



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

26 | 2022
Melville's Measures

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/47093>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.47093

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Ryan Heryford, “The “Odd Inches”: *Moby-Dick*'s Fossil Record and Melville's Admeasured Time”, *Miranda* [Online], 26 | 2022, Online since 14 October 2022, connection on 29 October 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/47093> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.47093>

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The “Odd Inches”: *Moby-Dick*’s Fossil Record and Melville’s Admeasured Time

Ryan Heryford

- ¹ In some final enumerations on the body of the whale, Ishmael recounts “the almost complete vast skeleton of an extinct monster, found in the year 1842, on the plantation of Judge Creagh, in Alabama. The awe-stricken credulous slaves in the vicinity took it for one of the fallen angels” (457). Melville’s reference draws from an 1842 *Penny Cyclopaedia* entry recounting paleontologist Richard Harlan’s acquisition of some Alabama fossils, which Harlan erroneously registered as a heretofore undiscovered species, and which were later reclassified in England in 1839. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville weaves together this recorded exchange of Judge Creagh and Harlan with an enslaved body of witnesses, whose awe arrives like lightning, striking all “in the vicinity.” Melville’s monstrous bones become an event, their awesome or awful, cataclysmic immediacy inextricable from the deep-time of their making. While first introduced as “the most wonderful of cetacean relics,” the Alabama skeleton also emanates, if only momentarily, within the time when it is not a whale, but “one of the most extraordinary creatures which the mutations of the globe have blotted out of existence” (457). In relatively short spans between the 1834 registration of fossils by Harlan in Philadelphia and their 1839 reclassification in England, between Melville’s own reading of the *Penny Cyclopaedia* and his narrative re-genesis of the 1842 event, and between the half-sentence when “some specimen bones [were taken] across the sea to Owen, the English Anatomist” (457), the extinct relics are credulously believed to be the remains of *Basilosaurus*, or “royal lizard,” what taxonomists refer to as a “wastebasket taxa,” classifying organisms that exceed or elide any known genus. Within these gaps between the deep time of fossil-making, the erroneously presumed stability of historical time, and the acknowledged irregularities of lyric and narrative time, ossified angels, king lizards and taxonomic waste continue to appear in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, each attributed by Ishmael to the same conceptual and material substance, including and exceeding their incorporation into the genus whale. This essay seeks to address

these many occasions of misregistered or admeasured extinction and exhaustion in Melville's novel, considering the ways in which their incomplete but nevertheless adequate measurements as supplied by Ishmael open up new possibilities for conceiving scalar dissonance and tensions between narrative temporality and geologic time.

- 2 As Ishmael cautions, extinction's most emblematic remainder, skeletons, furnish "but little clue to the shape of his fully invested body" (457). Such un-furnishment, or lack, continues to galvanize some of the most nourishing scholarship to date—from Samuel Otter's historicist arguments that the novel affords "a viscerally immanent critique of 19th-century efforts to get inside the body, and to gauge and rank its character" (102), to K.L. Evans' suggestion that the "startling conclusion" of *Moby-Dick* is ultimately "what connects the word 'whale' to the situation outside in the world it picks out" (3), a philosophical deconstruction of Cartesian thought and an attention to words and their meaning as situated either within or beyond language. Bones, fossils and other relics of death-trellised life are invoked in Melville not as reductionist conclusions, but rather, as Ishmael reminds, to further our narrator's ultimate approval of himself "omnisciently exhaustive in the enterprise" (455). As *Moby-Dick* makes painfully clear, attaining omniscience, or merely even thinking one scrutable thought, would indeed be exhausting. Yet rather than see exhaustion as a retreat, melancholy, or limit, I'll try to read the possibilities that exhaustion affords within Ishmael's fossiliferous point of view, both as integral to what Geoffrey Sanborn, quoting from Merleau-Ponty, calls Melville's "commitment to the antepredicative unity of the world" (13), as well as a nod to worlds whose persistence surpasses ontological essence and species-life, habiting, instead, an eventful and simultaneously general, incorporeal and also substantive time which, like those born witness to angelic afterlives, leaves Ishmael "horror-struck" (457).
- 3 Reading across Ishmael's survey of antediluvian remains, I begin with a historicist consideration of debates around biogenesis in Melville's mid-19th century, moving toward a discussion of the coeval times of extinction and exhaustion in *Moby-Dick*'s pre-mosaic chronologies. I suggest that the fossil measurement in Melville might best be read as one mode of what Baruch Spinoza called an *adequate idea*, distinguishing the contingent from an extra-historical whole. In Melville's deep vision, this adequate idea registers through an awful or awesome general time which, I argue, is as prehistorical as it is post-epochal, envisioning a world whose forecasted temporality expands beyond the narrative and lyric capacities of historical time. I conclude by arguing that the anachronistic tendency of many scholars approaching Melville today is not so much a presentist error as an invitation from Melville himself, where, what Otter calls Melville's stylistic "articulation of discontinuity" (Otter 2019, 123), welcomes future readers to imagine *Moby-Dick*'s narrative time beyond their own contingent chronologies, looking toward a yet-ongoing epoch that many scholars refer to as the Anthropocene, and which Melville would later reference in *Battle-Pieces* (1866) as humanity growing "[t]oward the fullness of her fate" (Melville 2009, 102).

Fueled Fossils and Abiogenesis in the Arsacidean Glen

- 4 The archeological admeasurements which instantiate Ishmael's ramblings into the scalar planes of deep geologic time begin amidst a well-known holiday, when encountering the barbaric *vertú* of a worshipped skeleton, our narrator observes:

the ever-woven verdant warp and woof intermixed and hummed around him, the mighty idler seemed the cunning weaver; himself all woven over with the vines; every month assuming greener, fresher verdure; but himself a skeleton. Life folded Death; Death trellised Life; the grim god wived with youthful Life, and begat him curly-headed glories. (450)
- 5 As Robert Zoellner has noted, the humming "warp and woof" surrounding the "mighty idler," this long dead whale, now a "cunning weaver," suggests a "conversion of death from a static to dynamic entity" (210), where the left-behind carcasses of previously vibrant beings refigure themselves in a process of newly entangled emergences, evidencing what Geoffrey Sanborn has called *Moby-Dick's* orientation "toward the prospect of a reciprocal, companionable vitalization" (11).
- 6 Such welcomed entanglements help to resolve Melville's own conflicted readings of Goethe's all-spirit, his supposed universal proclamations of an individual's infinite worldly entanglements. Melville's ambivalence to Goethean envelopment is best exemplified by a letter to Hawthorne, where Melville first writes, "[w]hat nonsense! Here is a fellow with a raging toothache. 'My dear boy,' Goethe says to him, 'you are sorely afflicted with that tooth; but you must *live in the all*, and then you will be happy!'" (Melville 1993, 193-4; my emphasis). And yet, Melville subsequently acknowledges in the marginalia the profound possibilities of such vitalist thinking, noting that "what plays the mischief with [such] truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion" (194). The gigantic idler of Pupella, an ever-illuminated site of spiritual communion, a *vertú* of sovereign barbarism, a host for masting ivy, and ultimately, only one of Ishmael's exhaustive enumerations on the whale, certainly plays with these frustratingly encapsulating yet simultaneously fleeting moments of lively entanglement. It is both a momentary, spectacular curio and an emblem of the ever regenerating verdure of Melville's philosophical thought, intertwined even and eventually in the concrete sculptured ivy that would ultimately ornament the author's tombstone.¹ Yet, rather than celebrate *Moby-Dick's* aggressive Goethean vitalism, I would suggest a vision of the whalebone temple as aligned to Melville's writings on, what I refer to as, necro-genesis, or, a privileging of life's preconditions in death, decay or decomposition, as opposed to the comforting assurances that regeneration offers to the losses occasioned by death. Beyond raising the ontological stakes surrounding aesthetic representations of generative decay, a necrogenetic historicist reading also allows us to situate Melville's narrative within 19th-century energy transitions from biopolitical harvestings of life (lumber, labor, leviathans) to the extraction of accumulated, stratigraphically composted decay and decomposition.
- 7 While it is well-known that *Moby-Dick* was published prior to the 1859 discovery of petroleum in Titusville, Pennsylvania, an entrenched historical signal to both the demise of the whaling industry and the beginnings of a mass acceleration in the United States, such tidy dating often elides a more muddled history of energy use across the 19th century. As whale oil surpassed its peak supply in 1845, consumers had already

begun resorting to less expensive fuel sources, including live-tree oils like camphor and turpentine, as well as the ever-readily available coal oil, a byproduct of cannel coal whose noxiously smoky off-burn, like the "unextinguished aromatic flame" in the fossilized skull (449), elicited some of the earliest recorded usages of the noun "exhaust" and made the resource less popular for indoor lamp lighting, until James Young's 1850 patent of a refined distillation process which would overwhelm the European and American markets and subsequently decimate the whaling industry.²

- 8 Transitions from living fuel to fossil fuel occurred slowly across a long 19th century, and amidst a subsequent debate about energy origins and their onto-ecological implications, including a reemergence of the now-widely discredited theory of abiogenesis, a hypothesis that certain natural gases, rock oils and bituminous coal deposits were formed from preexisting hydrocarbons deep in the geologic mantle. First evinced and abandoned in the 16th century, abiogenesis was resurrected by Alexander von Humboldt's 1804 trip to petroleum springs in the Bay of Cumaux, where he suggested that "petroleum is the product of a distillation from great depth and issues from the primitive rocks beneath which the forces of all volcanic action lie" (cited in Sadtler 95). Humboldt's envisioned reserves of inorganic oil influenced a range of writers, including J.N. Reynolds, and would invigorate debate around the possibilities afforded by spontaneously-generated life prior to Louis Pasteur's experiments in the 1860s. The myriad implications of abiogenesis remain varied and often contradictory, ranging from a familiar 19th-century ecological vision of earth systems' self-regulatory powers, to more alienating possibilities of a geological core that functioned entirely apart from biological life. Most importantly, as I hope to illustrate in Ishmael's journeys through geological time, abiogenetic theories opened up lyric and narrative possibilities for imagining and playfully rearticulating the relation between geologic lifespans and an increasingly energy-dependent 19th-century American society.
- 9 While Ishmael's Arsacidean sojourn does not explicitly comment upon such historically concurrent energy debates, watching the aging whaler watch this repurposed fossil, its skull exhaling an ever-burning, gaseous flame, invites a number of onto-phenomenological questions about the prefixes abio-, bio-, and necro-, as they inform categories of the human indebted to energy sourcing, and its entailed or assumed finitudes. Indeed, when read within the theoretic purviews afforded by new scholarship in the *petrol humanities*, Melville's fossil architecture, illuminated by the oil of a harvested life, offers a strange, almost parodic inversion of contemporary fossil fuel aesthetics, what Stephanie LeMenager has called a category of the human born within the 19th century whose persistence was and is fundamentally tied to the extraction of fossil fuels.³ This inversion, however, is not mere symbolic play nor atmospheric philosophical commentary. Rather, upon entrance into the ossified remains of the sperm whale, Ishmael simultaneously enters into a horrific narrative-vision of deep earth time, a disembodied flight among antediluvian fossils, offering us lyric temporalities through which to better think the peculiar ways that pre-chronicular measurements also anticipate time beyond the human species and recorded social histories.

Moby-Dick's Ante/Anti-Historical Time

- 10 Like the enslaved people on Judge Creagh's plantation, Ishmael is "struck" by the vast possibilities that an individual might intuit from the deep temporal makings of a fossilized whale. Jennifer Baker has argued that the use of this term ("struck") throughout *Moby-Dick* signals to moments in Ishmael's observational methods where "his discernment of affinities and patterns involves not laborious induction but a flash of insight or an irresistible impression upon the mind" (91). The word itself is most often invoked in Ishmael's discussion of whale bones and fossils, where "[i]n considering these ribs, I could not but be *struck* anew with the circumstance, so variously repeated in this book, that the skeleton of the whale is by no means the mould of his invested form" (453; my emphasis). While many critics have cited this passage as further evidence of Melville's argument that empirical methods fail in capturing the world in its imaginative infinities, Baker notes the way in which formal measurements and their limits represent not the foreclosure but rather the very ground by which Melville's imaginative work might take place. I would expand Baker's argument here to note the way in which the words "struck" and "stricken" also set the necessary limits for an imaginative leap into new planes of deep time. This can be best seen in Ishmael's narrative flight from the Arsacidean temple into a prehistorical temporality that leaves him "struck" by the horrors of "unsourced existence":

When I stand among these mighty Leviathan skeletons, skulls, tusks, jaws, ribs, and vertebrae, all characterized by partial resemblances to the existing breeds of sea-monsters; but at the same time bearing on the other hand similar affinities to the annihilated antichronical Leviathans, their incalculable seniors; I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun; for time began with man. Here Saturn's grey chaos rolls over me, and I obtain dim, shuddering glimpses into those Polar eternities; when wedged bastions of ice pressed hard upon what are now the Tropics; and in all the 25,000 miles of this world's circumference, not an inhabitable hand's breadth of land was visible. Then the whole world was the whale's; and, king of creation, he left his wake along the present lines of the Andes and the Himmalehs. Who can show a pedigree like Leviathan? Ahab's harpoon had shed older blood than the Pharaoh's. Methuselah seems a schoolboy. I look round to shake hands with Shem. I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over. (457)

- 11 While it is easy to be seduced by the momentum of Melville's lyrical chronology, this passage does not so much mark a direct line back and beyond historical time, as it opens up narrative possibilities for conceiving many planes of time (individual, historical, biblical and geological) simultaneously. Ishmael's chronology can thus be read as a narrative parallel to the materiality of the temple from which he speaks.
- 12 The temple, too, allows for multiple temporal planes to be inhabited simultaneously. In one epistemological sense, it is a necro-genetic archive and institution of human community, whose persistence of being has been reoriented from cycles of decay and regeneration to the spiritual telos of an Arsacidean religious history, competing with ever-encroaching Polynesian ecosystems. It also has its own singular life-history distinct from but inclusive of its species-being and posthumous repurposing. First encountered "after an unusually long raging gale," we are invited to imagine the catastrophic weather event wherein a temple might also reveal "the eddyings of his

angry flukes; only on the profound unbounded sea" (454). The finally dead whale then dwells in an ambiguous time of decay, exhausting its vital fluids and nourishing flesh, until "the vast body had at last been stripped of its fathom-deep enfoldings, and the bones become dust dry in the sun" (449). The whale's transformation into an object of worship is borne of careful transportation, human emplacement as well as a nonhuman hospitality eviscerating in its welcome, a habitable relic which too is housed within "a grand temple of lordly palms" (449). While the "unextinguished aromatic flame" of its cranium, and the "Arsacidean annals" scrimshawed across its ribs, announce human histories, those histories are illegible, what Ishmael calls "strange hieroglyphics," telling us little of social life in the archipelagoes, privileging instead the longer durations of death, decomposition and necro-genetic becoming of an individual sperm-whale-temple (449). This overlay of nonhuman biological and organic time onto the relatively limited historical time of Ishmael's travel narrative only expands as we witness the bones "all woven over with the vines; every month assuming, greener, fresher verdure" (450). Like the long history of the skeleton's sacred appearance, the present participate activating the ever-greening verdure raises questions concerning the length of this holiday. Was this an extended vacation, in which our traveling correspondent watched life's encroachment upon bones month after month? Are the chronologies of ecosystemic immersion also being recorded, recounted by priests and worshippers? Is this a time of assumption, by which certain happenings occur beyond the temporal knowledge of any one perceiving subject?

- 13 Skeletal musings in *Moby-Dick* appear to create modal conflicts for Ishmael, who, when discussing the incompatibility of bones and being, is compelled to reference the time of textual crafting "so variously repeated in this book" and "again and again repeated in this book," as well as his self-identification in a world apart from the Pequod where the poet-surveyor's body has little room left for tattoos (453, 457). As Tom Nurmi has noted, these authorial inconsistencies are part of Melville's broader lyric ecologies, where the power of passages like those in the Arsacidean glen come "not from its imagery of the humming glen but from its poetics: the formal linguistic conventions that shape our reading experience and reproduce emergent complexity in the very event of reading" (33). Such peculiar lyric confluences of the historical time of spiritual annals, the chronological time of the post-plot travel narrative, and the accumulative time of a greener, fresher verdure, also prefigure what Merleau-Ponty called a "general time," which is neither historical nor natural time, but rather a time that is present in the abstract and casual sense, but never locatable in any one moment, where time's generality relies on the opacity of a specific present, definitively singular yet also broadly abstract, an immediate now that persists indifferently across the historical moment.⁴ While Merleau-Ponty figures "general time" only in relation to perceiving subjects, Melville invites conceptualizations beyond the duration of lived experience. Ishmael's admeasurements, determined by a "green measuring rod" (450), cut presumably from the ever waxing and waning vines, are tattooed upon the body, scaling his own enfleshed time of epidermal deterioration against the longer but also contingent time of fossilization. If, as Susan Stewart has argued, tattooing in *Moby-Dick* offers "not depth but additional surface" (149), such corporealization asks also about the surfaced and deep times of the body, the dissolution of flesh toward the decomposition of bone, as well as the horizontal placement of embodied knowledge along a scalar surface that expands before and beyond the time of human thought.

- 14 Such vast undertakings require that Ishmael embrace what he calls "an archaeological, fossiliferous, and antediluvian point of view" (455), playfully interceding in 19th-century debates between the emerging uniformitarianism of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, and earth historians like Edward Hitchcock for whom, as Ishmael agrees, "time began with man" (457). Synonymous and equational, to inhabit time before and beyond the human requires forsaking both, inviting "affinities to the annihilated antechronical," or as read in pre-1967 editions of *Moby-Dick*, the "anti-chronicle," a time that is both prior to and against itself, when one is "by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun" (457). Experiencing the antechronicular, for Ishmael, is exhausting, where, "in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs" (456). Sweeping comprehension of the general time of one's species-life is a threat to the body and its extension in consciousness—wearying, faint-inducing. Scalar time exhausts because it proliferates, attritional and coeval, a prehistoric and posthuman collapse, leaving one "horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which having been all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over" (457).
- 15 "Whale," no longer a genus, but an antegeologic, post-epochal signature, induces the sort of terror more familiar in Melville's later writings, what Branka Arsić refers to as his "ontology of desertification," where, when journaling on Egyptian pyramids, Melville:
- finds them "awful" not because they testify to the magnificence of memorialization but, to the contrary, because they testify to its failure. If they signify at all it is only to mark the advance of elemental powers that annuls memory and promotes oblivion, canceling the very logic of monumentalization. (380)
- 16 While Arsić distinguishes these late desert writings from Melville's earlier "Pacific archipelagoes that showed the earth to be something that couldn't fail to live, its geology indistinguishable from abundant vegetal life" (380), amidst these vitally entrenched, overwhelmed skeletal biosystems, we nevertheless bear witness to modes of desertification and onto-historical exhaustion, which not only precede Melville's later writings, but also, in some measures, exceed them, so far as Ishmael observes not only the inadequacy of monuments, but also the inadequacies of the fossilized remainders of species life, where fossilization is not the final word, but one moment in a scalar time of decomposition, extending beyond the comprehension of time itself.

Admeasurements and the Adequate Idea

- 17 Yet, despite the seeming futility of this exhaustive enterprise, initiated by Ishmael's entrance within the skeletal whale, obliated eventually by his temporal narrative flights beyond and outside of time, our narrator, nevertheless, as the priests lambast, "Dar'st [...] measure this our god!" (450) Such admeasurements are far from exact, and yet they are equally far from fanciful. Accurated to the "skeleton authorities" of subsequent reference, they arrive, as Ishmael notes:

copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed; as in my wild wanderings at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics. But as I was crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing—at least, what untattooed parts might remain—I did not trouble myself with the odd inches; nor, indeed, should inches at all enter into congenial admeasurement of the whale. (451)

- 18 Such congenial admeasuring, no closing lament on the inscrutable distance between word and world, offers what Spinoza refers to as an *adequate idea*, a moment when one is briefly struck with an intuition of the completeness and universality of our world's material order as it is reflected within the completeness and universality of the order of thought. Spinoza refers to this as the experience of the subject perceiving peripherally before God, noting, "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite substance" (6). While this incorporeal infinity is necessarily ungraspable and always incomplete, there are instances when a perceiving subject might make *adequate* measurements, or awe-stricken intuitions, acknowledging, as Elizabeth Grosz notes in her reading of Spinoza, that:

Substance has infinite attributes, ways in which it expresses itself through the world, but we, as humans, as terrestrial beings limited by the relations between things that affect us, can only perceive and conceive two—extension, the order and connection of things; and thought, the order and connection of ideas. (59)

- 19 According to Grosz, in her reading of Spinoza, our inability to perceive the infinite attributes of substance should not be seen as a nihilistic retreat from ethics. Rather these admeasurements of extension and thought can inspire an ethical consciousness that acts from adequate intuitions—and *not* comprehensive empirical knowledge—of the infinite scales, horizons and temporalities beyond any one individual's range of perception. Such admeasured extensions share in Michael Jonik's comprehensive reading of Melville's Spinozian "ethopolitics," whereby each individual character in *Moby-Dick*:

[...] is not the site of the suturing of the affective to the embodied, but a process of entering into material-affective relationships that do not abide by interior-exterior, subject-object, human-inhuman, person-thing, or even immaterial-material distinctions. (10)

- 20 By considering temporal admeasurements within such an ethopolitics, readers are invited to inhabit the ambiguously intersecting planes of narrative and geological time as they likewise elide such distinctions within their broader material-affective relations. An adequate idea thus acknowledges that materiality and ideality are just two combinations in an infinity, and this acknowledgement threatens to exhaust the intuiting subject in their elaboration of the possible enumerations. It is such exhaustion toward which adequation ultimately arrives, and within which Melville asks us to participate, as an ethics and way of being in the world.
- 21 As I have argued throughout this essay, Ishmael's measurements are as much about space as they are about the spatialization of time, recorded across the body and upon its fossilized remainders. To measure in this manner requires openness to the infinite attributes of substance, free from what Spinoza called the *defects of our knowledge*, including but not limited to spiritual, historical, geologic or taxonomic empiricisms. By recording within the body, upon the body and beyond the body, Ishmael moves from perception, to generalization, to an intuition of what Spinoza calls a third knowledge, where he can distinguish what appears contingent, minor, or irrelevant from its

creation and connection to the whole. This whole, to which Ishmael bears witness, and which, unlike Goethe's all-spirit, is not totalizing but only one of infinite attributes, strikes of horror. It is not only exhausting, but is the experience of general time that is exhaustion itself. Admeasuring time in this manner allows Ishmael to participate in what Grosz, drawing from Deleuze, calls the world's "systolic and diastolic rhythms, contractions and dilations" (64). Among the fossils, he acknowledges exhaustion as a mode by which our essences and our expressions partake in a waning that is the world and us.

- 22 This is not to celebrate exhaustion as some "great shroud of the sea" (Melville 1988, 572), under which varying ontological iterations and their relations can be subsumed, obscured or ultimately absolved. Rather, like later Melvillean tortoises in "The Encantadas," the time of exhaustion never remains wholly committed to its "drudging impulse to straightforwardness in a belittered world" (Melville 1987, 132). As Ishmael notes, none of the fossils he examines are entire. Even the "most wonderful of cetacean relics" unearthed or struck down upon an Alabama plantation are only almost complete (457). As Melville's referenced *Penny Cyclopedia* recounts, between the rain-induced landslide and Judge Creagh's submission of *Basilosaurus*, many of the skeletal ribs had already been expunged from the loose soil, repurposed and eventually destroyed as andirons for cooking and heating. Melville doesn't mention this, just as the *Penny Cyclopedia* makes no reference to the "awe-stricken credulous slaves" of a state which was once home to incredulous Pip, also home in Connecticut, recalling that, "My father, in old Tolland county, cut down a pine-tree once, and found a silver ring grown over in it; [...] How did it get there?" (435). Just as exhaustion expresses and orients itself by the remainders of life, so too does life make use of the remainders of exhaustion. As archives and artifacts from the belittered worlds of dinosaurs and angels, as the spiritual and material fuel dilating and contracting possibilities for life, and, also, as play things. As Ishmael acknowledges, odd inches are not all that have been left out of his admeasurements. Of ever smaller vertebrae, Melville writes,

I was told that there were still smaller ones, but they had been lost by some little cannibal urchins, the priest's children, who had stolen them to play marbles with. Thus we see how that the spine of even the hugest of living things tapers off at last into simple child's play. (454)

- 23 In her reading of Spinoza's ethics, Grosz writes, "wisdom is not abstract knowledge of things in general, but a knowledge of what enhances and expands as well as what diminishes or contracts our beings and that of the world" (91). While both Grosz and Spinoza remain cryptically oblique about how such unabstracted wisdom might ultimately take form, Melville's adequate artifacts of exhaustion offer tactility for play. Fossilized marbles reappearing across other times, grown over in the digestions and respirations of the antechronicular, their eventual uncovering beneath enshrouded verdure, the oaken wood of a glen provoking intuition, "striking" their perceiving subjects with awe. I conclude in suggestion of some of the very real ethical imperatives that adequate admeasuring might inspire, looking at the kind of deep temporal reading practices that Ishmael's narrative time requires, as well as the kinds of future readers we are asked to imagine.

Conclusion: Melville and the 200-Year Present

- 24 Shortly before her death in 2010, the Quaker sociologist and peace activist, Elise Boulding, began to evince an ethic of time which she referred to as the two-hundred-year present:

The 200-year present began 100 years ago with the year of birth of the people who have reached their hundredth birthday today. The other boundary of the 200-year present, 100 years from now, is the hundredth birthday of the babies born today. If you take that span, you and I will have had contact with a lot of people from different parts of that span. So think in terms of events over that span and realize how long change takes. You can see how difficult it has been to create these bodies and new ways and how in many ways we are slipping backward; but in other ways we are not. (Portilla and Boulding)

- 25 Boulding's expansive, though still limited and demarcated, time-scale asks us not only to reach into shared and conflicting historical pasts, but also, concurrently, to the speculative possibilities of an imagined future when confronting the social, political and environmental choices of our daily lives. Such temporal ethics continue to inspire activists and artists like Julia Goodman, whose 2017 synonymous installation allows visitors to walk through multidimensional paper circles meant to represent the anteriority and looming futurity of multigenerational lifespans. Goodman's *200 Year Present* invites its visitors to approach the installation—comprised of eighteen concentric hanging circles—from any angle or direction they choose. One could walk straight through the center, or only around its peripheries, view it from the side, or stand several feet behind, looking for gaps and holes within the individual sheets. There are seemingly infinite patterns by which one could conflate, expand or overlap past and future time within the two-hundred year present that Goodman's piece comes to represent.

Figure 1



Photograph of Julia Goodman's "200 Year Present" on display at Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco (2017)

Photograph by Goodman; permissions received by the artist

- 26 Writing shortly after Melville's two hundredth birthday, I cannot help but notice the author's peripheral echoes throughout such an installation—from Goodman's use of pulped rags and worn cloth, emblematic of the early—and mid-19th century papermaking and printing processes with which Melville was so concerned, to the expansive and ambiguous shape of the piece itself, which might lead us to ask, like a young Ishmael gazing upon that "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" in the Spouter-Inn, "does it not bear a faint resemblance to a gigantic fish? even the great leviathan himself?" (26) If compelled by such "faint resemblance," might we bring a text like *Moby-Dick* with us among these twenty-first century hanging sheets of pulped rag, asking: what does it mean to read the now two-hundred-year-old Melville within our own multigenerational, two-hundred-year present?
- 27 Envisioning a reader of *Moby-Dick* one century beyond Melville's bicentennial presents unique concerns that did not necessarily exist during the Melvillean Renaissance of the early-20th century nor within the author's birth year of 1819. As environmental critic Ursula Heise notes, living and thinking within the 21st century requires that we look toward a future which "cannot be symmetrical with the past because economic, demographic, and ecological conditions have changed in such a way that radical new forms of social organization are required" (86). Heise specifically locates these present and future visions within an earth-systems shift now commonly referred to as the Anthropocene: the proposed geological epoch in which human activity has rendered an irreversible impact on global climate and conditions for life on the planet. While the Anthropocene was a term first considered by geologists, biologists and atmospheric chemists, its entailing vision of human species collapse presents unique imperatives for literary scholars engaging the existential and ontological question of what it means to

approach the humanities in an epoch where this current iteration of "the human" may be abruptly nearing its close.

- 28 Though we must always remain cautious to avoid any presentism that excessively or irresponsibly interweaves Melville's own social and ecological meditations among a contemporary discourse of anthropogenic climate change, the kinds of temporal admeasurements that I have argued permeate Ishmael's fossiliferous journey offer us compelling invitations to think outside the paradigm of anachronism that often stymy such queries. Alternately, Melville offers what I refer to as a lyric chronology, drawing upon Jonathan Cullers' celebration of the temporal affordance of the lyric as "presenting itself as an event in a time that repeats, creates for us effects of presence [and] links value to that mortal time that Jacques Derrida calls 'living on,' not to some kind of transcendence of mortality" (16). While Cullers builds his claim from epideictic performance, I would argue that Melville's engagement with Anthropocene chronologies in *Moby-Dick* nevertheless embodies the lyric as emblemized by Ishmael's intentional embrace of admeasurement and exhaustion, which creates a horizon of various temporal frames without the promise or anticipation of transcendence. In his essay on Melvillean times of extinction, John Levi Barnard's refers to these lyric frameworks as "inscriptions," offered by Ishmael to imagined future readers, an ethical and archival account of coming erasures, "an encyclopedic natural history of the world of life the histories of empire and capital have been erasing all along" (870). Yet, by entering into a Melvillean general time of admeasurement and exhaustion, I would argue that Ishmael exceeds his initial objective as the "Sub-Sub" (206) librarian, carrying readers beyond the assumed linear teleology of abundance-to-extinction, to instead inhabit a scalarly-dissonant lyric time more attuned to the experience of walking around and within Goodman's installation, where historical time is neither linear nor coeval, but merged in dialogue across an ever-shifting horizontal plane. Melville, in this light, can be considered a quintessential author of the Anthropocene, both as his writings respond to the shifting patterns of energy extraction within his own moment, and also when read through the author's temporally-displaced narrative wanderings, which find shared concern with historical abstractions and geographic boundarylessness of our epoch.
- 29 While this reading neither requires that we take Melville out of his own historical time, nor reduce the text to a series of proliferating symbols and metaphors, to approach *Moby-Dick* from within the speculative futures posed by the general time of admeasured exhaustion presents readers with a radically different vision of Melville's opus, where we find new limitations to our author's gaze into the "howling infinite" (107), as well as particular illegibilities now rendered less opaque. And perhaps also, like the thin, already crumbling paper sheets of Julia Goodman's *200 Year Present*, the "greatness" of *Moby-Dick* lies in its own acknowledged temporality. Rather than a defined historical testimony speaking in wholeness and certainty to the world we live in, *Moby-Dick*, when read across its admeasured time, accentuates its limitations and forecasts the collapse of its own world view in anticipation not only of the many "voices that speak might through it" (450), but also of the "unsourced existence" (457), which peripherally hovers before and also beyond.

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NOTES

1. For more on Melville's tombstone ornamentation, see Timothy Marr's "Melville's Planetary Compass."
2. For more information on cannel coal, energy use and the whaling industry, see Charles Baskerville's "Cannel Coal in the United States" (1918).
3. See LeMenager's *Living Oil*.
4. For a more detailed discussion of "general time," see Merleau-Ponty 432-457.

ABSTRACTS

This paper considers the measurements of fossils and markers of geologic time as they appear throughout *Moby-Dick*, complicating histories of bodies and their remainders. Looking for instances where Ishmael's measurements fall short or fail to include the "odd inches," I argue that such ellipses around quantifiable materiality and ontological ideality urge us to reimagine new subject positions from which to perceive narrative, social and deep time. Reading across Ishmael's survey of antediluvian remains, I'll begin with a historicist consideration of debates around biogenesis in Melville's mid-19th century, moving toward discussion on the coeval times of extinction and exhaustion in *Moby-Dick's* antediluvian chronologies, concluding in suggestion that fossil measurement in Melville might best be read as one mode of what Spinoza called an *adequate idea*, distinguishing the contingent from an extra-historical whole, and, in Melville's deep vision, a general time which is as prehistorical as it is post-epochal.

Cet essai s'intéresse aux mesures de fossiles et aux marqueurs du temps géologique dans *Moby-Dick*. Il entend ainsi complexifier dans le roman l'histoire des corps et de ce qu'il en reste. Les mesures d'Ismaël ne sont pas toujours exactes ou suffisantes, il n'est pas à « quelques pouces » près. Je montre que de telles ellipses autour de la matérialité quantifiable et de l'idéalité ontologique nous poussent à imaginer de nouvelles positions à partir desquelles le sujet peut

percevoir le temps narratif, le temps social, et le temps long. L'essai se préoccupe d'abord de l'enquête d'Ismaël sur les vestiges antédiluviens et propose une lecture historiciste des débats sur la biogénèse au milieu du 19^{ème} siècle ; puis j'examine les périodes concomitantes d'extinction et d'épuisement dans les chronologies antédiluviennes de *Moby-Dick*, pour conclure en suggérant que la mesure des fossiles chez Melville doit être lue comme une modalité de ce que Spinoza appelait une *idée adéquate*, qui distingue le contingent d'un tout extra-historique, et esquisse, selon la vision au long cours de Melville, un temps général qui est aussi pré-historique que post-historique.

INDEX

Keywords: anthropocene, phenomenology, abiogenesis, geo-humanities, eco-criticism, deep time, environmental humanities, 19th-century American literature

Mots-clés: anthropocène, phénoménologie, abiogénèse, géo-humanités, éco-critique, temps long, humanités environnementales, littérature américaine du 19^e siècle

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