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# How Thick Is the Whale's Skin? Ishmael, the Reader, and the Limits of the Text

Boris Vejdovsky

*Wir haben die Kunst,  
damit wir nicht an der Wahrheit  
zu Grunde gehen.*  
Nietzsche

## I

Whoever has read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* knows of the interminable character of that disseminating novel. Indeed, there seem to be no limits to Ishmael's accretion of textual possibilities, and Melville seems to be working on a limitless loom where a thin and fragile narrative thread is drawn and stretched to, or even beyond, the limits of its possibilities and resistance. But even in this in-finite novel, there comes a moment when the narrative line snaps: the text comes to a close, the space of the text is delimited by that closure, and an outer non-textual, non-narrative, non-fictional, space seems to be designated through that delimitation. For many a reader, the long-expected, and finally all too foreseeable conclusion – the final showdown between Ahab the crippled captain and the monstrous white whale – may prove rather disappointing. But the almost endless deferral of the end that works both towards and against the closure of the novel also works as the novel's exploration of what we may call the "limits of textuality" allegorized in the asymmetrical limits of the book and the de-limitation of its *écriture*.

The limits of the text and of textuality in which texts are inscribed seem to be defined by the metonymical etymology of the word "text" that derives from *texere*, to weave. Textuality and its synecdoche, the text, owe their existence to a metaphorical transfer from the loom to the page, from the woof to the line, from the pattern to the plot, from the thread to the

(story)line. Whatever its size, when it draws on the metonymy of the woven fabric, the text has to be limited on at least one side, and “the necessity of the back-and-forth movement [of the shuttle] implies a closed space. . . . Such type of space seems necessarily to present an inside and an outside: even when all the threads of the woof are of exactly the same nature, weaving reconstructs an inside by always hiding on the same side the knotting of the threads” [la nécessité d’un aller-retour implique un espace fermé . . . [U]n tel espace semble présenter nécessairement un envers et un endroit; même quand les fils de la chaîne et ceux de la trame ont exactement la même nature,. . . le tissage reconstitue un envers en reportant d’un seul côté les fils noués] (Deleuze and Guattari 593-94, my translation). In a textuality-ridden civilization, the model of the woven text has imposed itself well beyond the narrow limits of the page; this is why Plato takes the model of weaving as a “paradigm for the ‘royal science,’ that is, the art of governing men and exerting on them the pressure of the State” [paradigme de la “science royale,” c’est à dire de l’art de gouverner les hommes ou d’exercer l’appareil d’État] (Deleuze and Guattari 594).

Could it be that the lines on which we inscribe our *biographies* are a part of a huge but invisible loom operated by an even bigger, more mysterious and maybe more terrifying, weaver? While *Moby-Dick* is very much an example of a nineteenth-century “realistic” novel that presents the reader with a human comedy that seeks to capture in its loom or web all the aspects of human experience, something goes wrong in this blueprint that was to have presented under the allegory of a whaling trip the Alpha and the Omega of that experience. The project ironically and ruthlessly turns against its own *telos*, and the novel that was to map out the delimited space of textuality and delineate its “limits” appears as an anachronistic confirmation that there is no *hors-texte*. Where does the textual space begin (and end), or, as Ishmael ponders, how thick is the whale’s/*The Whale*’s skin?

The question is, what and where is the skin of the whale? . . . That same infinitely thin, isinglass substance . . . which . . . invests the entire body of the whale, is not so much to be regarded as the skin of the creature, as the skin of the skin, so to speak; for it were simply ridiculous to say, that the proper skin of the tremendous whale is thinner and more tender than the skin of a new-born child. (*MD* 259-60)

On the other hand, in this novel that constantly proclaims that textuality is everywhere, and that the world is ordered (like Ishmael’s bestiary) in “Folios” and “Quartos,” the text constantly and heavily insists that there are “limits” to textuality and its limitless exploration of possibilities: there is a

boundary beyond which the real pain of real humans begins, a limit beyond which tropes crystallize with dramatic consequences for those living beings. But it also appears that it is only when that limit is reached that it is possible to read the character of textuality. Ishmael seems to suggest this when he uses the dried skin of whales that forms their limit and boundary with the outer world "for marks in [his] whalebooks," and adds:

It is transparent . . . and being laid upon the printed page, I have sometimes pleased myself with fancying it exerted a magnifying influence. At any rate, it is pleasant to read about whales through their own spectacles, as you may say. (*MD* 259)

From what precedes, it appears that the ethical connotation of the word "limits" can be heard as being coextensive with its topographical dimension. The metonymy drawn by text on weaving seems to impose boundaries, frontiers, margins on the text: "[t]he pages are in order, with a margin framing the lines in a white border, 'justified,' as we say, suggesting some vague ethical or judicial responsibility to keep neat and straight the frontiers between meaningful signs and unmeaning blank" (Miller 6). In many instances, indeed, *Moby-Dick* suggests that the neatly ordered space of the book is an allegory for the way different forces police space for "real" people, and the novel questions the limits posed by the "chapters," the "margins," and "arguments" that constitute the plots of human *biographies*. The novel recasts the question of the limits of textuality in a double articulation of space and performativity, and constantly reminds the reader that the material space of the novel is coextensive with another sort of space that always spills over the limits imposed by the topography of the page.

The trip of the *Pequod* is a voyage to the limits of textuality, and it can be read as an exploration of the ethico-political possibilities of textuality that fabricated the American world. Throughout the novel, Ishmael pursues a somber meditation on the possibility of a politically, socially, and economically ethical behavior shaped by textuality, while Melville, his *alter ego*, pursues a reflection on the end of textuality, that is, its purpose and ethical character, but also on its coming to its limit, its historical closure. From *Mardi* on, Melville's fiction envisages the end of Western textuality by reflecting on it through the paradoxical condition of an interminable novel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As the well-known reception history of the novel confirms, many nineteenth-century readers thought that Melville had actually overstepped the limits of the novel and had thereby killed his whale of a book by pushing it beyond the limits of the text, and proclaimed thereby his own death as a marketable author. Many contemporary reviews of the novel have been anthologized

Melville starts to suspect that every act of writing inscribed on the old Platonic loom of Western textuality may well be a “dead letter,” and the death of the letter – that is, the death of the Platonic text – is the occasion of mourning and the sitting of a wake, but also of the opening up of new renaissance and emancipating possibilities. *Moby-Dick* cracks the loom of the text to see if there is a possible renaissance of the text after the posting of those dead letters; *Moby-Dick* is a letter shipped and maybe not yet received in which Ishmael, the survivor of the tragedy of the *Pequod*, is at work as a post-man in charge of delivering the text.

In this “whale of a book” the text disseminates in all directions and challenges its own textual – that is woven – nature inscribed on its pre-established and delimited woof. Rather than a finely embroidered fabric, *Moby-Dick* is a collection, a stitching together of rags – one might say a quilt – made of bits of texts fabricated in different historical and cultural horizons and recycled to form a narrative pattern, a figure in a checkered blanket reminiscent of the counterpane under which Ishmael and Queequeg share their first night of intimacy; Ishmael adds to that counterpane bit by bit until it is large enough to cover, conceal – and maybe protect – both him and the reader.

The first parts of the novel encountered by the reader partake of that quilted character. “Etymology” and “Extracts” are not exactly “chapters” in the sense that they do not “head” anything. They should usher readers from their extra-textual space into the novel and give that entrance a sense, but instead of that, they give a series of contradictory indirections that problematize the motive of a narrative line readers could follow. These loomings – in the sense of dark foreboding, forceful distortion, but also bits fallen off a loom – that range from the Old Testament to a “Whale Song” harmonized by

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for the delight of the (post)modern reader who can admire the vast expanses that textuality has conquered since the dark ages when the author of *Moby-Dick* was said to be:

Thrice unlucky Herman Melville! . . . This is an odd book, professing to be a novel; wantonly eccentric; outrageously bombastic; in places charmingly and vividly descriptive. The author has read up laboriously to make a show of cetological learning. . . . Herman Melville is wise in this sort of wisdom. He uses it as stuffing to fill out his skeleton story. Bad stuffing it makes, serving only to try the patience of his readers, and to tempt them to wish both him and his whales at the bottom of an unfathomable sea. . . . What the author’s original intention in spinning his preposterous yarn was, it is impossible to guess; evidently, when we compare the first and third volumes, it was never carried out. . . . (*London Literary Gazette*, December 6 1851)

Many contemporary critics relish to see how far the American novel had pushed the limits or the last frontier of textuality in an advance on chaos that seems to have no boundary.

some Nantucket whaler, are stitched together by “a late consumptive usher to a grammar school” and a “sub-sub-librarian” to constitute the textual body of *Moby-Dick*, which is also – as the subtitle of the novel says – the body of “The Whale” itself. The textual body of the whale/*The Whale* is constituted with de-contextualized excerpts of texts, pinched here and there, now and then, by a “consumptive” scholar to form a vaguely and often incorrectly remembered collection of motley rags coming from the monstrous and equally consumptive body – or corpse – of Western textuality. The live body of the whale/*The Whale* is made of those dead letters; once the sturdiest limbs of a textual body, they are now pitiable and rejected members that lie in the pre-textual limbo of the novel. They have become miserable and derisory synecdoches of what was once the glorious and well-proportioned body of a text that formed, with its headers and footnotes, the apt anthropomorphic representative of a perfect ordering of the world made in the image and after the likeness of God. The body of the whale/*The Whale* does not grow like a harmonious tree with its branches carefully pruned to respect an anthropomorphic fearful symmetry. It does not have the wonderful proportions of the harmonious man imagined by Leonardo da Vinci in his famous drawing the “Vitruvian Man” that represented man reborn into a new perfection, a man who embodied the new humanism of the age called the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> Da Vinci’s “ecce homo” is evocative of – even as it veils Him in an anthropocentric displacement – Christ the resurrected man, and replaces him with the Renaissance man. On the contrary, the body of the whale/*The Whale* resulting from the resurrection of Ishmael and the exhumation of the dismembered corpse of Western textuality is violently disproportionate, dangerously monstrous; it is a body that is always too large to be contained in a folio or a quarto, just as *Moby-Dick*, the white whale, is too large to be contained by Ahab’s infernal weave.

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<sup>2</sup> The “Proportional Study of a Man in the Manner of Vitruvius” (c. 1487) is Leonardo’s reinterpretation of Vitruvius’ *Ten Books* where the latter describes how the world is to be ordered:

In the components of a temple there ought to be the greatest harmony in the symmetrical relations of the different parts to the magnitude of the whole. Then again, in the human body the central part is naturally the navel. For if a man be placed flat on his back, with hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centered at his navel, the fingers and toes of his hands and feet will touch the circumference of the circle described therefrom. (*Ten Books*, 3.1. Kemp 115)

In Leonardo’s drawing the arms and legs of the man trace the perfect geometry of God’s creation, but the center of the work is the body of a male human being with his navel and genitals – the source of his seminal and semantic power – exposed.

*Moby-Dick* is a narrative of dismembering and death, and it is inscribed within a double economy of dismembering and remembering, of proportion and disproportion, which gives rise to two competing textual economies: one of weaving (*texere*), and one of patching or quilting. The novel is suspended between these two economies, as it is suspended between its two protagonists, Ishmael and Ahab, and their remembered and dismembered bodies. The dismemberment of texts and their violent reassembling within an economy which no longer answers the call for ideal harmony, but that for necessity and survival, produces the body of a text, *Moby-Dick*, that bears the scars of a violent battle.

The novel owes its existence to the work of memory, but that work of remembering leads to the forceful throwing together of textual limbs that do not belong together, and gives rise to another metaphor. It is no longer a metonymy that draws of the skillful craftsmanship of the weaver: *Moby-Dick* presents itself as a vast catachresis, a forceful use of misuse of the "text." When called, Ishmael responds and remembers the narrative by stitching together the motley rags, the dismembered body of textuality, mutilated, amputated, and maimed in a terrible fight, and the novel consists of recycled material returned to the new body of the text sometimes with exhilarating enthusiasm, sometimes as the disquieting return of the repressed. The novel no longer develops on a linear but on a rhythmic pattern that forms the figure of a *polemos* that seems to result in the triumph of so-called eternal life, liberty, and responsibility. However, as Derrida rightly points out: "a triumph bears in itself the traces of the battle. A victory may have been snatched in a war between two really inseparable adversaries; the victory is proclaimed on the next day, but its very celebration bears in itself the traces of the memory of the war" [Un triomphe garde en lui la trace d'une bataille. Une victoire aura été arrachée au cours d'une guerre entre deux adversaires au fond inséparables; elle éclate le lendemain au moment de la fête qui commémore . . . et garde la mémoire de la guerre] (Derrida 34, my translation). *Moby-Dick* is a wake, a mourning in which Melville seeks to recapture the traces of the conflict without a front between a bold, heroic, and overtly phallic textuality inscribed in an extravagant economy of dismembering, mutilation, and sacrifice, and a quilting economy of remembering, responsibility, and survival.

Remembering in *Moby-Dick* is a call for vigilance and a wake. The "consumptive usher" stands before the door of the dead letter office where the strange vigil is kept. But the reader never knows on which side of the door the usher is standing: we can never ascertain when/if we leave our

extra-textual world to get through the skin of the whale/*Whale*, and very soon the broken threads of the text seem to get reattached like the nerves of a severed and grafted limb. The apparently haphazard collection of scraps of texts and etymologies is ordered along spacio-temporal lines that seem to be uncoiled to retrieve a lost point of origin of knowledge of what the whale is.

"Etymology" (*MD 1*) seeks to retrace the original meaning of the word "whale," which might, this is the implied hope, help the reader to re-member the forever lost signification of the word. This part focuses on the textual nature of the world and the historical process closely enmeshed with that textual nature: etymologies are genealogies; words remember history; words constitute the trace of history. The genealogy of the word "whale" seeks to unearth a supposed point of origin situated geographically and historically in Palestine in what might be believed to be the most ancient and original language of the Western world, the language of the Old Testament. It is that testament or will that the succeeding words trace through time with a movement westward from the supposed cradle of Western civilization to its furthest expansion or limit, from the historically ascertained – though erroneously quoted – Hebrew word "*tan*," to the last frontier of Western textuality the Fiji ("Fegee") Islands, and beyond, to the fictive islands where Erromangoan may or may not be spoken but where Western textuality has always already landed.

The ushering into the novel thus tests the limits of a departed transcendental logos that could once impose its authority beyond the limits of the text and guarantee its value. Various authorities are called upon to say what the whale is; the definition from Hakluyt peremptorily states:

While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true. (*MD 1*)

This definition seems to be confirmed by the definition excerpted from "Webster's Dictionary" which traces the word back to a Swedish and Danish root "*hval*" where the "h" that "maketh up the signification of the word" prominently appears. However, "Richardson's Dictionary" quoted immediately afterwards omits the "h" and renders moot the authority of the first two etymologies. The "truth" about the whale/*The Whale* thus depends on one letter, and the quest for that truth, for the essence of the whale/*The Whale* depends on that single dead or purloined letter that identifies the whale/*The Whale*, forms its mysterious figure or *character*, and

distinguishes it from unworthy simulacra. The contradictory etymologies in *Moby-Dick* suggest that trying to retrace the whale to an original point in time and space where the weaver began H/his great work is vain, for “the effect of etymological retracing is not to ground the word solidly but to render it unstable, equivocal, wavering, groundless” (Miller 19). Instead of uncoiling a thread that would lead to the center of a labyrinth where truth may be hidden, *Moby-Dick* opens with a set of texts and definitions which all differ from one another: they all constitute a game of difference, but none of them can be used as the firm ground of comparison. Uncoiling the line of etymologies does not lead to a logocentric understanding of the whale/*The Whale*; in fact it leads to no origin, goal, or base all three of which “come together,” as Miller observes, “as the gathering movement of the logos.” Uncoil the spool, follow it to the heart of logos, and what you will find is another coil, for logos is itself entangled in the textual weave: “*Logos* in Greek meant transcendent word, speech, reason, proportion, substance, or ground. The word comes from *legein* to gather, as in English collect, legislate, legend, or coil” (Miller 18). In *Moby-Dick*, this movement of coiling and uncoiling which is also an ungrounding of words is allegorized by the ungrounding of Ishmael and the reader who embark on the *Pequod*, and on Christmas Day, the day of death and rebirth, leave the *terra firma* delimited by textuality for the open surface of the sea.

The pre-chapters – “Etymologies” and “Extracts” – that prevent the novel from having a real point of origin, serve as a pre-text for a meditation on the limits of textuality. By forestalling its beginning, these dismembered texts also deprive the novel of a teleology and the possibility of a concluding goal. The pre-textual limbo is also a reminder that textuality always precedes experience and that nobody can embark innocently on the cruise. The preventive opening of the text is a memorial for all those who have embarked aboard the *Pequod* and launched on the pursuit of the monster; all those readers – fresh water sailors or weathered sea-wolves – who sharpened their harpoons in the hope of catching the whale/*The Whale*, knowing it, killing it by striking through its heart and lungs, ending its history, and knotting the last thread of the last figure of the text.

## II

*Moby-Dick* has often been compared to a maze or a labyrinth that holds in its center a grave and terrifying secret. *Moby-Dick*, the white whale, is that

center of gravity toward which all objects of study and attention fall. In the chapter "The Line," Ishmael recasts the myth of Ariadne's thread and redefines the textual space and the textual economy governed by that myth. "I have to speak of the magical, sometimes horrible whale-line," Ishmael says (*MD* 238). Catching the whale/*The Whale* means attaching it to a line, namely, for the reader, a narrative line. The reader is to uncoil and follow that thread to the center of the maze, find the monster, and drive the harpoon through its heart. That is the violent magic of the line, the dream of every weaver, but the line is "horrible" as John Ruskin wonderfully perceives in his interpretation of the myth:

Note . . . that the question seems not at all to have been about getting in; but getting *out* again. The clue, at all events, could be helpful only after you had carried it in; and if the spider, or any other monster in midweb, ate you, the help in your clue, for return, would be insignificant. So that this thread of Ariadne's implied that even victory over the monster would be vain, unless you could disentangle yourself from this web also. (Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*. Miller 2)

The novel stands as a memorial to all those who have been devoured by the whale/*The Whale* because they have followed the thread leading to it and have become entangled in the terrible web they have themselves woven. In the allegorical finale of that same chapter Ishmael philosophizes:

All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the . . . turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in a whale-boat, you would not . . . feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side. (*MD* 241)

In this typical move for the novel, the reader is snatched from what he or she may have taken for a safe extra-textual haven, and is dragged into the midst of the most threatening events. The passage proposes that the risks run – or sat – by the readers living in textuality are similar to those encountered by Ishmael and Ahab: dismemberment or violent death when the (narrative) line takes "somebody's arm, leg, or entire body off." The skin between fiction and reality may be thinner than some think, and in the apparently vicarious activity of reading danger looms large.

To weave one's way to the whale/*The Whale*, to make it the goal of the journey, is to expose oneself to the risk of being swallowed up and never resurfacing. The allegory is moral but also economical: there is always a

*price to pay* for wanting to face the truth hidden inside the labyrinth. In Ovid's version of the tale, it is Daedalus who teaches Ariadne the trick of the thread, that magic narrative line that allows her to read the maze where Theseus is kept prisoner. As a punishment for his sacrilegious act Minos imprisons Daedalus in a labyrinth that the latter has himself built. Daedalus manages to escape by flight, but the price for his freedom and survival is the loss of his beloved son Icarus who cannot resist the anabatic attraction to the sun, the center of logos and light, and is precipitated "into the profundity of the sea" (*MD* 239). In *Moby-Dick*, the white whale is the Platonic object of fascination that tempts and attracts those who covet truth. On the *Pequod*, the mast-head is the place where the young and inexperienced Ishmael can hope to gain the soaring Platonic overview that may allow him to catch a glimpse of the truth. Ishmael recalls these hopes in the chapter "The Mast-Head":

Beware of enlisting in your vigilant fisheries any lad with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditateness; and who offers to ship with the Phædon instead of Bowditch in his head. Beware of such an one, I say: your whales must be seen before they can be killed; and this sunken-eyed young Platonist will tow you ten wakes around the world, and never make you one pint of sperm richer. (*MD* 139)

The passage is not without irony, of course, since Ishmael remembers himself as a young Platonist with, precisely, the *Phædon* in his head. The novel recounts his transformation from a young sunken-eyed Platonist who is willing, not unlike Socrates in the *Phædon*, to sacrifice his life for the elevation of his soul, into someone who offers his life, within an economy which is no longer sacrificial, by reflecting on death, by thinking it through, and thereby paradoxically offering his life for others, not through his death, but through his survival.

As is often the case in the novel, the meditation on death is troped in economical terms of gain and loss within the Capitalist logic of the whaling business. But there is another economy at play in *Moby-Dick*; it is an economy that poses the question of value and of the currency of value woven in Western textuality. The issue is not "money" which merely tropes value, but value as in Martin Heidegger's words: "Value is value insofar as it is valuable. It is valuable insofar as it is set out as that which matters" [Der Wert ist Wert, insofern er gilt. Er gilt, insofern er als das gesetzt ist, worauf es ankommt] (Heidegger 211, my translation).

Practically any passage in *Moby-Dick* can be read as an allegory (and a critique) of a market-oriented and dollar-determined world. Melville shrewdly enmeshes Christian and Capitalist discourses that appear as mutual metaphors of one another or as asymmetrical narratives whose threads converge within the same system of value. *Moby-Dick* is not simply an allegory of American Capitalism: the aggressively phallic discourse of Capitalism tropes a mode of thinking molded in narratives whose driving metaphors are invested by value. It is therefore vain to consider *Moby-Dick* as a critique of ideological forces – capital, religion, politics – situated beyond the limits of the text, for all these forces are entangled in the logocentric and monological lines that all converge toward the whale/*The Whale*: the value of *Moby-Dick*, its “truth,” is a devouring “beast” that sits in its very heart and is uncoiling its deadly thread from within.

If Ishmael survives, it is because he manages to cut the Gordian knot and break the monological line attaching him to the whale/*The Whale*. In the early chapter “The Chapel,” he ponders:

Yes, there is death in this business of whaling. . . . But what then? Methinks that we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air. (*MD* 41)

Under their satirical and comic guise, Ishmael's words operate an essential reversal of value on which the various monetary and semantic economies represented in the novel are predicated. The jocularity of Ishmael's recasting the Platonic myth of the cave in the narrowly specific and inadequate terms of a young sailor (“oysters observing the sun through water”), and the dissociation of body and soul in his claim that “stave [his] soul Jove himself cannot,” is in fact the ironic rejection of a world built on the commonly accepted and unchallenged superior value of the suprasensory world of the soul that “has been deemed since Plato, and more exactly since the late Hellenistic and Christian unfurling of Platonic philosophy, as the real and genuine world” [Dieser Bereich des Übersinnlichen gilt seit Platon, genauer gesagt, seit der spätgriechischen und christlichen Auslegung der Platonischen Philosophie, als die wahre und eigentlich wirkliche Welt] (Heidegger 199-200). At this point of his recollection, however, the experiencing Ishmael is still ventriloquized by the Puritanical discourse embodied by Father Mapple, as his ironically solemn rhetoric shows; after

the sermon his degree of dependence and atonement is even greater, and Ishmael leaves the chapel unable to say a single word.

Ishmael's reflection on death follows his reading, on the walls of the chapel, the cenotaphs of mariners who died in the pursuit of whales. These inscriptions on tombs with no bodies in them literally *petrify* the connections between Capitalist economy, neo-Platonism, and Calvinistic hermeneutics. They are a dark foreboding of the fate that awaits the *Pequod* and its crew who will all be sacrificed to the extravagant sacrificial economy troped by these inscriptions. If Ishmael is the only survivor, it is because he reverses the value that predetermines and predestines the journey of the *Pequod*; he survives by defacing the tombs of those fathers whose epitaphs are the inscription of their will and the projected doom of their sons. "Only [Ishmael] is escaped alone to tell [the reader]" (*MD* 470), to bear witness at the trial of the economy in which the fatal narrative of the whale/*The Whale* is inscribed. He does so by completely reconsidering "this matter of Life and Death" and inscribing it into a new textual economy, that of *Moby-Dick* the story, the novel, the work of art, as opposed to *Moby-Dick*, the whale, the hidden beast, the ultimate value – the "*summum ens qua summum bonum*" (Heidegger 209) that God Himself has become in Western metaphysics and textuality. The chapel scene is an angular moment in Ishmael's reversal of values. Far from being a simple piece of anti-Calvinistic criticism, the scene is a radical reversal, a return upon itself, an "*Umkehrung*," of the driving values of Ishmael's world. The only way to escape the beast is to prove wrong the petrified text, undo its will, and upset the metaphysical and logocentric woof that inevitably makes of the encounter with the beast the end of the voyage. In one word, Ishmael has to return.

Both the Capitalist ruthless extortion of human lives and Ahab's murderous monomania are narratives written on cenotaphs. Ishmael comments *in petto*:

What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrection to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave. (*MD* 41)

Indeed, of all the men entangled in the deadly web of petrified textuality none will return, and the only resurrection will be that of Ishmael, not as a whaleman, but as a story writer within a post-textual economy in which Ishmael functions as the post-man after the closure and the bankruptcy of the Platonic textual economy; a post-man addressing a post-humanist project.

What Ishmael's transformation through his act of remembering achieves is not only a critique or a debunking of certain economic practices and their interconnections – e.g., Capitalism-slavery-Protestantism – but a radical transformation of value as it is troped, exchanged, and commodified within those economies. By queering the loom on which all threads are drawn, Ishmael negates the values attached to those threads and renders them nil: it is a negation of value comparable to Heidegger's understanding of Nietzsche's nihilism “through which the devaluation is achieved in the constitution of values that will henceforth be the only ones valid” [durch den die Entwertung zu einer neuen und allein maßgebenden Wertsetzung vollendet wird] (Heidegger 206). This devaluation is in itself a figure of language: it is troped in the disproportions and the indirections of the text that gives up its center of gravity, renounces the pursuit of the beast, and refuses to pay the price for its capture.

### III

It may be tempting to celebrate Ishmael's triumph of life and proclaim the advent of a renascent textuality, maybe even to shout “God is dead.” But before we celebrate this resurrection, it seems necessary to question our textuality-determined *post*-modern condition, and read *Moby-Dick* as an exploration of the tropological relations between textuality and (post-) modern history, that is, as an exploration of the way we read and remember.

In his interpretation of Nietzsche's famous phrase “God is Dead,” Heidegger writes:

Insofar . . . as Nietzsche grasps nihilism as that which imposes its law within the history of the devaluation of the old values, and insofar as he interprets this devaluation as a reversal of the value of all values, the unfurling of nihilism depends, according to Nietzsche's interpretation of it, on the reign and the ruin of values, and, therefore, on the very possibility of at all instituting values.

[Sofern . . . Nietzsche den Nihilismus als die Gesetzlichkeit in der Geschichte der Entwertung der bisherigen obersten Werte begreift, die Entwertung aber im Sinne einer Umwertung aller Werte deutet, beruht nach Nietzsches Auslegung der Nihilismus in der Herrschaft und im Zerfall der Werte und damit in der Möglichkeit der Wertsetzung überhaupt.] (Heidegger 214)

Something of the same sort takes place in *Moby-Dick* where Ishmael's queering and quilting of the value-determined weave questions the

metaphysical assumptions on which story-telling and therefore also Western history is based.<sup>1</sup> Through Ishmael's survival and act of bearing witness, *Moby-Dick* pushes textuality to the limit by presenting itself as an aporetic text on the post-textual condition. It explores an even more disquieting possibility than the death of God, the author of the "Word": the possibility of the death of the text and the death of a civilization whose history depends on textuality. Ishmael's queering of the historical line is a negation of the line, but it is also an affirmation of other values, possibly in the Nietzschean sense when he proposes that "[a]rt is *more valuable* than truth" [Die Kunst ist *mehr wert* als die Wahrheit] (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. Heidegger 223).

It seems *worth* considering the cultural anxiety that makes so many readers systematically side with Ishmael's infinite expansion of textuality against Ahab's monomaniac need for speedy annihilating conclusion. Wandering in the labyrinth without ever encountering the Minotaur, or circumnavigating the globe on the *Pequod* without ever coming eye to eye with the whale/*The Whale* is like fighting in a war in which the enemy who is the *raison d'être* of the *polemos* remains invisible; it becomes a war without a front. In a bold historical parallel between *Moby-Dick* and the Cold War, Donald Pease proposes that the latter "provides a melodrama with an anticipated last scene, a moment capable of divesting the passing moment of its boredom by investing emptiness with total significance: The Moment of Final Annihilation" (Pease 115). Pease's remark reveals the often obfuscated links between textuality and Western civilization that has constructed a world on an unfaceable yet threateningly ever-present *polemos* that can only be resolved in the blinding light of final revelation.

The cultural anxiety that makes postmodern readers hail Ishmael's infinite progress of text(uality) was expressed in equally anxious terms by F.O. Matthiessen who saw in *Moby-Dick* one of the central texts of what he interpreted as a rebirth of America. *American Renaissance* was written by Matthiessen over a period of ten years and finished in April 1941, a few months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entering its perilous confrontation with the totalitarian forces of the Axis. In his chapter on Hawthorne, Matthiessen echoes the cultural angst of the period when he

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that Nietzsche's "Word" cannot be taken as a consolidated ground where a new sense of origin could be constructed is suggested by Hannah Arendt who notes that "It was not Nietzsche but Hegel who first declared that the 'sentiment underlying religion in the modern age [is] the sentiment: God is dead'" (Arendt, *Mind* 9). Arendt's remark deprives Nietzsche's "Word" of some of its "originality," but more importantly it suggests that even the death of God is an event that can, that must, repeat itself.

writes that "living in the age of Hitler, even the least religious can know and be terrified by what it means for a man to be possessed" (Matthiessen 307). Pease shrewdly argues that "[a]lthough [Matthiessen] only mentions Hitler [in] his account of Chillingworth, . . . [Hitler] is everywhere present in his discussion of Ahab" (Pease 128). Matthiessen's book suggests that the Renaissance he hopes for in America is metonymically displaced onto the protagonists of the texts he reads, but that the real heroes who had given their lives for the resurrection of America were the writers themselves – Thoreau, Emerson, Melville, Whitman. Ishmael's survival and ironic rebirth epitomizes "in the eyes trained to see by the *American Renaissance*, [Melville's] earn[ing] the *authenticity* of the doctrine of self-reliance by literally realizing its *doctrine* as his defining aesthetic action" (Pease 129). For Matthiessen, Ishmael's resurrection is that of a whole nation, or, as the shared etymologies of "renaissance" and "nation" suggest, it symbolizes America's re-nation.

At about the time when Matthiessen was writing his renaissance hymn to America in Kittery, Maine, on the other side of the Atlantic, in the heart of Nazi Germany, Martin Heidegger was ruminating on Nietzsche's phrase "God is dead." In a post-scriptum added to the 1950 edition of his collection of essays *Holzwege (Lumbermen's Trails)*, Heidegger writes:

The main parts [of "Nietzsche's Phrase 'God is Dead'"] have been presented on several occasions during the year 1943, in a limited circle. The content is based on my *Courses on Nietzsche*, taught at the university of Freiburg-im-Breisgau during five terms between 1936 and 1940. These courses had for aim to understand Nietzsche's thought as the closure of Western metaphysics by taking as a starting point the history of being.

[Die Hauptteile wurden 1943 in kleineren Kreisen wiederholt vorgetragen. Der Inhalt beruht auf den Nietzschevorlesungen, die zwischen 1936 and 1940 in fünf Semestern an der Universität Freiburg i. Br. gehalten wurden. Sie stellen sich die Aufgabe, Nietzsches Denken als die Vollendung der abendländischen Metaphysik aus der Geschichte des Seins zu begreifen.] (Heidegger 344-45)

In his "whale of a book" Matthiessen anxiously uncoils a narrative thread that is to ensure him the possession of those values hidden at the heart of the works he reads. At the heart of the maze he drives the dagger into the heart of Ahab's totalitarian discourse and saves Ishmael, alias Herman Melville, the nascent American man. More importantly, Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* poses the problem of the essence or the possibility of literature

in a world constantly threatened by annihilation, when literature itself tropes the very values that lead to that annihilation.

Heidegger's *Holzwege* is also a meditation on the possibility of the work of art, that is, of the work of art as a possibility – the first essay of *Holzwege* is titled “The origin [*Ursprung*] of the Work of Art.” His somber reflection on power is steeped in passionate anguish. “‘The will to power’,” he writes, “has such common currency that nobody understands it, and nobody understands why somebody should bother to try to explain that assemblage of words” [Dieser Name “Der Wille zur Macht” gilt als so selbst-verständlich, daß man nicht versteht, wie jemand noch sich abmühen mag, dieses Wortgefüge eigens zu erläutern] (Heidegger 214). Matthiessen takes Ahab's will to power for granted and denounces him as a negativist of American values; thereby, however, he keeps the structure of power and value intact, and makes them return as the repressed, mostly under the form of a prescriptive canonical interpretation of the whale/*The Whale*. He gives his readers directions, studies the map, and acts as a guide. The canonization of his interpretation of *Moby-Dick* shows that his directions were followed by those who succeeded him.

Heidegger offers only indirections. His “lumbermen's trails” lead some distance into the *selva oscura* roamed by the beast, but they disappear without reaching the center of the woods and the voyager has to retrace his or her steps. The knowledge imparted by this sort of journey that comes to a closure but to no end is imparted by the Heraclitean character of those roads: they are roads that must be taken at *least twice*, once on the way out, once to return. Going out only once even to find the greatest treasure is useless if nobody can bear witness to it. The possibility of the work of art, the possibility of literature, depends on repetition, which supposes that the closure is not an end, and that the text begins after it has reached, and survived its own limits.

What Heidegger's experience of power may have been in Hitler's Germany is not too difficult to imagine.<sup>2</sup> “The will is strife toward something,” Heidegger writes. “What power means is something everybody can experience daily nowadays as the exertion of domination and force. The will ‘to’ power is, consequently, and simply the will to come to power” [Wollen ist ein Streben nach etwas. Was Macht bedeutet, kennt heute jeder aus alltäglicher Erfahrung als die Ausübung von Herrschaft und Gewalt.

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<sup>2</sup> “In Heidegger's understanding,” Arendt writes, “the will to rule and to dominate is a kind of original sin, of which he found himself guilty when he tried to come to terms with his brief past in the Nazi movement” (*Mind* 173).

Wille “zur” Macht ist demnach eindeutig das Streben, an die Macht zu kommen] (Heidegger 214). But Ahab’s will to power is not simply [eindeutig] his desire to come to power by dominating Moby-Dick; his will to power cannot be merely condemned, it needs to be thought through. Moby-Dick, the white whale, predetermines the narrative because Ahab’s quest tropes a metaphysical quest for certainty understood as the ultimate good. Matthiessen – and others “because of the dread in [their] soul” – cannot resist the attraction of Ahab’s discourse and read his pursuit of the whale “simply” as his desire “for” power. Ishmael insists on this dependence:

I, Ishmael, was one of the crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. (*MD* 155)

Ahab pushes his harpoon to the very heart of the beast. His uncoiling of the line attached to the harpoon, like the thread through the labyrinth, appears in the novel as an Oedipal conflict of injury, emasculation, and revenge, but his quest for certainty and revelation tropes a civilization’s *unreflected* will to power and, most of all, the fatal attraction of power.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely that unreflected will to power that Matthiessen recasts in *American Renaissance* causing two asymmetrical narratives – Ahab’s quest for Moby-Dick and his own quest for the redeeming values that will allow an American Renaissance – to come together, enmeshed in the same narrative thread. Ahab is condemned in the name of values that need to be defended because he appears as he who negates those values. But such condemnation on moral grounds is dangerous because it does not allow to think through Ahab’s will to power and the sentence repeats the crime. Heidegger sums up this danger when he writes:

Public frauds have abolished thought and replaced with their gossiping; they detect nihilism everywhere where they feel their gossiping is threatened by thought. Such is the irresistible self-blinding attitude of those confronted with

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt notes that “the totalitarian regimes, so long they are in power, and the totalitarian leaders so long they are alive, command and rest upon mass support,” and she insists that “their popularity [cannot] be attributed to the victory of masterful and lying propaganda over ignorance and stupidity.” Arendt’s analysis suggests that totalitarianism is not the result of a “magic spell” that some personalities would cast, but of an absence of thought on the will to power which leads to an “identification with the movement” that “destroy[s] the very capacity for experience, even if it be as extreme as torture or the fear of death” (*Totalitarianism* 305, 306, 308).

real nihilism and who seek to excuse themselves for their dread in front of thought. This dread, however, is the dread of dread.

[Die öffentlichen Herumsteher haben das Denken abgeschafft und es durch das Geschwätz ersetzt, das überall dort Nihilismus wittert, wo es sein eigenes Meinen gefährdet meint. Diese immer noch überhandnehmende Selbstverblendung gegenüber dem eigentlichen Nihilismus versucht auf dieser Weise, sich ihre Angst vor dem Denken auszureden. Diese Angst aber ist die Angst vor der Angst.] (Heidegger 246)

It is all too tempting to side with Ishmael in the name of a cheap morality of higher values that are simply the very values in disguise that one seeks to refuse. The descendants of Ahab, that is, all the future generations of captains – all sorts of captains – and their sons will continue the feud with “Moby-Dick” instituted as arch-enemy, but also, thereby, as arch-economic motor of the monetary and semantic economies sustained by that supreme value. This is inscribed in the novel in various ways, but the most revealing may be the Abrahamic allegory of the sacrificed son, in which the Captain of the *Rachel* sacrifices his beloved son, and “only [finds] another orphan,” Ishmael, the rejected and forlorn son. Ishmael, the errant and illegitimate son, substitutes for the anonymous son of the captain, and thereby defiles his patriarchal genealogical line. Ishmael survives in and through the only possibility that is left when Platonic textuality has attained its limits: the possibility of writing and the work of art. Ishmael survives through the writing of *Moby-Dick*, a post-mortem *écriture*, a writing *d’outré-tombe*, an *écriture* that breaks the limited loom of textuality. He writes from beyond the limits of the text and beyond the set limits of textuality itself.

### Postface

In countless paintings of the Passion, in innumerable commentaries on the *Dialogues* is the survival of the dying hero who gives up his life for the sake of others celebrated. Hagiographies of Socrates and Christ crowd our libraries and collective memories; legions of martyrs, heroes, and sacrificial lambs for whom they constitute archetypes have been immortalized through media apparently as diverse as text, painting, sculpture, or cinema. In all cases there are deep consequences to be drawn from the spiritual rebirth of these men and women which always takes place at the expense of their bodies in the name of some higher value that lives through them. Ishmael survives by clinging to a coffin that obstinately refuses to take down his

body, and remains on the surface; his survival is superficial, ironic, accidental. In a sacrificial economy Ahab – the Christ figure of the novel – vainly rises on the third day of the chase; in a surviving economy, Ishmael, the least worthy member of the crew of the *Pequod* and the imaginary predecessor of Bartleby the scrivener, writes the story of his death. Like Socrates in the *Phædon*, Ahab refuses to economize life and aims at an eternal, transcendental survival through his heroic deed. Ishmael does not survive to speak the truth; he is no seer, no prophet. Unlike Christ who dies for others, he has no message to convey, no secret to hide and eventually reveal. The quilting art through which he lingers on offers no redeeming values, and we would fall into the same Socratic trap again if by escaping Ahab's totalizing of the whale we fell into Ishmael's totalizing of *The Whale*. Ishmael's haphazard survival suggests that in none of the Christian or Platonic texts based on a sacrificial economy of death and rebirth is death taken seriously, as a real possibility: it is merely the passage to a more valuable form of life. Grimly and ironically, Ishmael's survival is a reflection of death as a possibility, or rather the possibility of an impossibility: what would happen if Ishmael died with the rest of the crew at the end of the novel? On the Platonic loom, the question seems to make no sense, because the whole textual structure, the very existence of the narrative logically depends on its narrator and on the ideologically constraining binary opposition between life and death. This may be the limit to which Melville pushes Platonic textuality: he seriously thinks out death as a possibility for the work of art which is no longer the means of eternal salvation but the ironic life buoy that allows us to sur-vive – oh, for just a moment longer – on the surface of things, and keeps us from being drawn up toward the sun or down into the profundity of the sea.

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