A Jacket That Shrinks: Measuring Time on Board Melville’s *Neversink*

Arturo Corujo
A room needs an awareness of the passing of time. Otherwise it risks becoming inanimate. Or, to be more accurate, its silence risks becoming inanimate.

John Berger, *What Time Is It?*

**A SEAMAN’S JOURNAL IN TIMES OF CONFINEMENT**

1 Honolulu, 1843. Herman Melville shipped as an ordinary seaman on board the *United States*, a voyage which provided him with a first-hand experience of Navy life on which he would later draw during his literary career. Among his early novels, *White-Jacket* (1850) is a semi-autobiographical work that meticulously documents his naval routine on a homeward-bound voyage to the USA. The novel has gained contemporary relevance in our uncertain times; it provides us with a realistic portrayal of the experience of long-term confinement and isolation aboard a 19th-century frigate.

2 In a statement that draws attention to domestic issues related to privacy in Jules Verne’s representation of the *Nautilus* as “the emblem of closure” (66), Roland Barthes writes, “To like ships is first and foremost to like a house.” But, as Barthes reminds us, Arthur Rimbaud provides us with another seafaring mythology: the *Drunken Boat*, which, unlike the *Nautilus*, shows “a genuine poetics of exploration” (67). Such tension between closure and exposure is worth exploring and Melville’s *White-Jacket* is a good starting point: an anonymous working sailor chronicles his daily life not on board the actual *United States*, but on the fictional *Neversink*, an overcrowded frigate on which (failed) attempts at social distancing and protection against rain and humidity become imperative for self-preservation: on the one hand, Melville’s novel gives an account of the desire for privacy on board a frigate; on the other hand, it describes the narrator’s exposure to his (human) fellow sailors and the (nonhuman) atmospheric phenomena, which hinders his comfort and threatens his well-being.

3 The story opens in Callao, Peru, where the sailor decides to make a jacket in order to protect himself from the adverse weather that he is to encounter off the coast of Cape
Horn, Chile, on his way back to Norfolk, Virginia. Unfortunately, his handmade project is doomed to failure: the textile materials at hand—sailcloth, old socks, and trouser legs—are so worn-out that the final product turns out to be inadequate for the cold and humidity of polar temperatures. As a result, the narrator asks old Brush, the captain in charge of paint, for help to waterproof this “well-patched, padded, and porous [jacket]” (5). However, sailors have stolen so much paint that the last pots are now under “lock and key” (4), and the narrator is left to wear an unfit jacket that cannot protect him against weather phenomena. To make matters worse, this self-made garment soon puts its unlucky maker in the spotlight: due to the fabric’s eye-catching color, the narrator is given the original name of White-Jacket, an unwilled baptism that forces him to engage in an intimate relationship with his garment, frustrating all his attempts to go unnoticed in the navy-blue jacket world of the American man-of-war. From this moment onwards, the white jacket “forever proclaimed the name of its wearer” (120).

Overwhelmed by the constant cohabitation with, and invasive proximity to, his fellow sailors, White-Jacket decides to sew and customize his jacket with pockets to keep his belongings in an attempt to achieve (the feeling of having) a semblance of privacy; or in other words, a cabin of his own: an old castle with hidden corners, crypts, and winding stairs (36). Some pickpockets, though, steal his domestic objects at night, and the sailor finally gives up: “I masoned up my lockers and pantries; and save the two used for mittens, the white jacket ever after was pocketless” (37). Robbed of privacy, the sailor resorts to his last comfort: the skin intimacy with a white jacket that shrinks due to its contact with temperature variation as Melville’s confinement narrative further develops on its course from the Southern to the Northern hemisphere.

In this article, I analyze Melville’s *White-Jacket* as an instance of domestic confinement, drawing attention to its material reality: marine architecture, weather exposure, and clothing. My double question is: how does confinement influence our understanding of domesticity, and in what ways does the novel’s garment represent an alternative to measuring time at sea? Inspired by Cesare Casarino’s *Modernity at Sea* (2002), in which *White-Jacket* becomes a historiographical project that records domestic trivialities, that is, “a world of minutiae” (60), I draw attention to the measures of the jacket as a material instrument for measuring time: Melville defamiliarizes chronological time (naval discipline) and sets it apart from natural time (seasonal weather), drawing away from omniscient metanarratives of progress (official history) and providing readers with a first-person, domestic account of natural growth (unofficial history).

Melville pits the abstract, clock-based understanding of disciplined naval life against the material, seasonal pace of natural time, or in other words, a weather-based temporality. By clock-based, discipline time I mean the strictly scheduled, military endeavours which discipline war sailors on the *Neversink*, such as maintenance, working, and, most importantly, training-days. What I mean by natural time on the other hand pertains to the cyclical pace of seasonal variation. The white jacket, I argue, is the aesthetic representation of the tangible tensions around exposure to human (sailors) and nonhuman (rain and humidity) actors on board the unliving space of Melville’s frigate.
THE FRIGATE, A DOMESTIC SPACE

No privacy can you have; hardly one moment’s seclusion. It is almost a physical impossibility, that you can ever be alone. You dine at a vast table d’hôte; sleep in commons, and make your toilet where and when you can. Herman Melville, White-Jacket

The Neversink plays a central and active role in Melville’s narrative as an (un)living space. Indeed, its naval organization is defined as one of “domestic communism” (322), which is characterized by the imposed reality of living together with hundreds of perfect strangers. This particular domesticity is described as reminiscent of “a lofty, walled, and garrisoned town, like Quebec, where the thoroughfares are mostly ramparts, and peaceable citizens meet armed sentries at every corner” (75). This is the sort of carceral arrangement that Michel Foucault would eventually identify as a Panopticon, where “Visibility is a trap” (1977, 200). For this reason, it is no wonder that the Neversink, which qualifies as a domestic space, is not livable in terms of habitability because its architectural design, domestic furniture, and fittings—or rather, the lack thereof—cancel the process of feeling at home on board due to, on the one hand, forced cohabitations with sailors and, on the other hand, the subsequent annihilation of the individual right for “intimate distance.” In The Hidden Dimension (1966), Edward T. Hall coined the concept of proxemics to refer to “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture” (1). Hall defined “intimate distance” as the innermost circle of intimacy in which “Sight (often distorted), olfaction, heat from the other person’s body, sound, smell, and feel of the breath all combine to signal unmistakable involvement with another body” (116). While corporeal distance is about “love-making and wrestling, comforting and protecting” (117), “intimate distance” does require some corporeal separation between six and eighteen inches. That sort of distance is unfortunately oftentimes not available onboard the Neversink, which “houses and homes five hundred mortals in a space so contracted that they can hardly so much as move but they touch” (222). For the low-rank sailors living on the berth-deck, the lack of distance among bodies does not foster interpersonal intimacy; instead, it eliminates it.

This invasive cohabitation is hierarchical, evoking “the lodging-houses in Paris, turned upside down; the first floor, or deck, being rented by a lord; the second, by a select club of gentlemen; the third, by crowds of artisans; and the fourth, by a whole rabble of common people.” Thus deprived of their right for privacy, “the mass of sailors swing their hammocks under all” (75), a situation which illustrates the precarious domestic conditions of sleeping on a frigate:

But when, with five hundred other hammocks, yours is crowded and jammed on all sides, on a frigate berth-deck; the third from above, when “spreaders” are prohibited by an express edict from the Captain's cabin; and every man about you is jealously watchful of the rights and privileges of his own proper hammock, as settled by law and usage; then your hammock is your Bastile and canvas jug; into which, or out of which, it is very hard to get; and where sleep is but a mockery and a name. (80)

In this unlivable shipboard environment, the narrator’s precarious hammock is a case in point: unlike the conventional bed shared by comrades Ishmael and Queequeg at the Spouter Inn, in Moby-Dick (1851), this hammock is not a self-supporting structure because it lacks the consistency of furniture. According to Tim Ingold, “the human ‘nest,’ [...] is a fixed point for the movements of its several occupants, and a place to
which they regularly return” because “it has the attributes of what the ethologist, Heini Hediger [...] would call ‘home’: it is a ‘goal of flight’ and a ‘place of maximal security’” (33). However, the narrator’s hammock constitutes neither a resting nor a safe place; rather, it is a place where “sleep is but a mockery and a name” (80).

10 The relationship between narrator and hammock lays bare the pressing threat to individuality. White-Jacket complains that his is not a hammock of comfortable width because: “Eighteen inches a man is all they allow you; eighteen inches in width; in that you must swing. Dreadful! they give you more swing than that at the gallows” (80). Such are the measures of individuality on board, which coincide with the boundaries of intimate distance (from six to eighteen) in proxemics. My hypothesis is that the forced cohabitations and the subsequent lack of privacy on board operate in a centripetal fashion (moving towards the individual), whereas the concentric circles of human interaction expand in a centrifugal fashion (moving away from the individual). Similarly, Sara Ahmed states that the process of inhabitance requires taking up one’s own space: “Loving one’s home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one’s body, saturating the space with bodily matter: home as overflowing and flowing over.” (11) The domestic process of expanding one’s body in space comfortably and safely in relation to subjects and objects is cancelled on the Neversink, where the centripetal forces of the outside squeeze individuality, reducing it to eighteen inches.

11 Thus being deprived of sleep and privacy, turning and tossing in his hammock, White-Jacket fights for his threatened individuality on board a man-of-war where it is impossible to feel at home. Meanwhile, the epidermic contact between this seaman and his hammock reminds us that the relationship between self and textile is constitutive of subjectivity on board the Neversink. This constitutive bond points to the love-hate relationship between the narrator and his jacket. According to Heini Hediger, “there is a sense [...] in which apes build from the ‘bottom up,’ seeking support for rest and sleeping, whereas humans build from the ‘top down,’ seeking shelter from sun, rain or wind” (qtd. in Ingold 33). White-Jacket does not build a domestic arrangement in a top-down fashion; indeed, he manufactures a jacket in a bottom-up manner because he wants to protect himself from adverse weather.

THE WHITE JACKET, A MATERIALLY-ORIENTED APPROACH

It was not a very white jacket, but white enough, in all conscience

Herman Melville, White-Jacket

12 The white jacket has awakened the interest of several critics throughout the last century. Some of them have highlighted its narrative role; others have read it as a figurative sign. According to Willard Thorp, the primary function of the jacket is to “tie the episodes together” so that the chapters about the garment “run like a gleaming thread throughout the book” (428). Besides this rhetorical—though obvious—appreciation of the white jacket, Casarino rightly argues that this piece of self-made clothing also becomes “the paradigmatic image of all those small ‘little things’ that one must capture promptly, as they ‘are destined to pass away entirely from the face of the earth’” (50). Casarino sustains that the first-person narrator enacts a materialist “theory of historiography” that consists in recording the domestic objects that have
been excluded from official history. Although my reading of Melville's novel is particularly indebted to Casarino's philosophical discussion of the USS Neversink in relation to time and space, as I will analyze later, for him the jacket is, again, a simple "thread that loosely binds together the pieces of the novel" (50). For these critics, the jacket seems to be either a cohesive device or a representational image.

Other critics analyze the jacket as a literary tool for textual and contextual interpretation. In Melville's Anatomies (1999), Samuel Otter makes a compelling case for the analysis of the white garment in the context of slavery: he argues that, in writing White-Jacket, Melville was interested in drawing a political analogy between the 19th-century figures of the (white) sailor and the (black) slave in the Navy. In Otter's analysis, the vivid portrayal of naval flogging informs readers against this practice and, in so doing, "shows how the national drama of freedom and slavery is enacted on and in the skins of black and white slaves" (51). Thus, the white jacket is read as evoking "the treatments of skin color and texture in narratives of slavery and antebellum African American fiction" due to distinctive features related to "its confinement, capillary attraction, and color" (90).

My own reading moves away from the white jacket as narrative and figural motif, not to deny these hermeneutic possibilities (Casarino, Thorp) nor to contradict them (Otter), but to complement them with a reading methodology that stresses its taken-for-granted materiality as a legitimate object of literary criticism. In this context, I want to attempt to look at the actual properties of the jacket—its weight, drape, stretch—as a source of meaning that, I argue, might help us shed light on the leading role of the sailcloth. My approach to the novel's title object is also inspired by Simone Weil, who states that:

A method is necessary for the understanding of images, symbols, etc. One should not try to interpret them, but contemplate them until their significance flashes upon one [...]. They should first of all be taken in a purely literal fashion, and contemplated thus, for a considerable time. Then they should be taken in a less literal fashion and contemplated thus, and so on, by degrees. One should then return to the purely literal fashion of contemplating them. Meanwhile, one should drink in the light, whatever it may be, springing from all these several forms of contemplation. (The spring gushing out of the rock.) (334)

Although, at first reading, Weil seems to be arguing against the practice of textual criticism, she does not aim to condemn any exercise of hermeneutics, but just to suspend it momentarily. In this respect, Lorena Fuster argues that "the ideal of apprehension, or the reading of reality, is the progressive and regressive catharsis of the image from its possibly false interpretations. But it is precisely this ascent and descent into literalness which, in the moment of revelation, on the arrival of light, brings about the presence of every single possibility which has been contemplated for as long as the gaze has been allowed to do so" (149). My contention is that, in White-Jacket, the jacket is simply a jacket, a statement that, although tautological in form, describes my reading practice of looking at this object in its taken-for-granted materiality. Like Weil and Fuster, Melville might be also pointing to the interplay between the literal and the figural, or rather, the textile and the textual, in the form of a white jacket that invites us readers to participate in a process of manifold interpretations.

My hypothesis is that, because the garment is made of canvas, its textile properties lead to an uncomfortable skin contact which constantly makes its wearer conscious of his
body and, by the same extension, of any other entity that rubs against his corporeal limits. In his reading of Theodor W. Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Bill Brown highlights the importance of understanding “the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact,” meaning that “accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such” (12). Likewise, the otherness of Melville’s jacket is represented throughout the narrative by means of the tangible properties that account for the uneasy contact between subject and object.

Melville’s white jacket has three main attributes that account for the experience of otherness. Firstly, its drape: the fabric is quilted with “many odds and ends of patches” in order to make it safely “stiff and padded, as King James’s cotton-stuffed and dagger-proof doublet” (4). Hence its low-drape: even though the bulky character of the jacket displays protective layers, the rigid fabric still resists adapting to the shape beneath it and preserves its own structure. Secondly, its stretch: the jacket size changes due to its daily exposure to temperature variation, making it “shrink woefully all over, especially in the arms” as a short-sleeved garment (100). Thirdly, its weight: the jacket is a “universal absorber,” a spongy fabric that soaks up so much liquid in “a damp day” that many sailors usually stand on it in order to get rid of their own “drops of moisture.” As a result, its wearer’s bodily mobility becomes “[s]oaked and heavy” (4). Unlike the first attribute—that is, drape—which constitutes its textile singularity as an object different from the subject, the shrinkage and weight of the garment testify to the exposure to atmospheric phenomena through time.

In the following pages, I carefully read the materiality of the narrator’s white garment by looking at these two attributes—the stretch and the weight—at different stages of the voyage: firstly, the shrinkage of the jacket in Cape Horn; and secondly, its enormous weight in Rio. These material changes, I argue, account for the registration of the (seasonal) passing of time on board Melville’s *Neversink*, where the narrator must interact with (the passing of) time and (the unavoidable contact with) nonhuman otherness in the form of weather phenomena. In other words, I read the jacket as an instrument for measuring a weather-based temporality.

### CAPE HORN, THE HETEROCRHEONOMIC MEASURES OF TIME

Colder and colder; we are drawing nigh to the Cape
Herman Melville, *White-Jacket*

The exposure to atmospheric phenomena, such as rain and humidity, affects the white jacket, which shrinks as the crew cautiously approaches polar latitudes near the coast off Cape Horn. I want to draw attention to the difficulties in measuring one’s temporal and spatial location on the high seas, arguing that Melville’s *Neversink* qualifies as a Foucauldian heterotopia insofar as it simultaneously represents, contests, and inverts the narrator’s subjective experience of time. To do so, I also use the specific notion of “heterochrony,” succinctly defined by Foucault as an “absolute break with [men’s] traditional time” (1986, 26) and apply it to the narrator’s actual white jacket as the tangible representation of the natural pace of time.

The ship is a living and moving space that makes the experience of natural time perceivable, at least this is the case of Melville’s frigate. In his reading of Verne’s and Rimbaud’s ships, Barthes notes that they constitute two competing seafaring mythologies in that they are reduced to either “a habitat before a means of transport”
(in Verne’s maritime imagination) or “a travelling eye” (in Rimbaud’s). Here though I argue that a ship—be it a frigate, a whaler, etc.—is both a domestic space and a vehicle. In his reading of Verne, Barthes’s “before” is sequentially exclusive, but my use of “both” is simultaneously inclusive. The reason for this reformulation is simple: if we attempt to understand the particularities of the 19th-century ship as a ship, it is necessary that we address its domestic and travelling characters as mutually constitutive. Otherwise, we might run the risk of “domesticating” the ship as a static object out of context, as Verne does, or even abandoning it “to the infinite,” like Rimbaud (67).

21 For Melville, the Neversink does not represent either of these extreme seafaring typologies; instead, the novel’s frigate showcases a literally and materially-oriented shipboard world in which the ship is both a dwelling and a vehicle. Similarly, in his celebrated 1957 lecture, Foucault coined the concept of “heterotopia” in reference to a real place which simultaneously represents, contests, and inverts itself in the world (1986, 24). The philosopher conducted a systematic analysis of the different types of heterotopias, concluding that “The ship is the heterotopia par excellence” because, he lyrically explains, the ship is:

- a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens. (27)

22 These domestic and travelling particularities make the ship both a habitat (something that one goes through; or rather, that lives in) and a means of transport (something by means of which one can easily go from one place to another, and also something that simply goes by). Thus, the Neversink acts as a site in which the subjective perception of time is defamiliarized from the abstraction of (chronological) time and, as a result, reconnected with seasonal rhythms.4

23 The identification between Foucault’s heterotopia and Melville’s frigates is not new. Rodrigo Andrés has read the H.M.S. Bellipotent in Billy Budd, Sailor (1924) as a heterotopia in that “the crises and anxieties of a world divided between colonizers and subalterns mirror the real world Melville’s readers then and now inhabit” (133-134). In his reading, beautiful Billy Budd (the subaltern) is impressed into the Bellipotent in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Both Captain Vere and the master-at-arms Claggart (colonizers) racialize Billy as an Other (131). Casarino has also read the Neversink not as a heterotopia but, as he asserts, reformulating Foucault’s dictum, “the ship is the heterochrony par excellence” (61). Casarino, imbued with Walter Benjamin’s lyricism in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1942), argues that the experience of modernity in White-Jacket is one of urgency: “the urgency of capturing in the nick of time what is about to be swept away by the storm of progress, the urgency of that practice of historical representation that must always run faster than history itself and must always be a step ahead even of itself” (59). In his reading, the heterochrony of the frigate is “a space which is a ‘nick,’ an indentation in the flowing surface of time, a safe haven from its ruinous forces, a temporal hiatus, a caesura of history” (47).

24 Building on Andrés’s and Casarino’s analyses of the Bellipotent and the Neversink respectively, I propose to include the body in the spatiotemporal conversation with the space of the ship, drawing attention to the white jacket as the representation of the heterochrony of the weather-based temporality—often though not always—
experienced at sea. The sailor’s jacket, originally made for regulating bodily temperature in cold latitudes, fails to protect him from the bad weather because:

Then, again, the repeated soakings and dryings [the jacket] had undergone, had by this time made it shrink woefully all over, especially in the arms, so that the wristbands had gradually crawled up near to the elbows; and it required an energetic thrust to push the arm through, in drawing the jacket on. (100)

Therefore, the jacket cannot work as such because its primary function cannot be performed. And beyond the possibility of catching a cold, if not something more serious for naval survival, the failure of the jacket to function as a jacket is in fact an opportunity to tell its real story. Brown points out that “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (4). Thus, this failure lays bare a subject-object relation which interacts with otherness (the jacket as discomfort) and time (the jacket as organic).

The connection between jacket and weather is etymological: the Spanish term “tiempo” (time, weather) derives from Latin “tempus,” which is also made up of the Proto-Indo-European verbal root “temp,” which originally means “to stretch.” It is no coincidence that, in present-day English, “stretch” refers to “an extent in time; duration,” normally associated with a break in routine as well as with “a term of imprisonment.” For this reason, the actual stretch of the white jacket seems to be intimately related to the (shrinking) stretch of time in confinement, particularly in moments of frenetic, working pace.

In White-Jacket, Melville defamiliarizes chronological time in favor of natural time, which brings us back to the materiality of the jacket. My contention is that the relationship between jacket and weather is not casual, but causal: the garment shrinks due to its constant exposure to temperature variation from the Southern to the Northern hemisphere. If latitude is the distance, either north or south, from the equator (vertical axes, meridians), and longitude is the distance, east or west, from the prime meridian (horizontal axes, parallels), the Neversink must be thought in terms of latitude (angular distance), and not in terms of longitude (local time). This connection between the jacket (fabric, measures) and weather (latitude, measurements) is at the core of Melville’s defamiliarization of chronological time in White-Jacket.

**RIO, THE TANGIBLE WEIGHT OF LIFE IN HARBOR**

In good time we were up with the parallel of Rio de Janeiro, and, standing in for the land, the mist soon cleared; and high aloft the famed Sugar Loaf pinnacle was seen, our bowsprit pointing for it straight as a die

Herman Melville, White-Jacket

Rio de Janeiro, 1844. The frigate United States lay at anchor from August 16 to August 24. The fictional Neversink, though, stays in harbor much longer: from chapter 39 to chapter 65. Quantitatively speaking, in the novel, the crew lay in Rio for some weeks, “lazily taking in stores and otherwise preparing for the passage home” (159); whereas in qualitative terms, the subjective experience of naval life in harbor changed because, according to the narrator, “nowhere does time pass more heavily than with most man-of-war’s men on board their craft in harbor” (167). Such a qualitative perception of naval time seems to be motivated by long periods of inactivity and the torrid
temperatures in the tropics. This warm weather leads the narrator to a dilemma: “that I would ever again need such a thing as a heavy quilted jacket—and such a jacket as the white one, too—seemed almost impossible. Yet I remembered the American coast, and that it would probably be Autumn when we should arrive there” (200). Despite these thermal troubles, White-Jacket has an ambivalent attitude towards his garment: on the one hand, he wants to treasure it at all costs; but on the other, he wants to get rid of it. Meanwhile, the properties of his jacket—particularly its color and quilted structure—restrict his mobility, which, on the one hand, returns us to the domestic issue of feeling at home, and on the other, invites us to reconsider the bodily experience of time passing “heavily” (167).

In this section, I explore the harbor in Rio as an instance of spatial immobility which phenomenologically alters the subjective experience of time on board the Neversink. In my reading, the fact that the frigate is in harbor allows sailors to sense the passing of natural time in contact with their human body. In order to demonstrate my thesis, now I shall look at the aging of the white jacket described in chapter 47, “An Auction in a Man-of-War.”

In Rio, the narrator’s way to kill the “long, tedious hours in harbor” is to read books. His fellow sailors also engage in domestic practices such as aesthetic needlework, “making elaborate shirts, stitching picturesque eagles, and anchors”; tattooing “a palm-tree, an anchor, a crucifix, a lady, a lion, an eagle, or any thing else you might want” (170); and, if permitted, playing checkers, as well as selecting a “soft plank on the gun-deck, and go to sleep” (174). Another activity sailors usually do to kill time is related to the organization of naval auctions. In chapter 47, the narrator tries to get his jacket sold at auction so as to finally get rid of it because, earlier in his voyage, during one of his watches aloft, his fellow sailors mistook him for a ghost, lowering the halyards and nearly causing him to fall off. From then on, the love-hate relationship of the sailor with his jacket only gets worse as a result of his life being put at risk. Unfortunately for the desperate sailor, his peers are not interested in bidding for a garment that shows too many traces of its history with its former wearer:

A premature old age had now settled upon it; all over it bore melancholy sears of the masoned-up pockets that had once trenched it in various directions. Some parts of it were slightly mildewed from dampness; on one side several of the buttons were gone, and others were broken or cracked; while, alas! my many mad endeavours to rub it black on the decks had now imparted to the whole garment an exceedingly untidy appearance. Such as it was, with all its faults, the auctioneer displayed it. (201)

The relevance of this extract lies in the difficult representation of the jacket in textual form, which bears a resemblance to “a portrait taken at one period of life” which “will not answer for a later stage; much more this jacket of mine, undergoing so many changes, needs to be painted again and again, in order to truly present its actual appearance at any given period” (201). Unlike the pictorial representation of objects, the literary representation of the white jacket captures the flowing of time page after page. The garment’s shrinking fabric, damp weight, and dirty color convey the tangible weight of time. In other words, the white garment becomes a palimpsest devoid of symbols and layered with the hues of weather phenomena.

Finally, as clock time seems to dissolve as if it were released from its military value on board, the sailor’s garment still ages, shrinks, and gets dirty as days go by, recording organic history. Like Casarino, who is more concerned with the discursive
metanarratives of official history, the narrator’s account being an example of the unofficial history of a “world of minutiae” (50), I have been interested in extending the interpretive possibilities of reading Melville’s white jacket as a material instance of natural time, which draws away from omniscient metanarratives of progress (official history), and instead, reconciles us with first-person, domestic accounts of organic growth (unofficial history).

NORFOLK, “LIFE IS A VOYAGE THAT’S HOMeward-Bound!”

And now that the white jacket has sunk to the bottom of the sea, and the blessed Capes of Virginia are believed to be broad on our bow—though still out of sight—our five hundred souls are fondly dreaming of home, and the iron throats of the guns round the galley re-echo with their songs and hurras—what more remains? Herman Melville, White-Jacket

The Neversink completes her voyage in Norfolk, Virginia, but the story closes before arrival. In chapter 92, “The Last of the Jacket,” the narrator shifts from the first to the third person, as if to suggest—and foreshadow—that he has already severed the relationship with his jacket. But the most dangerous accident is yet to come: White-Jacket falls overboard into the ocean after mistaking his own garment for the sails when he was looking for a point of support aloft. Despite an initial loss of consciousness underwater, the sailor manages to come to the surface “like a buoy” in a baptismal scene in which his whole head is “bathed in the blessed air” (393). However, the sailor is unable to swim to the Neversink because the jacket restricts his mobility. The decision he finally makes proves fatal for the jacket:

I strove to tear it off; but it was looped together here and there, and the strings were not then to be sundered by hand. I whipped out my knife, that was tucked at my belt, and ripped my jacket straight up and down, as if I were ripping open myself. With a violent struggle I then burst out of it, and was free. Heavily soaked, it slowly sank before my eyes. (394)

Unlike Melville’s last piece of naval fiction, which ends with the tragic death of Billy Budd, the last scene in White-Jacket closes with the rebirth of the—once again—anonymous narrator, who finally manages to emancipate himself from his asphyxiating jacket after an emergency cesarean. While Billy Budd, Sailor takes place in the Mediterranean, a closed-off sea that seals Melville’s corpus, White-Jacket takes us from the open waters of the Pacific (Callao) to the Atlantic Ocean (Norfolk). Interestingly enough, the sailor gives an account of the circumstances of his arrival in port and its aftermath, but implements a narrative maneuver that consists in framing informative statements as rhetorical questions: “Shall I tell what conflicting and almost crazy surmisings prevailed concerning the precise harbor for which we were bound?” (395) This question introduces a set of other questions as a way of a chorus that, in my reading, orients the narrator—and also us readers—to look at the promise of arriving home in order to confront the emptiness of the horizon with the hope for other domesticities, cohabitations, and temporalities.

What I have attempted to do in this article is twofold. In the first place, I have proposed to bring the jacket to the front of my literary analysis as a—if not the—legitimate object of interpretation in Melville’s novel by attending to its material features as a source of meaning. I have argued that the jacket might benefit from a material reading that
stresses its in/organic character as an aesthetic representation of the tangible tensions around the exposure to both human (the narrator’s fellow sailors) and nonhuman (the atmospheric phenomena) actors. Therefore, the white jacket becomes an instrument for measuring two different naval issues: on the one hand, White-Jacket’s threatened individuality aboard the overcrowded Neversink; and on the other hand, an alternative weather-based temporality that respects natural seasons. In the second place, I have made a case for a polysemous reading, allowing for the manifold interpretations of the jacket that might contribute to a more complete reading of the novel. Following this materially-oriented approach throughout the narrative, I have moved away from reading the white jacket as a static object in an attempt to avoid fixating its meaning as a narrative or figurative motif. Instead, I have read the jacket as a dynamic object that changes as atmospheric phenomena alter the fabric, especially in terms of color, size, and weight. But despite its interpretable meaning, Newton Arvin reminds us that the mysterious garment “remains elusive and slightly equivocal” (34). Like the white whale in Moby-Dick, Melville’s following novel, the white jacket, too, “must remain unpainted to the last” (264). So be it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES


2. In recent years, Melville scholars have used this materially-oriented approach in their work. For Hester Blum, the sea is not “a figure of metaphorical reflection” but a literal space where the material conditions of shipboard life are represented (25). Similarly, Edward Sugden argues that Melville shows oceanic life in an interstitial state or, in Ishmael’s own phrasing, in a “‘brief interlude,’ at a midpoint between structural shifts in the world-system” (3).

3. My translation. “El ideal de la aprehensión, o de la lectura de la realidad, es la catarsis progresiva y regresiva de la imagen de sus posibles adherencias interpretativas falsas. Pero es precisamente esta ascensión y descenso en la literalidad la que determina que en el momento de la revelación, en la llegada de la luz, estén presentes todas las posibilidades contempladas durante todo el tiempo que se ha concedido a la mirada” (Fuster 149).

4. As a Spanish speaker, my reasoning behind the relationship between time and weather in White-Jacket is related to the distinction between “tiempo cronológico” (chronological passing of time) and “tiempo atmosférico” (seasonal passing of time).


ABSTRACTS

This article aims to read Herman Melville’s White-Jacket as an instance of domestic confinement, where the clock-based understanding of naval life is substituted for the pace of seasonal time. The story revolves around the narrator’s jacket, a stretchy garment that shrinks due to its contact with temperature variation. The jacket is a dynamic sailcloth and I draw attention to its physical properties—weight, drape, stretch—to read it as a material instrument for measuring time: building on Cesare Casarino’s reading of White-Jacket in Modernity at Sea (2002), I argue that, as the jacket shrinks, Melville defamiliarizes chronological time (naval discipline) from natural time (seasonal weather), drawing away from omniscient metanarratives of progress (official history) and providing readers with a first-person, domestic account of natural growth (unofficial history).

Cet article se propose de lire White-Jacket de Herman Melville comme un exemple de confinement domestique, où le rythme du temps saisonnier se substitue à la compréhension chronométrique de la vie navale. L’intrigue tourne autour de la vareuse blanche portée par le narrateur, un vêtement à la fois extensible et contractile, qui rétrécit sous l’effet des variations de température. La vareuse est une toile à voile dynamique, et j’attire l’attention sur ses propriétés physiques – poids, tissu, extensibilité – pour la lire comme un instrument matériel de mesure du temps. En m’appuyant sur la lecture que Cesare Casarino fait de White-Jacket dans Modernity at Sea (2002), je soutiens que, lorsque la vareuse rétrécit, Melville découple le temps chronologique (celui de la discipline navale) du temps naturel (temps météorologique). Ce faisant, le récit prend ses distances vis à vis des méta-récits omniscients du progrès (histoire officielle) et offre aux lecteurs un compte rendu domestique à la première personne de la croissance naturelle (histoire non officielle).

INDEX

Mots-clés: Herman Melville, White-Jacket, matérialité, temps chronologique, temps météorologique

Keywords: Herman Melville, White-Jacket, materiality, time, weather

AUTHORS

ARTURO CORUJO
Doctoral Researcher
Universitat de Barcelona
arturocorujo@ub.edu

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