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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between **voice** and **the sea** in Herman Melville's ***Moby-Dick***, focusing in particular on the role played by **Pip**, a character who falls into the ocean and seemingly goes mad. Reading Pip through critical frameworks offered by recent work in **oceanic studies**, I argue that Pip's speech acts symbolically echo the fluidity and instability of the **nonhuman oceanic depths**. Further, by giving voice to that which is otherwise rendered silent by his shipmates, Pip challenges both the **linguistic authority** of the human crew of the *Pequod* and Ahab's tyrannical hegemony.

Pip's Oceanic Voice: Speech and the Sea in *Moby-Dick*

In the fury of the whale-hunt described in Chapter 93 of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), the diminutive shipkeeper named Pip jumps from the whale-boat piloted by Stubb, the *Pequod*'s second mate. Having already retrieved Pip from the ocean once before, Stubb refuses to stop again and very soon there is 'a whole mile of shoreless ocean' between Pip and the boat.[1] Pip's subsequent experience is relayed to us through one of Ishmael's peculiar fits of omniscience:

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[1] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago, IL: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), p. 414; hereafter *MD* and referenced in parentheses in the text.

[T]he awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it! […] By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom and spoke it; and therefore his ships called him mad. (*MD,* p. 414)

Immersed in 'wondrous depths', Pip appears to go mad, and, for his shipmates, this madness is manifested foremost in the way in which the ocean has inflected Pip's voice. Following his encounter with 'the unwarped primal world' – an act which distinguishes him from the majority of Melville's sailors who, of necessity, are confined to the ocean's surface – Pip comes to speak what, I argue, might be considered a language of the deep.

By focusing specifically on Pip's experience of the depths, this article argues that language, if it is to engage productively with the ocean, requires dramatic reconfiguration in the unstable and famously un-inscribable 'watery part of the world' (*MD*, p. 3). Speaking for or with the ocean, Pip comes to embody the 'strange shapes' of the depths, his voice exhibiting an instability that recalls the fluidity of the

element into which he has plunged. As such, Pip offers a useful touchstone for the emergent field of oceanic studies and the role that might be played by the speaking human in representations of the nonhuman ocean. Moreover, by seeming to speak for and with something otherwise notable for the silence with which it is invested by Melville and his mariners, Pip offers up a challenge to the hegemonic authority of Melville's human seafarers: the voice that Pip brings back with him from the depths destabilizes not simply the tyrannical authority of Ahab (whose sympathy towards Pip very nearly causes him to abandon his quest), but also the interpretive and discursive powers of all those who attempt to engage with Pip. In this way, the silence imposed upon Melville's ocean is broken. Pip, in more ways than one, offers a language of resistance.

My discussion begins by examining the silence of the ocean and the ways in which the crew of the *Pequod* are themselves inadequately prepared for encounters with the ocean's depths. I will then go on to discuss the ways in which Pip's voice can be read as coextensive with the nonhuman oceanic depths and demonstrate the ways in which its oceanic dimensions destabilize human authority. To this end, a consideration of Ferdinand de Saussure's theory regarding the syntagmatic and paradigmatic qualities of language use will be productive, for the ways in which it posits the possibility of mapping language spatially; read paradigmatically, I argue, Pip's speech acts symbolically echo the depth of the ocean. Ultimately, I aim to suggest what an oceanic voice might sound like and to posit what can be termed an oceanic poetics.

Sea Voices

The centrality of the seas to the development of American literature in the nineteenth century has long been acknowledged.[2] For critics such as Margaret Cohen, the seas are a place eminently suited to America's assertion of independence, while, in their literal and imaginative freedoms, they offer a place for meditation on the American condition.[3] For both Cohen and Hester Blum, the sea is also a place where physical and imaginative labour intermingle.[4] Blum especially is interested in recovering the voices of nineteenth-century skilled maritime labourers who played an intrinsic part in America's extensive textual engagement with the sea. More recent still is the emergent discourse of oceanic studies, which aims to recover such maritime voices while paying close attention to the ways in which oceanic experience demands a critical framework that reflects the specificities of life at sea, one which does not misrepresent or distort maritime life through the application of

[2] I use the terms sea and ocean interchangeably throughout this essay, as Melville does throughout his work.

[3] Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 150-55. Further critical studies of the relationship between nineteenth-century America and the sea include Thomas Philbrick's foundational study, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961); Burt Bender, *Sea-Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to Present* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); *America and the Sea: A Literary History*, ed. by Haskell Springer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Robert Foulke, *The Sea Voyage Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Hester Blum, *The View from the Masthead* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

[4] Cohen, p. 144; Blum, *Masthead*, pp. 1-4.

critical perspectives rooted in more traditionally terrestrial-focused practices: it is a way of reading that is sensitive to the 'multi-dimensional flux' and 'nonhuman scale and depth' of the ocean.[5]

Blum highlights how 'the sea is a medium inherently resistant to inscription and other forms of fixity of possession'. The names the seafarers of Melville's sea fiction assign themselves, for example, partake of a flexibility responding to the fluidity of the oceans they inhabit.[6] By the parameters established for oceanic studies, Pip is simultaneously a heightened version of and an aberration of the representative figure of this discipline. Pip's subjectivity is so thoroughly reconstituted by the ocean following his immersion in it that he becomes inextricably anchored in the element on which he sails: Pip cannot escape the ocean which has so dramatically impressed itself into his sense of identity, such that he fails to locate his body and 'drowned bones' anywhere other than within the ocean's depths (*MD*, p. 534).[7] This is to become associated with the ocean in a rather atypical fashion. It is, after all, important for a sailor to keep out of the sea and to

[5] Hester Blum, 'Introduction: Oceanic Studies', *Atlantic Studies*, 10.2 (2013), 151-55 (pp. 151-52).

[6] Hester Blum, 'Melville and Oceanic Studies', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. by Robert S. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 22-36 (p. 23).

[7] This phrase has already appeared in Ahab's eulogy to the dying whale in Chapter 116: the whale is that 'who of drowned bones hast builded thy separate throne somewhere in the heart of these unverdured seas' (*MD*, p. 497). This serves to reiterate Pip's connection not only with the sea's depths, but with death too.

keep the sea outside himself; Pip's failure to do so, combined with the fact that he is not a highly skilled maritime labourer (for a good sailor would not have responded to the whale-hunt as Pip does),[8] suggests a quite different perspective of the ocean – one that, as I suggest, takes account of a depth outside the typical experience of his shipmates. To attend to Pip's voice, then, is less a recovery of the voices of those maritime labourers who work upon the ocean, than it is an opportunity to think on the prospect of giving voice to the very element central to oceanic studies.

For, in contrast to Pip's experience, what much recent work on American sea narratives reiterates is the extent to which the sea is a surface and that maritime labour understands depth insofar as it influences this surface. To suggest, for example, that '[s]ailors frequently describe th[eir] work by means of metaphors of reading' is to draw attention to a sailor's engagement with surfaces.[9] Sailors read the surface of the ocean for the signs of a whale's presence, among other phenomena; this of course makes logical sense, as it is the surface to which sailors have access. And yet, to encounter the ocean is to encounter a medium notable for the immensities of its largely-inaccessible depth as much as the seeming unboundedness of its surface.[10] These maritime figures, then, have a language and system of reading

[8] For Donald Pease, 'Pip names what the whale ship did not want'; he is 'unwanted as a laborer and inconsumable as meat'. Pip, here, is excess; he is placeless. Donald Pease, 'Pip, *Moby-Dick*, Melville's Novel Governmentalities', *Novel*, 45.3 (2012), 327-42 (p. 336).

[9] Blum, *Masthead*, p. 14.

[10] We might also note that it is in the mid-nineteenth century, too, that the United States began practical and extensive operations for sounding the depth of the ocean floor, intending to lay submarine telegraph cables, lines of communication, in the deep. Helen M.

well attuned to the signs imaginatively inscribed on the ocean's surface, giving indications of depth and the presence of things beneath this surface, but which does not itself confront these depths. For this reason we might understand Pip's experience as more fully representative of the ocean as a medium than anyone else's aboard the *Pequod*. While paying attention to the 'multi-dimensional flux' and 'nonhuman scale and depth' of the ocean, we can understand the particulars of Pip's discourse as Melville's imaginative effort to find a space in language for oceanic depth.

The efficacy of language has long been recognized in criticism of *Moby-Dick* as a central aspect of Melville's literary and philosophical concerns, particularly as it relates to language's inadequacies as a vessel for the kinds of metaphysical truth sought by one like Ahab. As Maurice S. Lee argues, language in *Moby-Dick* is neither 'transparent or transcendent'.[11] Instead, Melville shows that 'language is slippery, partial, approximate, subjective, and contingent', and Pip figures as a central symbol of this linguistic instability: his strange speech 'represent[s] the challenge of the novel's narrative instability', as 'efforts to impose systematic control cannot quell Pip's babbling subjectivism'.[12] This is language whose significance cannot be pinned down and will not be contained within familiar (limited and limiting) realms of experience. If Pip here can be connected to Melville's wider anxieties about linguistic

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Rozwadowski, *Fathoming in the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), pp. 67-95.

[11] Maurice S. Lee, 'The Language of *Moby-Dick*: "Read It If You Can"', in *A Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. by Wyn Kelley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 393-407 (p. 397).

[12] Ibid., pp. 403, 396.

reliability and its representational fidelity to reality, then it is efforts not to control but to interpret Pip's babbling that point the way to maintaining narrative stability.

It is K. L. Evans, in her frequently excellent study of Melville's language use, *Whale!*, who draws attention to both the importance of language as a shared phenomenon and the manner in which a whaler's language is figured foremost as something concerned with surface. Pip, I think, challenges both of these ideas. For Evans, the ambition of Ahab is to capture and comprehend the white whale in 'a language sufficiently complex and elastic enough to speak with authority about things unspeakably slippery, submerged, and colorless', a language in which it is 'impossible to *not* know what a word means'.[13] Throughout her study, Evans reiterates that '[w]ords are not private, but public'.[14] To be of any use words 'must be somehow reliable – not by way of an anchor (latching onto something solid and dependable) but in the way of a compass and sextant':

> the multivalences of words – the voices and preoccupations of the other writers and speakers, meanings that change in changing contexts, the knocking and noisy universe of expression and use – and not a word's accessible foundations, are what attach language to the world.[15]

For language to function properly, it must be part of a community – even if each member of the community understands each word slightly differently. It is the availability of this language to the community as a whole that is important. To understand language as a phenomenon that gains meaning from its involvement in a

[13] K. L. Evans, *Whale!* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 109.

[14] Ibid., xiv.

[15] Ibid., pp. 18, 43.

community or a culture is to privilege the ways in which words travel between speakers and accumulate significance as a result of this movement. Again, this draws attention to the prominence of a surface or network – something Evans reiterates with her suggestions that it is not 'depth' but 'noise' that words take on.[16]

To start thinking about language as something that travels along different axes is to recall Saussure's distinction between the syntagmatic and the associative (now more commonly, the paradigmatic) qualities of language – later adopted in Roman Jakobson's explication of poetic language. The syntagma refers to the 'linear character of language'; it is the successive chain in which language is uttered, in which words are 'strung together one after another […] preclud[ing] the possibility of uttering two words simultaneously'.[17] In this chain, meaning depends on the way in which any given word interacts with the words preceding it and following it. Operating alongside this is the paradigmatic aspect to language. It is here that language begins to exhibit something akin to a vertical dimension, something like depth. The paradigmatic is a type of word association and exists 'outside the context of discourse', as it refers to 'words having something in common [which] are associated together in the memory'.[18] Paying attention to the paradigmatic chain, any given word may call to the individual's mind words that are associated with it through such things as a shared or similar semantic meaning, synonymity, homophony, or rhyme. Thinking about 'pips', for example, might make one think of

[16] Ibid., pp. 44.

[17] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. and trans. by Roy Harris (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 145.

[18] Ibid.

'seeds', 'chimes', 'ships' or 'slips'. Both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic chain are in play whenever we use language.

For Jakobson, the poetical nature of language (which is not restricted specifically to poetry itself, but extends to prose and everyday speech) is to be understood as arising from the way we select particular signs from the variety offered by the paradigmatic axis and combine them together along the syntagmatic axis. 'The selection is produced on the base of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and antonymity, while the combination, the build of the sequence, is based on contiguity'.[19] Discourse therefore takes place along the horizontal axis, but the speaker has already made their language choices from the available options on the vertical axis. Coherence depends on the appropriate selection and ordering of the paradigmatic along the syntagmatic axis; to move too far into the paradigmatic, or to draw inappropriately from it, is to inhabit Jakobson's poetical dimension while also courting incoherence.[20]

Pip's voice may, then, be understood to arise from his transition from speaking along the linear syntagmatic chain to speaking primarily along the paradigmatic chain – a transition that accounts in part for Pip's alienation aboard the

[19] Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 350-77 (p. 358).

[20] The paradigmatic chain must ultimately differ, however subtly, between any two individuals, and for this reason, it exists, as Anthony Easthope claims, 'outside *coherent* discourse.' In order for meaning to take place, it is necessary to exclude from discourse the 'associated signifiers offering themselves from the paradigmatic axis'. Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 36-7 (emphasis in original).

Pequod, while also offering a way of thinking about complementary kinds of depth or verticality in speech acts and in oceanic experiences. It is common in criticism on Pip to address the way Pip's altered language offers new perspectives for engaging with the epistemological significance of the whalers' voyage and environment.[21] What I am suggesting also needs foregrounding is just how this altered language functions on a linguistic, and not simply a semantic, level. It is the poetics of Pip's language that matters here.

Silence and the Squid

The sea has long enjoyed a particularly unsteady relationship with the human voice in its literary representations. In this space, speech acts are disrupted and language fails to function as a reliable system of signification as the sea, in its liquid instability, troubles both the efforts of those who attempt to impose form on this formless medium and the networks and communities underlying language.[22] What I think is especially important about Melville's characterization of the sea is the silence he imbues it and its inhabitants with – a feature which, of course, denies the sea its own voice. The whale, for instance, the great emblem of the inscrutability of the seas, swims through the water in 'pyramidical silence' (*MD*, p. 347) and spouts in 'silvery

[21] See, for example, Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1999).

[22] The text with perhaps closest kinship to Pip and his speech acts is Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', whose seafarers find themselves becalmed in the Pacific – the 'silent sea' – and 'speak only to break / The silence of the sea'. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Major Works*, ed. by H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 48-68.

silence' (*MD*, p. 232); sharks embody 'the white, silent stillness of death' (*MD*, p. 190); a giant squid 'silently gleam[s]' on the sea's surface (*MD*, p. 275); and the sea's billows roll on 'speechless and unspoken to' (*MD*, p. 497). Even in the fury of a whale-hunt, Ishmael laments the 'dumb brute of the sea' with 'no voice save that choking respiration through his spiracle', who is 'unspeakably pitiable' (*MD*, p. 355). In part, at least, it is the sea's depths that obscure any voice the sea or its creatures might have: during this same hunt, Ishmael observes of the sea that 'not a single groan or cry of any sort, nay, not so much as a ripple or a bubble came up from its depths; what landsman would have thought, that beneath all that silence and placidity, the utmost monster of the seas was writhing and wrenching in agony!' (*MD*, p. 356).

Without its own voice, without the power to speak back, the meaning of the sea is up for grabs for those who can colonize it linguistically and semantically. Moreover, it is a meaning that can continually be challenged and re-made. Even Ishmael's professed admiration for a sea that 'will permit no records' inscribes the sea with meaning, casting it as an unwritten and – therefore unoccupied – space. Yet the sea also exceeds modes of representational discourse, such that, as above, it strips Ishmael of the ability to speak – it is 'unspeakably pitiable'. Lucy Maddox offers some productive ways to start thinking about this typically Melvillian silence. In his engagement with the colonial vision of the blank and unclaimed expanse of the American continent in works like 'Hawthorne and His Mosses' (1850) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857), Melville's writing, Maddox argues, 'addresses the lie of emptiness both by acknowledging the silence and by attempting to incorporate it –

as silence – into his revised version of the American story'.[23] This recognizes the power of language as a colonial tool, something which can impose itself onto a silence (whether actual or, as is more likely, assumed) that cannot speak back. Such power is wielded effectively by Ahab.

In Chapter 36, 'The Quarter-Deck', Ahab famously demands the crew swear allegiance to him and his hunt, and is not satisfied until all have sworn 'Death to Moby Dick!' (*MD*, p. 166), binding themselves to him by a speech act. Louise Bennett argues that '[d]ialogue as ritual, in which each utterance is prescribed and the end result is to confirm a value he already holds, is Ahab's paradigm for verbal interaction'.[24] For Donald Pease, too, Ahab determines 'what will and what will not count as a felicitous speech act'.[25] Ahab's is speech *par excellence* in Chapter 36 because it makes all other voices echoes of his own and reads even Starbuck's wary silence as the precursor to 'tacit acquiescence' (*MD*, p. 164).[26] Moreover, Maddox posits that, in *Moby-Dick*, 'the silent otherness of the whale is precisely what

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[23] Lucy Maddox, *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 52-53.

[24] Louise Bennett, 'Speech in *Moby-Dick*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 11.2 (1983), 139-51 (p. 144).

[25] Pease, p. 339.

[26] Even Ishmael's first-person narration evaporates at this point. He doesn't return as the novel's narrator until Chapter 41, after four chapters of dramatic dialogue and soliloquies apparently operating independently of Ishmael's control. The novel and its narrative form, it seems, are imperilled by Ahab's speech acts.

generates all that gets written or read'.[27] It is the silence of the whale that simultaneously propels Ahab on his quest to impose meaning on the whale and that so enrages him in its inscrutability. And to occupy the sea, sticking flags and harpoons bearing their owner's initials into the corpses of whales, is to attempt possession of such things both physically and linguistically.[28]

That the *Pequod*'s whalers, however, are inadequately prepared for speaking about and thereby representing the depth of the ocean may be gleaned from the way their language interacts with the ocean and its inhabitants. Throughout *Moby-Dick* we see the whalers engaged with a depth that has been drawn up to and interrogated at surface level, at which point they experience a deformed, decontextualized version of the deep. This, of course, is of little consequence to whalers whose business involves dredging things out of their oceanic context to be recontextualized aboard the ship for terrestrial purposes.[29] There is also a corresponding failure in their efforts to comprehend the deep and the creatures of the deep as phenomena that exist beyond the surface. There are numerous instances of tension between the whalers and oceanic depth in *Moby-Dick*, and I

[27] Maddox, p. 54.

[28] The role of 'waifs' and 'waif-poles' as symbols of possession is outlined in Chapter 89, 'Fast Fish and Loose Fish'. And Ishmael explains in Chapter 45, 'The Affidavit', that harpoons are marked by 'private cypher[s]' (*MD* 237). In the event that a whale escapes its pursuers, the cyphers are an indication of who has previously marked or claimed the whale.

[29] 'Whalers don't care about depth', argues Evans (p. 124). It is what is accessible to them on the sea's surface that preoccupies those in the whaling business and, as outlined above, the language accompanying this business is one expertly attuned to the reading of surface.

focus here on just one that is, I think, representative: the encounter with the giant squid in Chapter 59.[30]

One of the harpooners, Daggoo, has cried out for a whale, but as the whalers approach the creature they discover instead a giant squid floating on the ocean's surface:

> We now gazed at the most wondrous phenomenon which the secret seas have hitherto revealed to mankind. A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, of a glowing cream-color, laying floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas, as if blindly to clutch at any hapless object within reach. No perceptible face or front did it have; no conceivable token of either sensation or instinct; but undulated there on the billows, an unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life. (*MD*, p. 276)

Here, the 'secret seas' (a phrase again suggestive of a silence) have granted the whalers a glimpse of what life it conceals in its depths – a creature that is 'unearthly' and otherworldly precisely because it belongs to the unfamiliar, non-terrestrial realm of the ocean. Significantly, Ishmael's description reveals the way in which this creature violates what might be termed surface logic, as it defies Ishmael's perceptive capability and resists being held in the language that attempts to represent it. The squid disturbs conventional ideas about figuration and orientation:

[30] Of the numerous other instances in the novel where human modes of discourse are seemingly troubled or silenced by contemplation of oceanic depth, the other most potent moment occurs when the whalers completely abandon the chase upon encountering a school of calving female whales in Chapter 87, 'The Grand Armada'.

it is a ‘vast pulpy mass’ with ‘innumerable’ ‘curling and twisting’ arms; it is ‘formless’ and ‘chance-like’; it is spatially disorientating with ‘[n]o perceptible face or front’ and it seems squashed into just two dimensions, ‘length and breadth’ – an observation that fails to grant the squid any depth. Overloaded with adjectives, similes, and hedged conjectures, which all attempt to somehow give linguistic form to the squid’s apparent formlessness, Ishmael’s language instead ultimately ends up echoing that formlessness. From Ishmael’s surface-bound perspective, this vision of the deep is alien to the stability and solidity that language aims to grant things by fixing, describing, and naming them; the squid, it seems, will not be fixed by a final signified.

To recall Lee’s description of Melville’s language use, Ishmael’s narrative becomes ‘slippery’ and ‘partial’. There are perhaps two interrelated reasons for this. Understanding depths via their occasional manifestation at the surface is of course to lose the specificities of the deep and to try to account for something out of context; it is to see that object distorted, to both make it strange (in relation to the deep) and reduce its original strangeness (on the surface).[31] Following from this, we

[31] Evans makes a similar point on the ways in which whales themselves are identified by, and spoken about among, whalers: ‘Whalers do not look for some fully invested caricature of the whale, floating about the surface or swimming in its crystalline waters. They find whales by employing the signs of their whereabouts. Employing signs does not entail reading them for meaning (squid does not mean “whale”) but involves using them to get one’s bearings’ (p. 124). Whales cannot be seen in their entirety and when they are spoken of it is in reference to signs that mediate between the whaler and the whale itself, at one remove from the

might also think of ways in which the oceanic depths and its inhabitants are indeed illogical; that is, how the ways in which form or orientation or space occur in the depths either diverge from or exceed how surface-dwellers traditionally understand those things. From the perspective of the surface, the squid seems without 'sensation or instinct', thereby proving that Ishmael cannot think like a squid nor confront the depths on their own terms – he fails to grasp that what equates to instinct and sensation on the surface may not be the same in the nonhuman realm beneath him. In his final effort to present the squid, he approaches it through a series of negations, concluding with a dismissal of the possibility of instinct in the squid. To approach an object in such a way is, of course, to posit the object as an absence within language, even during the process of utterance. The squid is significant for what it is not and for what it lacks, and Ishmael accommodates it within his language by carving out this empty space for it, which description circles around but ultimately fails to occupy.

Ishmael's shipmates, too, are troubled by the squid and its meaning, as they find themselves silenced by the encounter:

> As with a low sucking sound it [the squid] slowly disappeared again, Starbuck still gazing at the agitated waters where it had sunk, with a wild voice exclaimed—'Almost rather had I seen Moby Dick and fought him, than to have seen thee, thou white ghost!'
>
> […] Ahab said nothing; turning his boat, he sailed back to the vessel; the rest as silently following. (*MD*, p. 276)

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creature that cannot be seen out of the context of the depths in which it is at least partially obscured.

The ‘low sucking sound’ of the squid – the nonverbal and unrepresentable voice of the deep – prompts Starbuck to exclaim in an uncharacteristically ‘wild voice’, while Ahab says nothing at all, and his crew, their voices contingent on his voice, follow suit. The crew are effectively silenced by the creature from the deep, which sits outside any viable frame of reference for their discourse.

Following Daggoo’s cry for ‘whale!’, the whalers have gone in search of a whale, but this is not what they find and there is, it seems, nothing more to say on the matter. None of this is to imply, of course, that the whalers are unimaginative users of language. The curses and exhortations bellowed by one like Stubb while piloting his whale-boat demonstrates how deeply the whalers are invested in creative speech acts, in speech acts whose imperative function mirrors and produces the physical fury of pulling after a whale across the surface of the ocean (an example may be found in Stubb’s rather poetic haranguing of his crew in Chapter 48, ‘The First Lowering’). Indeed, to enter into the world of maritime labour is to immerse yourself in the peculiar linguistic community specific to the manning and maintaining of a sailing vessel, whose nuances it is essential to comprehend. As Greg Dennig writes, ‘the force of seamen’s language lay in its capacity to relate actions to a precisely named environment’, and such a language ‘created a remarkable sense of rhythm and tempo’.[32] The encounter with the squid in *Moby-Dick* sits outside of this lexicon. Going in search of a whale and finding a squid, the language of the whalers is suddenly redundant – the squid is not part of this discourse and to suddenly encounter it leaves them silenced.

[32] Greg Dennig, *Mr Bligh’s Bad Language: Passion, Power and the Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 57.

It is into this community that Pip re-emerges after his fall into the ocean, and it is into the whalers' discourse that Pip introduces the possibility of a language from the depths, one that brings the voice of the deep onto the ship and breaks the silence that Ahab's linguistic authority relies on.[33] The consequences of Pip's return are to highlight the limitations of his shipmates' language, but also to perform language differently, offering a language that engages with the oceanic depths by positioning itself vertically – against what I am terming conventional, horizontal discourse. In this respect, language broadly mirrors the topographies with which it is primarily concerned. A horizontal or syntagmatic language maps the oceanic surface with which Melville's whalers are engaged, while Pip's vertically-oriented or paradigmatic language mirrors the oceanic depth he experiences, thereby suggesting a symbolic affinity between two different types of horizontality and verticality – the oceanic and the linguistic – predicated on the fact that Pip is forced to acknowledge a new dimension to oceanic experience, one not accounted for in the conventional language of the mariners.

Pip's Oceanic Poetics

Before we can assess how Pip's oceanic voice comes to bear on the crew of the *Pequod*, it is helpful to understand how Pip functions on the ship before his accident.

[33] Pip's return is also a break in a boundary that is, at best, perilously maintained throughout the novel and, at worst, entirely illusory – that is, the boundary between the ship and the sea. Ishmael attests to the frequency with which leaking boats are plugged with bits of cloth, and Ahab himself, with his ivory leg, exists – part man, part whale – as a symbol of the continual intermixing of these environments that notionally stand opposed to one another.

We first meet Pip in Chapter 40, 'Midnight, Forecastle', as the crew give themselves over to song and dance prior to the onset of a storm.[34] The revelry on display in this chapter, and the outpouring of unrestrained voices it includes, comes mere hours after the crew have sworn allegiance to Ahab and his hunt in 'The Quarter-Deck'. Something of an antithesis to this earlier chapter, in 'Midnight, Forecastle', Melville foregrounds the voices of individuals, whose utterances partake of the rhythmic and musical qualities of song, and goes some way towards reasserting the polyvocality of the crew.

Pip takes centre stage here, as his musicianship and his dancing serve as the primary entertainment. Even at this point in the text, Pip is being singled out for his voice, though here it is the racialized dimension of his voice that serves to identify him. For Sterling Stuckey, Pip here is emblematic of Melville's knowledge of African culture, as he experienced it in New York City and Albany in his youth. Stuckey focuses on the rhythmic musicality that Melville embeds in 'Midnight, Forecastle', arguing that 'the universal appeal of African dance and music – of instrumentation, through the tambourine – is suggested, despite marked insularity'.[35] The 'insularity' of this moment is important. Certainly, to sing aboard the whaler is central to any crew's experience of maritime life, but for all its centrality Pip's voice never properly merges with that of the crew. The attribution of 'All' in the stage directions which

[34] The correspondence between a violent sea and song is reiterated in Chapter 119, 'The Candles'. Stubb is singing as the waves strike the *Pequod*, much to Starbuck's consternation as the song symbolically brings the instability of the storm on board (*MD*, p. 504).

[35] Sterling Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 31-32.

frame the dialogue of this chapter is an 'All' of which Pip is not a part. We can look to the final lines of the chapter for confirmation of this: the sailors' 'jollies' have been brought to a premature end by an oncoming storm and 'All' exclaim 'The squall! the squall! jump, my jollies! (*They scatter*)'. After this, 'Pip (*shrinking under the windlass*.)' begins speaking (*MD*, p. 178). 'All' and 'they' refer to a collection of individuals from which Pip is excluded; Pip's voice, though a fundamental part of the sailors' entertainment, is not integrated with the voices of his shipmates.

Alone on deck, Pip gives his first major speech:

> Jollies? Lord help such jollies! Crish, crash! there goes the jib-stay! Blang-whang! God! Duck lower, Pip, here comes the royal yard! It's worse than being in the whirled woods, the last day of the year! Who'd go climbing after chestnuts now? But there they go, all cursing, and here I don't. Fine prospects to 'em; they're on the road to heaven. Hold on hard! Jimini, what a squall! but those chaps there are worse yet – they are your white squalls, they. White squalls? white whale, shirr! shirr! Here have I heard all their chat just now, and the white whale – shirr! shirr! – but spoken of once! and only this evening – it makes me jingle all over like my tambourine – that anaconda of an old man swore 'em to hunt him! Oh, thou big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness, have mercy on this small black boy down here; preserve him from all men that have no bowels to feel free. (*MD*, p. 178)

Recalling the musicality Stuckey imputes to Pip, the ship-keeper here affirms how the storm 'makes me jingle all over like my tambourine'. Pip's identity here is elided with his function on the ship, as he becomes metonymically representative of the tambourine, via which the other sailors have already summoned and defined Pip: if

the tambourine won't work, '[r]attle thy teeth', the China Sailor says (*MD*, p. 174). Additionally, the musicality of Pip's voice works to transform how Pip is engaged with language: it shifts from something that signifies because of what it says, to something that is significant for how it sounds.

Pip is also beginning to conceive of vertically-oriented speech, which begins to assert a correspondence between different types of darkness. Pip here addresses his speech up to the storm, towards 'the big white God aloft there somewhere in yon darkness'. Pip asserts his blackness in opposition to a whiteness that surrounds him, while directing his speech vertically upwards towards a God who also inhabits 'darkness'. Pip rethinks the spatial dimensions of speech, moving away from the 'noisy' horizontal field implied in Evans' reading of *Moby-Dick*, towards a verticality that seems to symbolically correspond to the blackness through which he is repeatedly read by his shipmates.[36] Moreover, this language is already being unmoored from the subjects or interlocutors it depends on. Pip locates God 'somewhere in yon darkness'. Pip cannot conceive precisely where his imagined and intended audience lies, and though Pip's speech remains anchored 'down here' to the speaking subject, there is no guarantee that it reaches its final destination.

[36] As Christopher Freeburg has demonstrated, for Melville, darkness and blackness are philosophical concepts that are also always racially inflected. Freeburg argues that blackness 'signifies the violence of disruptions' and that the ocean, in particular, and the 'unforgiving abyss' that its depth posits present 'a literal scene of blackness where one cannot help but agonize in blindness, smallness, and powerlessness'. Christopher Freeburg, *Melville and the Idea of Blackness: Race and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 50, 20.

When Pip eventually leaps from the whale-boat in Chapter 93, 'The Castaway', a further dissociation between the speaking subject and the speech act occurs. Returning to the quotation with which this essay opened, Pip's 'finite body' becomes seemingly dissociated from 'the infinite of his soul', and what remains is a confused separation between the speaking subject and that subject's speech; Pip no longer identifies with his body and 'drowned bones', and it is his speech, not body, that most prominently returns to the ship. Thus, the madness ascribed to Pip manifests itself most obviously in speech, for when Pip is rescued by the *Pequod*, it is claimed that his shipmates 'called him mad' specifically because he 'speaks' what he glimpses beneath the waves – that is, both makes an effort to articulate this depth and that which it contains and also, as 'spoke's' maritime meaning implies, speaks *with* the depths.

To understand the ways in which Pip's language, as well as his person, might be conceived of as somehow oceanic in its dimension and deployment, it is worth turning attention to how Pip speaks and how this speech reveals the way in which Pip conceives of his relationship with language and his environment. Underpinning this reading are those terms, proposed by Blum, that characterize how we comprehend the ocean – by paying attention to its 'unfixed, ungraspable contours' which are 'ever in multi-dimensional flux'. Perhaps the most famous of Pip's peculiar linguistic performances is the moment he interprets the doubloon, which has been nailed to the mainmast by Ahab as a prize for the first person to cry out for Moby Dick. Various members of the *Pequod*'s crew take their turn in offering up a reading of the meaning of the symbols inscribed on the coin – a flame, a tower, a crowing cock, and the signs of the zodiac – while Stubb eavesdrops and offers a commentary

on each reading. The last to step up to the coin, Pip offers the following interpretation: 'I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look', prompting Stubb to declare 'Upon my soul, he's been studying Murray's Grammar! Improving his mind, poor fellow!', before quitting the vicinity because Pip is 'too crazy-witty for [Stubb's] sanity' (*MD*, p. 434-35).

This moment has elicited much critical commentary for the way it seems to offer a reading of ways of reading; Pip, from this perspective, is not reading the coin but reading his shipmates' actions and by so doing Pip's words 'do not emphasise distinct perspectives but, instead, define perception as a shared, structurally linked activity'.[37] If, then, Pip's deconstruction of the reading and the meaning-making process stresses the communal dimensions of such processes and recognizes that language is 'not private, but public', the 'awful lonesomeness' of Pip's experience of the ocean means it is ultimately an unshared and unshareable experience: there is nobody with whom he can enter into a meaning-making discourse. Moreover, despite the idea that Pip is emphasizing that processes of seeing and interpreting have a fundamentally communal dimension, Pip's own observations continue to fall outside any community and, as we have seen, produce a space with which others fail or refuse to engage. That this may lead to the ostracizing of the single subject from discourse is already implied in the syntactical mirroring at work in Pip's statement, in which the 'I' of the opening clause is transformed into and submerged beneath the 'we' of the second clause: the statement proposes a process of depersonalization.

[37] Otter, p. 170.

Commenting on the significance of Stubb's reference to Murray's Grammar – as opposed to any other popular nineteenth-century grammar – Michael West observes that, by following Murray, Pip 'practices grammatical rather than historical etymology. Instead of deriving meaning of words from something outside language, Pip emphasises how meanings derive from the structure of language itself'.[38] Pip's is a language contemplating itself as much as it contemplates the actions of others, and yet it is the very altered structure of Pip's language that has determined how meaning is being differently conceived by Pip. To return to the grammatical or etymological dimension of language, Pip is emphasizing the mechanics that permit the proper functioning of speech. To think further of the Saussurian qualities of the speech act, Pip returns us to *la langue*, the principle of language use from which meaningful utterance – *parole* – can be constructed. Pip's act of conjugation before the doubloon serves to foreground the mechanical groundwork that must be grasped before one can attend to *parole*, to individual speech acts. Indeed, it is Pip's seeming violation of *parole* that causes his shipmates to respond with such hostility and bafflement to his voice.

Pip's utterances make sense on a linguistic level: that is, we can tell what the words mean and understand each sentence as a discrete unit. It is most often the context in which they're being uttered that renders them strange. By returning to *la langue* at the moment he reads the doubloon, Pip is reducing language to its most basic function, and it is this that subsequently allows him to reconceive his relationship with language, suggestive of a movement from the syntagmatic towards

[38] Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature* (Athens, GA: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 328.

the paradigmatic. This version of language emerges as Pip continues his interpretation of the doubloon:

> And I, you, and he; and we, ye, and they, are all bats; and I'm a crow; and I'm a crow especially when I stand a'top of this pine tree here. Caw! caw! caw! caw! caw! caw! Ain't I a crow? And where's the scare-crow? (*MD*, p. 434)

Unmoored from its formal constraints, Pip's language flows freely – becomes 'slippery' – as it shifts between the different meanings and the associative connotations of words.[39] Pip and the crew 'look' and yet they remain (blind as) 'bats'. To think of looking is to be reminded of blindness, an inability to look, which expressed figuratively by Pip allows him to think of bats; and if the crew are bats then Pip is a crow, as the word 'bat' pivots between two meanings and allows Pip to leap from one paradigmatic chain (that associated with looking) to another (that associated with flying creatures). Pip's language games allow him to layer different meanings of the same word atop one another to move through an ever-developing reading of his immediate environment.

That Pip's speech remains anchored in his experience of the depth may be inferred from the way his speech tends back towards this event. Still at the doubloon and imagining the moment of 'the resurrection when they come to fish up this old mast, and find a doubloon lodged in it', Pip remarks on 'the gold! the precious, precious gold!—the green miser 'll hoard ye soon!' (*MD*, p. 435). This, of course, returns us to 'the miser-merman, Wisdom' and 'his hoarded heaps' that Pip, we are

[39] For an illuminating, if occasionally misleading, interpretive commentary on this chain of association see *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. by Harold Beaver (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 885-87.

told, encountered during his abandonment. Attending to Pip's spatial and temporal positioning here, his speech shows his tending backwards to the moment of his drowning while contemplating the verticality of his environment – upwards to the crows' nest and downwards to the seabed. Pip's speech, and the subject revealed by and constituted by this speech, continues to associate him with the oceanic. Pip's inability to get beyond his own drowning – evident in his remark that 'Pip's drowned bones show white' – while he yet outlives this death, confuses both the linearity and spatiality of his discourse. He speaks as though he were in two places at once.

A predilection for re-contextualizing words allows Pip to further reposition himself by reworking the significance of his own nickname. If, as West argues, Pip's experience has taught him that meaning inheres to words themselves and that meaning does not exist outside language, then so too is he aware that the things language points to remain distinct from language itself. Pip learns of the inherent separation of the signifier from its referent, and thus Pip is aware of the displacement involved in his others' deployment of the name 'Pip'. In response to the question from Ahab, '"Who art thou, boy?"' Pip responds: 'Bell-boy, sir; ship's crier; ding, dong, ding! Pip! Pip! Pip! Reward for Pip! On hundred pounds of clay – five feet high – looks cowardly – quickest known by that! Ding, dong, ding! Who's seen Pip the coward?' (*MD*, p. 522). Pip reveals the extent to which he has embraced a flexible, unstable language. He is one who 'pips', who sings out as 'ship's crier', a 'bell-boy' in the most ludicrously literal sense of the term. Here then his name has become the onomatopoeic signifier of his own function; it no longer signifies his self, but what it is that this self does. If, as Blum argues, Melville's sailors exhibit a flexible relationship with their own names which 'should be understood as both a reflection

of and a reaction to the largely oceanic setting of [Melville's] works', then Pip's speech here interrogates what it means to be named in the first place and emphasizes that, if identity is at least partially a performance, then that identity is constituted by a performance of one's name.[40] To be named 'Pip' is to perform 'Pip', which in turn is to be 'pipping'. While Pip has gained an awareness of the separation between signifiers and their real-world referents, Pip's actions here may be understood as an effort to re-contextualize himself and thereby gain a sense of a coherent, single self. If Pip no longer identifies with the referent (the body of the ship-keeper), he instead asserts his solidarity with the signifier and by so doing transforms himself into that signifier. This, paradoxically perhaps, works to restore the rift between the signifier and its referent. Pip does not so much answer Ahab's question of who he is, as provide an indication of what he is – a distinction that disappears at the level of language inhabited by Pip, as he finds a way to articulate the subject as a figure in, and constituted by, language.

Silence, Finally

Such speech as Pip utters is, to the crew, nonsensical, and their reaction for the most part is to see Pip as an outsider aboard the ship and exclude him from the linguistic community of the *Pequod* by refusing to engage with his discourse directly. Ishmael, for instance, seems unwilling to actively think through Pip's metaphysical drowning and refuses to indulge the experience: 'my God! who can tell it!' Ishmael exclaims as he simultaneously dismisses responsibility for dealing with Pip's experience while implying that there is no way of telling it, no way of accommodating Pip's experience

[40] Blum, 'Melville and Oceanic Studies', p. 23.

into acts of telling (*MD*, p. 414). He then describes how Pip walks about the deck 'an idiot; such, at least they said he was', and states that when Pip gives voice to his vision 'his shipmates called him mad' (*MD*, p. 414). Ishmael carefully avoids implicating himself in these accusations, perhaps for the same reason that Stubb has to abandon his eavesdropping and why Ahab too, who responds so uncharacteristically sympathetically to Pip, ultimately forces himself to abandon Pip because he finds his discourse 'too curing for my malady' (*MD*, p. 534).

Donald Pease similarly reads Pip as a figure who challenges the hegemony of the shipboard community. Fundamentally, for Pease, 'Pip does not fall under Ahab's persusasion'; 'Pip, who is both dead and not yet dead, opens a hole in [Ahab's] symbolic authority by embodying the excess plenitude that Ahab cannot rule'.[41] That is, when Pip returns to the *Pequod*'s community, he becomes representative of both that which stands outside the influence of Ahab's will and that which destabilizes the monolithic power of such a will. That Pip may be here being thought of as somehow coextensive with the ocean is evident in fears that Pip's speech may somehow leak into the language of the *Pequod*'s mariners, as Ishmael and Stubb isolate Pip's speech so that his madness doesn't infect them also. When Ahab claims that he can 'suck most wondrous philosophies' from Pip because '[s]ome unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty into [him]', Ahab is recognizing the fact that Pip is not a closed-off, stable subject, but something akin to a porous vessel whose 'babbling subjectivism' suggests a fluidity to his character with roots in his undoing in the ocean. Yet even for Ahab it is Pip's speech from which he must ultimately isolate

[41] Pease, p. 339.

himself: 'If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab's purpose keels up in him' (*MD*, p. 534). It is not a voice from the ocean that Ahab has sought in his pursuit of Moby Dick, but rather, as in 'The Quarter-Deck', the imposition of his voice onto that which is defined by its silence. For such a reason must Ahab deny the signifying power of Pip's language.

All of these sailors – Ishmael, Stubb, and Ahab – impose a distance between themselves and Pip's speech acts, effectively working to contain the threat posed to their own subjectivity and the stability of their own syntagmatically-aligned language by Pip's paradigmatic speech.[42] Pip's is a challenge, then, not simply to the authority of Ahab's voice as captain. He is a challenge as well to Ishmael's narrative authority and to the crew more widely, all of whom stand above Pip – 'the most insignificant of the *Pequod*'s crew' (*MD*, p. 411) – in the shipboard hierarchy, and who depend on the silence of the sea for their symbolic and linguistic colonization and exploitation of it. If Ahab's revenge might be best enacted through language, as Evans takes pains to emphasize, then it is in part predicated on the colonization of the 'pyramidical silence' of the whale and its territory (*MD*, p. 347). It is Pip, returning to the ship from the deep and bringing aboard that which should remain outside the physical

[42] It is, of course, Ishmael who claims a special affinity with Pip when he claims that 'in the sequel of the narrative, it will then be seen what like abandonment befell myself' (*MD*, p. 414). Yet Ishmael's experience is different from Pip's. When the *Pequod* sinks and Ishmael alone survives, he does so by clinging onto Queequeg's coffin, an object inscribed all over with the tattoos that adorned Queequeg's body. Ishmael does not experience the depths as Pip does, nor does he relinquish his hold on the language that remains intrinsically tied to surfaces (the ocean's surface and the surface of Queequeg's body).

and linguistic environment of the whalers, who gives voice to the ocean and its nonhuman dimensions and is almost able to deter Ahab from his course.

Throughout the preceding sections it has been my intention to demonstrate how Pip's language operates, why his shipmates distance themselves from his speech, and how Pip's language may be rooted in and a reflection of the ocean's depth, with which he remains inextricably associated after his fall from Stubb's whale-boat. Following 'The Castaway', Pip's voice, repeatedly recalling as it does his fall, may be considered to embody an oceanic poetics – a poetics that tries to map in language the flux, instability, and 'multitudinous' qualities of the ocean. While, ultimately, Ahab will not be stopped, the impact of Pip's oceanic voice on Ahab's consciousness negates the possibility of Ahab ever capturing the whale in a language 'sufficiently complex and elastic' which yet remains rooted in syntagmatically-oriented exhibitions of power. The human authority that depends in large part on the power of the speech act to foreclose the oppositional alterity of other voices is finally silenced by a voice that is ultimately irreducible, that is powerful not for the way in which it counters Ahab's authority but destabilizes it simply by speaking without control. When Ahab darts his last, impotent harpoon at the white whale, the whale-line, attaching the harpoon to the whale-boat, runs foul. In his effort to clear the line, 'the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victims, he was shot out of the boat' (*MD*, p. 572). At the end of the novel, Ahab is finally pulled into the depths he has desired desperately to fathom, but he can only do so 'voicelessly'.

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