dick and gains a prosthetic leg; he needs a new prosthetic leg upon leaving the Samuel Enderby, but then fractures that prosthetic leg and requires a new prosthesis. Just as Ahab transforms the crew into constant capital so that he can wield them as objects, he attempts to transform his body into a mere machine to accomplish his goal. In contradistinction to the crew, however, his body resists until the last moment. On the second day chasing Moby-Dick, Ahab's, "ivory leg had been snapped off, leaving but one short sharp splinter" (417). His recurrent dismasting demonstrates that his body rejects the prosthetic limbs that help him achieve his will. Ahab understands the inevitability of this recurrence. He thinks that, "all miserable events do beget their like" (355), and thus establishes that losing his leg has a genealogy (through "like" or linked events), which implies both that the event has precedence, but also that it will continue to occur in some manifestation.

The body, separate from Ahab's will, becomes the site of resistance to the processes of production to which he ultimately falls victim. In repeatedly losing his prosthetic legs, Ahab's body rejects the labor to which Ahab subjects himself—both the labor of whale hunting, and the labor congealed in the bone leg. His body's attempts to deter his quest to kill Moby-Dick, and thus rid the world of evil (156), indicate the novel's insistence on the division between the

physical world and cosmic world filled with the “progeny of griefs.” Ahab rejects this division despite his body’s warnings, and this causes his downfall. If a body is the potential for a certain world, Ahab’s body proposes a different outcome, one resting on transformed social relations, yet in subjecting his body to his will, he prevents himself from imagining a better resolution for himself and the crew.

III: Ahab's Contingent Body

In *Freedom and Nature*, Paul Ricoeur writes about the contingency of existence, and claims that, “freedom responds to the *no* of condition with the *no* of refusal” (463, emphasis his), meaning that a certain kind of subject upon finding herself limited by conditions of existence, will attempt to refuse those conditions through her own volition. He claims that, for such a subject, the first response to existential constraint is, “the haughty affirmation of consciousness as absolute, that is, as creative or self-producing” (463). Ahab is such a one: he asserts himself as “self-producing” when he takes up the chains in ‘The Candles’ claiming, “thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother I know not” (383). He thereby severs himself from genealogical ties, refusing to accept his human descent. He imagines that even the natural world poses no restrictions, hence his claim: “I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (140).

For Ahab, time operates as an unacceptable limitation to his existence, a limit to be refused through his relation to Fedallah, who says to him:

[N]either hearse nor coffin can be thine....that ere thou couldst die on this voyage, two hearses must be verily seen by thee on the sea; the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in American....I shall still go before thee thy pilot [and]....Hemp only can kill thee. (377)

While it may seem as though Ahab’s very relation to Fedallah makes Ahab contingent upon him, with Ishmael describing them “as one man” (377) (or two sets of linked contingency), Ahab cuts through conditionality by taking Fedallah’s prophecy seriously: Fedallah’s prophecies transform time from a dimension over which Ahab has no control, into a sequence of riddles available for fixed interpretation. Each of Fedallah’s prophecies concern Ahab’s death: taken as predictions the riddles’ circumvent time as chance and accident. Ahab insists that his death will be self-

chosen and insofar as it proves predictable, subject to interpretation rather than to external conditions.

However, Ricoeur argues that the “affirmation of consciousness as absolute” merely veils the refusal of limitation. He likens any declaration of freedom from fortuity to Titanism: “the wish for totality in which [one repudiates] the constrictions of character” (463). Using a classic example, Ricoeur asserts that, “all idealism is Promethean and conceals a secret rejection of the human condition” (464). Ishmael uses a particular instance to explore Ahab’s rejection of human limitation. He describes the moments when Ahab, tortured from dreams, jumps up from his sleep, saying that “this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him” (169). Ishmael indicates the tension between the parts that compose Ahab: his soul, body, and most significantly, a will that evades personal pronouns. In this antagonistic triad, the will prevails, “[forcing] itself against the gods and devils into a kind of self-assured, independent being of its own” (170), and leading Ishmael to refer to its vehicle [Ahab] as “a Prometheus” (170). According to Greek mythology, Prometheus (a Titan) shaped man from clay, and subsequently stole fire from the gods to warm his creation. As punishment for his transgression, the gods tied Prometheus to a stake and instructed an eagle to eat his liver each day, the liver re-growing each night only to be eaten anew (Theoi Greek Mythology). Just like Prometheus, Ahab refuses the natural limits of humanity, epitomized by his body and his soul, in favor of an unbounded will that can accomplish his purposes. Yet Ishmael points out that Ahab’s limitation refusal and will valorization leads to his fragmentation, a literal dis- and re-embodiment, and turns his soul towards horror.

Misrecognition of limits carries dangerous consequences. Ricoeur notes that, “when the wish for an excess of freedom is concretely wounded, the ignored condition is finally transformed into a *refused* condition” (466, emphasis his). One condition especially that the titan resists is that of the body: “in positing a fictitious and in a sense dimensionless subject, without shadows and without body, idealism gives consciousness a triumphant appearance” (464). Idealism rejects everything that is not of the self. A female titan faces one option in refusing her limitations: “suicide presents itself...as one of the highest possibilities; it is in effect the only total action of which we are capable with respect to our own life” (466). A body, subject to circumstance and time, poses a problem for the titan who wishes to direct every aspect of her existence. Committing suicide requires that she take control of the limits that circumscribe her: in a chosen death, the body too becomes entirely subject to the will, albeit only through the act of destroying that contingent body and life.

Ahab takes scorn for limitation to its conclusion: suicide. On the final day of chasing Moby-Dick, Ahab tells Starbuck, “some ships sail from their ports, and ever afterwards are missing” (421), demonstrating an awareness that he advances towards his own death, and will do nothing to stop it. In effect, he commits suicide, rejecting those limits placed on his existence. Despite Ahab’s claims that fate drives him towards his death (418), in his final confrontation with the whale he exclaims: “towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee” (426). Ahab’s repeated use of “I” insists that his pursuit of the whale is entirely his own—an act to which he’s committed despite and perhaps because of its end. Calling the whale “unconquering” indicates Ahab’s belief that even should the whale kill him, Ahab will prevail no matter the outcome. He dedicates his labor, his grappling, stabbing, and spitting, and his “last

breath” to death as an abstraction—abstract in that, by assertion, it transcends human conditions. Subjecting his body to his will necessitates his own death. We have seen earlier, however, that Ahab has transformed the crew and the vessel into an extension of his body. Consequently, in refusing his own limitations by destroying his body, Ahab submits the ship of state to his own designed fatality.

Ahab’s scorn for limitation gestures towards the extended logic of capital. In *Grundrisse* Marx states:

[C]apital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life. It is destructive towards all of this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem in the development of the forces of production. (410)

As with the Titan, so capital refuses limitations in its drive beyond them. While it may seem that capital aims to generate new ways of life, Marx reminds us that, “the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorization takes place only within this constantly renewed movement” (*Capital* 253). Capital does not concern itself with the form that it takes (labor, commodity, money)—it merely “assumes [those] forms of appearance” (255) to cast them off as temporary though necessary figures in an endless pursuit of value production.

Marx’s account of the value form of capital sounds eerily similar to Ishmael’s account of whiteness in ‘The Whiteness of the Whale.’ Throughout the chapter, Ishmael reaches for multiple instances of whiteness to explain his fear of the white whale. In part, Ishmael fears whiteness because it symbolizes the best and the worst experiences in the world: his examples of such polarities range from, “the innocence of brides” (159) to “the aspect of the dead which most

appalls the gazer” (162). Ishmael’s language reflects Marx’s description of capital—whiteness transcends and transmutes the objects it contacts. In *Capital* Marx notes that, “no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a peal or a diamond” (177), which indicates that value is not a concrete substance. Ishmael struggles with this same lack of substance when he asks, “is it by [whiteness’s] indefiniteness [that] it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with thoughts of annihilation[?]” (165). Whiteness’s all pervasive “indefiniteness” allows it to exist through physical manifestations that it transcends, and thus without limitation. As Ishmael’s description continues, “white” increasingly becomes a synonym for light—he even calls it “the great principle of light” (165). We can read whiteness as a metaphor for capital—whiteness is likened to light, and since whale oil was one of the main sources of light in the mid 19th century, it becomes apparent that what Ahab chases in pursuing the white whale is not vengeance, but the seizure of value as an elusive and “ubiquitous” (154) epitome.

Yet Ishmael struggles to understand the characteristics of whiteness: a single and syntactically tortured sentence comprises the third paragraph of ‘The Whiteness of the Whale.’ Most of the clauses begin with “though” (159), demonstrating Ishmael’s uncertainty about how to describe whiteness, while the paragraph concludes with a clause that begins with “yet for all” (160), indicating Ishmael’s dissatisfaction with the solutions he offers over the course of the paragraph. By the end of the chapter Ishmael has yet to resolve the horror of whiteness: he concludes his contemplation with a question, placing the responsibility for understanding whiteness on the reader, rather than himself.

In an effort to comprehend whiteness, Ishmael studies Ahab, who as the pursuer of the white whale personifies structures and imperatives inherent in whiteness—structures and

imperatives that neither Ahab nor Ishmael can fully grasp. Whiteness transubstantiates from object to object, and from body to body, indicating its prime and metaphorical characteristic as dis- and re-embodiment. Thus it proves fruitful to examine Ahab's initial moment of disembodiment. Upon losing his leg, Ishmael speculates that Ahab,

probably but felt the agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more. Yet, when by this collision forced to turn towards home, and for long months of days and weeks, Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock...then it was that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad. (156)

Ishmael explores the progression of Ahab's injury, and distinguishes between the pain he experiences first in his body and then in his soul. Prior to his prolonged exposure to anguish, Ahab's body and soul existed separately within him. Yet pain renders his constituent parts malleable, and thus allows them to "interfuse." Focusing on the moment when Ahab's madness seemed to leave him, Ishmael observes, "Ahab's full lunacy subsided not, but deepeningly contracted; like the unabated Hudson, when that noble Northman flows narrowly, but unfathomably through the highland gorge" (157). The strengthening of the river's current interests Ishmael the most: the same water fills the river, but the gorge transfigures it—making the water swift and white. Later, Ishmael describes whiteness as an "intensifying agent" (165), revealing that the intensification of Ahab's lunacy results from his facing the horror of whiteness.

Perhaps even more terrifying than whiteness itself is Ahab's relation to it. Ishmael says Ahab "had some glimpse of this, namely: all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad" (157), and then speculates that "that thing of his dissembling was only subject to his perceptibility, not to his will determinate" (157-158). Ahab conceals his "mad" object. Yet

“perceptibility” indicates that though Ahab may perceive the cause of his madness, his perception does not guarantee understanding. His will no longer governs his mad pursuit of the whale—just as whiteness transcends its objects, so the will transfuses Ahab as its bearer. While Ahab insists on scorning his limits as a titan, ultimately he cannot exert control over that which drives him to madness and to chase Moby-Dick: whiteness. Ahab becomes the subject of whiteness rather than the willful agent who pursues it.

Ishmael’s own rumination on whiteness ends with death. As Ishmael discusses colors he concludes that they are: “subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without, so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within” (165). Ishmael understands Nature and all its surfaces not as that which is “inherent” in the world, but rather as that which light illuminates only to expose all things as colored masks veiling a whiteness inseparable from corruption and death. So read, whiteness, which hides in objects but is not those objects, takes on forms only to cast them off. Ishmael concludes his white anthology with whiteness as that which represents death: the end of the possibility of assuming and casting off forms—the end of substance.

Now, with the recognition that deathly whiteness for Ishmael and Ahab operates as an “intensifying agent,” we can begin to understand why Ahab goes mad and how this madness affects his body. The chapter ‘The Chart,’ wherein Ahab suffers from sleepwalking, follows quickly after ‘The Whiteness of the Whale,’ as if Ishmael, unable entirely to formulate his account of whiteness, transposes his inquiry to Ahab’s interiority. In ‘The Chart’ Ishmael describes Ahab rising injured from his bed and running in his sleep, “the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being; a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an

object to color and therefore a blankness in itself” (170). Whiteness, that “ray of living light” possesses Ahab transubstantiating him, stripping him of his will and controlling him. Yet the language Ishmael uses to describe the “formless” thing that inhabits Ahab repeats the language of ‘The Whiteness of the Whale’—that which lives in him defies substance and limitation. The will that Ahab cannot control torments him—whiteness, the structure and imperative for value production. Ultimately, that which Ahab most desires to control, the limitations of existence, undoes him, dividing his body and soul, and irreconcilably dividing this willful man from his agency through his own will.

IV: Ishmael's Voice

At this point in my project, a problem emerges: how does Ishmael know that to which he has no access, the interiorities of the men around him? Functioning as a prosthetic voice, Ishmael sometimes records, and at other times invents, the thoughts of the Pequod's crew. I deploy Volosinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* to understand both the social nature of language and the nature of free indirect discourse—understandings that will help me to account for Ishmael's problematic narrative voice.

In "Verbal Interaction," Volosinov argues against a model of language rooted in individual subjectivism—that which takes a speaker's inner utterance as the source of linguistic meaning and semantics (93). Insisting on the social nature of language, Volosinov asserts that, "verbal interaction is the basic reality of language" (94). Individual subjectivism begins with the speaker's internal experience and its utterance, but Volosinov argues that, "there is no such thing as experience outside [an] embodiment in signs" and that "the location of the organizing and formative center (of inner speech) is not within...but outside" (85). Social structures organize and determine a person's language-comprised interiority. As a result of social orientation, every utterance is "determined by...its immediate social situation" (85). Even in the case of an absent addressee, Volosinov says, "an addressee is presupposed in the person, so to speak, of a normal representative of the social group to which the speaker belongs" (85). Language's social nature renders each expression socially available and never entirely private.

After investigating language as a whole, Volosinov explores how individual words function. Every word has an addressee, and so each word "*is a two sided act...determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant*" (86 emphasis his). Thus word meanings can change, depending on who speaks and who listens. In Volosinov's account, language is the

primary route to interaction with another person. He claims, “a word is a bridge thrown between myself and another” (86). Understanding requires that both speaker and listener actively engage with the words, thus, “dialogism” defines language (95). Yet word meanings also depend on “the immediate social situation and the broader social milieu” (86). Language’s social nature originates not only with a speaker addressing a listener, but also stems from the social structures in which those people live, which structure both how they use language, and the prior content of the word (or “theme” (100)).

In ‘Quasi-Direct Discourse,’ Volosinov applies his social theory of language to literature in particular. The phenomenon of what we recognize as “free indirect discourse” originates with the advent of silent reading, the only mode that grants access to “the multiveiledness and voice-defying complexity of intonational structures” (156). Concluding that “free indirect discourse” constitutes more than just a “mixture” of voices (qtd on 142), Volosinov argues that it results in “a completely *new*, positive tendency in active reception of another person’s utterance, a *special direction* in which the dynamics of the interrelationship between reporting and reported speech moves” (142 emphasis his). Free indirect discourse requires more than that one character report what another says—it occupies a space in between the distinct voices. In the multi-vocal space, a “single linguistic construction [emerges] within which the accents of two differently oriented voices are maintained” (144). Yet as the free indirect narrator sidles up to the perceptual purview of a character’s consciousness, her move causes one voice to “[impose] upon the reported utterance its own accents, which collide and interfere with the accents in the reported utterance” (154). Thus, literature, via free-indirect discourse, may become the site at which the social nature of language is dramatized: free-indirect discourse performs how words and voices occupy other voices and words, yielding divided or severally valenced signs.

Ishmael himself holds multiple vocal positions. The novel begins even before his famous instruction, “Call me Ishmael,” with an ‘Etymology’ of the word “whale” (7) and ‘Extracts,’ an anthology of literary whales (8-17). Ishmael takes on the characters of “a late consumptive usher to a grammar school” (7) and a “sub-sub-librarian” (8) as he records his findings. Later, in the same inflection, he will report his collected knowledge concerning whale measurements—data that he received, after the Pequod’s destruction, from “Tranquo, king of Tranque, one of the Arsacides” (344). Ishmael establishes himself as a scholar and an archivist, skills that allow him to gather and store a knowledge-base from which to write his whaling narrative.

In an alternative capacity, Ishmael frequently acts as an amanuensis for Ahab. For example, in ‘The Deck,’ when the carpenter transforms Queequeg’s coffin into a life buoy, the text contains what appears to be a stage direction: “Ahab to himself” (396). Ishmael then records that Ahab says, “A life buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver!” (396). The stage directions indicate that the text wishes to dramatize what would appear to be Ahab’s soliloquy about immortality. Volosinov tells us that no man ever addresses only himself, and that speakers always speak with a listener in mind; putting “Ahab to himself” in the stage directions dramatizes an interior conversation: Ahab may be speaking to himself, but his speech implies a present listener, above and beyond Ishmael. Consequently, in this instance Ishmael’s reporting of Ahab’s speech does not exemplify free indirect discourse. Ishmael’s and Ahab’s voices remain separate, and Ishmael does not endeavor to impose his own accent or intonation onto Ahab’s language.

Yet at other times, the novel deploys free indirect discourse, allowing Ishmael access to Ahab’s interiority in an unexpected way. I return to the paragraph earlier quoted at length, the moment when Ahab shatters his leg upon leaving the Samuel Enderby. Ishmael insists multiple

times that he reports that which Ahab “thought.” He gives an example of this when he claims, concerning Ahab, “it remained a mystery to some, why it was, that for a certain period, both before and after the sailing of the Pequod, he had hidden himself away” (355). Yet Ishmael confidently concludes, “that direful mishap [losing his leg] was at the bottom of his temporary recluseness” (355). The simple nature of the sentence contrasts with the others filling the paragraph (see my page 16), indicating Ishmael’s belief that he has solved the puzzle of Ahab’s hiddenness. Ishmael claims to know Ahab’s private motivations for his seclusive behavior—actions that resist understanding. Yet the socially oriented nature of interiorities, and Ishmael’s proximity to his captain, grant him access to Ahab’s inner thoughts. In Ishmael’s insistence that he knows Ahab’s thoughts, Ishmael approaches Ahab’s socially constructed consciousness, and articulates it in an attempt to understand him, thus providing an example of the free indirect discourse that fills the novel.

Ishmael seems confidently to proclaim Ahab’s thoughts, but a close examination of the text exposes Ishmael’s concerns about his capacity to represent Ahab’s consciousness accurately. When Ishmael contemplates Ahab’s habit of hiding away, he uses the phrase “not to hint of this” twice in one paragraph, followed by explanations of that about which he purports not to hint, indicating his desire to veil the assertions he makes. In a similar way, when Ishmael struggles to understand the “tormented spirit” that inhabits Ahab while he sleep-walks, he describes it as “a ray of living light, to be sure” (170). Yet Ishmael’s insistence on his certainty (“to be sure”) implies that he questions his own understanding of Ahab, despite the reach of that understanding.

While Ishmael at times interrogates his *accuracy* in narrating Ahab’s interiority, he does not have access at all to the interiorities of the crewmembers. Ishmael’s account of the carpenter

(addressed on my pages 12-13), describes the artisan without entering into his interiority. Of the carpenter Ishmael claims:

For nothing was this man more remarkable, than for a certain impersonal stolidity as it were; impersonal, I say; for it so shaded off into the surrounding infinite of things, that it seemed one with the general stolidity discernible in the whole visible world; which while pauselessly active in uncounted modes, still eternally holds its peace, and ignores you, though you dig foundations for cathedrals. (357)

In calling the carpenter “impersonal,” Ishmael describes the artisan in the terms of his experience of him, and indicates that he does not have direct access to him. Perhaps the starkest distinction between Ishmael narrating for the carpenter and Ishmael narrating for Ahab can be located in his phrase “I say,” which stands in contradistinction to Ishmael’s claim that he knows what “Ahab thought.” Ishmael reports on his experience of the carpenter, and does not sidle up to the artisan’s consciousness as he does with Ahab. Ishmael narrates *for* the crew, but not *through* free-indirect discourse—no evidence can be found for the collision of voices and consciousnesses when he writes about the crew. Such narrative distinctions ultimately reveal Ishmael’s proximity to Ahab and isolation from other members of the crew. Through Ahab, Ishmael explores the structures of value production and its pursuit, yet his inability to associate with the crew severs him from a detailed understanding of those very laborers who create value.

Despite Ishmael’s incapacity to enter the minds of the crew, he finds solace in his relationship with Queequeg. In ‘The Counterpane,’ Ishmael meets Queequeg for the first time and feels hesitant and fearful, yet during their first night together they sleep in the same bed, and Ishmael says he wakes up with, “Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I was his wife” (36). By addressing the reader with

“you had almost thought,” Ishmael acknowledges that it may appear as though they are wed, but indicates that he holds even Queequeg at some distance from himself. Despite the space between them, Ishmael still relates to others without transforming them into an extension of his will—Ishmael simply enjoys the pleasure of Queequeg’s company, a feat of which Ahab seems incapable. Ishmael perceives his social relations in new ways that brings him comfort, figured by Queequeg as his wife, yet also refuses to maintain cognitive and perceptual proximity to Queequeg, that is—to lay his voice beside the harpooner’s voice.

Upon waking with Queequeg’s arm around him, Ishmael contemplates a childhood memory of feeling the embrace of a phantom arm around him in bed. He recalls that he, “had been cutting up some caper or other—I think it was trying to climb up the chimney, as I had seen a little sweep do a few days previous” (37). The context of the memory establishes his propertied social standing as a child: he had a “little room in the third floor,” and sequestered in his room he heard, “gay voices all over the house” (37), a detail that suggests the presence of servants. Climbing up the chimney would turn Ishmael’s skin black, dissociating him from the house and positing links to slavery. His name further solidifies his transubstantiation—the biblical Ishmael was the son of a slave. Punishing him for associating himself with a lower social class, and to a certain extent, with slavery, his stepmother sends him to his room, where he experiences a visit from a “supernatural hand” (37).

In *Monsters of the Market*, McNally quotes Shildrick, for whom, “monsters [are] signifiers of the radical destabilization of the binary processes of identity and difference” (qtd on 10). Ishmael refers to the “supernatural hand” as a “silent form or phantom,” which leads him to be “frozen with the most awful fears” (37). While the phantom hand could merely result from a child’s wild imagination, this reader understands the hand as a monster created by way of

Ishmael's transgressive boundary crossing. In attempting to change his social class, Ishmael forces the propertied class to encounter the exploited laboring class—the phantom hand (an instrument of labor) constitutes the consequential monster. Ishmael recalls his social transversal because of Queequeg's loving hand—while Ishmael proves able to transform his social relations, and finds some comfort in so doing, ultimately those social relations horrify him, providing an explanation for why he maintains distance between himself and Queequeg. Yet after recounting his dream, Ishmael asserts, “now, take away the awful fear, and my sensations at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in their strangeness, to those which I experienced upon waking up and seeing Queequeg's pagan arm thrown around me” (38). A truly embodied relationship with Queequeg, in contrast to the ephemeral experience he had with the supernatural hand, recasts Ishmael's anxiety towards social relations, and invites him into a meaningful and transformative relationship.

‘The Monkey-Rope’ explores Ishmael's dependence on Queequeg. Ishmael describes the process of removing the blubber from the whale, a process which requires Queequeg to stand on the whale's back as the carcass hangs next to the ship. The monkey-rope, “was fast at both ends; fast to Queequeg's broad canvas belt, and fast to my narrow leather one” (255), and “should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake” (255). In contrast to Ahab, Ishmael accepts radical contingency—his body and life depend on Queequeg. Yet Ishmael does not despair over this: rather, he calls the situation “humorously perilous” (255), experiencing pleasure in his relationship with Queequeg, though that linkage might lead to his death.

Perhaps extending or intensifying his description of his relationship with Queequeg in ‘The Monkey-Rope’ (Ch. 72), in ‘A Squeeze of the Hand’ (Ch. 94), Ishmael imagines his

utopian linkage to the crew as a whole, but even as he does so, encounters the manner in which the structures of capital may thwart amicable social relations. Together with his crew-mates he squeezes globules of oil so that it will remain liquid; in doing so, he “mistakes” the hands of his coworkers, “for the gentle globules[,] such an unbounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget (322-323). He imagines relating to members of the industrial class without conflict, which leads Ishmael to plead that they should, “squeeze [themselves] into each other” (323), dissolving even the physical boundaries between individual workers. In “Universal Thump: The Redemptive Epistemology of Touch in *Moby-Dick*,” Lisa Anne Robertson claims that Melville presents Ishmael with “physical contact with other human beings” as a remedy for his “philosophical quandaries” (5). For Robertson, ‘A Squeeze of the Hand’ explores the way touch, “staves off the insanity of isolation in an infinite and unknowable cosmos” (19). Yet even within this chapter, Ishmael experiences confusion about the world around him. In “mistaking their hands for the gentle globules,” he goes so far as to perceive a worker and the commodity that the worker produces as interchangeable. Even in Ishmael’s idealized world, money (the purposive form of the commodity) mediates between men—they cannot interact with each other apart from their labor. While Ishmael finds human connection, the relationships cannot be realized outside of the processes of commodification and the abstraction of human labor.

Despite the problems Ishmael encounters in imagining ideal social relations, ultimately his choice to tie himself to Queequeg will save his life. In the epilogue, Ishmael describes the moment when, “owing to its great buoyancy, rising with great force, the coffin life-buoy shot lengthwise from the sea, fell over, and floated by my side. Buoyed up by that coffin, for almost one whole day and night, I floated on a soft and dirge-like main” (427). The coffin’s force and providential proximity makes its appearance seem purposive; even in his death Queequeg

supports Ishmael, helping him to live. While ultimately, Ishmael cannot find a way to escape entirely Ahab's will, as that will extends through the crew, causing the ship to go down in its pursuit of the white whale, his ability to maintain social relations even as the structures of capital hinder him provides an alternative understanding and mode of being that leads to life, rather than death.

Conclusion

Given that the Pequod's crew realizes the danger they face in chasing Moby-Dick, why don't they try to stop Ahab? Starbuck, on first hearing Ahab's plan to hunt the white whale, resists. Yet ultimately, Ahab renders him silent, and except for his frantic pleadings in 'The Symphony,' he takes no action against his captain. During a storm, Starbuck must report to Ahab any change in the Pequod's course: upon doing so, he contemplates the rack of muskets kept near Ahab's cabin. Starbuck asks himself, "shall this crazed old man [Ahab] be tamely suffered to drag a whole ship's company down to doom with him?—Yes, it would make him the wilful murderer of thirty men and more, if this ship come to any deadly harm" (387). I argue that in ruminating on Ahab's guilt, Starbuck works through his own responsibility to the crew—"him" refers both to Ahab and Starbuck thinking of himself. If Starbuck "tamely suffers" Ahab's commands, allowing for the possibility of deadly harm, Starbuck himself could be considered guilty in their shared death. Starbuck continues his hypothetical musings and asks, "is heaven a murderer when its lightning strikes a would-be murderer in his bed, tinding sheets and skin together?—And would I be a murderer, then if—" (387), but he then places the musket he has held back in the rack. Starbuck cannot rebel against Ahab, neither can he bring himself fully to articulate his idea of killing Ahab; his "then if" realizes no conclusion.

While Starbuck fails to stop Ahab, an act that would amount to a mutiny, the novel retains an awareness of the possibility of such an act on such a whale ship. In 'The Town-Ho's Story,' Ishmael recounts the story of a mutiny that happened on another whaler. Aboard the Town-Ho, the first mate Radney repeatedly mistreats a crewmember named Steelkilt; their tense relationship culminates with Radney telling Steelkilt to sweep the deck, a task beneath Steelkilt's place in the maritime hierarchy. In response, Steelkilt hits Radney with a, "hammer [that]

touched the cheek; the next instant the lower jaw of the mate was stove in his head; he fell on the hatch spouting blood like a whale” (204-205). Rather than using the possessive pronoun “his,” Ishmael uses “the” (“the cheek”), depersonalizing the experience—the phrase “the lower jaw of the mate” again separates Radney from his body. The creation of a distance between the mate and his body implies that the threat is not to Radney himself, but rather the power he holds, the power threatened by the pain he experiences in his body. In comparing Radney’s body to a whale, Steelkilt attacks not the man himself, but the mode of production in which they work. Through attempting mutiny, Steelkilt not only fights the ship’s hierarchy, but also the structures of capital that motivate their voyage. While Steelkilt’s mutiny fails when his fellow rebels betray him, the Town-Ho story’s presence in the novel indicates that Ishmael could conceive different reactions to Ahab’s commands: rather than the crew’s willing obedience, or Starbuck’s silent hesitancy, a crewmember might have physically resisted hunting Moby-Dick.

Why then does Ishmael remain silent with regard to the prospect of mutiny aboard the Pequod? The answer resides in the way Ishmael hears the Town Ho’s story. While Ahab and the mates knew that the Town-Ho encountered Moby-Dick, they were not told that Steelkilt’s mutiny preceded Radney’s death. Ishmael claims that the crew learned the story when Tashtego, “rambled in his sleep, and revealed so much of it in that way, that when he was wakened he could not well withhold the rest” (200). After hearing the entire story, the crew “kept the secret among themselves so that it never transpired abaft the Pequod’s main-mast” (200). Even Tashtego seems reluctant to articulate possible mutiny—he can only reveal the story while unconscious. Though the crew knew Steelkilt’s story while laboring on the Pequod, Ishmael narrates the story from Lima after the Pequod’s sinking (200). Ishmael’s narrative proximity to Ahab rather than to the crew precludes his reporting the story as Tashtego recounted it. By

implication, Ishmael fails to present rebellion against Ahab as a viable possibility for the Pequod's crew. For Ishmael, mutiny becomes thinkable only in hindsight.

Ishmael's belated realization of mutiny as a possible course of action demonstrates the importance of speech and of choice as to whom one listens—the voice he listens to, Ahab, conditions how he understands his agency, and the agency of those around him. Mutiny finds voice only in a sub-semantic whisper. Volosinov refers to words such as these as “novels without heroes” (92), ideas that fail to find full formation. Although mutiny had its hero in Tashtego, the only person able to articulate possible resistance, *Moby-Dick* is not his novel. My project has engaged in a close reading of *Moby-Dick* because even at the local level of sentence and phrase, the novel dramatizes how an interplay of voices forms narrative, and encourages its reader to listen at the fringe of those voices. *Moby-Dick* requires that its reader pay scrupulous attention to its language, and in so doing, teaches her the consequences of valorizing particular voices and of silencing others.

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