

ISHMAEL'S CALL, AHAB'S PEN: ORALITY AND LITERACY IN *MOBY-DICK*

by

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(Under the Direction of Douglas Anderson)

ABSTRACT

A consideration of *Moby-Dick* is also a reconsideration of the sonic and written components of language. The book is fascinated with the ways in which language structures consciousness. It presents a highly verbal crew, a wayward and ambiguous narrator, and a driven, hyper-literate sea captain to engage with the very nature of reading, thinking, and communicating. This essay moves through a consideration of the effect of letters on the mind, encountering Walter Ong and Roland Barthes along the way and explores the differences between fixed and fluid consciousness and between speech and writing in *Moby-Dick*. My end is to understand the type of reader that the book shapes for itself and its status as a multi-media creation. It promulgates a relationship with language that is liberating, open and expansive, and ultimately, reproductive.

INDEX WORDS: Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Walter Ong, Roland Barthes, Post-structuralism, Multi-media, Primary orality, Chirography, Typography, Secondary Orality, Orality, Literacy, Writerly text, Play, Cetology, Sound, Speech, Reading, Writing

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DEDICATION

This one goes out to all the whales, including—but not limited to—the Folio Whales, the Octavo Whales, and the Duodecimo Whales. That is, the Sperm Whale, the Right Whale, the Fin Back Whale, the Hump-backed Whale, the Razor Back Whale, the Sulphur Bottom Whale, the Grampus, the Black Fish, the Narwhale, the Thrasher, the Killer, the Huzza Porpoise, the Algerine Porpoise, the Mealy-mouthed Porpoise, the Bottle-Nose, the Junk, the Pudding-Headed, the Cape, the Leading, the Cannon, the Scragg, the Coppered, the Elephant, the Iceberg, the Quog, the Blue, &c.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
1 ISHMAEL'S CALL, AHAB'S PEN: ORALITY AND LITERACY IN <i>MOBY-DICK</i>	1
NOTES.....	38
WORKS CITED.....	41

CHAPTER 1

ISHMAEL'S CALL, AHAB'S PEN: ORALITY AND LITERACY IN *MOBY-DICK*

The academic quickly learns to approach *Moby-Dick* with humility. Its front matter denigrates the bookworm, the usher, the sub-sub-librarian. Grammars, etymologies, and quotations, it asserts, are the disciplines of those “threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain,” “that hopeless, sallow tribe which no wine of this world will ever warm.”¹ Scholarship cannot be a “veritable gospel”; the possibility always lurks within it that “while you take in hand to school others ... you deliver that which is not true” (5). *Moby-Dick*, then, requires of the academic a particular approach—that is, it requires no particular approach at all. One cannot look for the truth about *Moby-Dick* without missing the point. Like the white whale himself, the book will not consent to be harpooned by a particular argument or thesis. In its wake, it drags a thousand sunken criticisms that are twisted into its flesh yet cannot pierce its heart. In the academic field, Ishmael's warning proves as true as on the open sea: “there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like ... Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan” (352). The sub-sub scholar must relinquish his pertinacity. Even though *Moby-Dick* will not consent to be summed up or pinned down, it will permit an encounter. It encourages readers to follow its wake and explore its ways, to read and also to listen.

Thus, a consideration of *Moby-Dick* is also a reconsideration of the sonic and written components of language. The book is fascinated with the ways in which a person's consciousness is constructed through his relationship with language. It presents, as I will argue, a highly verbal

crew, a wayward and ambiguous narrator, and a driven, hyper-literate sea captain to engage with the very nature of reading, thinking, and communicating. The current of this essay, then, will move through a consideration of the effect of letters on the mind, encountering Walter Ong and Roland Barthes along the way. The course will run through an exploration of the differences between fixed and fluid consciousness and between speech and writing in *Moby-Dick*. My end is to understand the type of reader that the book shapes for itself. It promulgates a relationship with language that is liberating, open and expansive, and ultimately, reproductive.

Treatments of language in *Moby-Dick* abound (as do treatments of *Moby-Dick* in general). I do not pretend that my consideration of these treatments has been exhaustive; however, I would like to point out that many of these studies, such as Louise K. Barnett's *Authority and Speech*, have been grounded in speech-act theory, a classificatory schema.ⁱⁱ I am less interested in classifying what types of speech take place in the novel and more interested in how the novel grapples with what language—and its component part, speech—is on an essential level. I am looking through the same scope as poststructuralist studies, such as James Guetti's *The Limits of Metaphor*, but I find the conclusion that “Melville's final metaphorical statement [is] that all language ... is artificial, that the ineffable must exist as such, and its reality cannot be perceived” more distracting than illuminating.ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Carmello's *Silverless Mirrors*^{iv}, which positions *Moby-Dick* as a postmodern text, is insightful in its consideration of subjectivity and authorship in the novel (by way of Barthes and Derrida) but falls short in its conclusion that *Moby-Dick* represents a kind of frustrated dialectic oscillation between the authority of the work and the fluidity of the text.^v I reject this postmodern fragmentation in favor of a reading that focuses on the life-affirming wholeness of *Moby-Dick*, which is tied to oral/aural media.

Although I am far from the first to consider language in *Moby-Dick*, I may be the first to examine it alongside Ong's *Orality and Literacy*. His vocabulary provides me with a particular advantage over critics who consider language without discussing the sonic, written, and textual components—the media—that comprise it. As Marshall McLuhan, Ong's mentor, wrote in *Understanding Media*, “the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph.”^{vi} Criticism needs this larger vocabulary for understanding the workings of language to prevent ambiguity. For example, in his “*Moby-Dick*, Work of Art,” Walter E. Bezanson notices the complexity of language in the novel but fails to unpack it fully. To him, there seem to be two Ishmaels, one is “at his desk trying to explain himself to himself and whoever will listen” and the other is “aboard the Pequod doing his whaleman's work.”^{vii} But Bezanson is at a loss to say whether the first Ishmael is writing or narrating and to discern the difference between the two acts. Thus, he concludes on a hopelessly convoluted note: “The great thing about fiction, which is simply the telling of a story in written words, is that it is fiction.”^{viii} Not only is this statement obviously equivocal, but it also conflates “telling” with “written words.” My goal is to demonstrate that these two things are far from “simply” the same. By approaching language as a composite of interrelated media, I hope to understand the force of the novel in a new way.

Moby-Dick concerns itself with these media complications. Just as they are an admonishment to the academic, the extracts are also a playful mixing of source materials, a curiosity cabinet of both traditional and unusual references. Ironically, the sources of the quotes are perhaps more interesting than their content. “Other or Ochter's verbal narrative taken down from his mouth by King Alfred” is a prime example of the wild intricacies of media that the section explores (10). First, linguistic confusion surrounds the name of the speaker in question.

The medium of the letter is not wholly suited to portraying the medium of sound. Similarly, “verbal,” “narrative,” and “taken down” do not seem properly qualified for one another. On the whole, the citation suggests that the text has been removed literally from the mouth of Other/Other as one might take an object off a shelf or pull a tooth (teeth happen to be the commodity that the quotation discusses). The extracts also toy with translation, the attempt to voice one language through another. The book irreverently references Francis Bacon's *Translation of Certain Psalms in English Verse* as “*Lord Bacon's Version of the Psalms*,” highlighting both Bacon's fallibility and the possibility that he has taken liberties with his materials in the process of moving them from one form to another (10).

Juxtaposition of quotations in the extracts is also fruitful ground for inter-media play:

'By art is created that great Leviathan, called a Commonwealth or State--(in Latin, Civitas) which is but an artificial man.'

Opening sentence of Hobbes's Leviathan.

'Silly Mansoul swallowed it without chewing, as if it had been a sprat in the mouth of a whale.'

Pilgrim's Progress. (11)

Both of these attributions are false. The first is from *Leviathan*, but it is not the first sentence, and the second is not from *Pilgrim's Progress* but from one of Bunyan's lesser-known works. The two books are clearly being toyed with, and the arrangement is thought provoking in terms of their generic difference and thematic similarity. Most importantly, the arrangement suggests that the “artificial man” with which the first leaves off finds its correlative in “Silly Mansoul.” An act of translation is going on here, as if the second quote might pick up where the first leaves off. While it is not the purpose of this essay to delve deeply into the strange intricacies of the

extracts, let it suffice to say that those intricacies exist. In addition to the media already mentioned here, the section includes dramatic dialogue, verse, letters, the uncertain attribution “Edmund Burke. (somewhere.),” conversations, narratives, references, etchings, speeches, newspaper accounts, “‘Something’ unpublished,” and songs (15,21). Just in its opening pages, the book suspends the reader in a complicated web of various materials, somewhere between sound and text.

My thoughts about media in *Moby-Dick* proceed largely from a consideration of *Orality and Literacy*. Ong defines writing—and its descendant, type—as a technology that derives from orality: “Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. ‘Reading’ a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination ... Writing can never dispense with orality.”^{ix} Inevitably, at the heart of any book is speech. Certainly, *Moby-Dick* is no exception. As I will discuss later, “Call me Ishmael” is an invitation to speak.^x Ong goes on to explore various cultures’ relationships with orality and writing. He designates a culture whose relationship with language has no concept of literacy or writing as one that is in a state of “primary orality.” He admits that “today primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effect. Still, to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality.”^{xi} Thus, it is possible for gradations of orality to exist within chirographic and typographic cultures (those who have writing and print technology, respectively). This spectrum of orality is important; understanding whether the sound or the letter predominates in a character’s psyche will prove to be revealing for an exploration of *Moby-Dick*.

Typographic cultures, those that have moved beyond manuscript culture and developed print technology, are furthest removed from primary orality. In oral/aural cultures, knowledge is stored in repetitive mnemonics and proverbs that are linked to rhythm, breathing, gesture, and the body. Knowledge is not a matter of what one can think but a matter of what one can remember. Conversely, for print cultures, knowledge is linked to the fact, a closed unit of meaning. The fact could not exist without typography, for it “encloses thought in thousands of copies of a work of exactly the same visual and physical consistency print is comfortable only with finality.”^{xii} The reproducibility of print gives the black marks upon the page an air of closure and permanence. Type and the epistemology that it produces suggest a fixity of knowledge and the existence of accessible truth. Ahab, as I will discuss, is a product of a typographic culture. His epistemology is consistent with a belief in the authority of print.

While a culture's distance from primary orality is a matter of gradations, some effects of literacy are irreversible since they fundamentally alter the workings of the mind: “Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form.”^{xiii} The literate mind operates on a different register from the oral mind; aided by writing and text, consciousness can partake in some degree of “sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths that is impossible without writing and reading.”^{xiv} Essentially, abstraction is the product of literacy: “writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set.”^{xv} This split between exteriority and interiority is particularly compelling. For the literate, the external world becomes personal. Thinking about something is akin to writing on that thing, although this writing can only be seen

by the consciousness that created it. Literacy creates the potential for authorship, not just in the sense of putting pen to paper or finger to keyboard but in the sense that a person can construct an internal narrative of his own experience that is both abstract and intimately personal, located nowhere but in his vision of the world around him. As I continue, I will consider whether the sense of fixity that typography suggests affects the nature of abstract thought. I want to question how the seeming permanence of print knowledge might fuel an obsessive search for concrete manifestations of truth.

Typographic culture is by no means the opposite of oral/aural culture; rather, these markers are indefinite points on a spectrum of exposure to the letter. Manuscript and chirographic cultures exist between the oral and the typographic. Proceeding from a typographic outlook, a culture might enter a state of secondary orality, a hybrid mode in which orality is resurrected through the power of media technology. Electronic devices like telephones, radios, and televisions could not exist without the record-keeping, planning technology that is print, but the information they produce is aural. Ong links this resurgence in the relevance of sound to print culture to a growing sense of community and spontaneity. While secondary orality is a product of analytic thought, it is also a move away from the cold fixity of type towards something new, a multi-media phase, but what this new relationship with media will entail, Ong admits, is grounds for further study.

I find a preemptive continuation of Ong's thought on secondary orality in the work of Roland Barthes. Ong acknowledges the association between type and death that Barthes plays upon: "The dead flower, once alive, is the psychic equivalent of the verbal text. The paradox lies in the fact that the deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance."^{xvi} By contrast, in "The Death of the Author," Barthes

essentially unfixes the meaning of the printed word and links it back to the instantaneousness of the utterance. He resurrects the text at the expense of the author. By loosening print from the tyranny of authorial intention, Barthes contends that

it is language which speaks *writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, 'depiction' ... rather, it designates exactly what linguists call a performative, a rare verbal form ... in which the enunciation has no other content ... than the act by which it is uttered.^{xvii}

The focus of this passage is on multiple components of language (letter, sound, and also performance) working together to form a new mode of expression, a new relationship not just to the letter but to language as a whole. So although Barthes never talks about new media specifically, their centrality to his work is implicit. This new voice of language derives from secondary oral, multi-media modes. Barthes unfixes type, which for so long in typographic cultures has stood immovable. It exists and is meaningful only when the reader hears it as a sound in his mind. An experience with the authorial reign over writing has shown readers just how much more than a closed function of its author's purpose the printed word can be. The future that Barthes envisions for writing—the broadening of the field of interpretation, a “multiplicity [in which] everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*”—is the advent of secondary orality.^{xviii}

A consideration of orality and literacy in *Moby-Dick* falls along the Ong/Barthes spectrum detailed above. I want to begin by identifying the characters who cogitate in primary orality and then proceed accordingly through chirography, typography, and secondary orality (although this task will prove far more complicated than the linear trope of a spectrum suggests). Ostensibly, Queequeg is the most obvious character in whom to trace primary orality; after all,

when Ishmael enters the Whaleman's Chapel, he contends that “This savage was the only person present who seemed to notice my entrance; because he was the only one who could not read” (64). True as this observation might be, it belies Queequeg's intense curiosity about and association with the letter, not the least evidenced in the writing that covers his body. For this reason, I will reserve my focus on Queequeg until later and begin instead by looking at the orality of the crew in general.

It is unlikely that any of the crew could be classified as primarily oral in the true sense of the word—that is, never having been exposed to writing at all. For one thing, they all must sign Bildad and Peleg's shipping documents in order to work on the Pequod, so it is certain that they all have some experience of the letter. But whether or not they can *actually* read is somewhat of a technicality here. My assertion is simply that the majority of the crew is highly verbal and interacts in a way that suggests they use their oral/aural faculties far more than those that involve writing. Residual primary orality inheres in the crew.

In the first place, whaling is an oral/aural occupation. “What do ye do when ye see a whale men?” Ahab demands in the chapter entitled “The Quarter-Deck.” “Sing out for him,” is the crew's reply. “And what tune is it ye pull to, men?” he queries. “A dead whale or a stove boat!” the crew responds in unison (217). The question and answer performance between Ahab and his men is a component of primary oral culture in which “the individual's reaction is not expressed as simply individual or 'subjective' but rather as encased in the communal reaction.”^{xix} This exchange also includes a mnemonic device, the sailors' “tune” (this word in itself is a nod to the importance of sound to their task). Mnemonics are a fundamental component of the epistemological structure in oral cultures. It is clear that oral/aural exchange is at the heart of the

crew's identity. Whether there are literate sailors among them, it is difficult to know. As a unit, though, they function within the realm of primary orality.

Sound drives the crew on in the midst of the whale hunt; at the most crucial moments, sight—the sense associated with writing—becomes irrelevant for all but the harpooners: “the oarsmen must put out their eyes ... they must have no organs but their ears ... in these critical moments” (299). They rely on the sound of the mates' voices to drive them on. The content of the mates' words is not of importance in the whale boats; rather, their emphasis is on the medium of sound itself.^{xx} They strive to make a corporeal connection with the men through rhythm and repetition. “Pull, pull, my fine hearts-alive; pull, my children; pull so, so easy, easy; don't be in a hurry—don't be in a hurry so, so, so pull, will ye? Pull, can't ye? Pull, wont ye?” Stubb exhorts his crew (292). Flask has a similarly repetitive style of command: “Beach me, beach me on their black backs, boys Lay on me—lay on me! O Lord, Lord!” (298). Starbuck, on the other hand, has a very different style of communicating with his crew, one that is much more in keeping with his “sobriety and fortitude” (158). He produces as little sound as possible in a series of whispers, and what is represented of his dialogue is choppy and unsustained, broken up by a conversation with Stubb. Starbuck is far less oral than his counterparts; correlatively, he is the only mate whose boat does not independently kill a whale (although Queequeg, his harpooner, does graze one). In the whale boats, as in primary oral culture, speech is a source of power and inspiration that focuses the sailors' attention on the present moment.

Chapter 40, “Midnight, Forecastle,” also emphasizes the centrality of speech and sound to the crew's communications. With the exception of the soliloquies, it is one of only two chapters presented in dramatic form. (The other is Chapter 112, “Ahab and the Carpenter,” and its form is only loosely dramatic.) It is a compendium of sound, including songs, expletives, dialects, and

onomatopoeias. “Legs! Legs!” shouts the French sailor (232). “Bang it . . . Rig it, dig it, stig it, quig it,” rattles the Azore sailor (233). For the most part, this chapter is sound without sense, or rather, the sense of the uproar is in the moment. Each cry of “Crack, crack” or “Crish, crash!” imitates the momentary noise of the ship at sea (236, 238). This dramatic scene attests to the spontaneity of speech and its close connection to the “human lifeworld” found in primary oral cultures.^{xxi} The sailors' copious noisemaking correlates to the demands of the ship, a constantly changing environment that moves from dancehall to boxing ring to squall scene in just a few short lines, and the dramatic form of the chapter emphasizes the centrality of sound to the primary oral whaling culture.

*

To cast Ahab as a print-based thinker is to make a contentious claim. After all, decades of scholarship have emphasized his abilities as an orator.^{xxii} Ahab speaks, certainly, but his diction is abstract. As I will endeavor to show, his message is often one that could not be conceived in a world without writing, and his hold over the crew is based only ostensibly on oration; his main grip on them is internal and psychological. Ahab is a creature of thought that comes from writing, and his entire epistemology is structured around the air of factual permanence that print produces. Ahab's tragic flaw is a sense of deluded authorship. The fixity of print has altered his consciousness in such a way that he attempts to make the world around him signify in the same set way as a word upon a page and, ultimately, fails.

Ahab's orations may be striking and significant in number, but equally numerous—although less well known—are the ways in which Ahab's relationship with speech is the result of internal, abstract meditations. As Ong points out, “once the chirographically initiated feel for precision and analytic exactitude is interiorized, it can feed back into speech, and does.”^{xxiii}

Ahab's speech is the product of this interiorization. What's more, it is a ruse; his orations are the result of an analytic consideration of how best to maintain the allegiances of the crew: "Ahab plainly saw that he must still in a good degree continue true to the natural, nominal purpose of the Pequod's voyage; observe all *customary usages*;^{xxiv} and not only that, but force himself to evince all his well known passionate interest in the general pursuit of his profession" (286).

These usages are both the common ship rituals and particular ways of using language, and while Ahab has factual knowledge about them, his use of them is forced. The speech that is natural to him is of a different kind:

there were times when, owing to peculiar circumstances connected with events hereafter to be detailed, he addressed [the crew] in unusual terms, whether of condescension or *in terrorem*, or otherwise; yet even Captin Ahab was by no means unobservant of the paramount forms and usages of the sea.

Nor, perhaps, will it fail to be eventually perceived, that behind those forms and usages, as it were, he sometimes masked himself; incidentally making use of them for other and more private ends than they were legitimately intended to subserve. That certain sultanism of his brain ... became incarnate in an irresistible dictatorship. For be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume the practical, available supremacy over other men, without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base. (198)

This "dictatorship" describes his influence over the crew, but it also represents the "sultanism of his mind" that dominates his external forms of expression. He must strategically repress his drive toward intellectual speech as one "entrench[ing]" himself in a battle in order to connect with the

sailors, although his efforts are sometimes confounded by his predisposition to slip into the “unusual terms” of the analytic mind.

Ahab makes an intellectual decision to engage with the crew on an oral level so that they will submit to his greater aspiration of pursuing Moby Dick, even at the risk of forgoing a larger profit from the voyage. Thus, when he provides the crew's cues, what he calls “external arts and entrenchments,” in the oral ritual of “The Quarter-Deck,” discussed above, he is participating in a calculated performance that results from a “precautionary motive” (198, 286). Indeed, it is a performance that requires an entire day of “pacing the deck, with the same intense bigotry of purpose in his aspect” to execute (216), and it is negotiated first through the crew's common usage, the verbal swearing, and then through an abstract, symbolic, eucharistic ritual that is meaningful to Ahab but a matter of “silently obeying the order” for the crew (224). In fact, while members of the crew speak frequently during the swearing, Ahab's voice is the only one that sounds after his cry of “The measure! the measure!” that hastens in the “brimming pewter” that begins the eucharist (223). Through the verbal swearing, a matter of common usages, Ahab engages the crew on a level that is meaningful to them. With the ceremony that follows, he fulfills his own need for symbolic resonances that the sultanism of his brain demands.

“The Quarter-Deck” has its counterpart in “The Candles,” in which the cognitive differences between Ahab and the crew are especially apparent and in which Ahab's analytic stratagems are put to the test. At the beginning of the chapter, Stubb evinces his oral, situational thinking, based not on analysis but on spontaneous responses to the particular state of the world around him:

“The sea will have its way. Stubb, for one, can't fight it. You see, Mr. Starbuck, a wave has such a great long start before it leaps, all round the world it runs, and

then comes the spring! But for me, all the start I have to meet it is just across the deck here. But never mind; it's all fun: so the old song says;"--(*sings.*)

Oh! jolly is the gale

And a joker is the whale

A' flourishin his tail,--

Such a funny, sporty, gamy, jesty, joky, hoky-poky lad, is the Ocean, oh! (636)

While other forces, such as the wave, operate on a grander time scale, Stubb responds only to what he sees at any moment on deck, and his consciousness is dominated by whatever sounds or songs happen to be passing through it at the moment. Throughout the scene, Stubb “immediately shift[s] his tone” from light and bantering to panic-stricken and reverent as the situation demands (639). Stubb pleads with what he can see in front of him with cries of “the corpusants have mercy on us all!” (639). Ahab, on the other hand addresses his cries to what is abstract in the storm:

There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it. Oh, thou foundling fire, thou hermit immemorial, thou too has thy incommunicable riddle, thy participated grief. Here again with haughty agony, I read my sire. (643)

Ahab is frustrated by issues of legibility. He wants to “read” the “incommunicable riddle,” and he invokes the abstract concept of eternity. His concerns could not be more different from Stubb's much more immediate one.

Ahab engages with the supposed abstract progenitor of reality while the crew—represented by Stubb—confronts the material reality before them. Due to these differences in

thought, Ahab is momentarily unable to keep control of them. Their ways of thinking are so different that when they look at the lightning, they think they are seeing two different things. Primary oral cognition and chirographic cognition are at odds, and the crew moves to rebel against Ahab: “the panic-stricken crew instantly ran to the braces . . . they raised a half mutinous cry” (644). For a moment, Ahab has forgotten his plan to observe the crew's common usages, and his leadership nearly fails. To quell the mutiny, he threatens them with the harpoon, but more importantly, he reminds them of their pledge to him, saying “all your oaths to hunt the white whale are as binding as mine” (644). After his lapse into the abstract, Ahab recalls his resolve to engage the residual drive to oral culture in his men and succeeds in subduing them by recalling them to their own utterance, but all the same, Ahab has nearly loosed his grip on them. Common usages are not natural to his chirographic disposition; they are a ruse that he must maintain.

For all the drama of the speeches he does make, Ahab is often prone to silence or even a type of expression that cannot be rendered in words and is inaccessible even to Ishmael. When he dines with the mates, for example, Ahab “preside[s] like a mute, maned sea-lion . . . these cabin meals were somehow solemn meals, eaten in awful silence; and yet at table Ahab forbade not conversation; only he himself was dumb” (202). Except for when it suits his purpose, Ahab has no inclination towards speech. Similarly, he is predisposed to forgo gams—in which whaling captains and crews visit one another's ships and share news—under most circumstances: “he cared not to consort, even for five minutes, with any stranger captain, except he could contribute some of that information he so absorbingly sought” (316-317). As with the crew, he speaks with other captains only when he has something to gain by so doing—in the case of the crew, of course, he gains labor. With the captains, he stands to gain information. For Ahab, speech is not

community-building (as with the crew); rather, it is an extension of his own fixed, closed system of thought.

Ahab is so far removed from the spoken world that Ishmael observes a certain ineffability about the way he expresses himself. In “The First Lowering” chapter, in which the mates' verbal exhortations are so important, Ahab's words to his crew—if any at all—are inexpressible. They are either “out of hearing” or “omitted here [because] only the infidel sharks of the audacious seas may give ear to such words” (294, 298). Ahab is speaking a language that Ishmael cannot translate to the reader. Of course, there is the implication in the latter example that Ahab's vulgarity embarrasses the narrator, but Ishmael is never shy about relating improprieties in other instances. Rather, this instance is one of several in which Ahab is “too analytic to be verbally developed here” (286). He is so abstract and removed from the lifeworld of orality that he is unnarratable.

So Ahab, while he does speak often, is not a fundamentally oral thinker; rather, he expresses himself in a way that derives from a chirographic and typographic mindset. Writing and print produce hybrid beings with expanded consciousnesses. According to Ong, “writing is ... interiorized technology,” a “mechanical contrivance,” something “artificial” that humans have made a part of themselves (82). Ahab is the physical manifestation of this hybridity in *Moby-Dick*. His “steel skull” and his “whole high, broad form ... made of solid bronze” hint at his automaton mind (226, 186). His body is physically marked in the same way that writing has altered his thoughts: he is “branded” by a long scar that the sailors say runs across his entire body, and on his false leg he has contrived a “little oval slate, smoothed ivory, where he figures up the latitude”; he actually writes on his body (169, 602). The letter has become part of him.

Ahab is an expert reader and writer of charts and log-books, and his relationship with them shows how profoundly print has produced his consciousness. The end of his analyses of the data he has collected in Chapter 44, “The Chart,” is to “arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching certainties” (267). The notion of certainty here is derived from the closed, fact-based epistemological system that print creates, the epistemology of the textbook. Indeed, the highly representative nature of the chart demonstrates just how much such a document depends on “the deep interiorization of print ... which implements the use of fixed diagrammatic word-charts and other informational uses of neutral space,” in Ong's words.^{xxv} The concept of certainty is linked in Ahab's mind with printing and writing, although ironically, he often erases and redraws his previous pencil marks from his charts, indicating just how tenuous writing's hold on truth really is. Still, in Ahab's mind, assuredness—fixity, that is—comes from a consideration of the printed letter.

I want to employ vaguely some language of semiotics here to describe what the fixity of text entails. On a fundamental level, writing assures anyone who does not live in a primary oral culture that it means *something*. The sign inextricably comprises signifier and signified. True, the connection between the two components of the sign might be completely arbitrary, but that does not prevent a reading consciousness from assigning the sign some significance, even if it does so in uncertainty. What's more, the sign often promises a referent, an actual correlative to its abstract representation. Semiotics entails endless complications, but at its core, the discipline assures us—at least rudimentarily—that the relationship between signifier and signified is a given. As Ong writes, “chirographic and typographic folk find it convincing to think of the word ... as a 'sign' because 'sign' refers primarily to something visually apprehended ... etymologically, the 'object one follows.’”^{xxvi} That is, the letter positions itself as a fixed system of

representation that ultimately provides an appearance of some truth, even if it is only the truth of its own signification.

Ahab's internalization does not just entail the technology of writing and the habits of thought that it breeds; his consciousness is overrun with the fixity of the sign. According to Ishmael, Ahab's monomania derives from the time he spent in convalescence after the loss of his leg during which “his torn body and his gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad” (248). His soul and his body are fixed together. By contrast, Ishmael describes the “romantic” creative freedom that whaling affords as an “enchanted mood [in which] the spirit ebbs away to whence it came” (213, 214). Although the body, in this spiritless state, is left dangerously unattended so that the sailor at the mast-head risks falling to his death, the separation of the body and soul allows the sailor to intimately experience nature. Ahab is precluded from this experience; his soul is locked within his body—fused—just as the signifier is inseparable from the signified. He is “gnawed within and scorched without, with the infixed, unrelenting fangs of some incurable idea” (250 -251). As he gazes at the ocean, he does not experience the immersive freedom of Ishmael at the mast-head; rather, “there was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate unsunderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance” (170). Where other sailors are fluid, changing at each moment with their variable environment, Ahab is encased within his own mind and relentless in his will.

Ishmael sees evidence of Ahab's fixity—which stems from the fact-based epistemology of print—even in his outward aspect. The following takes place just before the verbal swearing in “The Quarter-Deck”:

And, so full of thought was Ahab, that at every uniform turn that he made ... you could almost see that thought turn in him as he turned, and pace in him as he

paced; so completely possessing him, indeed, that it all but seemed the inward mould of every outward movement.

“D'ye mark him, Flask?” whispered Stubb; “the chick that's in him pecks the shell. T'will soon be out.”

The hours wore on;--Ahab now shut up within his cabin; anon, pacing the deck, with the same intense bigotry of purpose in his aspect. (216)

Even Stubb can see that Ahab's oral expressions are the result of something internal and unknown to the crew. The sultanism of Ahab's mind “possess[es]” him. He stakes his identity on the correspondence between the inward and the outward, between the signifier and signified. His great ambition is to “strike through the mask” that comprises all visible objects, to see not just the signifier but the whole sign (220). His monomania, then, is an obsession with the fixity of the printed letter, the same surety that he strives to locate in the world around him. Ahab's madness stems from the same epistemological paradigm that he strives relentlessly to substantiate. His perpetual analysis—a tireless search for the fixed sign—would not be possible without the sign system, the writing technology that developed his proclivity for abstract thought and introspection.

Ahab's monomania spurs him to see the world as a text, but since, in the chirographic/typographic mindset, writing is a closed system, a text must have a definite author. This progenitor is beyond the fixity of his gaze, and to a man who values facts as Ahab does, indecipherability must be roused out. He sees himself unfairly taken captive by that unknown author:

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. 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. (221)

He similarly challenges the author's claims to authority as the corpusants burn atop the masts in Chapter 109, "The Candles." He addresses "the white flame [that] lights the way to the White Whale," either agent or principal of the author who lurks behind the pasteboard mask of the "all visible objects" in the "inert mental space" that Ahab longs to decipher (641, 221).^{xxvii} Twice he contends, "I own thy speechless, placeless power," the power of composition beyond the oral in the abstract realm of thought, which is akin to this same inert mental space beyond the mask (641, 642). He wants to confront text with text and inscribe his own message upon the author's text as a testament to his own power. He threatens, "of thy fire thou maddest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee" (642). He will fight fire with fire, sign with sign. Ahab's warpath—or path of religious veneration, depending on how one chooses to interpret his relationship with the authorial presence—will be one of textual interpretation. The *coup de grace*, he plans, will be an act of inscription, the killing of Moby Dick.

First, I want to reveal some of the ways in which Ahab treats the world around him as a text, and then I will consider how the slaying of Moby Dick would represent an act of inscription in which Ahab's custom-made harpoon becomes a pen and the whale's white flesh, the page. Early on in the voyage, Ahab reveals a deep-set belief in prophecy, a concept that suggests the future is already written. He believes he has access to the great text from which these predictions might derive: "The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. Now I prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one.

That's more than ye, ye great gods, ever were Come forth from behind your cotton bags!" (227). Ahab revels in what he perceives as his meta-textual understanding; he sees himself as a product, reader, and writer of the text, all in one. The gods themselves, who are removed from the text, do not possess this distinction. He casts himself as a grand accident in the removed author's narrative:

Swerve me? Ye cannot swerve me, else ye swerve yourselves! man has you there.
The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved
to run. Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under
torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the
iron way!" (227)

His idea that the gods might want to stop him and limit his power reveals that he sees himself as an authorial oversight, a bastard production with unintended consequences, a scourge on the author. This assertion is consistent with his identity as an orphan. Parentless “when he was only a twelvemonth old” (119), Ahab sees himself as someone who was overlooked by the grand plot yet irreversibly endowed—through some sort of negligence—with iron claims to his own authorial abilities that will enable him to inscribe his own will upon the world.

Before I proceed, a more in-depth consideration of the nature of prophecy might be useful. After all, prophets are often speakers, which might suggest that prophecy is an oral act and not a chirographic one. In this discussion, I do not want to deny the oral component of prophecy just as I do not wish to deny that Ahab makes speeches; rather, I want to emphasize the components of prophecy that are particularly chirographic. Prophets have served historically as both writers and interpreters of scriptures, acts that are squarely letter-based.^{xxviii} In *Moby-Dick*, when Gabriel of the Jeroboam wants to establish himself as the ship's prophet, he does so in

letters by “publish[ing] his manifesto, whereby he set himself forth as the deliverer of the isles of the sea and vicar-general of all Oceanica” (409). In Chapter 19, “The Prophet,” Elijah’s comments also tie prophecy to the letter. Ishmael casts Elijah in the chapter’s titular role, and although Elijah neither confirms nor denies that he is a prophet, he does discuss the fulfillment of past prophecy, and he invokes the notion of predestination when he says, “what’s to be, will be . . . it’s all fixed and arranged a’ready” (134). As a potential prophet figure, though, what is most useful about Elijah is his assertion that the “heavens” are “ineffable” (134).^{xxix} That is, they are outside the realm of utterance. If the future is discernible, it is so through the use of other faculties than the aural. As I have discussed, the concept of predestination suggests that the future is written in a space beyond the capacities of the lay person. The prophet, though, is literate in this hidden language. He is an interpreter, a reader.

With the notion of prophecy in mind, Ahab’s quest for *Moby Dick* is carried out through a search for signs that comprise the underlying text from which all prophecy proceeds, a reading, perhaps. Just as he scrutinizes his printed charts and log-books, he looks for signs to read in the world around him. He is loathe to confess his project of readership. He even denigrates Starbuck for suggesting that the signs he searches for exist: “Omen? Omen?—the dictionary! If the gods think to speak outright to man, they will honorably speak outright; not shake their heads, and give an old wives’ darling hint” (697). But these non-oral hints are exactly what Ahab looks for. When he thinks he is alone, he mutters, “The things called omens! And yesterday I talked the same to Starbuck there, concerning my broken boat. Oh! how valiantly I seek to drive out of others’ hearts what’s clinched so fast in mine!” (708). Time and again, he tries to “discover [a] sign in the sea,” whether he is gazing over the side of the ship or suspended atop the main royal-

mast head (691). He looks for marks on the world in order to read the grand narrative that shapes it.

But Ahab's grand aspiration is not simply to be a prophet, to read; his goal is to fulfill his own prophecy—that he will dismember his dismemberer—and thus inscribe his word in the inert mental space on the other side of the pasteboard mask that maps out all visible things. He wants to be a writer, so he must furnish himself with the necessary materials: first, a pen—or something like it, a harpoon. Peleg attests to the similarity between the pen and the harpoon: “Bildad, thou used to be good at sharpening a lance, mend that pen, will ye” (118). In his mind, the pen and the lance are essentially the same; thus, his remark, in almost the same breath as the one above, that “Ahab's been in colleges, as well as'mong the cannibals [and] fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales” is particularly interesting (119). What is this lance, and what are these foes? Is Peleg implying that Ahab is a writer? Nevertheless, the connection between the pen and the harpoon—and also fire—is a sufficient basis for the speculations of this essay. Ahab's harpoon is the instrument with which he will inscribe his own mark behind the pasteboard mask, and he has worked with Perth, the blacksmith, to forge it expressly for that purpose. The harpoon is the “fire [he] breathe[s] back” at the authorial force he confronts (642). The harpoon is a “branding iron,” and as such, it explicitly uses fire to make an assertive mark of authorial rights (621). It is Ahab's pen.

Moby Dick is a particularly appropriate surface for Ahab to write upon given the latter's obsession with fixity. Moby Dick is an unfixed cipher, and Ahab's goal is to make him signify. Ishmael reveals Moby Dick's lack of fixity and signification:

the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time...

For as the secrets of currents in the seas have never yet been divulged, even to the most erudite research; so the hidden ways of the Sperm Whale when beneath the surface remain, in great part, unaccountable to his pursuers; and from time to time have originated the most curious contradictory speculations regarding them, especially concerning the mystic modes whereby, after sounding to a great depth, he transports himself with such vast swiftness to the most widely distant points...

Hence, by inference, it has been believed by some whalers, that the Nor'West Passage, so long a problem to man, was never a problem to the whale.

(243 – 244)

Moby Dick exemplifies, through his ubiquitousness, the boundless, indiscernible mobility of all whales. This fluid relationship to the world is reminiscent of Ishmael's experiences at the mast-head, and Ahab is necessarily precluded from this fluid relationship by his fused, monomaniac nature.

But it is not simply Moby Dick's limitless motion that drives Ahab's obsession to inscribe him. As Ishmael discusses in "The Whiteness of the Whale" and as scholars have long noted, Moby Dick's coloring—or lack thereof—is the inscrutability that Ahab meets so maliciously. Ishmael carefully contextualizes whiteness in nature and history in "The Whiteness of the Whale." He roots it in the physical world. Ahab sees whiteness as similarly physical. It is a surface like pasteboard or a wall. It is a partition between him and the abstract space in which all events have been predestinated by some divine force. It is the physical thing that mediates between the writer and the reader. Whiteness, in short, is like a physical page through which a reader glimpses the presence of an author yet is ultimately separated from his thought. The

whale—the page, that is—has reminded Ahab that he is separate from the source code of the real, but it is also the surface on which he will assert his own authorial will. Thus, Ahab is frustrated by the closed, fixed standards of chirography and textuality, but these standards are embedded deep within him so that while he hates his own analysis of the world, he is unable to see it any differently. He thinks his only recourse is to fight fire with fire, letter with letter.

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Given the proposed trajectory of this essay, this section is the one in which secondary orality should be discussed. Of course, this idea is utterly ridiculous on certain levels: secondary orality, by Ong's definition is linked to a reemergence of orality from the realm of text through the sounds of electronic media like television sets, radios, and computers. *Moby-Dick* was first published in 1851. The electric telegraph was just a teenager. The phonograph was 20 years in the future. Broadcasting could not have been predicted. So yes, connecting anything in *Moby-Dick* with the technology involved in secondary orality is anachronistic, at least in the terms of Walter Ong and McLuhan's discourse. But Ishmael (or the narrator, if you prefer) constantly points out the inadequacy of print and writing. The powerlessness of writing at sea is one of the most notable examples of this inefficiency, and it is rehashed multiple times: “For the long absent ship, the outward-bounder, perhaps, has letters on board; at any rate, she will be sure to let her have some papers of a date a year or two later than the last one on her blurred and thumb-worn files” (317). In one instance, Ahab produces a letter for a sailor aboard the *Jeroboam* only to find that the man has been dead for some time. When Ishmael writes, “Of such a letter, Death himself might well have been the post boy,” he reaffirms the connection between death and writing that Ong and Barthes discuss (413). The closed, regular system of print only works effectively in an equally closed and regulated area, such as that of the gravestones in the

Whaleman's Chapel. Those inscriptions are “immovable” precisely because they are the markers of death (65). As for the highly unpredictable, ever-fluctuating environment of the ship on the sea, writing is irrelevant. It mildews, even. Perhaps it is more relevant on solid land, but Ishmael exposes its general inadequacy. Because writing and text are fixed, they are inevitably precluded from fluctuating with time as living things do.

So despite the missing technology required to move Ishmael out of textual culture into secondary orality, he does feel the inadequacy of the kind of world that type produces. He longs for a closer connection to the human lifeworld, but without the sonic devices of the 20th century, he has to find another means of transition. Yet it is this longing that is important. Ong often makes the mistake of giving electronic devices agency: “The electronic transformation of verbal expression ... has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality.”^{xxx} Again, more explicitly, “electronic technology has brought us into the age of 'secondary orality.’”^{xxxi} Ong always makes it seem as if media are acting on culture when in fact the case is quite the contrary. Media do nothing in and of themselves. Predating media, there must have been a sense that the role they perform was one that needed to be addressed. There must have been a societal drive to move beyond a text-based cultural paradigm. This is the drive that Ishmael evinces. From the opening page, he smarts from Ahab's brand of chirographic fixity, so he gravitates toward the intimate aural/oral world of the crew member. He is “grim about the mouth,” as one stiff from lack of conversation (23).^{xxxii} He finds himself keeping the company of the dead. He has an urge to go “knocking people's hats off” as if longing for some sort of embodied confrontation (23). His drive is to redefine himself as something other than a rigid text-based thinker; thus, he opens his narrative with, “Call me Ishmael,” an invitation to speak (23). But these drives are not

enough. He needs some sort of intercession to play the role that technology plays in the 21st century in moving a culture from textual to secondary oral. That intercessor is Queequeg.

Shortly, I will consider the relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, attached, as they are, by a narrative monkey-rope, but I want to explore for a moment some of the ways in which Ishmael is susceptible to Ahab's brand of textual fixity. Ishmael often dives into Ahab's consciousness, considering or channelling large swathes of his thought. He is fascinated by the sea captain and feels a strong connection with him: "Ahab's quenchless feud seem[s] [his]" (239). Ishmael follows Ahab so closely through the narrative that scholars have often questioned whether there are multiple narrative views or whether Ishmael is 'fictionalizing' the captain's speeches.^{xxxiii} What matters, though, is not *how* the two characters are connected but that they *are* intimately connected, almost as doubles. In the Epilogue, Ishmael points out that he and Ahab were both silently flung from the same boat during the encounter with Moby Dick, as if the fates of the two characters had been running parallel courses, although far from identical, all along.

Ishmael's initial darkness shows that he is cognitively aligned with Ahab to some degree. He has pronounced his repressed inclination towards pistol and ball from the first page, and he is familiar with the frustration of Ahab's text-based world view. He has been a schoolmaster, something of a sub-sub himself, and as his extensive textual references in the cetology chapters suggest, he has spent considerable time with books. Reassuming his role as teacher for a moment, he tries to teach Queequeg about print culture: "We then turned over the book together, and I endeavored to explain to him the purpose of the printing, and the meaning of the few pictures that were in it" (84). But whereas Ahab has imbibed writing to such an extent that he writes on his body, Ishmael remains skeptical of its power. Famously, he declares that his own writing can only be "the draught of a draught" because "any human thing supposed to be

complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty” (196, 181). He maintains an awareness of the effects of writing on his consciousness. Ishmael's awareness of his text-based consciousness and his move towards a state that resembles secondary orality are due in part to Queequeg's influence. 20th century thinkers have developed the television and the computer to supplement textuality, but since Ishmael cannot envision these contrivances, he builds a friendship with Queequeg, who is a unique hybrid medium of sound and text.

Ishmael and Queequeg quickly develop a prolifically oral/aural relationship, although when they first meet, they cannot understand each other's speech at all. Ishmael requires that the landlord translate between them: “Landlord,' said I, 'tell him to stash his tomahawk there ... tell him to stop smoking'...This being told to Queequeg, he at once complied” (51). Perhaps the miscommunication is due to Ishmael's investment in the world of print: he has spent the better part of the evening reading signs and apostrophizing to “old black letter, [who] reasonest well” (34). The two are only able to communicate after Ishmael watches Queequeg interpret language in a new way: instead of reading a book, he counts its pages and responds to it with “a long-drawn gurgling whistle” (82). He reinterprets text, makes it something physical, and draws it out orally. Witnessing this scene, Ishmael remarks, “I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it. There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits” (83-84). Where his consciousness was rigid, Ishmael becomes fluid after witnessing Queequeg's “speaking” nature. Ishmael is melted by the potential for multi-media approaches to language that is inherent in Queequeg's oral reading. After this incident, the two are immediately able to communicate, and they begin a series of unnarrated “social chat[s]” that make up the majority of the narrative until they board the Pequod (84). The

unnarrated nature of their communication suggests that the specifics of their interactions are beyond the textual, products of their new multi-media understanding.

Queequeg educates Ishmael into the primary orality of the savage, adding a new medium to his communicatory repertoire. This education allows Ishmael to assimilate into the crew to some degree so that his “shouts [can go] up with the rest” aboard ship (239). He eventually makes claims to this orality: “Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois. I myself am a savage, owning no allegiance but to the King of the Cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him” (358). As a narrator, he is fascinated with dialogue and continually moves into the bodies of his shipmates to take on their voices in the soliloquy chapters and the dramatic ones, like “Midnight, Forecastle.”

In addition to rediscovering orality for Ishmael, Queequeg also alters the way he understands writing. Queequeg is more similar to Ahab than one might suppose. Like his captain, Queequeg has allowed writing to become part of his body; he is covered in marks that Ishmael sometimes describes as “large, blackish looking squares” and other times as writings (47). While Ahab strives to be an authoritarian writer, Queequeg is content to be a page on which “a departed prophet and seer of his island ... had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth” (612). As a harpooneer—a harpoon being a pen—there is a certain sense in which Queequeg is also a writer: “Many spare hours he spent, in carving he lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body” (612). While they are both writers, Queequeg's authorial air is “wild whimsiness” while Ahab's is rigid and fiery. Furthermore, Queequeg does not know the meaning of his writing, so his work is totally unfixed and open to interpretation, unlike Ahab's would-be inscriptions. As both page and author, Queequeg is a hybrid figure, a

new medium. Wrapped up in this medium is also the power of the voice. In his person, Queequeg is akin to a new technological mode that helps Ishmael understand the proper place of typography and discover new forms of linguistic expression.

Although Ishmael's frequent references to Queequeg as a savage might suggest that the latter's relationship with letters is limited, Queequeg actually has a particularly intimate relationship with writing, even if it does not involve literacy. It might be true that Queequeg cannot read; Ishmael suggests as much in the Whaleman's Chapel when he says, "This savage was the only person present who seemed to notice my entrance; because he was the only one who could not read, and, therefore, was not reading those frigid inscriptions on the wall" (64). The location of this scene has particular import: the writing that Queequeg avoids is precisely the sort that is most rigid, closed, and typographic. He does not give an eye to these dead letters. However, in numerous other instances, Queequeg demonstrates an extreme curiosity about text, whether he can read it or not. Ishmael observes his interaction with an unknown book: he "took up a large book there, and placing it on his lap began counting the pages with deliberate regularity; at every fiftieth page—as I fancied—stopping a moment, looking vacantly around him, and giving utterance to a long-drawn gurgling whistle of astonishment" (82). This occurrence is odd for several reasons: If Queequeg cannot read or write, how does he have an understanding of the labor that a multiplicity of pages represents? But if he can read, why is he counting instead? Regardless of these quandaries, though, one thing is certain: Queequeg has little regard for the intentions of the author who composed the unnamed work. However he is processing the book—'reading,' perhaps—he does it in his own way. Just as the way Queequeg copies the hieroglyphs from his body onto the coffin is interpretive, so is the manner in which he treats the book.

Queequeg's paradigm of the letter is so open to mutability that he is “living parchment” whose “mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away” (612). He defies permanence. While letters that aspire to fixity inevitably associate themselves with death, Queequeg's chirography has no designs on permanence. While it might moulder away with time, it is also accessible to reinterpretation as in his carvings. Although he chooses the coffin as the surface for his carvings, his writing is very different from the inscribed gravestones. Instead of fixedly marking death for all time, the carvings are a mark of triumph over death. Since the coffin cannot be put to its nominal purpose, he turns it into a sea-chest, fills it with life's necessities, and inscribes it for his living amusement. It is so transformed by Queequeg's animating force that it becomes Ishmael's life preserver, a parchment for living in its own right.

Queequeg's wild whimsiness is a counterweight to Ahab's obsession with fixed meaning-making, and it is formative for Ishmael as a writer. I would like to return to my initial discussion of the work of Roland Barthes as it applies to *Moby-Dick*. As I have already said, Barthes's work is relevant to secondary orality because it links the letter and the voice and looks forward to a new kind of reading and a new estimation of the workings of text. Ahab's paradigm is that of the classics, “tyrannically centered on the Author,” that aims at a “final signified,” a fixed meaning.^{xxxiv} Queequeg, on the other hand, propagates a chirographic system that presupposes the death of the Author and presents instead “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”^{xxxv} It is indecipherable even to him and therefore subverts deciphering. Instead, he grounds his understanding of text in his whistling exclamations of astonishment as he counts pages, “a performative, a rare verbal form ... in which enunciation has no other content than the act by which it is uttered.”^{xxxvi} This understanding of writing is particularly germane to Queequeg because of his relationship with

time. As when he observes his Ramadan, he seems to give little thought to duration. “Prolonged ham-squattings” do not phase him (126). As a primary oral person might, he focuses on the present moment instead of a continuum of past, present, and future. Thus, with writing, he gives up designs on permanence and sees his inscriptions as persisting in a “perpetual present.”^{xxxvii}

Ishmael moves into a state of proto-secondary orality through the mediation of Queequeg, who serves as a conduit that asserts the oral in the textual and advocates for the merging of multiple linguistic media. After he becomes dissatisfied with the rigidity of the textual culture that surrounds him, Ishmael's writing style develops under Queequeg's influence. Ishmael becomes a producer of a writerly text, freed from the confines of intention, factuality, and temporality. What he produces—and what Melville has produced, thereby—is, in Barthes's terms, “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture,” “a plural text: the same and new.”^{xxxviii} It is repetitive. It comprises numerous voices. It is structured “for [Ishmael's] humor's sake” and on the principal of play rather than consumption” (322).^{xxxix} In fact, one might regard *Moby-Dick* in its entirety as a product of media play. Ishmael explores the ways in which different components of language might work together or against one another. Unlike Ahab, he is not a meaning-fixer, an approach that proves so futile and so silencing to the latter.

Ishmael's multi-media playfulness manifests itself most clearly in considerations of volume and containment. He explores how much and what kind of material a book can hold. “Cetology,” starts with an exploration about the nature of the letter and of facts and moves on to discuss the limits of their material forms. He begins:

It is some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that I would now fain put before you. Yet is it no easy task. The classification of the

constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed. Listen to what the best and latest authorities have laid down. (179)

Systematization is a component of a fact-based, textbook epistemology, the kind that derives from typographic cultures. Ishmael is acutely aware that the effort he feigns to ascribe to the values of typography will be in vain. A classification of a chaos is impossible, especially in strictly typographic terms. Instead, Ishmael's approach is a compilation of the visual "exhibition," the textual, and the sonic, to which he encourages the reader to "listen." All in all, he explains, "Cetology" will be "the draught of a systematization of cetology," and later, he asserts that "this whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught." The invocation of a draught here is particularly illustrative of Ishmael's project because it is a multi-modal concept. A draught is an "outline, sketch, or design preparatory to a completed work of art" and a "sketch in words," but it is also an "act of drinking" and "that which is inhaled at one breath," a "current," a "plan, map, chart, plot" a "mild blister or poultice," the "drawing or sweep of a weapon" and many other things besides.^{xl} A draught pulls together many media, those that are textual and intellectual with those that are purely sensory. In this way, it performs another of its meanings, the "act of drawing a net."^{xli} Thus, "Cetology," as a draught, inherently brings together multiple manifestations of language. Ishmael plays on the concept of a draught because he needs more than letters to represent his subject: "As yet, however, the sperm whale, scientific or poetic, lives not complete in any literature" (181). If the goal of writing is to produce something that closely resembles life, then Ishmael acknowledges he must have a medium more sensual than type to achieve it.

Ishmael acknowledges that literature is an inadequate container for life, but he proclaims later in the chapter, "according to magnitude I divide the whales into three primary BOOKS

(subdivisible into Chapters), and these shall comprehend them all, both large and small” (184). He writes ironically. By devoting the folio, the largest book size, to the largest whale, he is literally trying to give it room in which to live, as a child picking out the right size aquarium. Indeed, at the end of the chapter, the book system becomes a building: “I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower” (195). The books cannot house a living whale due to obvious material limitations, nor for the same reason, are they adequate containers for communicating the living essence of a whale. The proposed cetology books are missing materials.

Ishmael returns to his discussion of the volume needed to house a whale in “The Fossil Whale.” He begins the chapter with a reminder of the incommensurability of the real and the textual: “From his mighty bulk the whale affords a most congenial theme whereon to enlarge, amplify, and generally expatiate. Would you, you could not compress him. By good rights he should only be treated of in imperial folio” (580). The joke here, of course, is that even an imperial folio does not begin to compare in size to a whale. If there are any doubts about the limitations of the folio as a container, Ishmael invokes the image of “the gigantic involutions of [the whale's] intestines” to put these doubts to rest (580). In fact, Ishmael's subject runs away with him, just as a fast whale in sounding drags a boat down with it:

Unconsciously my chirography expands in 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 of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include all men, and

mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panorama of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. (580)

Writing cannot hold Ishmael's intentions; the letter-containers are stretched to their limit in capitals. Ishmael calls out for new media, a crater inkstand and a condor's quill. His body becomes a medium in its own right and is pushed to its limit. His thoughts threaten to destroy him. Ishmael finds he needs more matter with which to express himself, matter that is representative not just of the letter but of the entire universe.

Thus, as *Moby-Dick* progresses, Ishmael mixes many modes of communication: typography, inscription, and citation along with the opening call, the wild orations of Father Mapple's sermon, Queequeg's dialect, Quaker speech, soliloquies, tattoos, songs, paintings, a symphony, and more. He bridges the gap between primary oral storytelling and typography by rendering a transcript of an actual telling of the Town-Ho's story, complete with interlocutors. Above all, he refrains from fixing the very form of the novel, much less any of its contents. He realizes the limitations of text and takes advantage of the media available to him to create a new mode of linguistic expression.

As playful as he is, Ishmael realizes that the materials available to him are not enough on their own to realize his vision. Time becomes an important medium with potential to infuse his work with a life of its own. In both "Cetology" and "The Fossil Whale," Ishmael looks to the future. In the former, "small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything ... Oh, Time..." (196). If his cetological system is to have life, it will gain it through the involvement of future minds and materials. Likewise, in "The Fossil Whale," he predicts that "past, present, and to come" will be sucked into the vortex of the whale theme (580). His fluid sense of temporality

is distinct from both the present-based cognition of primary orality and the past-focused thinking of typographic cultures, in which past designations are upheld by the fixed sign. Ishmael wants to dissolve the boundaries of his authorship so that his work becomes a compilation of eras as well as materials.

With his focus on mixing and multiple forms, Ishmael could not end his narrative with closure. An air of finality would essentially fossilize his creation, making it a dead typographic object, of which Queequeg and Ahab have taught him to be suspicious. He must leave it open-ended. As it nears its end, *Moby-Dick* exemplifies the writerly text. Instead of closing its borders, Ishmael destroys the Pequod and, with it, any semblance of fixity. Symbolic resonances proliferate: the flag, the drowning bird, the reappearance of the Rachel (721-722). Their meanings are so elusive precisely because—in Barthes's words—“everything signifies ceaselessly and several times, but without being delegated to a great final ensemble, to an ultimate structure”;^{xlii} rather, these images that might trigger a reader's drive to reductively decipher them are really more akin to bits of wreckage, pieces of flotsam and jetsam floating on the sea. Each is “the crest line of the plural text, arranged like a berm of possibility.”^{xliii} Or perhaps, they are a loose framework, of which Ishmael has been the architect, that is left to the reader to be rewritten with every reading, to be hung with narrative debris in ever-new combinations.

Because *Moby-Dick* is a writerly text, unfixed in form and time, it remains eternally interactive. While it could not have been influenced by the electronic technology that marks secondary oral culture in its own time, it is in itself a type of analog technology, modeled on the figure of Queequeg and his influence on Ishmael. It is a construction that invests orality in text and emphasizes spontaneity and presentness, but it also invites future participation. It creates a

network in which the potential for participation is endless. It is not finished; it is not closed. It welcomes the addition of new materials, which have flocked to it over the past century. A wake of literary criticism, film adaptations, operas, pop songs, and abridgments make it ever-present and ever-expanding. It has been rewritten innumerable times by every reader who has heard Ishmael's voice—his call—in his head and continues his media play. It encourages appropriation. It asserts no intentionality, and it expands because of this passivity. It defies totalizing analysis and refuses to fit into any Ahabian system of thought or textbook epistemology. Its greatest achievement is that it propagates the fluidity that structures it. It overwhelms its readers and drowns them in its tissue of citations, its structurelessness. It advocates for giving up, for being thrown from the boat. Only then can one be buoyed up by an unknown and mutable truth.

NOTES

- i. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Charles Feidelson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985) 3. Subsequent references to this text will occur in parenthetical style in the body of the essay.
- ii. Louise K. Barnett, *Authority and Speech: Language, Society, and Self in the American Novel* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993).
- iii. Guetti, James, *The Limits of Metaphor: A Study of Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) 42.
- iv. Carmello, Charles, *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self & Postmodern American Fiction* (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1983).
- v. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 1470-1475. Barthes sums up the distinction between work and text in "From Work to Text." He writes, "The difference is this: the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field ...*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production.*"
- vi. Marshall McLuhan, "Understanding Media," *Essential McLuhan*, Ed. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York: BasicBooks, 1995) 151.
- vii. Walter E. Bezanson, "Moby-Dick: Work of Art," *Moby-Dick*, ed. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002) 645.
- viii. *Ibid.*, 646.
- ix. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 8.
- x. *Ibid.*, 23.
- xi. *Ibid.*, 11.
- xii. *Ibid.*, 130.
- xiii. *Ibid.*, 70.
- xiv. *Ibid.*, 8.

- xv. Ibid., 104.
- xvi. Ibid., 80.
- xvii. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *The Book History Reader*, Ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (New York: Routledge, 2006) 279-280.
- xviii. Ibid., 279.
- xix. Ong, 45.
- xx. As McLuhan would contend, "The medium is the message."
- xxi. Ong, 42.
- xxii. The chapter of F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* entitled "The Revenger's Tragedy" is perhaps the most canonical consideration of Ahab's language in *Moby-Dick*. Matthiessen emphasizes the dramatic dynamism that Shakespearean dialogue lends Ahab's orations.
- xxiii. Ong, 103.
- xxiv. The emphasis here is my own.
- xxv. Ong, 99.
- xxvi. Ibid., 75.
- xxvii. Ibid., 129.
- xxviii. The OED defines prophecy as both "that which is done or spoken by a prophet; the action or practice of revealing or expressing the will or thought of God or of a god; divinely inspired utterance or discourse," and as "The interpretation and expounding of the Bible," and also as "An instance of divinely inspired speech or writing; a revelation from God or a god; a prophetic text. Also as a mass noun: such writings considered collectively."
- xxix. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that 'effable' is from the Latin *fāri*, to speak, and defines it as "of sounds, letters, etc.: That can be pronounced" and as "That can be, or may lawfully be, expressed or described in words."
- xxx. Ong, 133.
- xxxi. Ibid.
- xxxii. According to the OED, 'grim' can mean of "unbending disposition," that is, of fixed attitude.
- xxxiii. See Bezanson.

- xxxiv. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 277, 279.
- xxxv. Ibid., 279.
- xxxvi. Ibid., 278.
- xxxvii. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 5.
- xxxviii. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 279. *S/Z*, 16.
- xxxix. Barthes, *S/Z*, 16.
- xl. OED
- xli. Ibid.
- xlii. Barthes, *S/Z*, 12.
- xliii. Ibid., 14.

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