

A Poetic History of the Oceans

Literature and Maritime Modernity

By

Søren Frank



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5 The Four World Pictures in *Moby-Dick*

Having delineated and described a historical framework of four different world pictures, we can now continue with a reading of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The four world pictures function as a framework that will guide our reading of the novel, but our reading will place concreteness (in the form of different perceptions of time and the ocean and of distinct literary styles and discursive strategies) back into the framework thus making it more complete and solid. I argue that the originality and complexity of *Moby-Dick* stems to a large extent from Melville's incorporation of the four world pictures into his most ambitious novel. It is also in this sense that "*Moby-Dick* dramatizes questions present if underarticulated in maritime writing: What do sailors know? And how is that knowledge registered or measured?"²⁰² The answer to both these questions posed by Hester Blum is linked to my idea of the coexistence of the four different maritime world pictures.

However, a few elaborations are in order here. It is important to emphasize that my reading of *Moby-Dick* serves as both summation and deconstruction of the above stage-by-stage historical narrative of sea writing. It is my hope that the reader accepts that what I have offered in the preceding pages of this historical chapter is a self-consciously simplified reading of the progress of Western sea writing through four stages: theocentric, anthropocentric, technocentric, and geocentric. Yet, I also believe that my historical narrative captures important epochal differences on top of the undoubtedly strong continuities that characterize historical evolution and, not least, builds a conceptual platform that is analytically operational and fruitful as well as pedagogically necessary. So, by claiming that *Moby-Dick* is a novel that comprises all four modes and historical trends, my intention is to reinforce the value of these historical frames and show by example how a literary writer such as Melville spans and combines them. My global and transhistorical reading method reveals how *Moby-Dick* is especially successful in practicing what Mentz calls an aesthetic of "composture,"²⁰³ which he defines as a recycling of multiple historical trends and layers simultaneously present to form a polychronic system (see also Table 1 at the end of this historical chapter). Literature in general seldom belongs to and exemplifies one narrow historical trend only. In *A Poetic History of the Oceans*, epochal claims such as the four maritime world pictures are not artificially imposed. They serve both a pedagogical, conceptual, and historical

²⁰² Blum, *View from the Masthead*, 130.

²⁰³ Steve Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), ix–xxii.

purpose, but my intention is to prioritize “an accumulated layering of exchange and entanglement,” thus turning to “turbulent plurality, a disorienting mixture of weak, attenuated, competing epochs.”²⁰⁴

Published in 1851, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* straddles the anthropocentric age of adventure, heroism, and enchantment and the technocentric age of industrialization, mathematization, and disenchantment. Belonging equally to two different eras, the age of sail and the age of steam, Melville’s novel simultaneously marks the culmination and prefigures the decline of the tradition of sea literature and maritime novels. Arguably, Melville was aware of *Moby-Dick’s* “double consciousness” of being a climax and an anticipation of future demise. Initially, Melville planned no more than a mere whaling version of his former more traditional novels such as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), both of which he referred to as a “plain, straightforward, and amusing narrative of personal experience.”²⁰⁵ However, during the summer of 1850, Melville decided to write what he later would refer to as “a wicked book.”²⁰⁶ The willfulness behind this decision is proof of Melville’s re-awakened megalomaniac ambitions. His meeting with Nathaniel Hawthorne at a picnic on Monument Mountain on August 5, 1850, stimulated these ambitions, as did his readings of Shakespeare’s dramas, of Milton, Virgil, and Mary Shelley as well as of Goethe, Thomas Carlyle, and William Beckford.²⁰⁷

Melville had already once failed to become a genuine writer-artist and not just some documentarist or romance writer yielding to the desires of the audience. His *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither* (1849) flopped, commercially at least. Following that unpleasant experience, he succumbed to the pressures of publishers and readers and returned to a more marketable format. In four months, Melville churned out two novels, *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849) and *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850). Going by what the author wrote in his journal, he did this so that he could “buy some tobacco.”²⁰⁸ The author

204 Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity*, xi, xiii.

205 Herman Melville, “Letter to Richard Bentley,” in *Correspondence, The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 14, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1993), 132. All subsequent quotes from Melville’s letters refer to this edition.

206 Melville, “Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 17 [?] November 1851,” 212.

207 Delbanco, *Melville*, 125–31.

208 Herman Melville, “Journal Entry,” in *Journals, The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 15, ed. Howard C. Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1989), 13. All subsequent quotes from Melville’s journals refer to this edition.

self-distanced from these novels by referring to them as “trash”²⁰⁹ and “two jobs, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood.”²¹⁰ Melville’s artistic ambitions were postponed out of necessity. However, the frustration of having to write for the market in combination with inspiration from Hawthorne and Shakespeare led to Melville’s ambitious gear shift during the summer of 1850.

Melville’s reading of Hawthorne’s work and the intimate conversations between the elder Hawthorne and the younger Melville, conversations Melville referred to as “ontological heroics,”²¹¹ made him realize three things: first, that the United States—despite a persistent and asphyxiating dependency on the Old World in cultural and literary matters after decades of political independence—could produce an author as accomplished as the greatest European authors; second, that Hawthorne was close to being the American Shakespeare; third, that he, Melville, could potentially equal or perhaps even supersede “divine William.”²¹² In short, Hawthorne and Shakespeare activated Melville’s artistic ambitions.

If Melville believed that his novel had the potential of being one of the greatest sea novels ever, the pinnacle of a noble literary tradition and written at the high-point of the maritime world’s enterprises, many passages in *Moby-Dick* are suffused with a nostalgic tone and an awareness of a world about to disappear—a world of sailing ships, whalers, and sperm lump squeezing. *Moby-Dick* shows us that Melville was endowed with a gift of presentiment regarding the near future and a gift of prophecy regarding the distant future. This maritime world was already undergoing a radical transformation. The heroic sailor battling with the elements or with the aquatic creatures of the sea would become an anachronism and the maritime novel a problematic or even outmoded genre. However, it is not only the nostalgic tone used to depict the old and soon to be extinct world of sail that bears witness of the novel’s self-consciousness around the imminent collapse of an entire world and a genre. The conversion from sail to steam and the resulting routinization of ocean travel that was well underway in the mid-nineteenth century were visible on the formal level of Melville’s novel just as they re-oriented his thematic concerns.

Instead of being driven forward by a linear plot and written in a traditional romance style like the works of Defoe, Smollett, and Cooper, *Moby-Dick* mixes

209 Melville, “Journal Entry,” 13.

210 Melville, “Letter to Lemuel Shaw,” 138.

211 Melville, “Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 29 June 1851,” 196.

212 Melville, “Letter to Evert Duyckinck, 24 February 1849,” 119.

a one-dimensional and monomaniacal quest narrative with a multitude of digressions comprising all sorts of stories. This “multiplicity of other things requiring narration”²¹³ ranges from Queequeq’s Polynesian family history and the laborious process of extracting whale oil to the Atlantic history of the Nantucketers and a cetological encyclopedia. In a metafictional comment, Ishmael reflects:

Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor’s quill! Give me Vesuvius’ crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying, is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme.²¹⁴

The stylistic features of this passage, including the use of exclamation marks, the paratactical syntax, and the accumulative sentence length supplement Ishmael’s explicitly stated encyclopedic ambition. Melville’s novel performs the intermingling of different discourses from sermon, song, dream, meditation, and Shakespearean dialogue to cetology, poetry, travel account, myth, and apocalypse. The formal crisis, or, put in more positive terms, the *invention* of *Moby-Dick* was a consequence of the growing anachronism of the sailing ship mariner and of the narrative potentials of this mariner in relation to action and adventure.

The anachronism also affected the novel’s thematic design. *Moby-Dick* was preoccupied with depicting the sailor’s battles against nature, against fellow mariners, and against the oceanic kingdom of animals. Alongside these traditional topics of maritime fiction, Melville’s oceanic epic explored psychological depths, natural history, racism, epistemology, and cultural diversity in a manner and degree never before seen in sea novels or in any other novel. Melville was fascinated with men who deep-dived ontologically and epistemologically: “Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more [...]. I’m not talking of Mr Emerson now—but

213 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 430.

214 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 456.

of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began.”²¹⁵ With *Moby-Dick*, Melville joined the corps of deep divers of the human mind and the phenomenal world. In the words of Gilles Deleuze, the overwhelming experience meant that he, too, returned to the surface “from what he has seen and heard with bloodshot eyes and pierced eardrums.”²¹⁶

The tension between the worlds of sail and steam and Melville’s awareness of living in a period of epochal change were infused into *Moby-Dick*. In my view, the result was a novel that pays tribute to four heterogeneous and somewhat incompatible world pictures: theocentrism, anthropocentrism, technocentrism, and geocentrism. In what follows, I elaborate on the distinctions delineated earlier in this chapter between these four world pictures. I attempt to systematize the novel’s thematic and formal heterogeneity around these four topics: gods-humans-technology-nature; temporality; worldview; style. This enterprise may seem irreconcilable with Melville’s aspirations while writing *Moby-Dick* and even with the book itself. My effort to systematize the overall complexity of the novel is intended to provide a helpful framework through which to read *Moby-Dick* and gain a deeper understanding of the novel and its continued relevance to a world that seems to get wetter.

5.1 *Historical Time and Broad Present*

Before discussing the novel and its coexisting theocentric, anthropocentric, technocentric, and geocentric world pictures, I introduce the concepts of “historical time” (Koselleck) and “broad present” (Gumbrecht), two different conceptions of temporality and past, present, and future that can assist us analytically. The chronotope of “historical time” emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century and became consolidated throughout the nineteenth century, whereas the chronotope of “broad present” emerged during the decade following the end of World War II.²¹⁷ Reinhart Koselleck was the first to historicize the very notions of historical time, historical thought, and historical consciousness and make us aware that the now obsolete chronotope of the nineteenth century was institutionalized so widely and comprehensively that many mistook (and many still confound) it with time itself. Koselleck does so by extracting two anthropological and metahistorical concepts—two formal categories structuring and acting as conditions of possibility for every human

215 Melville, “Letter to Evert Augustus Duyckinck, 3 March 1849,” 121.

216 Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (1993; London and New York: Verso, 1998), 3.

217 Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present*; Gumbrecht, *After 1945*.

relationship with time—from the vocabulary of history and philosophy: experience (*Erfahrung*) and expectation (*Erwartung*). His main point, which has implications for mankind's changing relationship with past, present, and future, is that “the classification of experience and expectation has been displaced and changed during the course of history.”²¹⁸

In the introductory chapter of *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (2014), Gumbrecht summarizes in six points the characteristics of the historical mindset that Koselleck describes.²¹⁹ First, the newly historically conscious humankind imagines itself on a linear path moving through time (i.e., time itself does not move). Second, historical thought assumes that all phenomena are affected by change in time (i.e., time is an agent of transformation). Third, moving through time, humankind is convinced to have left the past behind and is skeptical of the value of past experiences as points of orientation (i.e., the past is severed from and considered irrelevant to the present). Fourth, the future presents itself as an open horizon of possibilities toward which humankind is making its way (i.e., the future is the natural and unproblematic next step following the present). Fifth, the present—situated in-between the past (useless experiences) and future (great expectations)—is transformed into a fleeting, almost imperceptible moment of transition (i.e., the present is not essential in itself, but essential only as a difference from the past and as a steppingstone to the future). And sixth, the confined present of “historical time” offered the Cartesian subject its epistemological habitat. Here, Gumbrecht's point is that the transitory present was the site where the subject for the first time in human history felt that it could adapt experiences from the past to the present and the future and then make open choices among the possibilities offered by this future. The ability to select from among these options is both the framework and the condition of possibility for human agency.

Koselleck refers to the transition into the *Neuzeit* (“new time”) of European history as a “saddle time” (*Sattelzeit*) taking place between 1780 and 1830 (he sometimes broadens the period to 1750–1850).²²⁰ Koselleck's main thesis on modernity is that it is characterized by an ever-widening gap between humankind's horizon of (future) expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*) and its space of (past) experiences (*Erfahrungsraum*). Premodern man was convinced that his life, played out in an agrarian world dominated by the cycle of nature, would proceed in the same way as the lives of his immediate ancestors. Expectations

218 Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation,’” 259.

219 Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present*, vii–viii.

220 *Sattelzeit* is a (cognitive) third revolution running parallel with the (political) French Revolution and the (technological) Industrial Revolution.

were nurtured by the experiences of one's fathers, and those experiences then became the experiences of the descendants. Admittedly, events such as the Copernican Revolution and the overseas conquests could have challenged the premodern convergence of experience and expectation. However, according to Koselleck, the Christian eschatology ensured that the horizon of expectations remained confined within clearly defined boundaries. Therefore, at least up until the middle of the seventeenth century, the future continued to be inextricably tied to the present.²²¹

Modern man, on the contrary, lives in the conviction that the future can be made; that is, history can be created, and one can creatively intervene into the future. Francis Bacon perceived this in the early seventeenth century, but he was too restricted by the political, technological, and religious frameworks of his time to formulate what later thinkers did in that respect. In the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, thinkers such as Leibniz, Rousseau, Kant, and Lessing gave credibility to mankind's potential for secular *perfectibilité*. This paved the way for conceiving of earthly history as a process of continual and increasing perfection. They opened a new horizon of expectation called "progress." Consequently, eschatology was replaced by an open future: "Pragmatic prognosis of a possible future became a long-term expectation of a new future."²²²

The concept of "space of experience" also underwent a transformation in this period. Events such as the Copernican Revolution, technological developments (chronometer, steam engine, and gas lightning to mention but a few), and the discovery of the planet made people realize they lived on a planet defined by the synchronicity of the nonsynchronous and the nonsynchronicity of the synchronous. Diverging temporalities or "ages" coexisted on the planet: history became a question of evolution; geography and society a question of stage.²²³ Koselleck concludes:

It was new that the expectations that reached out for the future became detached from everything that previous experience had to offer. Even the new experience gained from the annexation of lands overseas and from the development of science and technology was still insufficient for the derivation of future expectations. From this moment, the space of experience was no longer limited by the horizon of expectations; rather,

221 Koselleck, "Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation,'" 263–64.

222 Koselleck, "Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation,'" 267.

223 Koselleck, "Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation,'" 266–68.

the limits of the space of experience and of the horizon of expectations diverged.²²⁴

Gumbrecht argues that “historical time” still dominates our way of thinking about time and history today. My point is that when Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* he anticipated the post-World War II chronotope of the “broad present.”

What does Gumbrecht mean by broad present? How does it differ from historical time? If we think about it, the ways in which we gain experiences and the ways we act have changed, although we may still be unaware of this change. As to our potential for agency, it is becoming more and more obvious that “the future no longer presents itself as an open horizon of possibilities; instead, it is a dimension increasingly closed to all prognoses—and which, at the same time, seems to draw near as a menace.”²²⁵ Several contemporary phenomena contribute to the transformation of the future from an open horizon of expectations and possibilities to a closed and menacing horizon of limited options. The climate crisis, social inequality on a global scale, and international terrorism are but three examples of looming catastrophes.

Our relationship with the past has also changed. If historical time was defined by an ability (or deeply felt desire) to sever the (irrelevant) past from a transitory present, then we are no longer capable of leaving anything behind in our broad present. If in “historical time” the past provided no points of orientation for the present, then our present is swamped with pasts because of digitalization, the internet, and electronic systems of memory. Finally, the broad present entails a new structure of the present, too: “Between the pasts that engulf us and the menacing future, the present has turned into a dimension of expanding simultaneities.”²²⁶ Instead of a transitory moment cut off from a relatively useless past and open toward a promising future that one could prognosticate, we now live in an ever-widening present in which we can no longer free ourselves from the past(s), and in which we only meet closed doors to an ominous future.²²⁷

In this chronotopic configuration, contemporary phenomena such as retro waves (of fashion, design, and music), the Google Books Project with its

224 Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation,’” 266–67.

225 Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present*, xiii.

226 Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present*, xiii.

227 Arguably, some of the first literary texts in which the author’s thematization of the topics of closed futurity and stalled present could be sensed were Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis clos* (1944), Albert Camus’ *La Peste* (1947), and Samuel Beckett’s *En attendant Godot* (1952). See also Gumbrecht, *After 1945*, 25–26, 49. Again, *Moby-Dick* contains elements of this chronotope, as I will demonstrate in a while.

promise of full access to everything that was ever written, and the institutional and private archives of photographs and video recordings make sure that the spreading present is in constant motion. The present is kept dynamic by pasts repeatedly evoked anew. However, the often mutually exclusive, yet coexisting (past) worlds within this present also cause it to lack clear contours. It is not merely a case of the common metahistorical difficulties of not being able to grasp one's present while living in the midst of it. The lack of a clear identity is amplified because of the multiple and diverging pasts expanding the dimensions of this present. Because the contraction of futurity makes it increasingly difficult to act authentically—that is, to act with the conviction that one's actions are an investment in potentially positive future outcomes (no action is possible where no place exists for its realization to be projected)—the mobilization of the present by the different pasts is contrasted by an immobilization of the present by the closure of futurity. The broadening present may offer room (or so we think) to move back into the past and forward into the future, yet such efforts return to their point of departure. What we get is a present that is stagnant, an “unmoving motion” in Gumbrecht's words.²²⁸ If the Cartesian subject reveled in “historical time,” because this chronotope allowed its consciousness to project itself meaningfully into the future, Gumbrecht sees a new figure of (self-) reference emerging in the “broad present.” This is a subject that is no longer merely or primarily defined by the mind, consciousness, and transcendence, but also by the body, the senses, and *physis*.

5.2 *Theocentrism*

Moby-Dick comprises the four mutually exclusive, yet coexisting world pictures that we have labelled theocentrism, anthropocentrism, technocentrism, and geocentrism. This encyclopedic complexity is one of the reasons for the novel's continued relevance. The *theocentric* world picture permeates the novel but does monopolize it according to Zachary Hutchins: “most studies of *Moby-Dick*, distracted by Melville's apparent Ahabian disregard for behavioral standards derived from mainstream Christian interpretations of scripture, underestimate Melville's interest in preserving and sustaining biblical structure and content within the novel. [...] his writing is so saturated with scriptural references that his entire corpus seems a type of third testament encompassing and extending the Bible.”²²⁹ A classical and still influential study by Nathalie Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (1949), highlights the influence of the Wisdom books

²²⁸ Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present*, xiii.

²²⁹ Zachary Hutchins, “*Moby-Dick* as Third Testament: A Novel ‘Not Come to Destroy but to Fulfill’ the Bible,” *Leviathan* 13, no. 2 (2011): 20, 29.

of the Old Testament, particularly the Books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, the latter for example cited explicitly in “The Try-Works” chapter: “No other group of scriptural books is so extensively represented in his pages, or so profusely marked in his Bible.”²³⁰ Nevertheless, my focus is mainly on “The Book of Jonah” and Melville’s chapter “The Sermon.”

Prophetic voices in *Moby-Dick* express a *Non Plus Ultra* approach to the sea, consider the ocean a barrier, and associate seafaring with risk. In addition, the novel carries powerful religious symbolism. Moby Dick is a natural phenomenon, a giant fish to be fought and caught, and more, a sacred creature to be admired from a respectful distance and a marvelous monster to be feared up close. In the novel’s *anthropocentric* world picture, Melville lauds the Faustian expansionist drive of mankind, its “immaculate manliness” and “august dignity,”²³¹ as well as its collaborative, yet agonistic, relationship with nature. Examples of anthropocentrism can be found in the novel’s descriptions of the Nantucketers and of the crew’s whale hunting. In the *technocentric* universe, we meet Melville’s tribute to the efficiency of industrialism and its services to humankind. The descriptions of the whale hunt as a rationalist and capitalist enterprise, “hopes of cash—aye, cash,”²³² fall into this category, and so do those of the ship as a factory and the cetological chapters with their systematization of nature. The *geocentric* universe enters the foreground whenever Melville pays homage to the ocean and to its animal kingdom, and when he evokes the prehuman or posthuman worlds. The shared practice of squeezing sperm lumps becomes a harmonious cosmic experience, whereas the novel’s ending depicts human apocalypse and planetary rebirth simultaneously. In the following, I compare the four universes in greater detail. More specifically, I will analyze their image of humanity’s relationship to nature, technology, and religion, their temporality, their worldview, and their style. This will allow me to discuss the chronotopic design of the novel and its potential uses of “historical time” and “broad present.”

Moby-Dick is undoubtedly one of the novels in the Western canon in which the Holy Scriptures, ancient religions in general, and the classical tradition and its texts have the strongest presence and afterlife. I shall present only one example, but it should provide enough input for us to get an idea of the theocentrism in the novel. In its polyphonic structure and heteroglossic style, we encounter a series of prophetic voices of biblical nature: “For many Christian

230 Nathalie Wright, *Melville’s Use of the Bible* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1949), 94.

231 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 117.

232 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 178.

readers, the Bible's claim to divine authorship identifies every page as the product of a prophetic pen, and *Moby-Dick* likewise invests its multiplicity of narratives with a clearly prophetic voice."²³³ Father Mapple draws ominous parallels to Jonah, Ishmael evokes a second Deluge at the end of the novel, and through his insistent warnings to Ishmael and Queequeg against signing up for the *Pequod*, "a stranger" in the chapter entitled "The Prophet" insinuates Ahab's hubristic transgressions of divine boundaries. Common to the three examples is a vision of a millennial future, an anticipation of its completion or failed completion, unfolded in linear, eschatological time.

The example I will discuss is Father Mapple's sermon.²³⁴ Melville exhibits Mapple's unifying ability, his power to centralize, in a double way. Before Father Mapple's entrance into the chapel, the "small congregation of sailors, and sailors' wives and widows" is scattered randomly around the room, each person apparently isolated in his or her individuality: "Each silent worshipper seemed purposely sitting apart from the other, as if each grief were insular and incommunicable." Just before beginning his sermon, now situated in the pulpit, adroitly boarded in a sailorly fashion by the assistance of a rope ladder, Mapple, in "a mild voice of unassuming authority," commands the people to draw together "midships."²³⁵ A former sailor, Father Mapple speaks the *lingua nautica* and reminds us of a captain who has a gathering effect on his crew.

Melville also underlines Mapple's centralizing function through his rhetorical style. Mapple tells the story of Jonah by starting with the ending and then going back to the story's beginning. Endowed with hindsight, the entire story and all its details are present in his mind. He is outside or above time.²³⁶ His sermon becomes a recollective and systematizing narrative in which everything is told at the proper time and place: "the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishments, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah."²³⁷ This structure corresponds to what Sacvan Bercovitch has called "the American Jeremiad," a Puritan narrative with roots in the Calvinist providential view of history in which recounted beginnings were simultaneously announcements that promised an epiphanic end in the fullness of time. Its purpose was "to direct an imperiled people of God towards

233 Hutchins, "Moby-Dick as Third Testament," 22.

234 For a more elaborated reading of "The Sermon," see Søren Frank, "Melville's Ambivalenz gegenüber Vater Mapples Rhetorik und Weitsicht," *Neue Rundschau* 1 (2013): 183–94.

235 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 34, 34, 41.

236 William Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 87–114.

237 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 42.

the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually towards salvation, and collectively towards the American city of God.”²³⁸ There are no deviations in Mapple’s sermon, because he—like the punishing (Puritan) God he believes in and believes that he serves—hovers above the material of his story as well as above the congregation, epitomized in his isolated and elevated position in the pulpit.

As William Spanos points out, the pulpit recalls Bentham’s Panopticon from which all details can be monitored and evaluated. In Mapple’s sermon, differing considerably from the biblical source in its density of detail, such particulars as Joppa (Jaffa in modern day Tel Aviv), Tarshish (Cadiz), customs papers, passport, passage money, cargo, parricide reward notice, locked cabin, and lamp never escape the gaze of the alert exegete. The numerous details endow Mapple with a godlike narratorial authority and serve to bend his narrative towards preaching “the Truth to the face of Falsehood.”²³⁹ All parts act together in supporting the whole. The countless details are semantically confined. If they are unambiguous, they are mentioned to demonstrate the narrator’s superior control, all-encompassing knowledge, and omnipresent gaze.

If we compare Mapple’s panoramic style to Ishmael’s narrative technique, they seem to be opposites. Mapple stays aloof; he never plunges. Ishmael plunges. He explores the watery and fluid depths, what D. H. Lawrence has called “the strange slidings and colliding of Matter,” whereas Mapple reaches out for the metaphysical heaven, for eternity. Ishmael also explores horizontally, allowing for digressions and doubts when commenting on details. Mapple is will, idea, and discourse. In contrast, but only occasionally (for Ishmael is also spirit, talk, and idea), Ishmael’s “bodily knowledge moves naked, a living quick among the stark elements. For with sheer physical vibrational sensitiveness, like a marvellous wireless-station, he registers the effects of the outer world.”²⁴⁰ Melville’s experience of writing on a formal *terra infirma* from August 1850 and onwards splits into two diverging narrative modalities, one stylistically sympathetic to or converging with his own insecurity (Ishmael’s ramblings, digressions, and pure bodily apprehensions of the physical world), the other a compensatory counterreaction to the insecurity, necessary in order to fend off chaos and the howling infinite, temporarily at least (Mapple’s teleology, linearity, and purely spiritual interpretations of the metaphysical world).

238 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 9.

239 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 48.

240 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; London: Penguin, 1971), 154, 155.

Instead of Father Mapple's magnetic ability to bend details into prophetic signs of later fulfillment, Ishmael's encounter with details and signs seems to emphasize chance, randomness, and coincidence, such as when he wanders about New Bedford and misses several lodging opportunities before choosing The Spouter-Inn where Queequeg just happens to be staying. It could be argued that this modality of contingency continues throughout the novel until the survival by chance at the end. To Ishmael, the signs are merely presentiments, and as such they are unreliable and highly ambiguous.²⁴¹ They are not, as in Mapple's case, clear-cut signatures of truth, but rather vague, fluid pre-structures that invite examination and doubt.

The contrast between Ishmael and Mapple signals a critique of Mapple's interpretation (misreading) of the biblical Jonah story. Mapple disregards the fourth chapter of "The Book of Jonah," the chapter in which God shows his mercy on Nineveh and the pagan inhabitants. And whereas Mapple's Jonah is portrayed as someone terrified of being discovered and who is treated as a criminal, the Bible's Jonah tells his shipmates right away who he is and what he has done. Mapple's Jonah fears that God will punish him, in the Bible he goes below to sleep, seemingly untroubled by his consciousness. Mapple says of Jonah that his repentance is genuine and that he is grateful for his punishment, but in the Bible, Jonah calls for God's help. No model of repentance, he stays angry until death, incensed by God's decision not to punish Nineveh. In that sense, the Jonah of the Bible and Mapple share a belief in the necessity of sacred violence, of identifying scapegoats to cleanse the world. However, this necessity seems undermined by God in "The Book of Jonah," since his logic, and the logic of Ishmael, is anti-sacrificial. In contrast to Mapple's punishing God, this implies a merciful and tolerant God, and, consequently, indicates a disruption between violence and the sacred.

Mapple's sermon takes an unmistakable stand on the need for sacrifices, scapegoats, and violence, whereas "The Book of Jonah" shows a God more compassionate and forgiving. In relation to a sacrificial world vision, Ishmael seems to end up on Mapple's side, although his narrative techniques differ from Mapple's, and though the fulfillment is apparently only temporary. As for *Moby-Dick*, it seems divided between a critique of the practice of victimization and its cleansing effects, on the one side, and the need nevertheless to come up with a victim on the other.²⁴²

241 Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, 91–92.

242 Giorgio Mariani, " 'Chiefly Known by His Rod': The Book of Jonah, Mapple's Sermon, and Scapegoating," in *Ungraspable Phantom: Essays on Moby-Dick*, eds. John Bryant, Mary K. Bercau Edwards, and Timothy Marr (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2006), 52–54.

The theocentric world picture in *Moby-Dick* rests on several other sources and chapters than “The Book of Jonah” and “The Sermon” but this will not be examined in depth here. However, I would like to offer a condensed summary of Melville’s theocentrism in *Moby-Dick*. The temporality governing most of the theocentric parts of the novel is a linear, eschatological conception of time in which the past is incomplete, the present transitory, and the future (fails to be) complete. It is a universe in which God’s will trumps that of humans, who are not yet assisted by modern technology in their confrontations with a divinely administered nature. Melville’s tone oscillates between reverence and prophecy depending on nature’s manifestations as being either enchanted or apocalyptic. Not yet a fish or a machine, the ocean is perceived as either a marvel or a monster, and Melville conveys this universe in a style that is predominantly either lyrical or allegorical.

5.3 *Anthropocentrism*

In “Nantucket,” Melville heaps praise on the islanders from Nantucket in a manner not so different from the famous anthropocentric chorus song in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Initially evoking the island’s geographical and natural characteristics and reaching back to legendary times when Nantucket was settled by American Indians, halfway into the chapter Melville describes the history and evolution of the Nantucketers in recorded time:

What wonder, then, that these Nantucketers, born on a beach, should take to the sea for a livelihood! They first caught crabs and quahogs in the sand; grown bolder, they waded out with nets for mackerel; more experienced, they pushed off in boats and captured cod; and at last, launching a navy of great ships on the sea, explored this watery world; put an incessant belt of circumnavigations round it; peeped in at Behring’s Straits; and in all seasons and all oceans declared everlasting war with the mightiest animated mass that has survived the flood; most monstrous and most mountainous! That Himmalehan, salt-sea, Mastodon, clothed with such portentousness of unconscious power, that his very panics are more to be dreaded than his most fearless and malicious assaults!

And thus have these naked Nantucketers, these sea hermits, issuing from their ant-hill in the sea, overrun and conquered the watery world like so many Alexanders; parcelling out among them the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans [...]; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires; other seamen having but a right of way through it. [...] The Nantucketer, he alone resides and riots on the sea; he alone, in Bible language, goes

down to it in ships; to and fro ploughing it as his own special plantation. *There* is his home; *there* lies his business, which a Noah's flood would not interrupt, though it overwhelmed all the millions in China. He lives on the sea, as prairie cocks in the prairie; he hides among the waves, he climbs them as chamois hunters climb the Alps. For years he knows not the land; [...] at nightfall, the Nantucketer, out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales.²⁴³

The perspective is clearly anthropocentric. The undisputed protagonists of the passage are the people of Nantucket, admired and celebrated for their actions and deeds. Their evolution as islanders and people is one of linear progression ("grown bolder"), hegemonic colonization ("overrun and conquered"), steady expansion (from a local interaction with the sea to a global oceanic authority), utilitarian cultivation ("ploughing it as his own special plantation"), and cartographic distribution ("parcelling out").

The relationship between the Nantucketers and nature is partly one of collaboration, partly one of rivalry, more specifically of the Nantucketers' dominance over nature. However, this domination is not unequivocal; the "assaults" and "panics" of both the sea and its most dreaded creature, Leviathan, are still to be feared by humans. Melville portrays an era in which the link between man and nature is still uncontaminated by modern technology. The American Indian settlers embarked upon the Atlantic Ocean in small canoes searching for their lost kin with only the aid of manpower and wind. Later, with their sea-conquering whaling fleet, the Nantucketers colonized the seven seas relying on their extraordinary navigational and seafaring skills, and on the currents, the winds, and the sails.

Before discussing the temporality, worldview, and style of the novel's anthropocentric component, I introduce one more scene to support my analysis. In the whale hunting scenes—the one quoted from below is part of "Stubb Kills a Whale"—the celebratory tone from "Nantucket" is maintained. But instead of the narrator's more physically and temporally distant perspective from outside, Melville transports us into the very action of the whale hunt through an inside perspective attached to the action (i.e., not to the psychology of the whalers) as it unfolds; that is, the narrator is both physically and temporally proximate:

"There go flukes!" was the cry, an announcement immediately followed by Stubb's producing his match and igniting his pipe, for now a respite

²⁴³ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 64.

was granted. After the full interval of his sounding had elapsed, the whale rose again, and being now in advance of the smoker's boat, and much nearer to it than to any of the others, Stubb counted upon the honor of the capture. It was obvious, now, that the whale had at length become aware of his pursuers. All silence of cautiousness was therefore no longer of use. Paddles were dropped, and oars came loudly into play. And still puffing at his pipe, Stubb cheered on his crew to the assault.

Yes, a mighty change had come over the fish. All alive to his jeopardy, he was going "head out"; that part obliquely projecting from the mad yeast which he brewed.

[...] "Start her, now; give 'em the long and strong stroke, Tashtego. Start her, Tash, my boy—start her, all; but keep cool, keep cool—cucumbers is the word—easy, easy—only start her like grim death and grinning devils, and raise the buried dead perpendicular out of their graves, boys—that's all. Start her!"

"Woo-hoo! Wa-hee!" screamed the Gay-Header in reply, raising some old war-whoop to the skies [...].

But his wild screams were answered by others quite as wild. "Kee-hee! Kee-hee!" yelled Daggoo, straining forwards and backwards on his seat, like a pacing tiger in his cage.

"Ka-la! Koo-loo!" howled Queequeg, as if smacking his lips over a mouthful of Grenadier's steak. And thus with oars and yells the keels cut the sea. [...] Like desperadoes they tugged and they strained, till the welcome cry was heard—"Stand up, Tashtego!—give it to him!" The harpoon was hurled.²⁴⁴

As in "Nantucket," we are dealing with a pre-technocentric bond between man, nature, and animal. This is an enchanted world in the way Max Weber understood it. To Weber, the process of modernity was a constant development towards a more and more disenchanted world. *Entzauberung*, or disenchantment, results from an increasingly rational (as opposed to magical) legitimation of human behavior, which consequently becomes purpose-guided and future-oriented. Rational behavior is always an investment in potential, and sometimes even pre-calculable, future outcomes and thus entails an idea of mankind's greater control of surroundings, an ability to master (or at least reduce or productively cope with) contingency.²⁴⁵ The transition from an enchanted

244 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 283–84.

245 Max Weber, "Wissenschaft als Beruf," in *Wissenschaft als Beruf. Politik als Beruf, Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/17, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter

world into a disenchanted one produces several side effects, which manifest in relation to temporality, spatiality, and existentiality. Future-orientedness, abstraction, and meaning replace immediacy, concretization, and presence.

Melville's whale hunt belongs predominantly to the enchanted world as does the discourse of "Nantucket." In the hunting scenes, the modus of time is the *hic et nunc* of immediacy. The whalers are absorbed in the present moment of the hunt that involves the bodies, senses, and instincts of all participants. The hunt does not allow time for reflection nor for abstraction or future planning. However, if time in the actual hunting scenes is a temporality of the immediate, the context supplies these scenes with a touch of nostalgia. The reason is the reader's awareness—transported to us by the different world pictures and discourses of *Moby-Dick*—of the enchanted world's termination in the near future. When Ishmael visits the Spouter-Inn, he feels inclined to describe the many exhibited maritime objects—paintings, clubs, spears, and lances—in a language of legend evoking the heroism of whale hunters of the near past: "With this once long lance, now wildly elbowed, fifty years ago did Nathan Swain kill fifteen whales between a sunrise and a sunset."²⁴⁶ The praxis of the past is here inextricably linked with the description of concrete objects. Remembering presupposes this description, because in Melville description of objects always has an evocative potential. Implicitly, Ishmael nostalgically draws a line between the enchanted near past and present, "the knightly days of our profession,"²⁴⁷ on the one side, and the disenchanted present and near future on the other.

As for literary style in the anthropocentric universe, Melville employs the style of romance and adventure characterized by an emphasis on human deeds and a relatively linear progression of plot. In these passages, Melville draws on a tradition running as far back as the Hellenistic and Chivalric romances, and closer to his own time on a tradition that includes Defoe and Fielding. It is a tradition that contrasts with the sentimental and psychological tradition of Richardson and Rousseau. Whereas *Pamela* and *Confessions* explore biography, inner feelings, and the intimacy of indoor private life, *Robinson Crusoe* focuses on practical problem solving, on recording the objects of the empirical outdoor world, and on surviving in dangerous and unknown territory.²⁴⁸

(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922), 49–111; Walter M. Sprondel, "Entzauberung," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 2, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 564–65.

246 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 13.

247 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 361.

248 Cohen, "Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe," 661.

If we think of the defining features of “historical time”—irrelevant past, transitory present, open future—the anthropocentric universe in *Moby-Dick* represents a different temporality. If past experiences had become useless points of orientation in the present during “historical time” (because the future was now expected to be something new), the exploits of the whalers depend on the transmission and internalization of experience and skills from the older generations of whale hunters. The present is a temporality of immediacy and nostalgia, so the future becomes irrelevant and undesirable to a certain degree. If anything, the chronotope of the anthropocentric universe is closer to Koselleck’s image of the agrarian world in which space of experience and horizon of expectation were still closely linked and almost converging.

5.4 *Technocentrism*

Moby-Dick also comprises a technocentric universe, which partly overlaps and partly contrasts with the anthropocentric world. Here, Melville writes enthusiastically about the effectiveness and productivity of industrialism and about the comforts it provides for humans. The passages quoted above belonging to the novel’s anthropocentric universe contained seeds to “historical time”: “Nantucket” in the form of historical progress and human agency, “Stubb Kills a Whale” in the form of human agency, although the horizon of expectation was here less important than the immersion in the here and now action of whale hunting. However, they were examples of a pre-technocentric and enchanted world of (sometimes agonistic) collaboration between mankind and nature. In the technocentric universe, on the contrary, the world is disenchanting, bereft of magic, and governed by rationality. The relationship between humans and nature becomes increasingly mediated through technology, so humans to a larger extent dominate nature and master its contingencies. The modus of time changes from a temporality of immediacy and nostalgia to one of presentiment and future-orientedness. Because of nature’s diminished role, *Moby-Dick* is less concerned with man’s battles against nature, and this influences the style of the novel. Instead of romance and adventure, the novel reveals traits of realism and protomodernism, when the narrator resorts to the encyclopedia, and the characters gradually turn their attention inward to confrontations with their own psychological depths.

In the nineteenth-century chronotope of “historical time,” people realize that time is an agent of transformation and that all phenomena are affected by the change in time. It is no coincidence that it is during this period that literary realism, with its propensity for meticulously describing the appearance and emotions of the characters as well as the design, function, and colors of the objects of the outer world, emerges. Balzac is one of the first authors to depict

a world in which history is experienced as inevitable change. To cope with this transitive quality of the present, he develops the art of description. The minute recording of appearances is a way of saving them from their imminent disappearance, or, in Milan Kundera's words: "Man began to understand that he was not going to die in the same world he had been born into." Consequently, everything had to be described before it disappeared. To Kundera, description can therefore be defined as "compassion for the ephemeral; salvaging the perishable." The concreteness of everyday objects, personal trifles, and natural phenomena suddenly become a major topic in novels. This is why Balzac's Paris is nothing like Fielding's London. In Balzac, the squares have their names, the houses their colors, the streets their smells and sounds. Balzac's Paris is the Paris of a specific moment, Paris as it had not been before and as it would never be again. Every scene of Balzac's novels "is stamped (be it only by the shape of a chair or the cut of a suit) by History which, now that it has emerged from the shadows, sculpts and re-sculpts the look of the world."²⁴⁹

Melville is part of that same world. He was acutely aware of the radical transformation of the maritime world due to technological developments. A strong discourse in *Moby-Dick* is thus a Balzacian urge to salvage the perishable through description. Melville's choice of naming many chapters after concrete objects (carpet bag, wheelbarrow, cabin table, cassock, lamp, musket, etc.) and devoting large parts of these chapters to meticulously describing these objects can be interpreted in this light. Around each object Melville draws a specific (maritime) culture and praxis, and he feels the urgency of doing so because things are changing and will eventually disappear.

The awareness of inexorable change has as one of its side effects the belief in progress and continual expansion of human knowledge, articulated by Kant as *Fortschritt* and by Koselleck as "long-term expectation of a new future." In the cetological chapters in *Moby-Dick*, Melville is a child of this belief. In "Cetology," Melville's ambition is nothing short of penetrating the "[i]mpenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacea," and he wants to do this by putting before the reader "some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera": "The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed."²⁵⁰ A little later in the same chapter, the narrator stresses that he is merely "the architect, not the builder," and then elaborates on his project, this "draught of a systematization of cetology":

249 Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Archer (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 14.

250 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 134.

But it is a ponderous task; no ordinary letter-sorter in the Post-Office is equal to it. To grope down into the bottom of the sea after them; to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan! [...] But I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans; I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest; and I will try.²⁵¹

Melville presents a two-fold legitimization of his ambition of “cetological letter sorting,” one *cerebral* (“I have swam through libraries”), the other *practical* (“and sailed through oceans; I have had to do with whales with these visible hands”). In a scientific tradition, he has read everything there is to read about whales, but at the same time his scientific enterprise of defining, describing, and classifying the whale is backed up by empiricism through his own hands-on experiences. The entire style of “Cetology” is maintained in the style of a natural science book and with clear categorizations between the folio whale, the octavo whale, and the duodecimo whale as well as between their respective subgenera. If there is a conviction in the novel’s anthropocentric enchanted universe that the whale “eludes both hunters and philosophers,”²⁵² the ambition in the technocentric universe is *to replace possibility and probability with certainty though comprehensive description*.

A word of caution, though. “Cetology” is, as are other chapters such as “Extracts” and “Etymology” whose objective is encyclopedic, marked by irony and a self-conscious awareness of the encyclopedic ambition’s futility. This realization of incompleteness has further implications: “It is significant that the narrative’s classification systems are not simply incomplete; they are in draft form, which invites the reader’s participation in the work of progress.”²⁵³ To Melville, maritime labor, scientific efforts, and works of literature are all collective democratic endeavors.

Another example of technocentrism is found in “The Chart,” in which the narrator describes how Captain Ahab with the help of “a large wrinkled roll of yellowish sea charts” “of all four oceans” and “piles of old log-books” is trying to “seek out one solitary creature in the unhooped oceans of this planet.” If this seems “an absurdly hopeless task” to most of us, Ahab, on the contrary, “knew the sets of all tides and currents; and thereby calculating the driftings of the sperm whale’s food; and, also calling to mind the regular, ascertained seasons

251 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 136.

252 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 140.

253 Blum, *View from the Masthead*, 130.

for hunting him in particular latitudes; could arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties, concerning the timeliest day to be upon this or that ground in search of his prey." As with the cetology, there is a conviction that "all possibilities would become probabilities" and "every probability the next thing to a certainty."²⁵⁴ Weber's disenchanting world of pre-calculable futures and rational presents is given poetic voice.

If cetology and cartography contribute to the transformation of the Atlantic into a "settled and civilized ocean," other discourses reinforce the novel's technocentrism. Melville treats the question of money and capitalism with ambivalence. He describes cash as a natural inclination of man ("man is a money-making animal") and celebrates it as a motor that drives progress and expansion. In "The Advocate," Melville resorts to statistics and numbers to draw the reader's attention to the financial and material benefits of whale hunting: "we whalers of America now outnumber all the rest of the banded whalers in the world; sail a navy of upwards of seven hundred vessels; manned by eighteen thousand men; yearly consuming 4,000,000 of dollars; the ships worth, at the time of sailing, \$20,000,000! and every year importing into our harbors a well reaped harvest of \$7,000,000." What could be labeled existential dominance in the anthropocentric sections of the novel is here transformed into utilitarian and financial dominance. Money also dehumanizes the universe as when Stubb yells to Pip, "a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama," just as it implies an elimination of animal species such as the whale, of which it is said that "he must die the death and be murdered."²⁵⁵

The influence of technocentrism on the style of *Moby-Dick* does not limit itself to realism in the concrete forms of description and encyclopedia. As the increased role of technology involves the taming of nature, the adventurous style of the anthropocentric universe in which the sailor was in constant heroic battles with nature is replaced by a protomodernist style in which the sailors are physically battling each other or psychologically battling with themselves. However, if Melville occasionally turns away from the traditional discourse of maritime fiction—action and adventure—and instead employs a style of introspection and psychology, he is, like Dostoyevsky, closer to twentieth-century authors such as Rilke, Döblin, and Joyce than to, say, Richardson. In Melville's writing, the ocean provides a context for introspection similar to that of the metropolis in Rilke, Döblin, and Joyce. Paris, Berlin, and Dublin are

²⁵⁴ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 198–99, 199, 200.

²⁵⁵ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 245, 413, 109, 413, 357.

urban oceans of chaotic impressions and cacophonous multitudes, just as the Atlantic and the Pacific are oceanic metropolises of multiethnic encounters and capitalist ventures. The domestic intimacy of Richardson is replaced with a propensity for madness, schizophrenia, and paralysis. Captain Ahab's soliloquies in this respect are famous: "They think me mad—Starbuck does; but I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself!" Captain Ahab is a precursor for twentieth-century atrocities and genuine technocentrism. Hence, when he exclaims: "all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad,"²⁵⁶ he appears as an early version of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, whose inhumanity was accentuated by the very rational processes facilitating it.

In the technocentric universe of *Moby-Dick*, the chronotope of historical time has come to the fore. Now, the past has become increasingly irrelevant in the sense that it is no longer able to provide points of orientation, and the present is transitory, a steppingstone towards an open future of possibilities. This is most manifest in the descriptive, capitalist, and scientific discourses of *Moby-Dick*, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish these from the anthropocentric universe of immediacy and nostalgia and the geocentric universe of prophecy and menace. The relationship between humans and nature is now so saturated with technology that technology becomes the dominant actor in the triangle, something that entails a general disenchantment of the world. Finally, the styles of adventure and romance give way to both realism (description) and protomodernism (introspection, fragmentation).

5.5 *Geocentrism*

Geocentrism entails an insertion of the terraqueous planet as the most vital component of the novel's cosmos. This reconfiguration of the cosmos in which humans and technology recede in order to make way for nature holds three possible outcomes. First, Melville outlines a genuine *re-enchantment* of the world supported by a poetical and lyrical discourse. One example is the description of sperm lump squeezing in "Squeeze of a Hand":

It had cooled and crystallized to such a degree, that when, with several others, I sat down before a large Constantine's bath of it, I found it strangely concreted into lumps, here and there rolling about in the liquid part. It was our business to squeeze these lumps back into fluid. A sweet and unctuous duty! No wonder that in old times sperm was such a

²⁵⁶ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 168, 186.

favorite cosmetic. Such a clearer! such a sweetener! such a softener; such a delicious mollifier! After having my hands in it for only a few minutes, my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralize.

As I sat there at my ease, cross-legged on the deck; after the bitter exertion at the windlass; under a blue tranquil sky; the ship under indolent sail, and gliding so serenely along; as I bathed my hands among those soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues, wove almost within the hour; as they richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine; as I snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma,- literally and truly, like the smell of spring violets; I declare to you, that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow; I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it; I almost began to credit the old Paracelsan superstition that sperm is of rare virtue in allaying the heat of anger; while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever.

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,- Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.²⁵⁷

Melville's language turns lyrical in these geocentric passages, and the scene evokes images of pastoral landscapes, universal brotherhood (including homoerotic pleasure), and cosmic harmony between nature and humankind. The lyricism is continued in "The Pacific" and "The Symphony" in which the synchronicity between ocean, ship, and man and between ocean, whales, and man are depicted in poetically dense prose.

Second, in the style of allegory Melville prophesies an ecological apocalypse in which mankind's Faustianism, its transgressive expansionism and haughtiness (e.g., Ahab's "fatal pride"), triggers an irreversible planetary evolution ultimately resulting in a *posthuman world*. However, if humans are

²⁵⁷ Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 415-16.

eradicated, nature is reborn. The novel's famous ending could be interpreted in this way: "then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago." This is a universe of "foolish mortals" in which "science and skill" will never prevent the sea from "insult[ing] and murder[ing]" humans. In this world, "the masterless ocean overruns the globe" and "this antemosaic, unsourced existence," the whale, "must needs exist after all humane ages are over."²⁵⁸

Third, the novel operates with a version of history in which not only humankind, but also *nature and the planet are wiped out*. As previously mentioned, Carl Schmitt once remarked that industrialization transformed the ocean from a big fish into a machine. Today, we can see that global consumerism has converted the ocean from machine into plastic. Melville was gifted with "divine intuitions" in that respect; this is why Ishmael often feels "foreboding shivers" running over him. Common to the three outcomes is a basic and, for Melville's time, early ecological awareness and mindset. In the first version, the transgressions and mistakes of mankind can still be remedied; in the second, this is only half true, as it entails an annihilation of humans, whereas "the sea will have its way";²⁵⁹ and in the third version, the outcome is total destruction.

Our contemporaneity is defined by a growing concern with the negative impacts that human activity has on the environment. From first-hand experiences as well as in his writings, Melville dealt with several geopolitical themes that are now part of early twenty-first century concerns: "Pacific Rim commerce, colonialism, deliberate or careless destruction of indigenous cultures and environments, exploitation of nature, racism, enslavement, immigration."²⁶⁰ Whales are no longer merely the victims of commercial and industrialized whaling but also of massive and increasing oceanic pollution.

The menacing aspect of the future of "broad present" is obvious here; the future is no longer an open horizon of positive expectations as in "historical time" and the technocentric universe. The temporal modus of the novel's geocentric parts is one of premonition, prophecy, and fatality, "fatal to the last degree of fatality";²⁶¹ the point of orientation is the distant future (of destruction). If chance and free will ruled the universes of anthropocentrism and technocentrism, necessity rules the universe of geocentrism. Agency has become problematic or even illusory because no action is possible where no place

258 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 519, 572, 273–74, 457.

259 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 374, 123, 504.

260 Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, "Preface," in Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002), x.

261 Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 180.

exists for its realization to be projected. The fatalism and skepticism toward human agency in Melville endow his work with a tragic view of history.

Necessity alone does not rule the Melvillean world. One reason that *Moby-Dick* continues to fascinate is its complexity, its holding together of a present that in Gumbrecht's words "has turned into a dimension of expanding simultaneities": "aye, chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together."²⁶² Chance, free will, and necessity are not the only divergent phenomena coexisting in *Moby-Dick*. It is a novel flooded with pasts belonging to theocentric, anthropocentric, and technocentric universes. Like Gumbrecht's "broad present," *Moby-Dick* lacks clear contours and thus falls into Henry James' pejorative category of "large, loose baggy monsters."²⁶³ But herein lies its longevity, timelessness, and prophetic potential.

Below is a table summarizing this chapter's findings regarding *Moby-Dick* (Table 1). There are overlaps between the categories, concepts, and attributes. This said, the table shows that it is possible to systematize the complexity of the novel. This is conceived as a pedagogical exercise that may help the reader to better grasp the novel. It is also meant as a strategy for understanding why complexity is not simply another word for chaos and what one early reviewer of the English version called an "ill-compounded mixture."²⁶⁴ In Melville's case, complexity refers to a highly ambitious and serious encyclopedic project comprising an inherent potential for longevity.

²⁶² Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 215.

²⁶³ Henry James, "Preface to *The Tragic Muse*," in *The Tragic Muse* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), x.

²⁶⁴ Anonymous (Henry F. Chorley), "*The Whale*. By Herman Melville, Author of 'Typee,' &c. &c.," *London Athenæum* 1252 (October 25, 1851): 1112–13.

TABLE 1 The coexisting world pictures in *Moby-Dick*.

World picture	Theocentric -1450	Anthropocentric 1450-1850	Technocentric 1850-1950	Geocentric 1950-
Chronotope	Eschatological time	Agrarian time (Koselleck)	Historical time (Koselleck)	Broad present (Gumbrecht)
Past	Incomplete	Relevant	Irrelevant	Flooding
Present	Transitory	Immediacy	Transitory	Broad
Future	Complete (failed)	Irrelevant (repeat)	Open (possibility)	Closed (menace)
Figure of time	Linear	Cyclical	Linear	Impasse
Tonality	Reverential/ Prophetical	Nostalgic	Premonitory	Reverential/ Prophetical
Human	Humans	Humans	Humans	Humans
Technology	(Technology)	Technology	Technology	Technology
Nature	< ≠	> ≈ ≠	> ≠ (Nature)	< ≈ ≠ Nature
Ontology	Enchanted/ Apocalyptic	Enchanted	Disenchanted	Re-enchanted/ Apocalyptic
Ocean	Marvel/ Monster	Fish	Machine	Fish/ Plastic
Style	Lyrical/ Allegorical	Romance, Adventure	Realism, Protomodernism	Lyrical/ Allegorical