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HESTER BLUM

Melville and Oceanic Studies

Call him Tommo; call him Typee, or Paul, or Omoo; call him Taji; call him White-Jacket. *Moby-Dick's* "Call me Ishmael" may be the line that lingers in cultural memory, but a *nom de marin* (as we might call it) is enlisted as well in *Typee*, *Omoo*, *Mardi*, and *White-Jacket*. Of the six first-person sailor narrators in Melville's first six novels, only Wellingborough Redburn – a novice on a one-time voyage, no Jack Tar – tells us his real (however baroque) name. Other notable Melvillean narrators without formal names include the anonymous sailor who sketches "The Encantadas," and, in perhaps the most extreme form, the multiply shape- and name-shifting titular character in the riparian *Confidence-Man*. What is not always clear, though, is how arbitrary the narrator's name and its meaning are supposed to be: that is, whether the sailor chooses the new name (as Ishmael seems to) or finds it imposed or picked up as a routine practice within the drift of nautical existence. There are many dozens of minor characters nicknamed according to their places of origin, nautical association, or appearance in Melville's novels, from the Manxman and the Skyeman to Selvagee and Doctor Long Ghost; these are drawn from a comic tradition of genre fiction (such as that of Tobias Smollett or Walter Scott) in which characters are reduced to types. Such is not the primary case with Melville's first-person narrators whose personhood is pseudonymized; even when they move from the center to the periphery of their own narrative, as Ishmael does, they are not types. What form of handle do these names provide for sailors – or readers – to grasp? What do the pseudonyms keep at bay? There is something about maritime life, perhaps, that invites such provisional naming.

A name change amidst a scene of comic adventure in *Israel Potter* illustrates the often cheerful haphazardness of such naming patterns. Potter had been serving aboard an American naval vessel; in an encounter with an English man-of-war, he undergoes a narrative and maritime pratfall that ends with him implausibly aboard the royal ship, rather than his original continental one. In an attempt to assimilate to the man-of-war's crew, Israel

calls himself “Peter Perkins,” maintopman, and jumps from mess (a sailor’s organizational dining unit) to mess. His skill in the maintop and his bluff good nature win over his new shipmates; the officer of the deck, originally skeptical, notes with surprise that he does “seem to belong to the main-top, after all.” The main character who has now become Peter Perkins replies, “I always told you so, sir, ... though at first, you remember, sir, you would not believe it” (141). In this scene Potter/Perkins enacts what Melville had described earlier in the novel as the sailor’s illustration of the principle that “all human affairs are subject to organic disorder” and are characterized by “a sort of half-disciplined chaos” (114). The “organic disorder” he invokes is oceanic in model.

The performance of naming in Melville’s writing should be understood as both a reflection of and a reaction to the largely oceanic setting of his works: the sea is a medium inherently resistant to inscription and other forms of fixity or possession. In turn, the names assumed by his narrators can be seen more broadly as an expression of his fiction’s conceptual interests in incompleteness and proliferation, and the instability of monuments and testaments. The nautical environment covers over 70 percent of the earth’s surface, and serves as the physical setting for roughly a similar percentage of Melville’s fiction. Even though the ocean is nominally divided into seas and punctuated by ports, when venturing upon its surfaces all traces of such anchors fall away in a manner akin to the world of the biblical flood. As Melville writes in *Moby-Dick*: “The first boat we read of, floated on an ocean, that with Portuguese vengeance had whelmed a whole world without leaving so much as a widow. That same ocean rolls now; that same ocean destroyed the wrecked ships of last year.... Noah’s flood is not yet subsided; two thirds of the fair world it yet covers” (273). In its vastness and motility the ocean opens up to possibility on a planetary scale, and yet also presents the risks of chartlessness or dispersion.

Going to sea as laboring sailors, as Melville’s narrators do, meant a radically different form of heading off to work, as seamen could not return to families or homes at the end of a shift, as other working classes might, but instead found their entire world encompassed by the ship. It stands to reason, then, that other markers or constraints of their land-based identifications would dissolve in the space of the sea. Subject to the caprices of storms and captains, and constituted on ships of heterogeneous crews – both racially and nationally – seamen could rarely claim individual sovereignty in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of Melville’s fictional worlds. This uncertainty extends to the nautical environment as well, which defies Lockean conceptions of possession or improvement of self or land. A sea that disallows records could register as a medium that both generated

and annihilated history, whether personal or literary. The seaman is literally outlandish: as the agent of nautical trade, transportation, and popular imagination, he experiences firsthand the dissolution of national affiliation in the space and time of the sea. As the first global travelers, mariners were imagined free from many of the constraints of social and political life – yet they faced hostile environmental conditions as well as repressive hierarchical structures aboard ship, neither of which could be mediated by the protections of statehood or citizenship.

This chapter situates Melville's work within the emerging field of oceanic studies. The field both extends and stands apart from recent transnational and hemispheric turns in literary studies, which have called attention to the limits of studying literary and cultural productions as national products or within strictly state-bound fields of circulation.¹ While oceanic studies shares with transnational work a desire to trace literary movement beyond a given political boundary, it might be seen to model itself conceptually after the fluidity of its object of study in its lack of concern with national distinctions. By casting adrift our critical position from land- and nation-based perspectives, oceanic studies helps us to develop other possible ways of understanding questions of affiliation, citizenship, economic exchange, mobility, rights, and sovereignty. If we now view history from the bottom up, or nations in terms of their transnational or hemispheric relations, or the colonizer as seen by the colonized – to gesture to just a few reorientations of critical perception in recent decades – then what would happen if we take the oceans' nonhuman scale and depth as a first critical position and principle? While transnational forms of exchange (whether cultural, political, or economic) have historically taken place via the medium of the sea, relatively little literary critical attention has been paid to that medium itself: its properties, its conditions, its shaping or eroding forces. As this chapter discusses, Melville's work exemplifies oceanic ways of being: he is invested in modes of thinking and writing that are unbounded by expected affiliations, forms, nations, mores, or doctrines. A long-established branch of Melville studies has described the importance of the maritime world to the writer's biography and textual sources; what follows builds on that history by focusing instead on his theoretical involvement with, as well as his works' contributions to, broader questions of literary representation and exchange on an oceanic scale.

Melville's writing opens itself up to the possibilities of oceanic thinking in three main ways, the latter two of which form the substance of this chapter. First, the maritime content of much of his work reflects his own experience as a sailor, as well as his broader literary and historical moment, in which the seas served (as they have for millennia) as the primary routes for

the transportation of humans, goods, and ideas.² These have been the main terms with which Melville's relationship to the sea has been discussed in critical history to date, and these terms are revisited briefly later in this chapter. Second, his work is deeply invested in political and etiological questions whose contours shift, if not dissolve, when considered in an oceanic context: What is the source of agency in the world? Where do affiliations lie? What taxonomies and structures organize the world? And third, we might see the formal experimentation of Melville's novels as themselves oceanic in nature, if we consider his experimental play with the generic expectations of the first-person narrative, the romance, or the sea novel. The conceptual forms of his nautical fiction are as chartless as the voyages they describe.

To sketch in a couple of paragraphs the literary-historical background to Melville's oceanic thinking: maritime culture was central to the economic as well as the imaginative lives of nineteenth-century Anglo-Americans. Population centers were clustered on coasts and the majority of trade and transit took place along water routes, as it had across global millennia. Literary culture in Melville's time offered a variety of forms of nautical writing, including fiction, drama, ballads and chanteys, pirate tales, sailor-themed religious tracts, histories, poetry, and first-person sailor narratives. While the sea has ever been a figure for metaphorical reflection, nineteenth-century U.S. maritime literature became increasingly concerned with the details of shipboard life and sailor experience. The experience or knowledge of the conditions of maritime labor became a generic feature of the sea novel in its representation of nautical practices and its specialized sea vocabulary.³ Melville's writing shares with this body of work an abiding and detailed interest in describing labor and life at sea. He was a canny reader of (and frequent borrower from) previous generations of sea writing, which in large part took forms other than the novel. Narratives of colonial encounters with the Americas – by definition sea voyages – presented the ocean as a space for providential judgment as much as for economic opportunity. From the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, readers consumed tales of shipwrecks, naval contests, captivity (particularly in the Barbary states of North Africa), piracy, and nautical adventure, which reflected the conditions of maritime life, however sensationalized.

Melville had himself, as is well known, logged time before the mast, spending the better part of four years as a working seaman aboard whaling, merchant, and naval ships. At the time of his own sea voyaging in the late 1830s and early 1840s, sea novels had been popular for several decades among British and American readers, who enjoyed the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett, the historical romances of Walter Scott, and the varied (and remarkably prodigious) nautical output of James Fenimore Cooper, in addition to

cheaper and more ephemeral fictions. Melville also read and absorbed the first-person narratives of sailors and sea voyagers such as David Porter's journal of his American naval cruises (1815), Charles Darwin's *Beagle* journal (1837), and ex-Harvard student Richard Henry Dana's hugely popular *Two Years before the Mast* (1840). In his maritime fiction, Melville explored a range of possible sailor stories and figures: the jumper of ships, the rover, the romantic quester, the greenhand, the philosopher, the pirate, the slaver, the enslaved, the man of the man-of-war, the aging Jack Tar, the Handsome Sailor. All were shaped by the political, cultural, and economic conditions of the nineteenth century. Experienced with both sea labor and sea literature, Melville at every turn drew from his nautical locker in crafting his fictions. And yet as the following section on taxonomic impulses in *Moby-Dick* suggests, he recognized the inadequacy of models of containment – such as “Davy Jones's locker,” the seaman's euphemism for death – for providing material or imaginative control over oceanic orders of being.

Special Leviathic Revelations

It can be argued that *Moby-Dick* is about record keeping and score keeping in the face of a maritime environment that either thwarts or is indifferent to such efforts. The sea's erasure of accounts is not always a cause for concern, however: early in *Moby-Dick* Ishmael in fact celebrates this refusal of inscription as he and Queequeg take a short passage from New Bedford to Nantucket, from which they will launch their whaling voyage. Ishmael exclaims: “How I spurned that turnpike earth! – that common highway all over dented with the marks of slavish heels and hoofs; and turned me to admire the magnanimity of the sea which will permit no records” (60). The blankness and ahistoricity of oceanic routes are preferable to the dull pedestrianism of the “turnpike earth,” which Ishmael scorns for its commonness. What Ishmael seeks is not the road less traveled, but no road at all, a passage at once without a plot and untraceable. He does not wish to blaze a trail, in other words, but to find refuge in the “magnanimity” of a sea whose indifference to human passage makes the categories of the “common” or the “slavish” irrelevant. His declaration from the ship's railing suggests that, in addition to the appeal of a fresh start, there may be something along the trail of Ishmael's history that he wishes to hide. For many young men in the first half of the nineteenth century, going to sea provided a way to escape undesirable obligations (such as debt, marriage, family business) as much as it offered a change of scene or a chance for adventure. In depressive Ishmael's own case, a sea venture is his “substitute for pistol and ball” (3) – either a suicidal move or an effort to ward off a drive to self-destruction. His

process of maritime transformation registers at first, and on the most local scale, with the erasure of a legal name and the adoption of a sea handle. In either event – suicide or survival – the desired end is the extinguishment of self that Melville portrays as coextensive with going to sea.

The world of the ship heaves, rolls, plunges; the presumed stability of signposts or structures of thought (much less land-based expectations and regulations) might not register at sea at all. If understood from the vantage point of the sea, how might the parameters of ontological investigation shift? The figure of Jonah in Father Mapple's sermon in *Moby-Dick* represents such equivocality. The biblical Jonah thinks the sea will put insurmountable space between him and God's unwelcome command to preach to the residents of Ninevah. In Melville's telling via the seamen's chaplain, a divine light – away from which Jonah flees in favor of the obscurity of the sea – illuminates the contingency of oceanic systems of valuation. A lamp suspended in Jonah's cabin serves as his parable:

Screwed at its axis against the side, a swinging lamp slightly oscillates in Jonah's room; and the ship, heeling over towards the wharf with the weight of the last bales received, the lamp, flame and all, though in slight motion, still maintains a permanent obliquity with reference to the room; though, in truth, infallibly straight itself, it but made obvious the false, lying levels among which it hung. The lamp alarms and frightens Jonah; as lying in his berth his tormented eyes roll round the place, and this thus far successful fugitive finds no refuge for his restless glance. But that contradiction in the lamp more and more appalls him. The floor, the ceiling, and the side, are all awry. "Oh! so my conscience hangs in me!" he groans, "straight upwards, so it burns; but the chambers of my soul are all in crookedness!" (44–45)

Melville literalizes the way oceanic spaces force "awry" the frames upon and through which one might base an understanding of fundamental concepts such as truth, light, and place. There is no way to come to rest: Jonah's spatial dislocation from truth suggests an oceanic frame relies on relativity rather than on absolutes.

We see a similar impulse toward definitional contingency (or what we might call a relativist epistemology) in the "Cetology" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, in which whales are memorably classified by size and shape as if they were books. This chapter inaugurates a shift in the novel's setting from the land or coastal shelf to the open sea, where Ishmael and the members of the *Pequod's* crew will remain for the rest of the novel. The chapter's first line – "Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harborless immensities" – registers the change in subject matter from port practices to oceanic "immensities," as well as what will increasingly become the formal disintegration of the novel's structural linearity

(134). As if to hedge himself and his narrative against the sea's endlessness, Ishmael sets to the precision-based task of what he calls the "classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less" (134). The three primary divisions of whales, as judged by size, he constitutes as Folio, Octavo, and Duodecimo volumes, from thence accorded chapters – that is, "BOOK I. (*Folio*), CHAPTER I. (*Sperm Whale*)" (137). This systemization is never complete, however, but always in "draught" form, like the narrative itself, as Ishmael acknowledges at multiple points in the tale. By describing his method of leviathic and imaginative taxonomy as a work in progress, Ishmael is alert to the lack of fixity or finality in the natural world of the sea.

And yet while the ocean appears unaccountably vast, shipboard life is itself characterized by confinement and tight regulation, as the strict bibliographic specificity of his cetological naming demonstrates. Ishmael's choice to classify whales when first confronted with "harborless immensities" is wholly consistent with the usual practices of nautical labor and their literary representation. While Melville's sea writing (as well as that of his contemporaries) acknowledges the limitless prospect of the sea from a ship, its narrative content then turns its back to the vastness, as it were, to focus on the habits and internal workings of ships: their ropes and schedules, for instance, which are rendered in maritime writing in what might seem excessive detail. A contemporary whaling narrative by Nathaniel Taylor registers this shift in prospect; when first at sea, he writes: "It is certainly a great event in the life of every man when land for the first time fades from his vision and he experiences the feelings of a wanderer upon the trackless ocean.... Oh, what a throng of deep thoughts and feelings moves the heart and imagination at such a time – thoughts which find no voice, for they are unutterable." Yet Taylor is accorded little time for such reflection; beholding the sunrise a day or two later he is interrupted by the call of shipboard labor: "the sunrise at sea! 'Is not this the time to wash down the decks?' shouts the mate. 'Bring buckets and scrub-brooms. Here you, Tom, what are you skulking for? Go relieve the wheel, Dick. Up aloft two of you and mind you keep a sharp look-out for whales. Doctor, you are only in the way; won't you go and write up my log book?'"⁴ A focus on the work at hand can be a calming or centering move, in many cases, when the sailor finds action a relief from the press of "unutterable" thoughts.

Another way to think of this practice of maritime accounting in the face of proliferation comes from Owen Chase's *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex* (1821), whose story furnished Melville with source material and is retold in part in *Moby-Dick*. In his account, first mate Chase relates how the Nantucket whaler was rammed twice and sunk in a seemingly premeditated attack

by a sperm whale while cruising in the equatorial Pacific. The survivors turned to cannibalism; the ship's captain shot his own cabin boy, recipient of the short lot, for food. Despite his later success as a captain himself, Owen Chase in his dotage secreted food in the rafters of his house as protection against starvation; we might see this act as a pathetic extension of the sailor's impulse to catalog and contain in the face of oceanic loss. In the catalog-rich *Moby-Dick*, Melville famously elaborates on Chase's tale of a malevolent and vengeful whale, and finds in the *Essex* story more than the basic plot elements of his novel.

Melville first read the *Narrative* when a copy was given to him by Chase's son, whom he met while a sailor on a gam in the Pacific in 1841 or 1842. Although the story of the *Essex* was well known among sailors, Melville had never seen a printed account before; the *Narrative*, despite Chase's hopes, found neither large profits nor large readership. In a copy he acquired much later, Melville wrote, "the reading of this wondrous story upon the landless sea, and close to the very latitude of the shipwreck had a surprising effect on me."⁵ The written narrative – and its intimate circulation within the whaling community, pulled as it was from the younger Chase's sea chest – bears a charge that goes beyond maritime gossip. It has an instrumental power as well in Melville's invocation of the narrative as part of a catalog of affidavits on whaling. The loss Chase struggles to convey is in some ways best tallied by the chart found at the end of the narrative, in which Chase organizes the fate of the men, whether "shot" (i.e., those cannibalized), "left on the island," "died," or "survived." The balance of this ledger is another way to tell the story, to account for those men lost: the "horrors" lie in the failure of the chart to serve as the ship's manifest for the dead men. It is no accident, then, that the *Narrative's* affective power over Melville is influenced by his own proximity to the site of the wreck when he first encounters Chase's story, as Melville's ship was then "close to the very latitude" where the *Essex* went down.

Melville in turn promotes Chase's history in *Moby-Dick* to underscore the experiential and epistemological stakes of narrative in his own text – and indeed, the *Essex* disaster is retold in a chapter that begins with the qualifying phrase "so far as what there may be of a narrative in this book" (203). Here, Chase's narrative becomes one of a series of affidavits for the historical existence of agency-bearing whales such as Moby Dick. Melville/Ishmael testifies: "I have seen Owen Chase [*sic*] ... I have read his plain and faithful narrative; I have conversed with his son" (206). The character's insistence on the personal narrative as a document of truth places the broader work of the novel into an economy of accounting practices, which categorize and attempt to give name to the oceanic world much as the author classifies the

different types of whales into book sizes. Melville emphasizes the physical whale, the tangible, deliberate creature throughout “Affadavit,” lest Moby Dick be thought “a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory” (205). While this stipulation is intended to be a comic note of self-awareness – generations of readers of *Moby-Dick* may have found the white whale an intolerable allegory, indeed! – it also privileges the experiential over the metaphorical, even as it acknowledges the limitations of experience to comprehend the sea.

As the cetology chapter in *Moby-Dick* reminds us, though, book knowledge and experiential learning go hand in hand. “I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans,” Ishmael testifies; “I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest” (136). But for all the taxonomic detail Melville lays out in “Cetology,” the chaos he attempts to constitute in the chapter becomes not antithetical to his epistemological or narrative process, but its very state of being. “God keep me from ever completing anything” (145), Ishmael expostulates in the face of his necessarily failed attempt to sort whales into books. The capaciousness of his maritime subject brings frustrations, but still presents its own model of intellectual and literary formal expansiveness. (This may be why the dim archive-pent Sub-Sub Librarian, cataloging the references to whales in the Etymology and Extracts that open the novel, is both bloodless and himself noncirculating.) Cataloging the creatures of the deep may seem analogous to other scientific processes of accounting, yet the sea offers geometric challenges in its depths, porous nature, and volume; after all, we are reminded, the sea is “an everlasting terra incognita, so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his one superficial western one” (273). A critical stance emerging from the perspective of the sea should be mindful of registering the volumes of what its geophysical properties render inaccessible.

Beyond the dimensional, there are other problems in assaying the sea. As Ishmael reveals in “Brit”: “however baby man may brag of his science and skill, ... the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make” (273). And if the sea treats with ships in this way, what, then, would it do to a cabin boy? When the small Pip hauntingly is left behind in the sea – for a spell – after imprudently jumping from a whale boat with leviathan on the line, Melville writes:

Pip’s ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably. By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned

entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. (414)

When Pip faces the “awful lonesomeness” of the “intolerable” open sea (414), he seems to experience an annihilation of self. His own assumed name at sea (meaning a speck or seed) registers his inconsequence, his peripheralness; the novel itself can't locate him, designating him an “Alabama boy” (121) or alternatively a denizen of Tolland County, Connecticut (412) before losing him in the pulverizing sea. And yet the reader is told that Pip gains special knowledge of wisdom and the driving presence of God – no agent, but principal – on the loom of fate. But his shipmates cannot sense “Heaven's sense” (414) in his insanity. Again the impossibility of comprehending oceanic depths recurs: the very fact of Pip having glimpsed the divine makes his superficial shipmates unable to register his knowledge as what we might perceive as oceanic sense.

Although deemed mad, Pip performs his own form of taxonomic thinking in the novel's “Doubloon” chapter, in which the mate Stubb observes how different members of the *Pequod* variously render meaning from the text and images on the Ecuadoran gold coin Ahab has nailed to the mast. But Stubb is aware of the limitations of the kinds of readings (whether of whales, tattoos, or texts) that are on display throughout the novel. “Book! you lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places,” Stubb instructs; “You'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts” (433). Pip provides a final reading of the doubloon and its multiple interpreters when he recites lines he picked up from Murray's Grammar: “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look” (434). His declension works on several levels: Pip's “I,” the reader's “you,” and the sailors' “he” all make a reading of the doubloon. Like the taxonomies and catalogs of “Cetology” or of the “Extracts,” Pip's reading seems to provide a grammar from which to build more complex meaning. Pip's chant also exposes, however, the various ways, both hopeful and hopeless, that naming or classification becomes shipboard practice when sailors are faced with the “heartless immensity” of the ocean. Yet as the next section demonstrates, shipboard order is not always produced as a response to oceanic chaos; when exercised too narrowly or tyrannically, nautical regulatory functions can shut down possibilities for oceanic orders of knowledge or resistance.

Jack of the Beach

The other side of nautical management can be seen in captaincy's absolute power. For Robert S. Levine, the "perfect sea order" of normal nautical practice (a phrase he adapts from Richard Henry Dana's sea narrative) could produce or go hand in hand with a kind of disciplinary slavery.⁶ Captains had capital authority that belied the organizational structure of wage labor in the period, and yet was justified as necessary in the face of seamen's roughness and dissolution. According to stereotype, when sailors were in port – that is, off the permanent job site of the ship – they engaged in riotous behavior, dispersing their earnings on spirits, sex, and unscrupulous landlords. Such conditions are what make the land "scorching" to Handsome Sailor Bulkington's feet in *Moby-Dick*, for whom "truth" can be found in "landlessness alone" (106–107). What would it mean, though, to find sailors in rest or repose, in seeming stasis? For one answer we can turn to the becalmed, passive captains and seamen of Melville's complex, perspective-shattering story "Benito Cereno," first published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* (1855) and later collected in *The Piazza Tales* (1856). Among his few works to deal substantively with slavery, "Benito Cereno" describes the encounter between the *Bachelor's Delight*, captained by the bluff New Englander Amasa Delano, and the *San Dominick*, a disabled Spanish ship seemingly under the command of the diffident captain Benito Cereno and containing a cargo consisting of apparently "tractable" slaves (PT 104). Even though "Benito Cereno" is set in the Pacific, off the coast of Chile, the events of the story emerge from the Atlantic slave trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Delano's persistent inability to interpret the actions of Cereno and of the presumed servant and slave Babo has generally been read as a reflection of his racialized preconceptions, which combine with his "singularly undistrustful good nature" to disallow him from perceiving any disorder (PT 47). The confidence Delano places in his uninterrogated notions of race-based hierarchy is betrayed by the individual actions of Babo and his comrades in revolt. Yet more broadly, Delano's assumptions are whelmed by an oceanic world in which fixed notions of national or racial identity might find less purchase, or more opportunity for mobility. A successful slave uprising (unimaginable to him) had taken place before Delano's encounter with the ship, and he is subject to the "juggling play" (87) of the resistance's leaders in their designs on taking the *Bachelor's Delight*. Throughout "Benito Cereno," slavery (as well as the piratical activity that could be a by-product of the slave trade) haunts the story in references that range broadly to cover the first moment of European contact with the Americas, the Haitian

Revolution, shipboard slave uprisings of the nineteenth century, and other issues contemporary with Melville's 1855 adaptation of the story from the 1817 account by the real-life Amasa Delano.⁷ On a structural level in the novella, too, we see the navigational triangulation of the fictional Delano's perspective; the insurrection's legal deposition; and Babo's silence in the face of Benito Cereno's restoration.

And yet it is the *non*-oceanic characteristics of the story's setting that should most give Delano (and Melville's readers) pause: the extraordinary stillness in the atmosphere, the lack of industry the American observes in the Spanish ship, the absence of nautical regulation and hierarchical behavior. The story opens portentously: "Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould" (*PT* 46). The stasis is uncanny in more ways than one. After being told that such conditions foretell "shadows to come," the reader is then informed that Amasa Delano – through whose perspective most of the tale is filtered – is deficient in the "quickness and accuracy of [his] intellectual perception" (47). This information, however, comes to the reader in Melville's most equivocal, hedging, and litotes-strewn prose, and requires a series of interpretive commitments whose meanings become liquid underfoot. To find humanity capable of ill would align one not with the "good-nature" of Delano's ignorance, but with a post-lapsarian recognition of a world in which things may not be as they seem, a world of unstable surfaces and depths.

Delano does not comprehend, in other words, that the unnatural motionlessness of the sea, the ship, and its actors reflect back to him the equally artificial (and equally unsustainable) prejudices and categories into which he has customarily organized his view of the world: that Africans are "stupid" (*PT* 75) and best fit for servitude, that noble blood produces good character, that an untrim ship indicates bad management, and so forth. For Delano, all actions performed by blacks – whether enslaved or free – are for the general comfort and pleasure of whites, and this belief produces his willed misrecognition of the menacing shaving scene, among other such moments in the story. Delano seeks only to satisfy his personal accounting practices; his role within the story's humming fixity is to decide to uphold presumptions when something does not fit his conception. What makes this perceptual problem potentially deadly in "Benito Cereno" is that for Delano to see "malign evil" in humans he must also be able to perceive will – and his static, racialized worldview cannot impute willed intelligence to the enslaved people aboard the ship. The very inertia with which the story begins indicates how at odds the plot will be with oceanic orders of chaos, motion, and movement. Unlike

Ishmael, for whom the results of classifying a chaos will still be a chaos, Delano shrinks from chaos and wishes only to see or will order.

His counterpart is found in Babo, the mastermind of the slave insurrection, whose actions may have evoked for Melville's readers the uprising aboard the Spanish slave ship *Amistad* in 1839 or the coastal American slaver *Creole* in 1841. Babo's itinerary has its own oceanic scale: after the revolt he seeks to navigate the *San Dominick* to "any negro countries" on the Pacific coast of South America, and when that fails he attempts a "return" to Senegal (PT 105). Yet Babo's mates are not the "raw" (50) Africans of Delano's imagination, fresh from the Middle and Cape Horn Passages; instead, they were being moved among South American colonial ports – from Valparaiso, Chile, to Callao, Peru. When Babo's revolution cannot be sustained, he refuses to communicate within a legal and social order that his entire being rejects. As Melville memorably writes: "seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say, since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words" (116). There can be nothing provisional for Babo, once his plan essentially to retrace the Middle Passage has been thwarted. Babo's intellectual being – in its subtlety and insistence on the doing of deeds as its expression – is the opposite of Delano's. In his disembodied silence Babo removes himself from both the oceanic order whose vagaries had sustained his revolutionary success for a brief time, as well as from a terrestrial order represented by Delano's dull, narrow judgment.

This Remote Chinese World of Ours

Melville's interest in oceanic figures for working through ideas of truth and valuation – whose standards are ever in flux – extends beyond his maritime-set fiction. As a closing example we can look briefly at the moment in his novel *Pierre* (1852) in which the title character finds at random in the seat cushion of the coach taking him to the city – and yet embraces as if a message in a bottle – a cheaply printed philosophical pamphlet. Written by a philosopher-bohemian named Plotinus Plinlimmon, the pamphlet proposes an oceanic form of provisional wisdom in squaring terrestrial and heavenly orders. (We can see this as akin to Pip's inability to bridge both the ship's world and the glimpse of God's heavenly order he'd received while cast away.) Plinlimmon's theory is that humans keep expedient "horological" or terrestrial time (say, eastern standard time), while God keeps idealized "chronometrical" or celestial time (in this figure, Greenwich mean time) – akin in its accuracy to the nautical chronometers that made accurate longitude readings possible. Reconciling these two contingencies, his pamphlet suggests, is like trying to keep Greenwich mean time while in China:

But though the chronometer carried from Greenwich to China, should truly exhibit in China what the time may be at Greenwich at any moment; yet, though thereby it must necessarily contradict China time, it does by no means thence follow, that with respect to China, the China watches are at all out of the way....[O]f what use to the Chinaman would a Greenwich chronometer, keeping Greenwich time, be? Were he thereby to regulate his daily actions, he would be guilty of all manner of absurdities: – going to bed at noon, say, when his neighbors would be sitting down to dinner. And thus, though the earthly wisdom of man be heavenly folly to God; so also, conversely, is the heavenly wisdom of God an earthly folly to man.... Nor does the God at the heavenly Greenwich expect common men to keep Greenwich wisdom in this remote Chinese world of ours. (211–12)

Orientation within our “remote Chinese world” is not just a matter of post-lapsarian recognition – or in other words, discovering that local or terrestrial time only becomes false in the knowledge of an ideal or celestial time. Instead, both terms – the terrestrial and celestial – are in play simultaneously in Melville’s conception, and mutually constitute the grounds for the third space – call it oceanic – in which actors move in a skew trajectory, keeping the horologue at one hand and the chronometer at the other. An oceanic sense of planetarity allows for differentiation and fluidity, indeed a protean understanding of space and time alike.

China time versus Greenwich time, insular earth versus continent earth: oceanic studies adds a dimension to our standard practices of referentiality. One of the fundamental premises of the emerging field of oceanic studies is that such patterns dissolve in the space and time of the sea. To take an oceanic perspective on Melville’s writing allows us not only a more profound understanding of his work on the sea, but also a refracted understanding of other recurring thematics and figures, such as his apologia for his organic, nonlinear narrative form. His frequent metaphors of architectural incompleteness, in a final example, have an oceanic cast in their investment not in some perfect futurity, but in an inevitable disintegration: “For the cope-stone of to-day is the corner-stone of to-morrow; and as St. Peter’s church was built in great part of the ruins of old Rome, so in all our erections, however imposing, we but form quarries and supply ignoble materials for the grander domes of posterity,” Melville writes in *Redburn* (149). Such moments take on new expansiveness or resonance when considered from the prospect of oceanic studies: Melville’s challenge to the limitations of monuments lies not in their fractional state, but in their presumption of stability or permanence in the first place. Oceanic studies finds capacious possibilities for new forms of relationality – erosion, drift, dispersion, confluence, solvency – derived from the necessarily unbounded examples provided by the seas.

NOTES

- 1 For examples of works that treat U.S. literature and culture in a hemispheric and/or transnational context with considerable attention to the nineteenth century, see Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine, eds., *Hemispheric American Studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, eds., *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2002); Anna Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Rodrigo Lazo, *Writing to Cuba: Filibustering and Cuban Exiles in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Sean X. Goudie, *Creole America: the West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
- 2 For more on Melville's personal experience at sea, see in particular Wilson Heflin, *Herman Melville's Whaling Years*, eds. Mary K. Bercaw Edwards and Thomas Farel Heffernan (Nashville, TN: University of Vanderbilt Press, 2004).
- 3 On maritime labor and its literary representation, see C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985); Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Marx, Conrad in Crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Hester Blum, *The View from the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). For accounts of the relationship between American literature and the sea, consult Thomas Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961); Haskell Springer, *America and the Sea: A Literary History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Jason Berger, *Antebellum at Sea: Maritime Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
- 4 Nathaniel Taylor, *Life on a Whaler; or, Antarctic Adventures in the Isle of Desolation* (1858; CT: New London County Historical Society, rpt. 1929), 2, 20.
- 5 Quoted in Thomas Farel Heffernan, *Stove by a Whale: Owen Chase and the Essex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 191.
- 6 See Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 168–82.
- 7 For the original historical narrative, see Amasa Delano, *A Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World; Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery, in the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands* (Boston: E. G. House, 1817).