

## Melville's Broad Present: Nostalgia, Presentiment, and Prophecy in *Moby-Dick*

Søren Frank

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* belongs to the great tradition of sea literature that spans from Homer's *The Odyssey* (8<sup>th</sup> century BC) to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900). Published in 1851, *Moby-Dick* stands firmly with one leg in the anthropocentric age of adventure, heroism, and enchantment, while its other leg is stretched forward into the technocentric age of industrialization, mathematization, and disenchantment. Belonging almost 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. This tradition thrived in the heroic age of sail – authors such as Luís de Camões, James Cook, Daniel Defoe, Tobias Smollett, James Fenimore Cooper, Eugène Sue and Richard Henry Dana remind us of that – but with the invention of steam engines and the subsequent radical transformation of the maritime world and its routines the tradition of nautical novels became obsolete, or, at best, problematic, although this only happened slowly and, to authors such as Melville and Conrad, very painfully.

Melville was no doubt aware of *Moby-Dick*'s “double consciousness” of being, generically speaking, a climax and an anticipation of future demise. After initially having planned no more than a mere whaling version of his former (and formally) more traditional novels such as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847) – that is, in his own words, a “plain, straightforward, and amusing narrative of personal experience” (Melville, “Letter to Richard Bentley” 132) – his (very conscious) decision during the summer of 1850 to write what he later would refer to as “a wicked book” (Melville, “Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 17 [?] November 1851” 212) is proof of Melville's re-awakened megalomaniac ambitions. His famous meeting with Nathaniel Hawthorne at the mythical Monument Mountain Picnic on 5 August 1850 acutely stimulated these ambitions, as did his readings of Shakespeare's dramas.

Melville had already once failed in what was his first attempt to become a true writer-artist (and not just some documentarist or romance writer yielding to the audience's desires) when he flopped miserably – commercially at least – with *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither* (1849). Following that unpleasant experience he docilely succumbed to the pressures of publishers and readers and got back to a more marketable format. After *Mardi*, Melville thus speed-wrote two novels in four months, *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849) and *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850), and if we are to trust the man himself, he did so primarily in order to be able “to buy some tobacco” (Melville, “Journal Entry” 13). Melville's self-distancing from these novels – he also bluntly referred to them as “trash” (Melville, “Journal Entry” 13) and “two jobs, which I have done for money – being

forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood” (Melville, “Letter to Lemuel Shaw” 138) – clearly indicates that his artistic ambitions had been suppressed once again. But, as already mentioned, Hawthorne and Shakespeare, in combination with yet another frustrating double experience of writing for the market (*Typee* and *Omoo* represent the first experience, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* the second), led to Melville’s ambitious gear shift during the summer of 1850.

In Hawthorne’s work and in the intimate conversations between the young Melville and the older Hawthorne – conversations that Melville referred to as “ontological heroics” (Melville “Letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 29 June 1851,” 196) – Melville became aware of at least three things: that America, after decades of political independence, yet a frustratingly persisting and asphyxiating Old World-dependency in cultural and literary matters, could indeed produce an author able to compete with the greatest European authors; that Hawthorne was close to being the American Shakespeare; and, even more significantly, that he, Melville himself, was the one who could not merely come close to but actually equal or perhaps even supersede “divine William” (Melville, “Letter to Evert Duyckinck, 24 February 1849” 119). In short, Hawthorne and Shakespeare re-triggered Melville’s artistic ambition, dream, and greed.

If Melville on the one hand was aware of his novel’s potential to be the greatest sea novel ever, the pinnacle of a noble literary tradition and written at the highpoint of the maritime world’s enterprises, many passages in *Moby-Dick* are, on the other hand, suffused with a nostalgic tone and an awareness of a world – the world of sailing ships, whalers, and sperm lump squeezing – about to disappear. A climax inevitably entails a subsequent demise (otherwise it would not be a climax), and an awareness of a climax just as inevitably entails an awareness of a demise soon to come. *Moby-Dick* shows us that Melville was endowed with a gift of presentiment in regard to the near future (and, arguably, even with a gift of prophecy in regard to the far away future) of the maritime world, a world that would soon undergo – or, rather, was already in the process of undergoing – a radical transformation that would make the heroic sailor battling with the elements or with the aquatic creatures of the sea an anachronism and thus transform the maritime novel into a problematic or even outmoded genre. However, it is not only the nostalgic tone employed when depicting the old and soon-to-be extinct world of sail that bears witness of the novel’s self-consciousness of the imminent collapse of an entire world and a genre as well. The conversion from sail to steam and the resulting routinization of ocean travel that was well underway in the mid-nineteenth century were also visible on the formal level of Melville’s novel just as they re-oriented his thematic concerns.

Instead of being driven forward by a relatively linear plot and written in a fairly traditional romance style like the works by Melville’s predecessors such as Defoe, Smollett, and Cooper, *Moby-Dick* mixes a one-dimensional and monomaniacal quest narrative with a multitude of digressions comprising all sorts of stories, a “multiplicity of other things requiring narration” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 430), from Queequeg’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. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 456)

In addition, Melville's novel does this mixing and sweeping in all so many 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, invention, of *Moby-Dick* was a consequence of the growing anachronism of the sailing ship mariner (and his narrative potentials in relation to action and adventure). This anachronism also affected the novel's thematic design. *Moby-Dick* was still preoccupied with depicting the sailor's battles with nature, fellow mariners, and the oceanic kingdom of animals, but 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, not least, in a degree never before seen in sea novels (or any novel for that matter). 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 of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with bloodshot eyes since the world began" (Melville, "Letter to Evert Augustus Duyckinck, 3 March 1849," 121). With *Moby-Dick*, Melville joined this corps of deep divers of the human brain, and, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, the overwhelming experience meant that he, too, returned to the surface from what he had seen and heard with "red eyes, pierced eardrums" (Deleuze 14).

The tension between the worlds of sail and steam, and Melville's awareness of standing in the midst of epochal change, were a context and "mentality" infused into *Moby-Dick*. The result was a novel that basically ends up paying tribute – so goes my argument – to three heterogeneous and, in a way also, incompatible figures of thought and style that we can rubricate under the general concepts of anthropocentrism, technocentrism, and geocentrism. The co-existence of these configurations constitutes what I choose to term the novel's "broad present." Arguably, the chronotope of the "broad present" is also one of the main reasons for

the endurance of *Moby-Dick*. In what follows I will attempt to distinguish between the three concepts of anthropocentrism, technocentrism, and geocentrism by analyzing each concept's particular configuration of four different dimensions: 1) the relationship between man, technology, and nature, 2) the temporal modality, 3) the world attribute, 4) the narrative style. In other words, what I will try to do is to systematize and typologize the novel's thematic and formal heterogeneity around these four topics: man/technology/nature; temporality; world-view; style. If this enterprise sounds irreconcilable with not only Melville's own aspirations when writing *Moby-Dick*, but also with the very book itself, I would first of all say that my effort to typologize should not be seen as exhaustive in regard to the novel's overall complexity, but I would also claim the typology to be in some degree a helpful framework through which to read *Moby-Dick* and get a better understanding of the novel and of its greatness.

### **Historical time and broad present**

Before discussing the novel and its three tensely coexisting anthropocentric, technocentric, and geocentric "universes" I would like to explain the concept of "broad present," a concept coined by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in relation to what he sees as a shift from the chronotope of "historical time" that emerged in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and consolidated itself throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the chronotope of "broad present" emerging today – or, rather, that emerged in or has been emerging since the decade following the end of World War II. It was Reinhart Koselleck who first began to historicize the very notions of historical time, historical thought, and historical consciousness and made us aware that the now-obsolete chronotope of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was in fact 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 relationship with time – from the vocabulary of history and philosophy, experience (*Erfahrung*) and expectation (*Erwartung*), and his point, which has implications for mankind's changing relationship with the past, the present, and the future, is "the classification of experience and expectation has been displaced and changed during the course of history" (Koselleck 259).

In the introductory chapter to *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* Gumbrecht summarizes, in six points, the characteristics of the historical mindset that Koselleck describes (see Gumbrecht vii-viii). First, the (in a 19<sup>th</sup> century context) newly historically conscious mankind 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, mankind believes it has left the past behind and is generally skeptical in regard to 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

mankind 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) – transforms itself into a fleeting, almost imperceptible moment of transition (i.e., the present is not essential in itself, it is essential only as a difference from the past and as a stepping-stone to the future). And sixth, the confined present of “historical time,” Gumbrecht concludes, eventually offered the Cartesian subject its epistemological habitat. 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 (in the real sense: open) choices among the possibilities offered by this future. Selecting among these opportunities is both the framework and the condition of possibility for (human) agency.

Koselleck’s main thesis on modernity, then, is that the transition into the *Neuzeit* of European history – a transitional period from 1780 to 1830 (or, sometimes defined broader from 1750 to 1850) Koselleck refers to as “Sattelzeit” (saddle-time)<sup>1</sup> – is characterized by an ever-widening gap between mankind’s horizon of (future) expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*) and its space of (past) experiences (*Erfahrungsraum*) (see Koselleck 263). Pre-modern 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 were thus nurtured by the experiences of one’s fathers, and subsequently those experiences also became the experiences of the descendants) (see Koselleck 263-64). Admittedly, the pre-modern convergence of experience and expectation may have been challenged by events such as the Copernican Revolution and the overseas conquests, but according to Koselleck the Christian eschatology ultimately made sure that the horizon of expectations remained confined within clear boundaries, and so the future continued to be – at least up until the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – inextricably tied to the present (see Koselleck 264).

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 had already sensed this in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, but he was still too restricted by the political, technological, and religious frameworks of his time to actually formulate what later thinkers did in that respect. It was, among others, Leibniz, Rousseau, Kant, and Lessing who in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century gave credibility to mankind’s potential for secular *perfectibilité*. This paved the way for conceiving earthly history as a process of continual and increasing perfection – that is, these thinkers opened up 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”

<sup>1</sup> *Sattelzeit* is, in Koselleck’s writings, a third revolution running parallel with the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. The three of them represent a cognitive, political, and technological revolution respectively, although these dimensions of course cannot be separated that easily.

(Koselleck 267). However, it was not only the concept of “horizon of expectation” that changed. The concept of “space of experience” also underwent a transformation in this period, not least because events such as the Copernican Revolution, technological developments (chronometer, steam engine, and gas lighting to mention but a few), and the discovery of the planet eventually did make people realize that they lived on a planet defined by the synchronicity of the non-synchronous and the non-synchronicity of the synchronous. In other words, diverging temporalities or “ages” co-existed on the planet. History became a question of evolution, geography/society a question of stage (see Koselleck 266-68). Koselleck concludes:

What was new was that the expectations that reached out for the future became detached from all 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 that time on, the space of experience was no longer limited by the horizon of expectations; rather, the limits of the space of experience and of the horizon of expectations diverged. (Koselleck 266-67)

Gumbrecht argues, correctly I believe, that the topic of “historical time” is still dominating our way of thinking about time and history today, but the point I want to make regarding Melville is that he, as early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, anticipated the post-World War II chronotope of the “broad present” when he wrote *Moby-Dick*. But what does Gumbrecht mean by broad present? How does it differ from historical time? If we think (seriously) about it, we realize that the ways we acquire experiences and the way we act have changed – although we may still be unaware of this change. As to our potential for agency, it is thus becoming increasingly 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” (Gumbrecht xiii). We can think of several contemporary phenomena that contribute to transforming the future from an open horizon of expectations and possibilities to a closed and menacing horizon of catastrophes. Global warming, world-scale social inequality, and international terrorism are but three obvious examples. Our relationship with the past has also changed. If historical time was defined by an ability (which, admittedly, in most cases was in fact no more than a very deep-felt desire) to sever the (irrelevant) past from a transitory present, in our broad present we are no longer capable of leaving anything behind. If the past’s past (i.e., the past of “historical time”), did not provide any points of orientation for the past’s present (i.e., the present of “historical time”), our present is, on the contrary, and thanks to digitalization, the internet, and electronic systems of memory, swamped with pasts. Finally, 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” (Gumbrecht xiii). That is, instead of a transitory moment cut off from a relatively useless past and open towards a promising future that one was able to prognosticate, we now live in an ever-widening present in which we are no longer able to free ourselves from the past(s), and in which we only meet closed doors to an ominous future.<sup>1</sup>

In this chronotopic configuration, contemporary phenomena such as retro waves of fashion, design, and music, the Google Books Project with its 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; that is, the present is kept dynamic by repeatedly re-evoked pasts. However, the often mutually exclusive, yet co-existing (past) worlds within this present also cause it to lack clear contours. In other words, it is not merely a case of the common metahistorical difficulties of not being able to grasp one’s present because 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. At the same time, and because the contraction of futurity makes it increasingly difficult to act authentically – that is, to act with the conviction that one’s actions are indeed 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 (or so we think) room to move back into the past and forward into the future, yet such efforts seem ultimately to return to their point of departure. What we get, then, is a present that is stagnant, an “unmoving motion” (Gumbrecht xiii) in Gumbrecht’s words. If the Cartesian subject reveled in “historical time” because this chronotope allowed its consciousness to constantly project itself meaningfully into the future, Gumbrecht believes that a new figure of (self-) reference is emerging in the “broad present” – a subject no longer merely or primarily defined by the mind, consciousness, and transcendence, but also by the body, the senses, and *physis*.

### **Anthropocentrism, technocentrism, and geocentrism in *Moby-Dick***

As already mentioned, Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is a novel composed of three mutually exclusive, yet co-existing “universes.” In the novel’s anthropocentric universe, Melville lauds the Faustian expansionist drive of mankind, its “immaculate manliness” and “august dignity” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 117), as well as its collaborative, yet also 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 encounter Melville’s tribute to industrialism’s efficiency and its services to mankind. The descriptions of

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<sup>1</sup> 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). Again, *Moby-Dick* also contains elements of this chronotope, as I will demonstrate in a while.

the whale hunt as a rationalist and capitalist enterprise – “hopes of cash – aye, cash” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 178) – fall into this category, and so do those of the ship as a factory. The cetological chapters with their systematization of nature also belong here. The geocentric universe steps into the foreground whenever Melville pays homage to the ocean and to its animal kingdom and when he evokes the pre-human and post-human world. The squeezing of sperm lumps is one example of cosmic harmony, whereas the novel’s ending simultaneously depicts human apocalypse and planetary rebirth. In the following I will compare the three universes in more detail, more specifically I will analyze their image of man’s relationship with nature, their temporality, their worldview, and their style. This will allow me to discuss the novel’s chronotopic design, that is, its potential use of “historical time” and “broad present.”

In “Nantucket” (chapter 14), Melville – in a manner actually not that different from the famous anthropocentric passage in Sophocles’s *Antigone* – heaps praise upon the islanders from Nantucket. Initially evoking the island’s geographical and natural characteristics and reaching back to legendary times when, supposedly, Nantucket was settled by Indians (who, in canoes, pursued an infant-snatching eagle from the coast of New England to Nantucket only to find the skeleton of the little Indian when reaching the sandy shores of the island), Melville halfway into the chapter 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, as the three pirate powers did Poland. Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; 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. Merchant ships are but extension bridges; armed ones but floating forts; even pirates and privateers, though following the sea as highwaymen the road, they but plunder other ships, other fragments of the land like

themselves, without seeking to draw their living from the bottomless deep itself. 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; so that when he comes to it at last, it smells like another world, more strangely than the moon would to an Earthsman. With the landless gull, that at sunset folds her wings and is rocked to sleep between billows; so 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 walrus and whales. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 64)

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 as a people is one of linear progression (“grown bolder”), hegemonic colonization (“overrun and conquered”), steady expansion (from a local interaction with the sea to 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 first's dominance over the latter. 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 Indian settlers embarked upon the Atlantic Ocean in small canoes searching for their lost kin only with the aid of manpower and wind. Later, with their sea-conquering whaling fleet, the Nantucketers colonized the seven seas relying on their extraordinary navigational skills and seamanship, and on the currents, the winds, and the sails, too.

Before discussing the temporality, worldview, and style of the novel's anthropocentric component I want to 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” (chapter 61) – the celebratory tone from “Nantucket” is maintained, but instead of the narrator's more physically-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 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, start her, my men! Don't hurry yourselves; take plenty of time – but start her; start her like thunder-claps, that's all," cried Stubb, spluttering out the smoke as he spoke. "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; as every oarsman in the strained boat involuntarily bounced forward with the one tremendous leading stroke which the eager Indian gave.

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. Meanwhile, Stubb, retaining his place in the van, still encouraged his men to the onset, all the while puffing the smoke from his mouth. Like desperadoes they tugged and they strained, till the welcome cry was heard – "Stand up, Tashtego! – give it to him!" The harpoon was hurled. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 283-84)

Still, 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 could be described as a constant development towards a more and more disenchanted world. *Entzauberung*, or disenchantment, is the result of an increasingly rational (as opposed to magical) legitimation of human behavior, which consequently becomes purpose-guided and future-oriented. In that sense, 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, that is, an ability to master (or at least reduce or productively cope with) contingency (see Weber 49-111; see also Sprondel 564-65). The transition from enchanted to disenchanted world entails a number of side-effects, which primarily

manifest themselves in relation to temporality, spatiality, and existentiality in that future-orientedness, abstraction, and meaning replace immediacy, concretization, and presence respectively.

Melville's whale hunt belongs predominantly to the enchanted world, and so does the discourse of the "Nantucket" chapter. In the hunting scenes, the modus of time is the *hic et nunc* of immediacy. The whalers are all absorbed in the present moment of the concrete hunt involving the bodies, senses, and instincts of all participants. The hunt neither leaves time for reflection nor abstraction or future planning. However, if time in the actual hunting scenes is a temporality of the immediate, the context also supplies these scenes with a touch of nostalgia, that is, a modus of time oriented towards the near past. The reason for this is the reader's awareness – transported to her by the different "universes" 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" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 13). 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 contains a strongly evocative potential. Implicitly, Ishmael nostalgically draws a line between the enchanted near past and present, "the knightly days of our profession" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 361), on the one side, and the disenchanting present and near future on the other.

As to 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 (including Cervantes), and closer to his own time on a tradition that includes Daniel Defoe, Tobias Smollett, and Henry Fielding. It is a tradition that opposes itself to the sentimental and psychological tradition of Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Whereas *Pamela* (1740) and *Confessions* (1782 and 1789) explore biography, inner feelings, and the intimacy of indoor private life, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) – but also James Cook's *Journals* (1769 and 1772-79) – focus on practical problem solving, on recording the objects of the empirical outdoor world, and on surviving in dangerous and unknown territory.

If we think of some of the defining features of "historical time" – irrelevant past, transitory present, open future – it becomes clear that the (pre-technocentric) 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 are indeed dependent on the transmission and internalization of experience and skills from the older generations of whale hunters. The present is, as we have

already seen, a temporality of immediacy and nostalgia, which means that the future becomes irrelevant and undesirable. 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.

*Moby-Dick* also comprises a technocentric universe, which partly overlaps, partly contrasts with the anthropocentric world. In different parts of the novel Melville writes enthusiastically about industrialism's effectiveness and productivity and about the comforts it provides for humans. If 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) – they were nevertheless examples of a largely pre-technocentric (which is not the same as pre-technological) 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 man and nature becomes increasingly mediated through technology, which means that 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. As a consequence 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 both realism and proto-modernism when, for example, the narrator resorts to encyclopedias and the characters gradually turn their attention toward the inner battles of their own psychological depths.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century-chronotope of "historical time" people begin to realize that time is an agent of transformation and that all phenomena are affected by change in time. It is not a coincidence that literary realism with its propensity for meticulously describing the looks and feelings of the characters as well as the objects of the outer world emerges during this period. In the history of literature Balzac is one of the first who depicts a world in which history is experienced as inevitable change, and in order to cope with this transitive quality of the present he develops, as a compensatory strategy we might say, the art of description in its fullest form. 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" (Kundera 14). Consequently, everything has to be described before it disappears. To Kundera, description can thus be defined as "compassion for the ephemeral; salvaging the perishable" (Kundera 14). The (often banal) 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 that moment 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 ["historical time"] which, now that it has emerged from the shadows, sculpts and re-sculpts the look of the world" (Kundera 14).

Melville is part of the same world. As mentioned already, he was acutely aware of the radical transformation of the maritime world due to technological developments, not least the change from sail to steam. 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 subsequently 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 urge to do so precisely because they are about to change and, ultimately, disappear.

The acknowledgement of inexorable change has as one of its side effects the belief in progress and continual expansion of human knowledge – cf. Kant's idea of "Fortschritt" and Koselleck's formula "long-term expectation of a new future." In the cetological chapters in *Moby-Dick* Melville is a child of this belief, although the novel in its entirety of course shows him to be a child of many (and mutually exclusive) beliefs. In "Cetology" (chapter 32), Melville's ambition is nothing short of penetrating the "Impenetrable 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" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 134). 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":

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! The awful tauntings in Job might well appal me. "Will he (the leviathan) make a covenant with thee? Behold the hope of him is vain!" 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. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 136)

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 and (still) magically enchanted universe that the whale “eludes both hunters and philosophers” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 140), the ambition in the technocentric universe is to replace possibility and probability with certainty through comprehensive description.

Another example of the technocentric dimension is found in “The Chart” (chapter 44). In this chapter, 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” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 198-99). 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 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” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 199). As in the case of the ambition to construct a cetology there is a conviction that “all possibilities would become probabilities” and “every probability the next thing to a certainty” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 200). This is a good example of Weber’s disenchanting world of pre-calculable futures and rational presents.

If cetology and cartography contribute to transform the Atlantic into a “settled and civilized ocean” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 245), other discourses merely reinforce the novel’s technocentrism. The question of money and capitalism is treated ambivalently by Melville. On the one hand, cash is described as a natural inclination of man’s (“man is a money-making animal” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 413)), and celebrated as a motor driving progress and expansion. In “The Advocate” (chapter 24), Melville resorts to statistics and numbers in order 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” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 109). What could be labeled existential dominance in the anthropocentric parts of the novel is here transformed into utilitarian and financial dominance. On the other hand, money also dehumanizes the universe as when Stubb yells to Pip: “a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 413), 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” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 357).

Technocentrism's influence 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 among others leads to 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 – Ishmael, Ahab, Stubb etc. – 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 still – like Dostoyevsky – closer to 20<sup>th</sup> century authors such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Alfred Döblin, and James Joyce than to, say, Samuel Richardson. In Melville the ocean provides a similar context for introspection to the one provided by the metropolis in Rilke, Döblin, and Joyce. Paris, Berlin, and Dublin are 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!" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 168). Captain Ahab can be seen as a precursor for 20<sup>th</sup> century atrocities and genuine technocentrism. Hence, when he exclaims: "all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 186), he appears as an early version of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, whose inhumanity was underlined most uncannily by the very rational processes facilitating it.

To summarize: In the technocentric universe of the novel, the chronotope of historical time has, by and large, come to the fore. Now, the past has increasingly become irrelevant in terms of being able to provide points of orientation, the present is transitory, a stepping stone 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 man and nature is now so saturated with technology that the latter 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).

In the remaining part of my article I will examine the geocentric universe of *Moby-Dick* and, additionally, discuss its possible use of "broad present." Geocentrism entails an insertion of the earth as the most vital component of the novel's cosmos. Basically, this re-configuration of the cosmos in which man and technology recede in order to make way for nature holds three possible outcomes. First, Melville outlines a genuine re-enchantment of the world and he does so in a

poetical and lyrical discourse. One example is the description of sperm lump squeezing in “Squeeze of a Hand” (chapter 94):

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 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. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 415-16)

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 mankind. The lyricism is continued in “The Pacific” (chapter 111) and “The Symphony” (chapter 132) in which the synchronicity between ocean, ship, and man and between ocean, whales, and man respectively are depicted in poetically dense prose.

Second, in the style of allegory Melville prophesies an ecological apocalypse in which mankind's Faustianism – that is, its transgressive expansionism and haughtiness (e.g., Ahab's "fatal pride" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 519)) – triggers an irreversible planetary evolution ultimately resulting in a posthuman world. However, if humans are eradicated, nature is reborn. The novel's famous ending – "then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 572) – could be interpreted in this way. 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" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 273-74) and "this antemosaic, unsourced existence," the whale, "must needs exist after all humane ages are over" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 457).

Third, the novel also operates with a version of history in which not only mankind, but also nature and the planet are wiped out. In *Land und Meer* (1942), Carl Schmitt remarked that industrialization had transformed the ocean from a fish to a machine (see Schmitt 98). Today, we can see that global consumerism has converted the ocean from machine to plastic. Melville was gifted with "divine intuitions" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 374) in that respect; this is why Ishmael often feels "foreboding shivers" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 123) running over him. Common to all three outcomes is a basic – and, for Melville's time, premature – 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" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 504); in the third version, we are talking total destruction.

Our contemporaneity is defined by a growing concern with the effects that mankind has on the environment, from the immediate surroundings to the entire planet Earth. From first-hand experiences as well as in his writings, Melville dealt with several geopolitical themes – "Pacific Rim commerce, colonialism, deliberate or careless destruction of indigenous cultures and environments, exploitation of nature, racism, enslavement, immigration" (Parker and Hayford x) – that are now part of the everyday concerns of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whales are no longer the victims only of commercial and industrialized whaling but also of growing oceanic pollution, not least plastic.

The menacing aspect of the future of "broad present" is obvious here; the future no longer represents an open horizon of (positive) expectations as in "historical time" and the technocentric universe. The temporal modus of the novel is one of premonition, prophecy, and fatality, "fatal to the last degree of fatality" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 180); the point of orientation is the far away 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 exists for its realization to be projected. No wonder that Melville has been rubricated together with Hawthorne as

naysayers in an American context favoring an optimistic view of history, individualism (agency), and freedom. The fatalism and skepticism toward human agency in Melville (and Hawthorne) endow his work with a tragic view of history.

This is not to say that necessity alone rules the Melvillean world. One of the reasons that *Moby-Dick* continues to fascinate us 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” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 215). Chance, free will, and necessity are not the only divergent (compatible or incompatible) phenomena co-existing in *Moby-Dick*. It is literally a novel flooded with pasts belonging to technocentric and anthropocentric, even to theocentric, universes. As Gumbrecht’s “broad present,” *Moby-Dick* lacks clear contours and thus falls into Henry James’s pejorative category of “large, loose baggy monsters” (James x). But herein lies its longevity, untimeliness, and prophetic potential – also in regard to the chronotope emerging after “broad present” is no longer relevant, whatever that might be.

### Tentative typology

	Chronotope	Past Present Future	Man Technology Nature	Worldview	Ocean	Style
Anthropocentric	Agrarian time	Relevant Immediacy/Nostalgia Repetition/Irrelevant	Man (Technology) > ≈ ≠ Nature	Enchanted	Fish	Romance Adventure
Technocentric	Historical time	Irrelevant Transitory Open (possibility)	Man Technology > (Nature)	Disenchanted	Machine	Realism Protomodernism
Geocentric	Broad present	Flooding Broad Closed (menace)	Man Technology < ≈ Nature	Re- Enchanted	Plastic	Allegory Poetry

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