AMERICAN VITALISM:
LIFE, MATTER, AND THE CRISIS OF ANTEBELLUM LIBERALISM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Alexander Erik Larsen

__________________________
Laura Dassow Walls, Director

Graduate Program in Literature
Notre Dame, Indiana
April 2016
AMERICAN VITALISM:
LIFE, MATTER, AND THE CRISIS OF ANTEBELLUM LIBERALISM

Abstract

by

Alexander (Erik) Larsen

“American Vitalism” refocuses analysis of the social crises that challenged antebellum American liberalism by investigating their connection to representations of physical nature that sharply differentiated living organisms from dead matter. The new American republic promised radical liberty and prosperity to many, but this project demonstrates how this prevalent bifurcation of the material world into living and dead components contrastingly situated racialized humans and non-human animals as the naturalized economic instruments of their vitally “superior” masters. The dissertation explores how an organic formulation of life—one that envisioned living things as distinctly autonomous and internally unified—influenced the insidious identification of white American males as nature’s ideal individuals, and thus as an ideal life form in an otherwise cadaverous universe. “American Vitalism” utilizes an interdisciplinary and transnational methodology, uniting close readings of influential antebellum literary texts with analysis of German, French, and English scientific and philosophical works. In chapters on Melville’s Moby-Dick, Edgar Allan Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, and the writings of Native American author and activist William Apess, it demonstrates how concepts of life and matter violently supported myths of
autonomous Caucasian male individualism. Each chapter also reveals these authors’
creative struggle to ambiguate the limits of life and death—of life and matter—in order to
challenge antebellum individualist paradigms.

Situating its discussion of racial difference within an interdisciplinary discourse
on the status of life and matter, “American Vitalism” recasts the crisis of American
liberalism as one inextricably linked to human violence against non-human nature. In
chapters that investigate the worldviews of *Moby-Dick*’s major Caucasian characters it
explores how their arrogation of a superior organic vitality to themselves produces a
concomitant equation of dead matter with racial others *and* with the whales
systematically slaughtered by the whaling industry. By bringing the European vitalist
tradition into conversation with the novel, the project reinterprets *Moby-Dick* as a
meditation on this diverse but shared life of nature—a nature that is neither fully opaque
in its otherness, merely allegorical or symbolic, nor anthropocentric in its structure.
This dissertation is dedicated to Anna Siebach-Larsen, my life’s greatest love, support, and intellectual partner.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................ iv

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter One: European Romantic Vitalism: Organicism and Its Discontents ........... 22
  1.1 Teleology in Nature: Cuvier and the Meaning of Bones ................................. 29
  1.2 Kant: The Organic Kingdom of Man ................................................................. 35
  1.3 Schelling: The Excessive Subject of Nature ..................................................... 46
  1.4 Humboldt: Labyrinths of System and History ................................................ 64

Chapter Two: Misbehaving Tools: Moby-Dick’s Material Factories ....................... 78
  2.1 Bodies and Bones .............................................................................................. 90
  2.2 Memory and Lost Voices ................................................................................. 106
  2.3 Matter and Mothers ......................................................................................... 132
  2.4 Skin .................................................................................................................. 139
  2.5 Ship .................................................................................................................. 178
  2.6 Slaves and Whales ......................................................................................... 183

Chapter Three: Motion and Matter: Vital Disintegration in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym ............................................................... 204

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 258

Works Cited .................................................................................................................. 266
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my Dissertation Director, Professor Laura Dassow Walls, whose unflagging support, enthusiasm, and brilliance made this dissertation possible. Professor Kate Marshall and Professor Tobias Boes have been constant supporters and invaluable guides for this and other projects at Notre Dame. Several faculty members contributed greatly to my intellectual development and preparation, including: David O’Connor, Alain Toumayan, Joseph Buttigieg, Olivier Morrel, Romana Huk, Donald Crafton, Susan Ohmer, James Collins, Stephen Sondrup, and Stephen Watson, among others. I also wish to thank Notre Dame’s PhD in Literature Program, the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, the Center for the Study of Languages and Cultures, and other organizations that generously funded my research. This project would never have seen the light of day without the sympathy and support of tremendous friends, such as: James Martell, Damiano Benvegnu, Hailey LaVoy, Bretton Rodriguez, and Michael Cerliano. My spouse, Anna Siebach-Larsen, provided invaluable insights about content and structure throughout this undertaking. She maintained faith in the project at times when I did not—for this support I will always be grateful. I thank my remarkable parents, Ann and Paul Larsen, for providing tremendous examples of personal integrity and love.
INTRODUCTION

Speaking before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson described a grave affliction destroying American society. In place of the unity and progress expected of the new republic, fragmentation and stagnation ruled the day. The radical political experiment begun with the American Revolution had transformed into something akin to a biological experiment gone monstrously awry:

Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the divided or social state, these functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his…the individual, to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. But unfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man (54).

What disturbs Emerson is the perversion of a natural holism implicit to his notion of “Man.” Writing in a semi-mythical vein, Emerson imagines man as an abstract, almost Platonic form—something dispersed into a multitude of individuals with varied social functions. Our “return” and “embrace” of “all the other laborers” is thought to form a social body that approximates the originary unity of the human ideal. Read in this light, Emerson’s lament seems a simple and traditional complaint about a lack of unity in the body-politic, albeit one resulting from the radical divisiveness of industrial labor specialization in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the peculiar shifts within the
passage between abstract, social, and individual senses of man muddies this interpretation of the crisis. Man understood collectively is neither farmer, professor, nor engineer, and yet neither is the individual simply reducible to one of these. Functions are “parceled out to individuals,” but each individual, in as much as he is “man,” must contain all faculties within himself that apply to these vocations. The return to an “original unity,” or “fountain of power,” is therefore also a return to the unity implicit to each individual. The final image of a society composed of monstrous fragments relies on a sense of the individual human body as the primordial whole—the indivisible unit from which other unities or disunities are comprehended. The crisis of holism manifests itself on all levels, but it issues from individual men failing to act in accordance with the oneness and autonomy expressed in the living unity of their bodies.

Emerson’s lament discloses a profound link between a perceived threat to American liberalism and a particular sense of natural somatic order and function. I describe this putative crisis as one of “liberal” ideals and culture because, in a broad sense, it issues from an enervation of the sacrosanct power, equality, and productivity he attributed to the individual man. Although for Emerson society rightly develops particular faculties in particular men in order to better their collective existence, it is because each man possesses the rudiments of these faculties that mutual development occurs. The problem wrought by American modernization is that of society’s forgetting of its foundations; a social experiment grounded in democratic respect had come ironically to treat each man as a caricature of their social function. Emerson’s solution thus implores a return to the “original unit” upon which collective greatness relies: “What is the remedy?...if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the
huge world will come round to him” (70). The unconscious instincts preserve the natural unity of each man and the corresponding power through which nature comes to orbit “round” him. Here, as in the previous diagnostic passage, Emerson draws on images and concepts of corporeal unity to express the natural holism of the individual. The body, however, does not stand only as a figure for subjective order, but appears as a material expression of this order, thus linking its corruption with a larger corruption of the self. The man who becomes only a good finger, neck, or elbow perverts the natural order because the transcendental self and its body are both expressions of a centralized unity of different parts and faculties. More than a mere collection of discrete members and their operations, the bodily self exists as a whole that informs their mutually supporting design and functions. The neck, finger, and elbow, like the different faculties of the mind, naturally refer to the “single man,” and bear within themselves the idea of their fellow parts. Bodily “instincts” contain a deep memory of this unity, such that the mindless mechanical motions of an errant part can be returned to its proper place and facilitate the autonomous life of the whole.¹

This study explores the sources and implications of antebellum American culture’s identification of the individual with such images of bodily unity, and the complex responses to this connection within influential works of antebellum literature. Diverse writings of the 1830s, 40s, and 50s brood over what became a pervasive naturalization and concomitant apotheosis of the individual arising from images of bodily autonomy and

¹ For further discussion of Emerson’s use of organicism, see Laura Dassow Walls’ *Emerson’s Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 108-112. Walls describes Emerson’s organic formulation of man and nature as containing a fundamental tension—that between greater holism on the individual level, and contrastingly, the integration of individuals into an extensive cosmic whole (97).
wholeness. As these examples from Emerson’s “American Scholar” oration suggest, strong appeals for the individual’s political and ontological priority in the cosmos, and relatedly for the ultimate superiority of American liberalism, drew on a common sense of somatic order for support. For the authors increasingly disaffected with the promises and principles of American political, social, and economic life, their attempts to think alternative possibilities often appear in terms of the ambiguously defined or structured bodies populating their narratives. In either case, this study demonstrates the profound resonance between American notions of bodily and subjective unity and European scientific and philosophical formulations of somatic and natural order. Although American senses of body and self developed their own native forms, a prevalent image of bodies as organically unified collections of different parts, all working to support a centralized will or self, was a foundational image of European vitalism. Analyzing influential European concepts of life in order to read major works of antebellum literature demonstrates the degree to which American culture had come to understand some of its most pressing concerns—those surrounding racial equality, the adverse effects of industrialization and capitalism, and relatedly, the viability of liberal formulations of selfhood and community—as profoundly imbricated with assumptions about the status of life and its somatic structures.

Understood in its most basic denotative sense, vitalism is the belief in the extra-physical origin and status of life. One can therefore apply the term liberally as a general description of numerous philosophical and cultural movements existing throughout western history, but the European-Romantic obsession with the concept of life marks it as one of vitalism’s most concentrated and developed instantiations. In *The Order of Things*
Michel Foucault observed that throughout much of the eighteenth century, life functioned as a mere predicate in descriptions of objects within accounts of natural history; according to Foucault there were “living beings” but the concept of “life” did not yet exist (127-8).

It was not long before “life” emerged as one of the central epistemic and ontological categories for a generation of philosophers, artists, and scientists. Dissatisfied with the radical skepticism of the English enlightenment and the mechanistic materialism of French science (Armstrong 14), many Romantics identified life and living things as the evidence of a divine and autonomous force structuring nature and human experience. The concept promised to preserve a sense of interconnected human and natural freedom, and appositely, to ward of the threat of a total mechanistic representation of existence. It seemed to suggest or produce evidence for intentional design within nature, and did so by frequently relying on the newly developing science of modern biology. “Life” also served as the notion of a common source or essence in a time of increasing social, economic, and ecological alienation; to say that human beings were “living” meant that they belonged fully within the common life force pulsing through and structuring aspects of the world around them. This force might be known, sensed, and communed with, because it ordered the very faculties of human perception, intuition, and intellection.

This deep equation of human life with immanent forces and material processes might have promised a sense of absolute harmony in a time of radical social upheaval, but it could only do so if life behaved accordingly. The oft unrecognized or undisclosed possibility inherent to many optimistic or ideologically over-determined expressions of Romantic vitalism was that life might prove, in actuality, to be amorphous and
monstrous.² In exchange for a sense of profound union with the sensuous world one risked coming face to face with a vitality terrifyingly alien to the hopes, expectations, and assumptions of the human individual—and one perhaps antithetical to the existence of individuals themselves. Many Romantic formulations of life did not merely sidestep this possibility, but they frequently labored to represent the human as a part or intimate expression of a nature that indemnified, and in some cases amplified, basic humanist assumptions. One of the more prominent concepts by which many thinkers attempted to achieve this balance was that of the organic whole.

Despite representing life as a highly dynamic force, many Romantic vitalists believed that living things develop according to a basic formal organization—one indicative of the unity subtending and connecting nature’s varied products. This order could be perceived readily in the somatic structure of individual organisms, whose mutually-supporting collection of organs or parts suggested the presence of a supersensuous whole to which they were implicitly related. These points of seamless unity appeared inexplicable from a purely mechanistic account of nature, and the self-oriented activity of organisms— their will or agency—seemed to confirm their exceptional status. Many Romantic vitalists characterized all of nature, including inorganic matter, as “living,” and thus as comprising an extensive organic whole, but celebrated the organism as the culmination of nature’s development. Kant, although perhaps not a vitalist in any normative sense, believed strongly in the transcendental unity of organisms, but

²Denise Gigante makes a similar observation about the threat and promise offered by life in much Romantic literature and science: “while the sublime object always threatened to exceed formal constraints, when it slid from theory into praxis, from imagined into actual, animated power, it could also slide out of the sublime and into a distinctly Romantic version of monstrosity” (5).
considered inorganic matter to be essentially dead (Bennett 65). Although a good deal of variation exists between organicist accounts of life, they tend to share a similar prioritization of the individual organism, either as an ideal expression of nature’s ubiquitous organicism; as the culmination of life’s teleological development; or as the only sensuous expression of divine order in an otherwise cadaverous universe.

As Chapter One will demonstrate, what unifies these different approaches is their celebration of the discrete holism and individual autonomy manifest in the somatic order they attributed to organic life. Vital forces might infuse all of nature, but they were thought to express the will of nature most fully as they constructed unified bodies capable of acting, rather than simply being acted upon by external forces. While not the only conclusion to be drawn from organic visions of life, this representation of the individual, autonomous body as the apotheosis of nature supported a robust vision of individualized human selfhood. Life’s sensuous and physical activity produced wholes characterized by a consistent internal identity and a degree of self-defining freedom. If there was any doubt about the consistency of the self, its autonomy, or place in nature, one needed only to observe life’s organic forms, and more immediately, the unity manifest in one’s own body, to find ready support for liberal senses of subjectivity and personhood. By identifying this connection I do not mean to occlude organicism’s important role as a forerunner of ecological sensibilities; its emphasis on profound interconnection undoubtedly opened possibilities for understanding nature as less rather than more individualized. Instead I contend that organic vitalism produced varying and conflicting tendencies, one of which was the strong naturalization of human selfhood and an anthropocentric vision of nature. In as much as the paradigm hierarchized life’s products
according to their degree of individual organic unity, and their corresponding capacity for autonomous action, it frequently represented the human self as the highest form of nature. In his *Hints Toward a More Comprehensive Theory of Life* Coleridge accordingly hierarchized nature’s creations on the basis of their holism, or what he described as nature’s “tendency to individuation,” and identified man as the ideal culmination of this process (49). Besides sketching an anthropocentric cosmology, Coleridge provided a corresponding practical maxim for human behavior: “he who stands the most on himself, and stands the firmest, is the truest, because the most individual, Man” (86).

If this assertion resonates strikingly with Emerson’s prescription for the recovery of American individuals and American society, it is because antebellum American culture had come to infuse many of its traditional political, ontological, and social categories with a heavily vitalistic and organicist worldview. “The American Scholar” undoubtedly demonstrates the well-established fact of Emerson’s individualist sensibility, but it reveals, more importantly, the extent to which this view had been naturalized and supported through an organicist image of the individual human body. Like Coleridge, Emerson asserts the single man’s superior place in the cosmos by referring to the fashion in which his transcendental self reflects a principle of natural organization that privileges individual physical unity and agency. Indeed, Emerson’s concern for American bodies and spiritual selves suggests that the former is more than a mere figure for the latter; both are intermingled expressions of a common life force. One of this study’s contributions to discussions of antebellum American culture and literature is its demonstration of the

---

3 For a brief consideration of Emerson as a vitalist see Hughes (162-64).
central place this schematization of self, organic body, and life held for American writers. European speculative and scientific formulations of this conceptual complex provide a backdrop against which I develop extensive readings of major texts—readings that demonstrate how the characters, events, settings, and concerns of much antebellum literature are implicated in a tension between the concept of life and the figure of the organism.

This approach should not be understood as methodologically dismissing the general importance of earlier periods of American culture and history for analyzing these works. I draw on aspects of American history to illuminate the fundamentally extra-national quality of the concepts and processes at hand. Less a narrative of one-way trans-Atlantic influence, this study emphasizes the general apotheosis of life as a concept in early nineteenth-century European culture to demonstrate a broader conceptual shift in western experience, and one with profound practical consequences. Perhaps because more speculative, discursive, and scientific in its formulations, European Romantic culture provides a clearer sense of this change and its forms than do its predominantly literary expressions in the United States, but this should not suggest that American literature represents a simple derivation and continuation of a primarily intellectual or academic conversation that took place in England, Germany, and to some extent in France. Reading American literature beside pivotal works of European vitalism provides a set of concepts that shed new light on major texts, but this method can also help to expose meaningful differences in the American engagement with life—differences that arose in part because Americans experienced more intensely the practical consequences of a modern vitalist paradigm. Indeed, one thing that differentiates Emerson’s account from Coleridge’s is the
strong sense of an immediate social crisis to which his images of somatic unity and disunity refer and respond. That much European vitalism was more philosophical or abstract does not imply, of course, that it lacked a substantial connection to the epochal changes occurring throughout the European continent in the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the work of many American writers in the antebellum period expresses a stronger sense of some impending cataclysm or social aporia—a fundamental crisis of the practical, representational, and ideological processes subtending the American political experiment.

The general crisis to which I refer here and in the title is intuitable in Emerson’s report on the monstrous damage done to American bodies and selves by modernization, but it relates as much to the foundational assumptions of modern liberalism than to presumably exterior threats to its providential progress. Put simply, the crisis of American liberalism arose from a failure to realize even the most elementary of egalitarian political ideals. A nation founded on the promise of liberty and prosperity for all could not free itself from reliance on Black chattel slavery, and its existence could not be disassociated from the extermination and disenfranchisement of millions of Native Americans. As industrial capitalism dramatically transformed the American economy in the early nineteenth century, many American citizens discovered that their possibilities for advancement were not far different from those of slaves. Rather than experiencing the progress promised to those who relied upon their “instincts” and initiative as individuals, many found themselves trapped in the plight of “white slavery” or wage labor. When wed with industrial technologies, the American productivist ethos also rapidly destroyed American ecosystems, and began to throw into doubt both humanity’s and the human
individuals’ presumption of superiority in the cosmos. My analysis of Melville and Poe demonstrates two crucial responses to these issues: a basic questioning of the ontological, practical, and social elevation of the human individual and the institutions that relied upon its mythos (primarily capitalism, colonial expansion, and slavery); and relatedly, a recognition of how vitalist categories had come to stratify invidiously American society, making a mockery of its egalitarian possibilities. In contrast with Emerson, who responded to the crisis with renewed faith in a liberal and organic representation of self, the authors studied here questioned the individual’s organic naturalization, viewing it as either fundamentally violent to life or as an impediment to its progress.

What Melville brilliantly explored in *Moby-Dick* is how the organicist tendency to privilege some life forms over others on the basis of their presumed autonomy and individual unity helped to create a self-sustaining naturalization of the white male as the veritable individual for whom liberal society existed. Indeed, when American society’s proper individuals were thought to be life’s proper individuals, and life’s proper individuals were male Caucasians—as they were considered to be in many European vitalist accounts—liberal society appeared to function without contradiction as it utilized those vital “inferiors”—women, animals, and people of the “colored” races—as instrumental supports for nature’s finest creations. In Chapter Two I analyze the struggle of *Moby-Dick*’s two main white-male characters, Ahab and Ishmael, as they endeavor to uphold and break from this schematization of life and the social positions and processes into which it places them. In as much as organicism used the image of the organic body as a support for the individual’s privileged position, Melville focused his critique of the biopolitical and bio-ontological assumptions at work aboard the *Pequod* on these
characters’ relationships to theirs and others’ bodies. This chapter focuses on Ahab’s desperate attempts to uphold, both practically and intellectually, the myth of his sovereign self through a corresponding myth of white-male bodily unity. It also explores how the dismembering wound left by the white whale ambiguates the sense of life’s proper boundaries, linking the Captain inextricably with those non-human animals, objects, and racial others he and the whaling industry represent as mere commodities. The chapter investigates Ishmael’s hesitation to come into bodily proximity with those designated as vitally and somatically inferior to himself and the concepts of life and materiality upon which this aversion rests. I trace his desire to experience life as more than merely the life of isolate individuals. Beyond illuminating Melville’s critique of the biopolitical violence subtending American industry and expansionism, and its relationship to organicist concepts, these readings follow his attempt to explore alternative configurations of life.

Rather than simply abandoning vitalism as a pernicious notion, *Moby-Dick* imagines life as infusing and connecting all bodies, and thus as implicating them in a vital network that ambiguates somatic boundaries, individual identity, and agential autonomy. This approach does not so much attempt to represent life as homogenous as it illustrates its intermingling of different bodies and processes within systems without organic or hierarchized structures.

Chapter Three dives into Edgar Allen Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* in order to explore its dual obsessions with bodily disintegration and race. Unlike Melville, Poe responded critically to the apotheosis of the organism and the individual by reimagining life’s proper teleology as one of increasing homogeneity. He imagined this tendency in terms of the bodily collapse of individual life
forms and things into a common, formless ocean of energy—in this case the Atlantic and Antarctic Oceans into which the novel’s characters and ships are repeatedly merged. The chapter investigates these scenes of destruction and amalgamation, investigating *Pym*’s attempt to think life as essentially non-individualized and moving always away from its individuations. Although this reading illuminates the text’s bold challenge to anthropocentric representations of life, and to images and concepts of nature that comfort and indemnify the individual human self, it also exposes Poe’s attempt to substantiate a racialized ontology by assigning to life a telos more reachable by one race than others. Whiteness comes to represent a possibility of radical disintegrative transformation, largely through the advanced nautical technologies that bring it into proximity with the vital ocean, while the black races seem doomed to live out a lifeless repetition tethered to the dead land. The analysis reveals an insidious possibility of vitalist responses to American liberalism’s organic individualism, namely that even some of its more radical challenges to American individualism might utilize life to reinforce violent biopolitical divisions.

Chapter One provides an overview and investigation of several European formulations of life from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Charting the rise of life as a central ontological and political category of European modernity, I analyze the different and often opposed uses of the concept for different thinkers. Although the chapter places some emphasis on Coleridge’s theoretical discussions of life, and on Georges Cuvier’s work on comparative anatomy in France, it primarily analyzes a sustained debate about the relationship between life, matter, and human selfhood in German philosophical and scientific cultures. Focusing on Kant’s organicism in the third critique, I inquire into how it provided a means to substantiate an anthropocentric
individualism—a view that schematized life hierarchically and suggested that sensuous nature was an instrument for human, and specifically Caucasian male development. Schelling and Alexander von Humboldt’s works are investigated to represent a contrasting sense of nature that decentered the organism and the individual by depicting life as a complex network of interpenetrating systems. While significantly different in their methodologies and some of their resulting views, Schelling and Humboldt offer examples of less anthropocentric and hierarchized naturalisms—perspectives that resonate strikingly with Melville and Poe’s critiques of a liberalized organicism. This initial investigation of mostly philosophical or scientific works provides a series of conceptual examples useful for illuminating the American literary exploration of similar notions. It also calls attention to a need, intuitable in Schelling and Humboldt’s thought, for non-discursive modes of expression through which to explore senses of life irreducible to purely formal, organic, or anthropocentric models. Implicit to the argument of this study is the notion that American culture, in the midst of a crisis of its vitalist representational categories, responded overwhelmingly through literature because it emerged as the vehicle capable of registering a novel sense of life’s complexity.

Although this turn to literature and aesthetic expressivity undoubtedly parallels a general Romantic trend, the pressures that cataclysmic social crisis placed on American sensibilities produced a unique and prophetic body of literature. Eyal Peretz’s invaluable reading of *Moby-Dick* provides a useful formulation of this American literary singularity in its relationship to Europe: “if indeed there is something particularly strange, even prophetic in feeling, thinking, and tone, in some nineteenth-century ‘American’ works, it might be because, paradoxically, it had witnessed or experienced the destruction of
Europe in some way before Europe itself did” (22). Peretz contends, and I fully agree with his argument, that Americans experienced a devastating upheaval of the ideals and institutions they inherited from European modernity, and which Europeans would not fully encounter until the twentieth century. The result was a body of literature that turned back on itself, radically questioning the possibility of representation and literary expressivity in a fashion indicative of European modernism (21-5). This approach helps greatly to illuminate the place and contribution of my analysis within the field of transatlantic American literary studies. Beyond drawing a link between concepts of life in European speculative culture and American literature, I contend that antebellum American literary explorations of life do not so much represent something idiosyncratically “American” as they express a general crisis within a concept that profoundly structured the intellectual, practical, and aesthetic regimes of western modernity. The intensity and conditions of this crisis were in some sense “American,” but its concepts and literary products participate in a nexus of biopolitical processes and bio-ontological notions that transcend the influence of regionalism and nation states.

This comparison should also indicate ways in which my analysis’ emphasis on concepts of life shift the nature of the conversation about transatlantic literary studies in a somewhat different direction. The questions I raise relate to the conceptual and practical traditions, found in both Europe and the United States, that structured the crisis of American liberalism and heavily influenced responses to it. I by no means wish to claim that vitalist notions and organic formulations of self and nature were the only supports for violent practices that led to a loss of faith in American liberalism, but the rise of hierarchized notions of life and corresponding biopolitical divisions were deeply
implicated in the divided and violent world confronting Americans in the antebellum years. Analyzing works of European vitalism and the rise of life’s central position in European thought helps to expose these biopolitical structures and the extent of their reach in the United States, but it also importantly reveals the manner in which the concept of life, understood as a unifying sensuous and spiritual force, haunted many writers of the antebellum generation. Although some invaluable scholarly work has taken up the issue of biopolitics and antebellum culture, the full extent to which life, understood as this mutually defining complex of practical and speculative processes, has not been a focus of American literary studies.\(^4\) Much recent interdisciplinary scholarship on European Romanticism virtually equates the movement with vitalism or notions of life, but no corresponding “American vitalism” is to be found.\(^5\) My study ventures one of many possible iterations of this subject, but hopefully conveys what I believe to be antebellum American literature’s rich contribution to modernity’s engagement with the concept of


life, and more significantly, with “non-organic senses” of vitality. Rather than simply duplicating its European counterpart, I argue that the crisis of American liberalism forced American literature into a productive interplay between investigating concrete biopolitical processes and the specific life forms they impacted, and reimagining life as the common, connective, and informing force structuring nature—a force that, without anthropocentric teleology or structure merges the human individual with myriad life forms and material processes.

Scholars of antebellum culture might object to my identification of a new sense of “American vitalism” on the grounds that it merely describes a set of much-studied transcendental concepts prevalent in works of the period. Richard Hardack’s recent work on pantheism and the American Renaissance richly demonstrates, for example, the existence of a pervasive “animist” sensibility informing the age (61). Formulated in terms of “pantheism” or similar concepts, it might seem that American vitalism means little more than American Romanticism. Although I acknowledge the similarity and frequent overlap of these notions, and their participation in a common cultural movement, focusing on life opens a specific and unique set of interpretive possibilities. It connects American literature directly with one of—if not the most—influential philosophical and scientific categories of European culture in the nineteenth century and a growing body of groundbreaking scholarship on the topic. My readings of American texts have, for example, much in common with Robert Mitchell’s recent Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature, which identifies a tradition within European vitalist

---

thought focused less on totalizing metaphysical notions of a vital order and more on life’s openness to transformation and new configurations (3). The aesthetic and conceptual novelty of *Moby-Dick*, *Pym*, and many other texts of the period is a species of such an open and experimental vitalism. These texts’ preoccupation with intense and ambiguating encounters between human and non-human modes of life speaks directly to Mitchell’s description of the experimental vitalist-artist as one who creates “new states of sensation and embodied perception in humans…producing new possibilities for individual and social life through new sensations and perceptions of life” (3).

Another critical opportunity emerging from a focus on life in the American context is what I have identified as its concentrated crisis of biopolitical categories. While European speculative and scientific accounts of life represented radical experiments, artists in the American context were perhaps more concerned with the fate of those species, races, and individuals violently effected by their social reality. The resulting rich mix of ontological and aesthetic experimentalism with the concerned investigation of specific scenes of violence against life and lives is what emerges from this context. While Poe largely embraced the experimental aspect of vitalism, appearing little concerned about the realities of specific biopolitical violence, Melville, Hawthorne, Fuller, and Thoreau richly fused these tendencies. Far more than reiterating a particular sense of American Romanticism as transcendental naturalism, “life” illuminates antebellum American literature’s productive interplay between depicting the period’s extreme violence against life and inciting its radical possibilities. This combination also marks my approach’s contribution to biopolitical readings of antebellum literature, and particularly to *Moby-Dick*—a text more commented upon in biopolitical terms than many other major
works of American literature. Although I characterize reductively, these readings tend to focus on the violence biopolitical concepts created within human communities, and accordingly ignore the text’s non-human elements, or represent those elements as meaningful only for a human struggle. The “vitalist” component of this study—its speculative emphasis on life as a common, albeit non-anthropocentric and extra-organic force—prompts a more inclusive sense of the linked violence of racism and ecological devastation. In doing so it reinterprets and synthesizes elements of texts that have otherwise been neglected or categorized as figurative, and understands the texts’ depictions of violence against human and non-human life in terms of a general and literal violence against a deeply interconnected community of life.

My approach also relates to a significant collection of scholarship focused on the body in antebellum American literature. Sharon Cameron’s semi-phenomenological and psychoanalytic study, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne*, called attention to the conspicuous focus on embodiment in antebellum works, and argued importantly that bodies play far more than allegorical or symbolic roles in them (2). My approach similarly treats the body in *Moby-Dick* and *Pym* as more than figurative, in as much as it becomes the site of a complex and ambiguous interplay of self, sensuousness, and life out of which the symbolic emerges. Concepts of ability and disability have recently revived the theme in scholarship on American culture, and while I find this and Cameron’s approach to be highly productive, situating discussions of bodies and embodiment within a larger discourse of life opens the field to a number of productive interpretive possibilities. Various conceptual, phenomenological, theoretical,
and historical approaches have yielded rich results in their respective investigations of the topic, but I would add that discussions of the body in the nineteenth century, whether in Europe or the United States, were often closely related to considerations of the vital forces thought to structure and produce them. “Life” thus provides a set of specific philosophical and scientific concepts that informed understandings of bodily structure, and a framework in which to understand the intense interactions between human, animal, and material bodies that haunt so many antebellum texts. Moreover, it provided a concept of community, or at least a concept of commonness, that is not simply defined by the bodies that compose it, or by a specific somatic image. In a cultural context in which particular somatic qualities differentiated and divided bodies violently, the concept of life provided an opportunity to imagine their common existence without resorting to an image of the body politic.

Matthew Taylor’s recent *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature*, a text with which I heavily engage in my discussion of Poe, has done a great deal to demonstrate the usefulness of nineteenth-century scientific, philosophical, and pseudoscientific notions for unearthing the varied posthuman sensibilities of American literature. What this study contributes to rich approaches like

---

7 Harriet Hustis recently continued the tradition of critical focus on the body, suggesting that what *Moby-Dick* identifies as pathological about the Captain is his attitude toward embodiment—his sense that he possesses rather than exists as a body, and one profoundly connected to other bodies (31-32). In many respects this approach resonates strongly with my own, and offers many rich insights into Ahab’s predicament. Nevertheless, like Cameron, by focusing centrally on embodiment, this reading occludes aspects of the biopolitical context informing the representation of bodies in the novel. It correctly identifies the text’s troubling of ideologies that indemnify bodies from each other—either through narcissism or practical divisions—but without another concept to radically differentiate the meaning of “being” a body from “having” a body, the spatial logic of embodiment persists and occludes the text’s more radical conceptual attempt to overcome an atomized vision of nature and society. Expressed differently, at a certain point complexing the notion of the body demands a different concept, lest the rhetoric of embodiment begin to contest the communal logic it is intended to express.
Taylors is a conceptual complex through which to link varied iterations of the posthuman in the period. More specifically, my focus on the organism as an image by which liberal senses of the human self’s superiority were naturalized and indemnified provides a figure capable of uniting the posthuman “experiments” of several antebellum works. Melville and Poe turn against this image, either by strangely linking and networking human and non-human bodies, or by simply amalgamating all bodies into a common impersonal mass, but a number of their contemporaries shared a similar tendency. Thoreau concluded *Walden* by characterizing nature as a series of interpenetrating flows that monstrously distort its stable forms (206-7). In her *Summer on the Lakes in 1843*, Margaret Fuller records a transformational moment in which she felt the thundering rhythm of Niagara Falls disorganize her sense of an organically unified self (3-4). I do not mean to suggest that all “posthuman” antebellum texts need be thought of as responding to organic formulations of life, but reading several of them in this context provides a rich matrix through which to link the age’s anxiety’s about race, ecological devastation, technological development, and non-human aspects of nature. It also provides a useful interpretive tool for linking elements of those strong reactions to the crisis of American liberalism and the troubling of humanist assumptions it engendered. As the example of Emerson’s “American Scholar” suggests, a specific formulation of organicism offered a powerful representational and conceptual mechanism by which to defend a privileging image of man. As the following readings will elucidate, concepts of life played a central role in defending a particularly insidious sense of anthropocentrism in the antebellum world, and offered, contrarily, a means of imagining nature without a human face
CHAPTER ONE

EUROPEAN ROMANTIC VITALISM: ORGANICISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In his *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Michel Foucault identified an epochal shift in European culture occurring around the turn of the nineteenth century. A new concept—or perhaps a distinctly new iteration of an old concept—came rapidly to reshape practical, intellectual, and aesthetic productivity. The notion, which seemed to offer a glimmer of unifying transcendence amongst the largely skeptical and empirical sensibilities of the late Enlightenment, was generally described as “life.” Scientists and intellectuals of the eighteenth century had regularly used the term in various contexts, but without attributing to it anything approaching the explanatory role it would play for a generation of Romantic thinkers. Although difficult for contemporary minds to fathom, Foucault contends that writing a history of biology for the eighteenth century is an impossible task, for the notion of “life itself did not exist.” Instead, Foucault argues that “all that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by *natural history*” (128). Life, in other words, was a predicate minimally differentiating one thing from another within representations of natural objects. The general schematization of nature was still very much dominated by a Cartesian sensibility, suggesting that living things were viewed as particularly sophisticated mechanisms, but as mechanisms nonetheless (128). The new sense of “life”
that emerged alongside the nineteenth century was largely a response and a challenge to this account of nature; life promised radically to redefine the basic categories and processes of European thought and experience. What mechanism had done to define an earlier Zeitgeist, life now accomplished for the new age.

The nearly ubiquitous impact of life as a concept and its complicated emergence from a different but similarly extensive ethos make writing its intellectual history in Europe a task far too large for a single study. It is nevertheless difficult to understand life’s meaning and impact without a brief description of the conceptual and cultural aporia from which Romantic vitalism arose. Although tremendously productive for the development of the natural sciences, to many European intellectuals, French materialism seemed a growing threat throughout the eighteenth century. Descartes’ mechanistic representation of the physical world made it difficult to comprehend its relationship to the human soul—the one thing in his Meditations with a verifiable reality and corresponding capacity for self definition (63-4)—but later mechanistic accounts would soon nullify the idea of a soul altogether. In his popular study of 1748, Man a Machine, Julien La Mettrie claimed that human existence could be fully explained through basic concepts of mechanical causality—the same concepts used to describe the most common material processes:

The soul is therefore but an empty word, of which no one has any idea, and which an enlightened man should use only to signify the part in us that thinks. Given the least principle of motion, animated bodies will have all that is necessary for moving, feeling, thinking, repenting, or in a word for conducting themselves in the physical realm, and in the moral realm which depends upon it (128).

Although an extreme example of the prevailing materialism, La Mettrie’s sensibilities represented a profound threat either to traditional religious notions of the soul, or to
humanism’s apotheosis of the autonomous human self. If these sacrosanct notions and the social institutions they supported were to be defended, and with them the very possibility of speculating about the transcendent, a concept capable of illustrating the existence of non-mechanistic order in the physical world needed to be developed. For an age in which empirical science had become a dominant episteme, simply asserting the mysterious reality of such entities no longer satisfied. Those attempting to oppose thinkers like Mettrie needed to describe and locate a physical force or phenomena that produced entities reflecting their assumptions about the supersensuous structure and freedom of the human self.

For a generation of European Romantic scientists, writers, and philosophers, life served as the solution to this problem, in as much as living things were understood to exhibit structures and behaviors inexplicable on the basis of brute material causality. Some vital force, which although not immediately perceptible, appeared to construct and develop physical phenomena, the nature of which seemed crudely and falsely explained by the chance motions of cadaverous corpuscles of matter. A force free from the constraints of causality, and thus capable of autonomously structuring its products, could be intuited and sensed throughout nature. However, beyond providing an intellectual solution to a largely intellectual problem, life’s rapid conceptual rise also indicates a growing sense of general alienation in European experience, and one that was felt deeply throughout the social and practical world. Descartes began his famous experiment in skepticism by banishing his senses, and eventually concluded that the soul was something utterly different and mostly disconnected from the body. As increasingly rationalized processes infiltrated European life, turning bodies and minds into instruments for
economic production, a less-abstract but similarly profound sense of disconnection emerged. Sensing themselves as cut off from bodies that were represented and treated as mere mechanisms, many average Europeans began to feel they had lost some primordial and beneficent relationship with sensuous experience—something forfeited upon moving to cities and descending into what Blake suggestively termed “those Satanic mills” (95).

The massive urbanization of Europe in the early nineteenth century and its resulting filthy, polluted, and dangerous metropolises did much to throw into doubt purely mechanistic representations of nature as the non-human world began to appear comparatively divine. Increasing ecological devastation similarly helped to bring into focus the value of non-human nature and its intimate relationship with human wellbeing.

More than simply rehearsing the general influences that gave rise to Romanticism, this brief list of contributing intellectual, practical, and social conditions should help to explain why life, specifically, served as a popular general response in a time of social crisis. At once sensuously perceptible but suggestive of transcendent forces, life’s products could be investigated through scientific research but never fully explained through mechanistic theories. Romantic vitalism provided a sensuous example and support for the supersensuous freedom and selfhood critically important for maintaining traditional religious senses of the human soul and for Enlightenment humanism’s apotheosis of the autonomous self. In as much as humans were represented as living beings, they could also think of themselves as participating in and belonging to one sensuous and spiritual force. This force structured body and mind, suggesting the possibility of a unified self underlying the increasingly fragmented and bifurcated experience of European modernity. Life’s status as both immanent and transcendent
offered a sense of essential and intimate belonging to the larger world of nature in a time when participation in the social world seemed mostly to mutilate and divide. As a conceptual, aesthetic, and ideological program, Romantic vitalism proved to be a highly adaptable and successful answer to the deep anxieties of the age.

Vitalism was also a paradigm highly adept at occluding its own radical possibilities. Life’s implicit interplay between the sensuous and the transcendent could be readily used to substantiate much of the isolation, violence, and ecological destruction it seemed designed to overcome. This chapter analyzes the concept through which Romantic vitalism attempted to satisfy the numerous and perhaps conflicting demands placed on the concept of life in the early nineteenth century. Although many a Romantic fervently believed in the existence of a vital force structuring nature as a whole, the sensuous evidence for this mysterious principle was most immediately recognizable in the structure of individual living things. The image and concept widely used to identify this structure was that of the organism, or the organic whole. As the term suggests, the notion of the organism relates directly to the concept of the organ and the bodily whole of which it is assumed to be a part. This holism, or seamless unity of different parts, seemed inexplicable as a mere accident of colliding atoms. The vision of a centralized somatic order helped to substantiate another common vitalist sensibility: organisms appeared to exhibit some degree of agency and a sense of self difficult to imagine as the effect of a mechanical process. The combined implications of unity and agency made the figure a powerful concept in the struggle to support fictions of the transcendental self—both soul and subject—that many feared would not survive empirical or materialistic scrutiny. As an image of nature’s productive will, the organism seemed proof of life’s prioritization of
the individual self, in as much as it worked to construct unified individual bodies that mirrored the supersensuous subject’s unity and autonomy. As the following analysis of prominent organicist formulations demonstrates, this identification of life with the organically unified body could be readily used to apotheosize the human self along highly divisive and violent lines. While the identification of life with the individual’s body might function to relate the self intimately with other bodies, and with nature more generally, it served frequently to idealize those selves thought to be most self-sufficiently whole. As a standard by which nature was judged and hierarchized, organicism could readily prioritize the lives of creatures thought to be most “properly” alive, and represent other human and non-human life as inferiorly vital or constitutively “dead.”

The interpretive work of later chapters illustrates the extent to which American culture experienced the devastating human and ecological outcomes supported in part by a particularly atomizing and divisive iteration of organic vitalism. The analysis of several European vitalists, and particularly Kant, will nevertheless demonstrate European conceptual divisions that informed systematically violent practices in the United States. Within speculative accounts of organic life in Europe lurk traces of the larger biopolitical divisions within modernity—those that operated along the lines of race and species—and which profoundly informed the crisis of American liberalism. My intention in this chapter is not, however, simply to identify European organicism or vitalism with a bloody defense of American liberalism and the biopolitical practices that supported it in the nineteenth century. European vitalists, while largely organicist in their focus, occasionally found ways to use the concept of life to challenge the reigning anthropocentric, racist, and subjectivist biopolitical paradigms of modernity. By refusing
narrowly to identify life with the organism, some began to envision nature as lacking formal and somatic boundaries, and thus as lacking absolute hierarchical divisions between one body or self and another. Exploring these radical attempts to formulate a non-organic cosmology provides a backdrop against which to understand the implications of antebellum American literature’s focus on strangely amorphous or hybrid bodies.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into brief sections focused on varied but highly important thinkers in the history of European organicism. Section one investigates some of the prominent debates and thought concerning anatomy in France, illustrating an early example of the differing positions on organic form and life that would reappear in various ways throughout Romantic works. Section two investigates Kant’s fateful turn to organicism in the *Critique of Judgment* and its relationship to his anthropocentric and racist formulations of nature. I explore Schelling’s complex response to Kantian organicism in section three, interpreting his *Naturphilosophie* as an attempt to think life beyond the atomizing limits of the individual organism. The chapter concludes with a reading of works by Alexander von Humboldt, who despite having explicitly rejected the notion of vitalism, developed some of its non-organic possibilities by constructing a vision of nature as a series of non-teleological, interpenetrating systems. Although far from comprehensive, this analysis should provide a sense of the complex and conflicted notions of the organism, vital force, matter, and the individual body that characterized much European Romantic thought, and which came to structure antebellum America’s vitalist turn.
1.1 Teleology in Nature: Cuvier and the Meaning of Bones

My first example of organicist thought in European culture comes from an unlikely source. French science of the late Enlightenment would hardly seem one of organicism’s early and influential sites, but a lengthy debate held between prominent scientists at the National Museum of Natural History exposed the extent to which it had already come to define European formulations of life. Modern biology did not, as Foucault suggested, exist prior to the last half of the eighteenth century, but its development in nationally funded institutes in France was rapid and internationally influential. The shift in focus from physics and chemistry to biology, while indicative of a general change throughout Europe that contributed much to the development of vitalism, is not immediately recognizable as a speculative movement in France, and in many respects it never developed into the philosophical vitalism that flourished in England and Germany. While the focus of the sciences shifted significantly toward the study of living things, how they were treated as anything other than objects organized in a “grid of knowledge constituted by natural history” is difficult to intuit. Nevertheless, in the work of Georges Cuvier, one of the founders of modern zoology and comparative anatomy (Appel 11), an organic schematization of life took place with strong vitalist underpinnings.

Unlike the deistic Count de Buffon, the highly influential author of the popular *Histoire naturelle*, Cuvier sought to develop a zoological classificatory system based on more than natural law and natural history (14). Rather than contributing another materialistic description of animals and their development, Cuvier developed a
systematic description of natural differences based on the notion of function. In order to classify animals into verifiable groups, the anatomy of a species needed to be analyzed, and what determined its distinctive somatic order was the purpose its parts were thought to serve. For Cuvier, because bodies are shaped and assembled according to the functions they perform, all body parts structurally reflect this function, and relate to or correlate with the other parts in order to achieve it. What Cuvier termed the “conditions of existence”—the specific environments into which life is placed—determined the different functions performed by different bodies (Somers-Hall 222). The morphology of a fish is determined by its aqueous milieu, because that milieu calls for certain types of functions achievable only through certain somatic arrangements; most obviously, scales and fins work together to allow for swimming, but Cuvier’s analyses even attributed differences in the size of common organs, such as the heart or lungs, to the kinds of activity demanded by certain environments (223). On first inspection this approach might appear as a proto-evolutionary account of life’s diversity, but Cuvier’s emphasis on function leads to very different conclusions. The relationship of parts supporting a specific function did not reveal life’s random adaptability—quite to the contrary, it revealed life’s transcendent purposiveness or design. Although claiming that his work reflected nothing but scientific fact, Cuvier effectively suggested that the creator had assigned different functions to life that governed its development and somatic makeup (Appel 41, 48). In other words, function, telos, or purpose had to be seen as existing prior to the material substances comprising a living thing’s body, for the remarkable somatic unity of parts supporting a function and its genesis would seem unimaginable without it. Given that any one part of a living thing should thus reflect the specific purpose or function served by all
of its combined working parts, Cuvier claimed that he could determine the morphology and appearance of any animal by merely studying one of its bones (43).

Although Cuvier refrained from discussing metaphysical notions such as vital force (50), his focus on function as the apriori category determining life’s individual structures, and his account of the ways in which somatic structure exhibited this informing idea through a seamless relation of bodily parts constituted a significant formulation of organic vitalism. When abstracted from the individual case studies of specific environmental conditions and functions, Cuvier’s general argument was that living things exhibited a holism, manifest in the relationship of their parts that could only be explained by reference to a transcendent force or agency operating outside of mere matter. Each part’s structure bore within it the idea of the whole and correspondingly the idea of all the other parts:

Every organized being forms a whole, a unique, and perfect system, the parts of which mutually correspond, and concur in the same definitive action by a reciprocal reaction. None of these parts can change without the whole changing; and consequently each of them, separately considered, points out and marks all the others (59).

No part of this “perfect system” was superfluous or wasted, and Cuvier could explain any unexpected change or monstrous aberration he detected in a creature’s anatomy in terms of a mere structural absence. This absolute holism forbade the notion of evolution; there was no space for significant structural change in a world in which every part of an organism perfectly related to the whole, and the whole had been divinely structured to function in its environment (Somers-Hal 230). Although a schematization of life as worthy of consideration as any other, one cannot help but detect in Cuvier’s reduction of life to the formal order of the organism a set of fears and desires indicative of much
Romantic vitalism. He appeared to focus on the organism in order to avoid the implications of a totalizing mechanistic materialism, but also feared the aleatory or monstrous possibilities lurking within life itself. His comparative anatomy thus preserves a sense of life’s transcendence while equating it with a highly rationalized, hierarchized, and immutable plan.

It is highly speculative to assign specific motives to Cuvier’s organic vitalism, but his formulations had a significant influence on thinkers such as Emerson and Hegel, for whom the organism served more explicit ideological purposes. Cuvier’s taxonomic system did not appear to hierarchize life forms according to their organic perfection, although it did forbid any attempt to think of different somatic forms as sharing a common structure (229). His demand that life should be understood as a collection of formally-defined somatic wholes gestures to the role organicism would play in supporting an atomizing individualism with insidious biopolitical consequences. Before delving into Kant’s organicism, which developed this link directly, a brief discussion of Coleridge’s theoretical work on life will help to draw out these connections and to clarify in advance some of Kant’s opaque formulations. Because Cuvier believed deeply in science’s purely factual status, he did not develop his results into a speculative or ideological system. Glancing at Coleridge’s deeply metaphysical and totalizing use of organismism reveals many of the ways in which the paradigm could support the invidious

---

8 Hegel, who drew extensively from Cuvier’s account in his Philosophy of Nature, contrarily used the formal perfection attributed to the organism as a standard by which to judge and hierarchize nature. Unsurprisingly, he fixed man as the example of organic perfection, and hierarchized the other forms of life according to their ontological proximity to the human (185). Laura Dassow Walls links Emerson directly with Cuvier through his transformative visit to the Paris Museum of Natural History—a visit that confirmed his sense of nature’s transcendental organic structuring (ELS 89-91).
divisions found in Kant, and by extension in Hegel.

Unlike Cuvier, Coleridge argued in his *Hints Towards a More Comprehensive Theory of Life* (1816) that all of nature, including matter, manifests the same vital force informing non-human bodies and human consciousness (40). This common principle works to organize the diverse products of nature into integrated wholes impossible to imagine as the result of mechanical cause and effect; Coleridge thus defined life famously as producing a mysterious “unity” in the midst of “multeity” (42). Although a rather vague formulation, like Cuvier, Coleridge’s proof for the vital force focused on the existence of somatically unified and empirically investigable individuals. Life manifests its transcendent order and power in the perfect unity of diverse but integrated parts that make up the organic whole. What differentiates Coleridge significantly from Cuvier, signaling a fateful turn in the speculative development of organicism, is his attempt to compare and prioritize living things on the basis of an organic ideal. *Theory of Life* argues that nature’s creations are all alive but unequally developed, and the standard by which they are hierarchized results from the degree to which they express what Coleridge termed the “tendency to individuation” (49). Life evolves according to a teleology, the goal of which is the production of increasingly perfect unities of part and whole. This process culminates in the human male—the superlative and sovereign organic individual (85).

Although for Coleridge the material nature surrounding man is not a mere lifeless remainder, it nevertheless comparatively confirms his natural superiority. Man contains and unifies the greatest diversity of physical and material functions within him, making him the telos of all natural productivity. A significant aspect of his special status comes
not only from this sense of formal perfection, but from the diverse and productive activities it enables. As the ideal expression of nature, man duplicates its centralized creativity on the level of the individual. While Coleridge’s perfect organism is entirely a creation or creature of nature, it becomes all the more so by being autonomously active and self-defining. In a formulation highly reminiscent of Emerson, Coleridge transforms this organic ontology into a semi-practical maxim: “he who stands the most on himself, and stands the firmest, is the truest, because the most individual, Man” (86). Here organicism becomes less a vision of life’s complex mutuality than a guarantor of the human individual’s active autonomy, identity, and superiority. It naturalizes a myth of the autarkic self by providing an image of life as the centrally unified body of the individual. Having made this individualized holism an ideal for which we should strive in practical and moral life, and within a relatedly hierarchized schematization of nature, Coleridge opens the door for a set of naturalized and insidious biopolitical distinctions between those seemingly most capable of realizing the “principle of individuation” and those human and non-human animals that appear to fall short of it.

I have greatly simplified this reading of Theory in order to illustrate how Romantic organicism could be generally used to indemnify liberal ideals of selfhood. Although Theory lends itself to this interpretation, Coleridge’s view of the individual in nature proves to be more complicated than his idealization of self-reliance would suggest. In keeping with Naturphilosophie, he also posits a force of “combination” in opposition to that of individuation (50), and while praising human liberty he is quick to enjoin a reverence for natural law (86). In works such as “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner”—a text whose influence is explicit and unmistakable on Moby-Dick—the profound
implication of the human in a greater natural order appears to call into question any facile apotheosis of the individual and its powers. At the very least, Coleridge’s identification of life with all of sensuous nature suggested a sense of belonging to a common force even as it represented life as ideally divided into individual wholes he ranked according to their capacity for independence. Kant, while assiduously avoiding the explicit metaphysical approach of Coleridge and other Romantics, similarly utilized the organism as a figure through which to apotheosize the human individual and to impose a thoroughly rational vision of nature. What substantially differentiates Kant from Coleridge, what marks his organicism as a particularly illuminating harbinger of the social and ecological catastrophes of antebellum America, is his denial of life to much of nature.

1.2 Kant: The Organic Kingdom of Man

To describe Immanuel Kant as a “vitalist” will undoubtedly strike many philosophically trained readers as a strange assertion. Vitalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whether appearing in literary, philosophical, or scientific guises, was commonly characterized as a rebirth of suspect metaphysical notions in a mostly skeptical and materialistic moment in European cultural history (Mitchell 5-7). The version of Kant’s project commonly taught in philosophy courses would seem diametrically opposed to such concepts; here Kant is the philosopher who doubts radically our capacity to understand and perceive anything outside ourselves (to know the *ding-an-sich*, or thing in itself). Kant’s statements about the purpose of his critical
project—his three major works or critiques—certainly recommend this interpretation. In *The Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* he described the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a work intended to illustrate how the interminable follies of metaphysics rest on the attempt to go beyond the boundaries of “all possible experience” in order to derive absolute or metaphysical knowledge (30). It is thus surprising to find that by his third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant identified life with an immaterial force, or “formative drive” (*bildende Kraft*) incomprehensible through notions of basic causality (253/KU 280). Like Coleridge, he argued that the evidence for this force was to be found in the organic structure of individual organisms—in the perfect holism manifest in their centralized union of parts. How could Kant attack the metaphysical tradition while resorting to one of its newest specters?

Understanding the diverse intellectual forces that compelled Kant’s turn to vitalism will help to lessen this contradiction’s apparent blatancy, but it will also greatly clarify how the concept of organic life could support a thoroughly anthropocentric, individualist, and ecologically violent practical and social paradigm. Although Kant’s formulation of organic life, and the practical consequences one might draw from it should not be understood as indicative of Romantic vitalism in general, his use of the concept reflects tendencies and divisions detectable in much of organicist thought. One of the central tasks Kant sent for himself was to salvage philosophy from the Lockean and Humean skepticism of the late Enlightenment without resorting to traditional metaphysics. He attempted to do so by demonstrating the existence of apriori concepts and judgments—structures of thought and experience that could not be derived merely from empirical experience (Guyer 46). Kant argued that the existence of these universal
categories provided evidence for a transcendental order structuring the human mind, but because these categories only produce knowledge when applied to sensory experience, any attempt to use them to assert the existence of metaphysical entities—like God or the soul—fails to generate certainty (Guyer 32-4).

While Kant carefully policed the limits of metaphysical knowledge, his project worked to demonstrate the absolute existence of a particular entity that gestured to metaphysical realities. More so perhaps than any other prior philosophy, Kant’s thought worked to position human subjectivity as the ultimate source of order, knowledge, and goodness in an otherwise opaque or epistemically closed existence. Andrew Bowie correctly identifies one of Kant’s foundational concerns as the continuation and intensification of Cartesian subjectivism (ASKN 17). In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes attempted to salvage philosophy from total skepticism by positing the cogito’s self-consciousness as the only ground of certain knowledge (63-4). As Bowie suggests, however, this project ultimately required extra-subjective theological support in order to salvage any connection of the subject to an external world (17). Kant’s thought is in part a response to Descartes’ inability to think the rational human self as the autarkic center of reality. By severing any significant connection the subject might have to the outside world, and by demonstrating the existence of its sacral internal unity, Kant idealized the human self without reference to any external reality—and perhaps because it appeared not to need any such reality as its support.

Rather than serving a severe blow to our epistemological pretensions, the critical philosophy can be read as positioning the human subject in the place previously occupied by the sources of power or order identified in traditional metaphysical ontologies. Kant
scrupulously avoided a directly metaphysical description or celebration of subjectivity, but after his first critique, the critical project focused increasingly on identifying human morality as the evidence for our unique place in the cosmos. For Kant, humans demonstrate their difference from mere mechanisms through their capacity to make free moral choices that reflect their rational, rather than material, foundations. One need look no further than this rational morality, or moral purposiveness, for proof of the human subject’s status as the apogee of creation (CJ 323). Indeed, by identifying nature’s intentional design so exclusively with human subjectivity and its rational functions, Kant effectively removed any need to imagine a non-subjective origin of subjectivity. As Bowie claims, the questions that primarily motivate Kant’s project are: “How…can subjectivity be its own foundation? How can subjectivity itself give rise to objective certainty without relying upon the dogmatic assumption of a pre-existing objectivity of the world of nature…?” (SMCP 17). Although a highly contentious and diversely interpreted philosophical maneuver, Kant’s attempt to deconstruct metaphysics while salvaging philosophy turned on positing the subject as its own foundation—as something whose unity, freedom, and agency derive from nothing beyond itself.

Kant’s belief in the divinity of the rational human subject required, on his own admission, no confirmation or proof from the physical universe (CJ 323). One can partly understand why Kant’s search for intentional design or rational order turned away from sensuous examples, given the cosmological worldviews informing his sense of physical nature. Like many of his contemporaries, Kant was influenced by the popular materialist schematizations of nature prevalent in the late Enlightenment. In this context matter appeared only under the concepts of causality, meaning that it appeared to lack any pre-
ordained holistic order. Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* bears the traces of a Newtonian cosmos in which physical nature consists of corpuscular bodies determined in their motions and relations by a purely mechanical arrangement. In *Metaphysical Foundations*, he also, like Newton, attributed a non-material supersensuous first cause to this mechanical dance—a cause that therefore acts outside of brute causality (Grant 68-9). This division of the divine source of creation from its material reality would seem to sit comfortably with Kant’s attempt to make supersensuous subjectivity its own foundation. While the subject’s experience of physical things might suggest a purely mechanical universe, its inner freedom and rational design offer a parallel to the non-material first cause Newton claimed as the source for the material universe. By so thoroughly representing materiality in terms of brute causality, Kant’s transcendental subject appears, by way of contrast, as an altogether different species. It thus becomes difficult, if not impossible to imagine how the subject could originate from matter, and this contrast serves to reinforce the sense of its status as divinely self-grounding.

Although this radical dualism may have seemed to support Kant’s anthropocentric subjectivism, its absolute bifurcation of sensuous from supersensuous experience produced its own set of quandaries. Kant must have recognized that Newtonian cosmology, like other mechanistic accounts of nature, threatened to call into question the subject’s apriori unity and freedom, but he must have also realized that a complete separation of noumenal order from material reality would potentially undermine our faith in these attributions. Without any sensuous evidence supporting the position Kant assigns the subject, it becomes difficult to understand why we should lend his extreme intensification of Cartesianism our credulity. Why, indeed, if the subject evinces the
reality of rational design and freedom in the universe, should it be the only possessor of these qualities? Why should we accept this radical dualism as the necessary but unexplained status quo?\(^9\) Perhaps because he intuited the force of these potential criticisms, in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant identified life as a physical phenomenon evincing the unity otherwise assigned to our noumenal subjective order. More specifically, Kant located in organic life a possible point of parity, or what he termed a “remote analogy” with the order of the self-grounding subject (*CJ* 255). Kant defines the organism (or “natural purpose”) as that which relates “to itself in such a way that it is both cause and effect of itself” (251). Unlike matter, or inorganic systems, which behave as mere machines in which parts are externally brought together, organisms seem guided by a unity of parts that presuppose a whole inconceivable as the accidental product of a chain of causes and effects (253). Recognizing in the organism a unity within difference, Kant also identified organic things with a center or self allowing them to pursue their own ends actively. Beyond the meaning intuitable in its formal organization, he thus identified life as distinct from matter due to its “inner capacity to determine itself voluntarily” (Qtd. in Mensch 65).

In essence, the organism’s expression of its own cause and effect—its containing both elements within itself freed from formal compulsion from its environment—provided the ideal physical analogy for the Kantian subject.\(^{10}\) While organisms are composed of

\(^{9}\) As Ian Hamilton Grant suggests, there is no robust demonstration, either by Kant or Newton of the mechanical causality both equate with nature (69). The assumption seems mysteriously to deserve our credulity.
materials drawn from their environments, and although they experience excitations and sensations, they are the expression of a formative drive (*bildende Kraft*) inexplicable as the result of exterior compulsion (253/ *KU* 280). Although Kant did not articulate an explicit “principle of individuation,” like Coleridge, the implicit connection between the organism’s somatic holism and its independence from environmental forces reflect a similar ideal of selfhood. In Kant’s vision life comprises individual somatic units defined by their centralized unity and by their capacity for autonomous self-maintenance. His ideal transcendental human subject is something distinctly similar; its varied faculties function in spontaneous unison to support the individual’s active pursuit of moral and rational ends (Mensch 65). Both subject and organism draw on their sacral unity to resist the material forces that would blindly control them. Looking to nature for some confirmation of the self’s privileged status, a Kantian needed only to observe the common organic holism evident in diverse living things, and to contrast it with the evident lifelessness of matter. Like Coleridge, who was directly influenced by Kant, the organism might in some sense provide an example of proper human activity in its individualized autonomy.

---

10 Kant is quick, nevertheless, to suggest that this is a “remote analogy” with our own moral purposiveness, and that it does not provide knowledge about nature or the cause of nature (255). However, it is just such purposiveness in ourselves that leads Kant later to suggest that “morality and a causality in terms of purposes that is subordinated to it is absolutely impossible through natural causes. For the moral principle that determines us to action is supersensible. Hence it is the only possible thing in the order of purposes that is absolutely unconditioned as concerns nature, and hence alone qualifies man, the subject of morality, to be the final purpose of creation to which all of nature is subordinated” (323 n. 30). Hence our identification of the analogy between our own purposiveness and that of the organism ultimately relates to an identification of the latter with the “final purpose of creation,” and posits the same organicism necessarily as reflected in the origin of nature. Indeed, if the choice Kant provides is between conditioned, or determined causes, and unconditioned (organic-natural purposiveness) he has effectively produced knowledge about the first cause of nature, despite his persistent attempt to appear as providing no such theoretical or metaphysical foundation.
This gulf between life and matter—between the living and the dead—is what separates Kant’s vitalism from Coleridge’s, and with some critical consequences. Coleridge hierarchized life along the lines of his principle of individuation, with humans placed at the apex of his vital pyramid, but he excluded nothing in nature from the community of the living. Kant bifurcated life and matter fundamentally, positing an unbridgeable chasm between the two (Bennett 65), and represented life as matter’s essential superior. This absolute difference in kind, rather than quantity, has serious ecological implications, in as much as it posits matter as a lifeless resource available for manipulation by the living. The analogy he drew between subjectivity and the organism would seem, nevertheless, at the very least to cement a link between the human and other organic life forms. Although Kant described this connection, he appears to have done so with the sole intention of substantiating his sense of human subjectivity’s privileged place in the cosmos. Indeed, the analogue served to confirm human superiority, in as much as it provided phenomenal evidence for that order most perfectly expressed in the spiritual life of rational human morality. Rather than calling into question human exceptionalism and its violent practical implementation, Kant retreated periodically from his flirtations with vitalism in order to nullify the hint of any such challenge. In a revealing note to the

11 Kant was consistently careful in drawing too close a connection between organism and subject. He thus suggested that the logic by which we intuit the organism’s order is non-discursive and basically different from that of the understanding—a differentiation that would seem to mark a profound connection. But Kant’s reference to this alternative, intuitive understanding, ultimately served as a theological support for the apotheosis of a particular sense of human morality as the end of nature (Protevi 85-6). Drawing on Deleuze, John Protevi suggests that for Kant, the organism thus serves to found a “theo-bio-politics,” by serving as the exemplar of this intuitive logic, or as “the judgment of God.” The end or purpose that most purely expresses this divinely appointed order is human morality, which is developed through the disciplined rule of reason over the impulses (87). Protevi connects the manner in which Kant’s sense of a supersensuous organic logic—expressed in the organism’s difference from matter—legitimizes a social regime of severe self-regulation. Following a similar line of thought, one might contend that by positing the
Critique of Judgment, he thus turned back sharply to the supersensuous as the guarantor of the human place in the cosmos: “For the moral principle that determines us to action is supersensible. Hence it is the only possible thing in the order of purposes that is absolutely unconditioned as concerns nature, and hence alone qualifies man, the subject of morality, to be the final purpose of creation to which all of nature is subordinated” (323 n. 30). The order attributed to the “supersensible” inner-life of man trumps any resonance it might have with similar material organizations, and to such an extent that they are unquestionably “subordinated” to human purposes. Seen in this context, what seemed like a substantial distinction between dead matter and organic life fades; all materiality should be subordinated to its ultimately vital superior—man, the “final purpose of creation.”

Andrew Bowie suggests that it is Kant’s splitting of matter from life that leads, surprisingly, to the vitalistic sensibilities of thinkers commonly associated with irrationalism. In other words, the formally self-grounding subject, like the organism, could only be understood in terms of a mysterious life-force, since all else observed in the material world fell under the category of mechanical causality (SMCP 35). However, in Kant’s case, this life force is not so much mysterious as it is a necessary device for the indemnification of the formally self-grounding subject; such a force is not, after all, differential or demonic, as it is in the case of Nietzsche’s Dionysus, but a guarantor of self-sameness. Ian Hamilton Grant makes a similar point, and one that might briefly summarize much of Kant’s focus in The Critique of Teleological Judgment: “Life acts as a kind of Orphic guardian for philosophy’s descent into the physical” (10). The subject’s organism as God’s judgment, Kant worked to guard the unity of the self-grounding subject by policing the notion of soma; the regime of disciplined morality serves to eliminate or to reduce the validity of affective experiences that might imply a different sense of the self—one irreducible to formally-defined somatic analogies.
analogy with the organism guarantees its exclusion from a material origin, while philosophy appears nevertheless to have reached down to the lowly physicality it has always avoided. Philosophy gives the illusion of a thorough descent, but its “sinking to the depths” results only in an illusion of greater purification. It is therefore unsurprising that Kant was resolutely opposed to the notion of “living matter” (Guyer 343), and not simply because it posed a rational contradiction with respect to his bifurcation of nature.\footnote{Kant agreed with Blumenbach in this respect, claiming that it would contradict reason to assume “that crude matter on its own should have structured itself originally in terms of mechanical laws, that life could have sprung from the nature of what is lifeless, and that matter could have molded itself on its own into the form of a self-preserving purposiveness” \cite{CJ}.} Living matter marked the problematic space of the origin for Kant—a link between the subject and a different order, and one in which it could never fully recognize itself or maintain its inviolate autonomy. If an expression of living matter, the subject would be forced to acknowledge the origin of its putative self-consistency in another order, and thus also ultimately to abandon the myth of total self-grounding.

Kant’s forbidding of the notion of living matter represented the exclusion of a more general attempt to locate a unity of the subject and its origin—a unity described by F.W.J. von Schelling as \textit{nature}. However, as the latter’s unique work and thought suggest, the expression and investigation of this unity require a new mode of knowledge production, which by definition could not rely on the myth of a rationally self-grounding subject. In order to overcome Kant’s dualism, Schelling developed a philosophy that traced the origin of transcendental subjectivity out of a robust material alterity—out of something exterior to or predating the organism and consciousness’ formal unity. However, in contrast to Kant, Schelling suggested that this exterior needed to be \textit{thought}
or expressed; it could not be simply dismissed in the Kantian fashion as mechanically determined or opaque. If the subject was to be recognized as possessing some form of agency, it was necessary to think this agency as extending from something other than a dead mechanism, but Schelling wanted to avoid thinking of this origin as a simple mirror for the subject’s rationality. Andrew Bowie summarizes the issue nicely, although without locating any motivation for Kant’s aversions: “For the Kant of the theoretical philosophy, answers to questions of such genesis depend upon the cognitive functioning of the already constituted subject, which means that one has no right to ask how such a subject itself becomes constituted. Schelling justifiably thinks that this is insufficient to account for our ability to understand the nature of which we are a part” (SMCP 34). As this analysis has hopefully illustrated, there are good reasons to assume that what prevents Kant from thinking such a genesis are its troubling implications for his paradigm of self-grounding selfhood.

It is at the point of the subject’s origin that Schelling’s philosophy of nature (Naturphilosophie) began, and although Schelling envisioned a subject potentially unified with nature, he did not posit this unity in terms of the harmonic or rational holism characteristic of much Romantic culture. Schelling’s thought challenged the most Romantic of Kant’s formulations—the organic formal holism of life. It correspondingly asked for a new complicated thinking, which as Jason Wirth suggests, and no doubt drawing upon Deleuze, represents a thinking of nature in terms of the fold (pli) (SN 92). Unlike the purely self-enclosed transcendental subject, and its analogous formal organism and isolate soma, a fold has neither an absolute interior nor exterior. For Schelling, nature is com-pli-cated; it is a series of distinct but changing folds or layers, all
enfolded from the same material, and thus constantly connected and mutually informing. A complicated nature cannot be separated or sequenced into distinct wholes or bodies. As the following section illustrates, Schelling’s non-somatic and non-divisive vitalism opened a possibility for a vision of nature as self-emergent and intrinsically creative.

1.3 Schelling: The Excessive Subject of Nature

Heidegger suggested of Kant that he withdrew terrified from the “abyss” of the anima—from the monstrous productivity of life—in order to preserve conventional morality (173; Wirth CL 89). As Heidegger’s rich diagnosis indicates, this dismissal was not simply the result of a rigorously limited epistemology. Indeed, the limits Kant places on knowledge may be read as preventing a form of thinking that would challenge conventional morality, or more significantly, challenge the integrity of transcendental subjectivity itself, and this because Kant intuited life’s formal instability. However, Heidegger’s use of the term “abyss” perhaps plays already into Kant’s rejection of whatever it was that caused him to turn back to morality as a guarantor of rational subjectivity. We have seen how Kant’s need to support a subjectivist paradigm worked through absolute exclusions that produced unbridgeable binaries. Kant preserves the subject’s unity by sundering its connection to an extra-human origin—an origin that would trouble its self-sustaining formal unity. Schelling began to overcome this endless dualism by characterizing whatever falls outside the subject as not merely abyssal or mechanically determined. In other words, nature and the subject must be shown to evince similar structures, but not in a manner designed analogously to indemnify subjectivity by isolating and essentializing one element and denigrating others. Like Kant, Schelling fully
supported the notion that the subject expresses a lawfulness impossible to explain through mechanical determinism, but which also could not have arisen from chaotic indeterminacy. Schelling attempts to avoid both of these characterizations, as well as a notion of the subject’s origin that serves only as a mirror for self-grounding rationality. This new thinking of the origin had thus to operate through an economy of difference and identity, in which the subject is shown to evince a parity between orders “within” and “exterior” to itself, while preserving the difference between these orders. This also means that no single order, species, or material structure, is fully and qualitatively differentiable from another. For Schelling, the subject is never fully self-enclosing or self-grounding because it “contains” or arises from orders never completely available to its conscious mode of intellection, although it senses something of a real and not merely analogous resonance with these orders.

When in the *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature* Schelling identifies something “daimonic,” or demonic, about the attraction of a magnet and an iron—their ancient “common constitution”—he identifies a telling example of this sense of identity in difference. The magnet and the iron are different substances with different structures, which explain partially their attraction, but without any parity of origin, or similarity, they would be incapable of “communication” (82). Although Schelling couches his reference in a semi-mystical diction, its purpose is to suggest that the demonic cannot be relegated to an opaque abyss or a mere determinism. This fundamental identity in

---

13 Schelling should not be viewed, as Andrew Bowie suggests, as simply dismissing the limitations Kant places on theoretical understanding. Bowie rightly contends that the “very fact that the attempt to overcome the problem of Kantian dualism gives rise to a theory of the genesis of subjectivity, rather than dogmatic assertions about nature in itself is proof of this” (*SMCP* 34).
difference is also not a contradiction one should accept on the basis of a mere leap of faith. Schelling did not, for example, want us to accept what Kant decried as the idea of “living matter” as an acceptable paradox. One can readily understand why Schelling was openly hostile to such mysterious formulations, for they simply make one inexplicable metaphysical idea ubiquitous without fully challenging the conceptual binarisms responsible for the aporia. Adding “life” to “matter” simply tacks a “living” predicate onto a “dead” substance, and thus fails to explain their basic differences and similarities. He described these and general vitalistic approaches as a “genuine product of lazy reason”—a convenient avoidance of the complicated problem of the origin (FO 61). In contrast, Schelling developed a model in which nature recapitulates similar orders autopoetically on different levels. Ian Hamilton Grant suggests that Schelling overcomes Kant’s vitalist antinomies by abolishing “the restriction of agency to consciously purposive rational beings, on the one hand, and the consequent location of activity to nature itself, on the other” (PNAS 8). That this activity is empirically available to rational beings suggests their deep parity with nature and their origination from it.

Following Leibniz, Schelling posited that being must be understood in terms of monism; there can, in other words, be no absolute distinction between mind and matter, or mind would be completely unreceptive to matter (Bowie SMCP 34-5). But this did not explain why the difference between mind and matter should appear in the first place. Referring simply to natural activity or the mutual intrication of different but resonant orders provides a rich critique of the self-grounding subject, but it begs the question of the origin. If, as Schelling did, we are to take seriously the evidence supplied by geology, physics, biology, and cosmology, indicating the substantial history or genesis of such
“orders,” as well as the ongoing change in all of nature, including the continuous change experienced within subjectivity as time, it becomes difficult to posit the classical primacy of atemporal form as the informing ground of experience. The monism Shelling identifies with nature must, in other words, avoid being reduced to the identity of something outside of time or change (Snow 126); a genuinely inclusive account of nature must think its constant process as one of its essential characteristics. Schelling thus suggests “the philosophy of nature does not have to explain the productive power of Nature; for if it does not posit this as originally in Nature it will never bring it into Nature” (FO 206). To exclude process and becoming from nature would be to denigrate, in traditional philosophical style, a part of experience or nature in order to elevate another, and Schelling’s attempt to think nature without such amputations demanded their inclusion. Schelling concludes that true existence is not, as philosophy traditionally defines it, the static perfection of being, but expressed in the active heterogeneity of becoming—a becoming from which the origin of nature and subjectivity cannot be separated.

However, if nature were nothing but a perpetual self-differing, it would seem to lack even a minimally limited self-consistency from which structured experience arises. Pure becoming, or what Schelling describes as “infinite activity” would be nothing more than a purely self-identical force, and thus utterly homogenous (FO 205-6). In order to posit difference as a genuine element of experience, Schelling had to explain how a minimal difference and identity emerge from this endless force without performing a traditional two-world bifurcation of nature. Rather than instituting the classical identification of becoming as a perversion of static being, Schelling suggests that an opposing force immanent to nature contracts infinite becoming, and the strife of these
forces produces the objective, observable world (*FO* 17). Nature is not a hard duality of “being” and “becoming,” but an ongoing relation of productivity and products that are never ultimately separable. The radical consequence of these reflections is the attribution of formal genesis to nature itself—objects and bodies are formed as the momentary inertial point of opposing forces. Schelling provides a striking analogy of liquid turbulence as a compelling description of this morphogenesis:

A stream flows in a straight line forward as long as it encounters no resistance. Where there is resistance—a whirlpool forms. Every original product of nature is such a whirlpool, every organism. The whirlpool is not something immobilized, it is rather something constantly transforming—but reproduced anew at each moment. Thus no product of nature is *fixed*, but is reproduced at each instant through the force of nature entire (*FO* 18).

The term “product” can be deceiving, for it denotes something finished or in stasis, when the whirlpool exists only from a force continuously striking against a point of inhibition:

“This whirlpool is not an abiding thing, but something that vanishes at every moment, and every moment springs up anew” (*FO* 206). Every product is both an expression of infinite activity and finite limitation, which means that products arise from this strife and recede, as whirlpools also eventually do, back into the infinite activity from which more products evolve. In other words, the identity expressed by nature is the result of nature’s struggle against identity. A whirlpool maintains a minimal self-consistency only as long as the force of infinite activity pushes it toward disillusion, while the force of inhibition would appear as nothing but a “mere point if Nature did not give them extension and depth by its own pressure” (*FO* 206).

Schelling introduced a novel possibility for understanding and investigating nature as a non-somatic dynamics, and provided a provisional solution to the problems Kant’s somatism produces for thinking about the origin and subjectivity. Cast in Schelling’s
terms, descriptions of nature that begin with the concept of body, or that analogize nature with reference to a specific type of body, represent nature by prioritizing the product over the forces from which it arises. Of his complaints against Kant’s conceptualization of matter, Schelling lists as his first “that it holds only from the standpoint of mechanics, where matter is already given as a product” (FO 77). This prioritization leads, as suggested previously, to the nullification of the notion of qualitative difference or genuine becoming all together (FO 200). In place of this formal somatism, Schelling suggests that to describe the most basic constituents of products we must posit simple “actants,” each of which are ideally indivisible but also singular (FO 21). Like wavelengths of light, or perhaps more appropriately, the wavelengths that are light, actants express a unique and intentional motion productive of qualitative differences. Indeed, actants are not qualities somehow pasted onto a substrate, for what we take to be a substrate, namely somatic matter, is similarly an expression of the activity of differing forces. Andrew Bowie suggests that for Schelling “the essence of a thing is the concatenation of forces which it is, not something else beyond this concatenation” (SMCP 37). Bodies are the productive products of an originary strife of forces, suggesting that the phenomenal appearance of somatic unity is the result of differing actants. Bodies are the expression of the ongoing struggle of bodiless forces, meaning that they constantly rupture the objective unity attributed to them.

Another way to express the significance of Schelling’s radical non-somatic reconceptualization of nature is to consider its implications for a thinking of the organism. Although Kant posits a chasm between the supersensuous unity displayed by life and the mechanism of material bodies, each of these formulations is supported by a set of
common somatic assumptions. As Schelling indicated, the problem with Kantian mechanics is that it begins with a “product”—a body—as the starting point for nature, which means that any attempt to trace a genealogy of nature simply encounters differences in the quantity of fully formed bodies and the forces between them. The bodies are constants without qualitative or internal variation. Organisms are similarly defined by formal self-consistency and self-grounding—they therefore appear to have no apparent external origin. Indeed, as Kant’s example of arboreal growth suggests (CJ 249-50), organisms express a basic awareness of their formal unity through self-directed activity. Schelling conveys a similar thought by defining organicism in terms of the organism’s clear delineation of external and internal space (FO 54). The organic begins with a gesture toward selfhood not without close resemblance to Kant’s description of organized beings as containing cause and effect within themselves, and Schelling frequently draws on this formulation throughout The First Outline (51). It would seem that Schelling recapitulated Kantian vitalism, that he isolated a separate and self-grounding sphere of life and subjectivity from the rest of nature, but as his whirlpool analogy states, organisms are the products of differing forces, and thus cannot be understood as self-grounding.

Although an apparent contradiction, the tension between these differing accounts produces a rich and complicated understanding of organic and inorganic systems. For when Schelling suggests that “every original product of nature is such a whirlpool, every organism” he nullifies Kant’s vitalist divisions. Every product is an organism, whether “organic” or “inorganic”; every product is, in other words, an organization or system irreducible to mechanical determinism or somatic representation. Whereas Kant
postulated the organism as the mark of a total qualitative difference from dead matter, and thereby hierarchized natural products on the basis of their resemblance to self-grounding subjectivity, Schelling attributed the same propensity for organization to all elements of nature. Life’s self-referentiality, its division of inner and outer space, is a more intense “potency” (*Potenz*) of the systematicity displayed by inorganic products. This recapitulation of self-organization extends from and mimics the first act of self-organization—the contraction of pure becoming into products. Nature is this perpetual splitting of unity in order to produce distinct products, but also in order to produce products that express more intensely the freedom of nature’s originary act of self-creation through their own limited selfhood or separateness. All of nature’s products are in this sense “alive” (Wirth *CL* 88), but nevertheless qualitatively differentiable. The difference in potency is also a difference between forces neither fully isolated from each other nor simply reducible to a single identity. In as much as there are different levels of force, there are differences between the products of those levels (Snow 87), and yet the spheres are interpenetrating and mutually founding, like a chain in which one link provides the starting point for the next. Every object or organism is defined by a duality of positive and negative force that prevents it from becoming a static product, and thus the dualism of forces is never fully canceled and continues to develop and evolve. Organisms are the recapitulation of nature’s self-productive systematicity at a higher level than the inorganic, but the latter contains within it the possibility of the former, and Schelling can

14 I will use the term “systematic” or “system” throughout the remainder of this analysis of Schelling’s thought in place of “organic” or “organism” in order to indicate the significant differences between Schelling and Kant’s accounts of self-organizing behavior. Here the term suggests a particular set of persistent connections between forces without an apriori foundation.
therefore state, “every individual is an expression of the whole of nature” (*FO* 228).

For the purposes of this analysis Schelling’s rather formal and empirically suspect schematization of nature in terms of universal polarity is less important than his general characterization of nature in terms of dynamic difference, force, and interpenetrating systematicity. Schelling opens a possibility for thinking of organisms as never fully self-enclosed or formally self-consistent. The whirlpool analogy, when compared with Kant’s abstract part-whole plan, reveals a different sense of the organic. For Kant the organism must begin with the formal scheme from which it will grow, lest its self-consistency prove dependent on outside influences potentially reducible to mere mechanical determinism. Schelling locates, contrarily, the organism’s genesis in the strife of forces, which while producing a limited formal consistency, never begins with an apriori formal plan and never results in a perfectly self-enclosed entity. Ian Hamilton Grant similarly suggests that “Schelling’s philosophy is not like Kant’s: he does not see in an organism the occasion for a lawful projection of subjective purposes into nature for reflection, since the organic kinds for which reflection is as it is at the moment of the transcendental deduction of the apriori forms of intuition, is itself manifestly contingent according to natural history” (*NS* 132). In other words, when understood in the light of empirical research, organicism manifests a procreative multiplicity of forms irreducible to a single transcendental organization. The whirlpool forms a regular pattern and appears to express an isolated centrifugal point, but it would be absurd to imagine this point either formally preceding its origination, or as somehow separable from it. Thus while Schelling defines organic being in terms of a division between external and internal space, it becomes immediately clear from this dynamic system analogy that there is no proper division between the two.
Organisms act with clear reference to a sense of self, but they have no more distinct or inviolate center than does a vortex. What produces their sense of interiority is a motion in the exterior against which they define themselves. Although now an empirically suspect characterization, Schelling could thus ask: “what else are bodies themselves but condensed (confined) electricity” (*FO* 227). Just as a piece of cloth folded on itself never fully encloses an inner space, bodies cannot develop a pure interiority, and as the reference to electricity connotes, the forces contracted into bodies threaten to break free. One might thus characterize the organism for Schelling as a constant, even rhythmic recapitulation of this contraction, in as much as the self-consistency of the organic is perpetually disrupted and re-formed from a source without interior or exterior.

The extent to which this notion departs from Kantian vitalism is further expressed in recent psychoanalytic readings of Schelling, which emphasize the priority of struggle or duality over originary harmonic unity in his philosophy. Slavoj Zizek suggests, for example, that for Schelling “reality is inherently fragile, the result of a temporary balance between contraction and expansion which can, at any moment, ‘run amok’ and explode into one of the extremes” (*IR* 24). Because a fragile balance of active forces produces organisms and their environments, in sharp contrast to Kant’s apriori organic-formal symmetry, these systems are prone to radical explosions or implosions. Indeed, nature would cease to become if it were not defined by a fundamental a-symmetry and lack of self-identity (45). While nature tends toward systematic development, without which complex organizations such as life would be impossible, an equally if not more primordial

---

tendency is the ceaseless becoming that perpetually nullifies existence, and which prevents the total self-closure of the organism. In his most dramatic moments Schelling goes so far as to claim that nature seeks to return to a state of stasis and absolute homogeneity, and therefore actively opposes life (FO 230-31). Nature’s most original tendency is toward formlessness—it “endeavors to liquefy everything” solid or enduring within itself (FO 27). While Schelling frequently posits fluidity and becoming as its most essential characteristics, the development of substantial organic and inorganic systems is also a legitimate expression of naturalness. Nature liquefies the solid, but this solidity is itself a perpetually recapitulating component of nature. What these perplexing and often seemingly contradictory comments might express is nature’s originary duplicity. Just as the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic traditions—traditions Schelling distantly helped to inaugurate—define the self not by originary unity, but always as a genuine tension, Schelling understood nature as fundamentally riven between opposed forces, none of which is fully balanced.

In specific moments of his philosophy Schelling designates humanity as the evolutionary telos of creation, as the apotheosis and expression of nature’s free subjectivity (Zizek 14). In works such as The System of Transcendental Idealism, Schelling describes nature in terms of the gradual evolution of God’s self-awareness through the self-externalizing division of subject and object, culminating in human self-consciousness (SCEP Bowie 48). But one would grossly misunderstand Schelling if this teleology were taken merely as the attempt to justify metaphysically Kant’s self-grounding subject. While human freedom was a central preoccupation for Schelling, the relative value of his account lies in his willingness to think this freedom without the
absolute indemnification of consciousness and rationality. Even if nature evinces an evolutionary development towards rationality, we are not allowed to assume that rationality, like the formal unity of the organism, constitutes its beginning or sole purpose. The rule-bound functioning of understanding and reason arise, like all else in nature, from the “unconscious” strife of primal forces, and reason can never fully conceptualize the unconscious origin from which it springs. Schelling describes this genesis of consciousness from chaos in one of his most remarkable passages:

> After the eternal act of self-revelation, everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as if order and form were what is original but rather as if initial anarchy had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but remains eternally within the ground. The understanding is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding. Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance (EHF 29).

There is an “indivisible remainder” haunting consciousness and rationality—an opening and origin that disallows the subject, like the other products and organisms produced by nature, to close in fully upon itself and to separate from this dark ground. Although Schelling’s references to “darkness” may sound pejorative or mystically hermetic, his purpose is to warn against the myth of a rational subjectivism without boundaries. As he suggests a few pages prior, such philosophies—including “the entire new European philosophy since its beginning (with Descartes)…has the common defect that nature is not available for it and that it lacks a living ground” (EHF 26). The origin is not simply a point of darkness receding into reason’s past, but the vital core of forces continuously feeding consciousness. While these forces lack the arkh (leadership) of rationality, they are not a purely random or purposeless anarchy; the “living ground” is the unconscious
productivity experienced without as material nature, and from within as the free act of nature by which consciousness posits itself. Humanity is in every sense permeated by a “living” and productive unconscious, fully external and internal to itself, and thus, like the whirlpool, it lacks an inviolate center. The human represents a remarkable moment in nature’s progression toward self-awareness, but as Jason Wirth pithily characterizes our place in Schelling’s cosmology, “we are Nature and it has us. We belong to the demiurgic circulation. It does not belong to us” (CL 89).

Such a lineage neither invalidates rationality nor the legitimacy of moral agency, although it complicates the meaning of human freedom, which for Schelling cannot be isolated from the ground of forces from which it arises. To be free in this context means to recognize the limits of the conscious self, as well as its self-grounding and self-indemnifying obsessions. Freedom is the capacity to acknowledge the origin of subjectivity in a giving prior to and to some extent other than its rationality and consciousness, and to support this goodness by upholding the delicate balance of forces from which the world emerges (Wirth 186-90). Alternatively, freedom is expressed through a choice merely to support the ego and to destroy the world. In as much as all things that exist express egoism in order to survive (EHF 63), creaturely selfishness or basic egoism is not evil, although the choice to support the self or a particular species at the general expense of others represents the purest wickedness:

Thus is the beginning of sin, that man transgresses from authentic Being into non-Being…in order to become a self-creating ground and, with the power of the centrum which he has within himself, to rule over all things…From this arises the hunger of selfishness which, to the degree that it renounces the whole and unity, becomes ever more desolate, poorer, but precisely for that reason greedier, hungrier and more venomous. In evil there is a self-consuming and always annihilating contradiction that it strives to become creaturely just by annihilating the bond of creaturely existence, and out of overweening pride to
be all things, falls into non-Being (EHF 55).

Human beings fundamentally misunderstand their unique place in nature when they assume a position of superiority and therefore, in sharp contrast to Kant, utilize nature instrumentally. In as much as nature is for Schelling first and foremost a delicate network of changing forces, rather than an expression of inviolate transcendental rationality, every thing, product, and organism is inextricably intricated in an outside, in a definitive “bond” or environment. But we are not simply bound by these complicated bonds—we are these bonds—and this common link allows for non-discursive communications between seemingly isolate egos or systems in nature. Schelling’s sense of human agency is the antithesis of Kant’s rationally consistent, self-grounding freedom; we are free, but our freedom arises from and is ever shaped by our non-somatic, demonic participation in nature’s unconscious productivity. Schelling’s proto-ecological ethics identifies anthropocentrism as the consumption of the world’s bonds, or what is the same thing, as self-consumption and suicidal annihilation.

What makes humanity both a unique and complicated product of nature is the relationship it evinces between conscious and unconscious freedom, and this combination is most richly expressed for Schelling in aesthetic activity. By dividing human experience into conscious and unconscious forces Schelling created a fundamental problem for theoretical philosophy: despite its origination in and inseparability from this dark origin, it becomes unclear how consciousness is to gain any access to the unconscious life of nature. If the “indivisible remainder” necessarily limits rationality and philosophy, it becomes impossible for philosophy to function as nature’s only path toward self-consciousness (233). Concepts cannot fully capture that which gives rise to them, although this
unconscious source remains an essential part of humanity, giving rise to a situation of seemingly endless striving for unity (STI 222). For nature to become completely self-conscious is perhaps, then, impossible, for it can only reach moments of consciousness by limiting itself in and through individual human consciousness, which cannot, in as much as it is always expressed as a product of nature, become identical with it (SMCP Bowie 51).

However, if philosophy’s conceptuality and the limitations inherent to consciousness would seem to prevent any substantial unity of nature, Schelling suggests that our very rootedness in the dark origin—this participation that gives rise to the initial dilemma—allows for a limited solution. The artist expresses the unconscious fecundity of nature of which he or she is a part, but through the conditioned reality of their consciousness. This union consummates, although necessarily to a limited degree, what philosophy’s detached logocentrism cannot. Schelling suggests that the emotional effect of a great work of art is a profound sense of unity: “Just as aesthetic production proceeds from the feeling of a seemingly irresoluble contradiction, so it ends likewise, by the testimony of all artists, and of all who share their inspiration in the feeling of an infinite harmony…” (STI 223).

Given the influence of Hölderlin and other Jena Romantics on Schelling, this turn from philosophy to art, and specifically his identification of art with possibilities of natural holism is not entirely surprising (SMCP Bowie 51). However, in light of the foregoing discussion of Schelling’s complicated understanding of force and nature, his sense of the aesthetic cannot be understood simply as one of many expressions of Romantic organicism, which although diverse in their formulations, frequently recapitulated Kantian formalisms within a more mystical rhetoric.16 Although The System of Transcendental Idealism

16
represents Schelling’s most commented upon work in aesthetics, its sense of art as the union of conscious and unconscious spheres can be applied within the larger context of Schelling’s thought to produce a novel understanding of aesthetics that breaks with many Romantic conventions. For although aesthetic productivity and experience may give rise to a profound experience of harmony, terrifying possibilities are contained within this moment of union. The natural unconscious is not a structure in which human rational subjectivity finds an indemnifying image of itself. This is not to suggest that the unconscious is a mere void, for nature’s deep productivity creates the structures from which structured consciousness arises, and which furthermore provides the basic content of the artwork. However, within this content the artwork also expresses the non-organic dynamism intricated within and linking these systems. If artworks function by limiting or framing a specific content, by focusing on an object, they also express a profound decentering with this focus; what the artwork communicates—for it cannot represent such content—is the “bond” or interpenetration of dynamic forces composing nature’s products, as well as the incessant becoming that dissolves them. Zizek is one of the few scholars to recognize this possibility in Schelling’s aesthetics:

…for Schelling, art is not primarily the ‘sensible appearing of the idea’…but, rather, the sensible appearing of/in the Idea…i.e. the appearance of…the unfathomable-chaotic Ground which is simultaneously the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of the Idea…In short, far from representing the supersensible Idea in a sensible medium, the power of great art resides in the opposite achievement of evoking, within the very ‘Apolloniac’ domain of ethereal, idealized form, the formless vortex of the Real (IR 81).

Coleridge serves well as a representative thinker for this tradition, despite his rather exhaustive borrowing from Schelling in Biographia Literaria. Coleridge’s aesthetic and philosophical orientation thoroughly recapitulates Kant’s rational-formalist approach; his emphasis on “unity in multeity” equates, as Laura Dassow Walls suggests, with an understanding of the universe as governed by a pre-formed Logos (510; SNW 61).
Schelling thus opens possibilities for aesthetic concepts dramatically different from Kant’s formalist philosophy of art, although the contrast is most profound with respect to Kant’s formulations of the sublime:

though the irresistibility of nature’s might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind from the one that can be assailed and endangered by nature outside us. This keeps the humanity in our person from being degraded…(CJ 120-1).

For Kant, one passes through the crucible of the natural sublime in order to be resurrected as a pure self-grounding subject for whom the indivisible remainder of sublime forces can be disregarded as inessential. Schelling suggests contrarily that this demonic sublime is especially intuitable in the artwork, which as the union of conscious and unconscious nature marks the parity of the conscious subject with these forces. For Schelling one does not rise from the ashes of sublime experiences, either in nature or in art, more assured of reason or of the self’s boundaries. Aesthetic experience produces a remarkable communion between conscious and unconscious elements of oneself and nature, but it does so through a non-discursive communication that collapses the everyday ego.

If the artwork, rather than philosophy, constitutes our most profound access to nature, whilst nevertheless delimiting and focusing on a moment of nature’s destructive productivity, one might ask more specifically what content an artwork actually reveals? For while Zizek’s suggestion that Schelling’s vision of the aesthetic provides us a glimpse of the “formless vortex of the real” captures an important element of Schelling’s aesthetics and cosmology, it is important to remember that nature is something also between form and formlessness in his philosophy. Although the artwork gestures toward
the formless, “liquefying” tendency of nature, it cannot by definition show us pure formlessness, and we are left to ask what this restricted expression indicates. Simply reverting to a discursive answer to these questions would betray the meaning of Schelling’s important aesthetic and philosophical innovations, but the turn to art seems also more revolutionary than Schelling might have realized. When he suggests that art is now the “organon of philosophy,” the famous expression indicates still the need for a certain degree of philosophical control or detachment. Thus while his project opens a remarkable space for a new thinking and writing of nature, Schelling remains unable to inhabit it, and with the result that his account seems to leave nature’s complicated and dynamic systematicity somehow just behind his philosophical account. The Naturphilosophie is a revolutionary gesture within philosophy, but its persistently abstract and idealized vocabulary, even when empirically nuanced, struggles to express the crucial middle ground of nature.

What is of great value in Schelling’s attempt to reach this middle point, or that fluid, fragile, and inter-penetrating systematicity of nature and mind conveyed in the work of art, is his general turn against the concept of soma in any of its organic or inorganic formulations. His rich whirlpool analogy suggested an alternative to the schematization of nature in terms of apriori formal unities, and he helped more generally to replace a reigning somatic vision of the late eighteenth century with a complicated image of the tension between diverse forces. Schelling recognized that a proper study of nature would trace these forces as they produce distinct and unique systems. The next section will explore the manner in which Alexander von Humboldt provided just such a tracing of specific natural systems, and thus another rich expression of a non-organic view of nature.
Humboldt’s development of physical geography as a discipline is significant for this analysis because it provides a novel set of concepts and descriptions for producing a positive account of non-somatic nature, and for its distinct influence on writers of the American Renaissance. While Humboldt did not develop a speculative theory of aesthetics, his rich non-reductive approach to writing nature was tremendously influential on the antebellum generation.

1.4 Humboldt: Labyrinths of System and History

“…in the midst of the universal fluctuation of phenomena and vital forces— in that inextricable net-work of organisms by turns developed and destroyed— each step that we make in the more intimate knowledge of nature leads us to the entrance of new labyrinths…” (Quoted in Sachs 357)

—Humboldt, *Cosmos*

Despite his general antipathy toward highly speculative conceptualizations of nature, Alexander von Humboldt described Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* as a profound achievement, for it illustrated “the possibility of reducing all natural phenomena to the incessant conflict of elemental forces and matter” (Qtd. in Dettelbach 18-19). It is perhaps because both understood nature as a “universal fluctuation of phenomena and vital forces,” and as an “inextricable net-work of organisms by turns developed and destroyed,” that Schelling and Humboldt were at times on good terms (Walls SNW 79). Humboldt’s description of nature, or to use his term, the *Cosmos*, resonates strongly with Schelling’s whirlpool analogy. The interaction of differing forces produces objects, bodies, and organisms, none of which are fully isolated from or exterior to the “inextricable net-work” of forces, just as a whirlpool is inextricably imbricated in the dynamic life of a river. Both
opposed to Kant’s bifurcated sense of nature a complicated image of the interpenetration of forces. Nevertheless, the “empirical rationalism” by which Humboldt came to understand the cosmos represents a significant departure from Schelling’s speculative project, and this radical new approach was tremendously important for writers of the antebellum generation (C 30).

Although possessing an encyclopedic command of empirical knowledge and data, Humboldt turned explicitly against the classificatory sciences of the eighteenth century (EGP 64), developing instead a new science focused on the “chain of connection” informing the “harmoniously ordered whole” of the cosmos (C 1-2). This concept of the “whole” is something decidedly different from the dualistic formalism expressed in Kant’s third critique and much subsequent Romantic culture. Laura Dassow Walls usefully describes Humboldt’s approach as an “empirical holism,” which in sharp contrast to “rational holism,” assumes neither the formal priority of a whole over its parts, nor the bifurcation of nature into formally-generative spirit and formless matter. Empirical holism constructs its sense of the whole from the infinite diversity of changing parts, and thus envisions the whole as formally open in a dynamic universe (SNW 60-1, 84-5). Although the term “whole” might conjure a sense of formal symmetry, Humboldt used it to emphasize nature’s essential connectivity—that ubiquitous interpenetration of diverse forces from which fragile and malleable systems arise. While his description of the cosmos as a “harmoniously ordered whole” seems to intimate a providential plan and a static universe, Humboldt’s cosmos is primarily dynamic and consistently destructive (Walls PC 237-8). Muck like Schelling, Humboldt understands harmony as the balance of forces arising without an apriori and extra-material structure, but the balance is far from
stable. Harmony alludes to that minimal systematicity, without which nature would never have come to exist. Commenting on Humboldt’s studies of plant associations, Margarita Bowen characterizes this view effectively by suggesting that Humboldt understood nature “not just as an ideal harmony, but in terms of functioning interdependence” (EGT 220).

This persistent focus on the dynamic “chain of connection, by which all natural forces are linked,” indicates a rich parity with Schelling’s non-somatic description of nature, but Humboldt’s “rational empiricism” also offered its own novel articulation of bodiless life. Humboldt’s work differed decidedly from even the most empirically sensitive Naturphilosophie, for it prioritized the close investigation and instrumental measurement of nature’s individual parts, assuming little more than the principle of natural connectivity. The forms this connectivity might take could not be pre-established through a speculative formula, and the resulting descriptions of nature are thus genuinely multiple and distinct. Humboldt found the general Romantic preoccupation with polarity, one shared and disseminated by Schelling, inherently reductive (Walls SNW 89).

Schelling’s philosophy offered a novel speculative attempt to move beyond the dualistic somatism of Kant, but its formulaic bifurcation of nature into negative and positive poles represented a partial retreat into rational holism, and a simplifying distortion of the diverse operations of which nature is composed. Humboldt once suggested bluntly, and in a formulation that might summarize the general results of his life’s work, that we cannot presently “hope to reduce the immense diversity of phenomena comprised by the Cosmos to the unity of a principle” (C 56). Nature’s life composes distinct and unique rhythms and systems, and while there are general laws operating in and upon nature, its emerging structures are genuinely diverse. In order to trace this non-somatic multiplicity one
investigates nature without formal preconceptions, and accepts, or even relishes, the ultimate absence of a speculative or somatic model. From northern Africa’s vast deserts, to the great mountain chains of Asia, to the dynamics of South American rivers, the profound effects of the Gulf Stream, and the habits of the earth-consuming Otomac peoples of the Orinoco river banks, along with the other multitudinous phenomena Humboldt investigated, nature evinces a multiplicity of different but linked systems discoverable on the largest and smallest of scales.

Nature has no general structure—no uniform pattern informs the whole—but a diversity of bodiless systems exist, thus orienting the study of nature toward the careful investigation of these structures, their unique characteristics, and their interactions. A critically important element of this process was the numerical and often mechanical measurement of changing phenomena—an approach for which Humboldt was sharply criticized by Schiller. The latter contended that such numerical representations constitute a perverse rational reductionism, robbing nature of its vital mysteries (Walls SNW 79). But Humboldt’s attempt was quite the opposite; numerical measurement accompanies vivid description, personal impressions, and pictorial diagrams in his work, creating a rich record of shifting modes of intelligibility. Indeed, rather than standardizing and homogenizing nature, here measurement serves to manifest the practically limitless differences nature continuously produces. And while Humboldt identified his method as a “rational empiricism,” he carefully limited the use of reason as a standard by which to develop accounts of the universe: “It is not the purpose of this essay on the physical history of the world to reduce all the sensible phenomena to a small number of abstract principles, based on reason only. The physical history of the universe, whose exposition I
attempt to develop, does not pretend to rise to the perilous abstractions of a purely rational science of nature…” (C 38-9).

Humboldt’s general openness to the diverse structures of natural systems also helped to develop a mode of thinking foreign to rational holism’s typically hierarchical schematizations of nature. Frequent encounters with surprising phenomena, such as the unpredictable behavior of fluid or liquid systems, forced Humboldt frequently to adopt a relational logic in order to describe nature (Ette 165). Ottmar Ette suggests, and with reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of the concept, that Humboldt’s thinking expresses a rhizomatic connectivity of nature—a tendency for utterly different systems to combine without a clear center of control or line of development (171; TP 3-25). Indeed, if somatic thought works to indemnify particular relations by codifying the limits of the body, rhizomatic thought represents a thoroughly non-somatic alternative. Humboldt’s cosmos is a mutually informing interaction of malleable systems, which are thus never perfectly self-enclosed or self-identical. The cosmos is a “functioning interdependence” characterized by a lack of formal authority from any one point within itself: For Humboldt, as it was for Deleuze and Guattari, this rhizome is never simply an image of a causally determined external nature, but a notion intended to refute the self-grounding subject. Science is thus not simply the conquest of matter by mind, but the participation of mind in matter’s multitudinous and democratic hybridity.

Ottmar Ette’s association of Humboldt’s relational logic with Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome can be extended to describe a greater similarity between what the latter describes as “nomad science” and Humboldt’s “physical geography.” Unlike “royal science,” which rests on hylomorphic assumptions about matter, and which functions
through a vertical hierarchy of regulators, nomad science works on a hydrological or flow-based model without an assumed formal unity of nature: “the model in question is one of becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant” (TP 361). Humboldtian science similarly describes a polyvalent and dynamic cosmos, and like nomad science it resists the intervention of state control, seeking instead the singular and democratic connections in nature that might challenge existing relations of power.

Despite their aleatory growth, rhizomes can be parsed into specific divisions and distinctions, and one of Humboldt’s important innovations was to replace the somatic schematization of natural difference with a notion of fluid “regions” (EGP 76-7). Although nature might not be divisible into discrete bodies, Humboldt recognized the existence of spatially limited and temporary zones, which while never fully separated from one another, are nonetheless distinguishable and measurable. In some respects the term “region” overemphasizes the spatial components of this divisibility, when the differences are broadly qualitative and quantitative; Humboldt defined regions by their contrasting climates, soils, plants, animals, air temperature, human civilizations, and by virtually any other measurable phenomena, including their aesthetic affects on an observer (EGP 78). The basic assumption accompanying the study of any region is that a fluid connectivity relates each of its phenomena, and to such an extent that they cannot be understood as expressing isolated identities—indeed, the identification of something measurable within a region leads differentially to more connections and forces, and thus to systems beyond the region. The more modern term “ecosystem” resonates strongly with Humboldt’s sense of a region, and while he was instrumental in developing the
science that led to contemporary ecology, the word connotes something perhaps too bio-centric to encapsulate the radical vision of interpenetrating systems defining a region (Nicolson 309). The term “system,” might better describe this general and active “chain of connection” between various phenomena, both organic and inorganic, than either “region” or “ecosystem” does.¹⁷

This perspective dramatically deflated notions of human exceptionalism, locating the origin of traditionally transcendental products of culture and science within specific systems. This humility was due partly to the sheer complexity and enormity of the task confronting Humboldt, who was well aware, despite his encyclopedic command of empirical data, that the human mind could never fully grasp the cosmos’ labyrinthine processes (Walls SNW 92). Schelling had, in a slightly similar fashion, attacked anthropocentrism on the basis of inherent human limitations, but his general narrative of history nevertheless teleologically privileges humanity. For Humboldt, language, reason, and more generally human culture are a few of many naturally interpenetrating systems, and while he was deeply concerned with social injustices, and supported the responsible expansion of agriculture, Humboldt seems as concerned with understanding the inextricability, if not total parity, of “human” and “natural” net-works. In his Physical Tableau of Equatorial Regions, while exhaustively describing the numerous factors determinative of the varying environmental regions of the Cordilleras, Humboldt included

¹⁷ The term “system” is used here in a general manner, in order to reference the distinctive, minimal recapitulations of identifiable relations of forces (including matter) without any apriori or transcendental foundations. Each system is unique, and while systems are only identifiable in as much as they perpetuate a particular arrangement, systems are also constantly changed by their interaction with other systems. The term will be used throughout the remainder of this analysis in place of Humboldt’s “region.”
soil cultivation and human culture among the many systems arising from and influencing the physical characteristics of the region (132-5). There is no hint here of a spiritual teleology culminating in the arrival of man and language. Traditionally “human” systems evolve seamlessly with “natural” ones, and both can be destroyed with equal ease by small changes in the local configuration of forces.

Although Humboldt resisted metaphysical speculations regarding the origin of the cosmos, his inclusion of the human within descriptions of nature’s rhizomatic life suggest conclusions similar to those Schelling developed in his exploration of the human subject’s complicated genesis. While Humboldt’s understanding of the cosmos avoids conjectures about a cosmic beginning, his thought describes a complicated imbrication of agencies and networks of force that are ambiguously teleological. There is no salvation through vitalism for Humboldt; life has no special priority or transcendental detachment by which analogical support could be offered for the subject’s rational holism (C 388-9). While Humans possess a conditioned agency, and are capable of transforming elements of nature and themselves, they are one malleable part among others in an open cosmos. Reason and the close empirical study of nature reveal its connectivity, but they also suggest a larger connectivity of forces beyond the grasp of reason, and from which reason cannot fully isolate itself. As it was for Schelling, reason is not opposed to this “unconscious productivity,” but its reach is circumscribed by it as a limitation that frustrates purely discursive or rational expression.

Humboldt’s new science of nature was tremendously important for numerous reasons, among which were the specific data it collected based on careful instrumental measurements, and its expansive view of nature as a collection of connected systems. But
a less commented upon element of Humboldt’s broader cultural, and particularly literary
importance is the extent to which his writing broke from prevalent Romantic conventions
and assumptions. Like many of his Romantic contemporaries, and particularly Goethe,
Humboldt lamented intensely the emerging divisions between the disciplines, and
believed in the ideal unity of a poetic, philosophical, and scientific approach to knowledge
production (Bowen 217). His seamless combination of more “poetic” or aesthetic
descriptions with what we might recognize as decidedly factual scientific information
connects him to a larger and important Romantic preoccupation with the limits of
reason—one that Schelling formulated in terms of the conscious and unconscious
productivity of nature. But this attempt to “bring the whole soul of man into activity,” as
Coleridge suggested, or to unify the various faculties of man through a polyvalent form of
expression and knowledge, does not fully encapsulate Humboldt’s unique contribution
(Biographia Literaria XIV). While he was in some respects more a genuine Romantic,
more a legitimate synthesizer of numerous disciplines than many of his contemporaries,
Humboldt’s writings leave the impression of something radically new. The title of his
Views of Nature (Ansichten der Natur) indicates the experimental direction of this
innovative approach. Humboldt seems to suggest that there is no perspective from which
to see nature as a whole, but we are capable, within the reach of our limited capacities, of
experiencing its various parts, and from the varying perspectives of our diverse “viewing”
faculties.

Humboldt confronted the difficult issue of how best to express this aleatory
rhizome without imposing a formal identity upon it. How, in other words, can writing
speak to the bodiless systematicity of nature and experience while registering the
singularity of each system? Simply to describe in a traditionally poetic or philosophical mode this non-somatic life would have obfuscated a critically important element of Humboldt’s thought—that nature is expressed in the particularity of each system, and thus each system must be distinguished from others through various means, including measurements expressed numerically and through close attention to local detail.

Expressions of nature became expressions of specific systems, and this was also because, as Laura Dassow Walls suggests, the limitations and influence of the observer’s gaze are included in the account (PC 232-3). For Humboldt, writing nature means foregrounding the limit of human focus, which includes narrowing attention to the workings of one system at a time, and perhaps even only to a few elements of each system. This is not to suggest that his writing failed to reach for the highest aspirations of his science—to map the greater chains of connectivity between all systems—for many of Humboldt’s specific “views” of systems spill into each other, indicating the “functioning interdependence” of the whole. Nevertheless, our limited temporal, spatial, and intellectual perspective constrain writing to a focus on specific systems, although importantly also to the porous borders between them—to the demonic thresholds indicative of spaces and times ambiguously internal and external.

One way in which Humboldt utilized writing to speak for the whole, while minding human limitations and the particularity of each system, was by avoiding many of the conventions that traditionally tie writing to a formally hierarchical structure. Humboldt did not narrate, especially teleologically, the various pieces of nature, past and present, into a single line of development. While elements of the human world are a necessary part of his works, Humboldt avoided structures that rely on the unity of the
subject or self—on the unity of temporal events and meanings that isolate and define “personal” experience.\(^{18}\) His works represent a basic rejection of scientific schemas drawn from the notion of somatic types and their degrees of essentiality. Humboldt never built a classificatory system confined by the discrete delineations of individual pages or diagrams. He once described the cosmos as a “mass of force and matter”—one emerging from a gargantuan history without a clear transcendental structure—and it follows that Humboldt’s works are meant to strike the reader as just such an overwhelming mass (C 3). *Views of Nature* in particular, while organized loosely according to specific types of systems—steppes and deserts, for example—ranges suddenly across the globe and across time, shifting abruptly from one system to the next with “dizzying” effect (Walls TC 256). The text mixes a widely diverse set of phenomena without a totalizing set of links, as though the debris of an explosion had been randomly collected and compressed. Sylvie Romanowski similarly describes Humboldt’s famous *Tableau of the Equatorial Regions* as a “composite” or “collage,” a characterization that captures well the non-sequential mass of systems expressed in *Views of Nature* and elsewhere (HPS 187).

In his book on Proust, Gilles Deleuze draws on a Neoplatonic distinction useful in clarifying the unique effect of Humboldt’s style. Deleuze suggests that time can either be understood as *explicable*—as literally something that can be *unfolded*, and thus sequentially distributed and organized—or as *complicated* (45). Within complicated time definite sequences are not yet differentiable, leading to a composite mass of experience,

\(^{18}\) This is not to suggest that Humboldt avoids personal impressions in his works; his *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* describes his specific journey through various parts of South America, but this journey is not shaped by Humboldt’s inner life. It bears witness to a personal component of science—the profound and far from impersonal involvement of self in measurement and observation—but without a driving inner narrative or allegorical function.
like the one Marcel witnesses when bighting into his madeleine cookie. Such experiences are comprised of an unstructured collection of folds, of com-pli-cations that mark a time prior to the orders of the subject. While Humboldt’s aesthetic concerns were no doubt quite different from Proust’s, there is a general sense in which his writing expresses a thoroughly complicated sense of experience and nature. Each fold or system of the cosmos can be glimpsed as distinct, but the greater collection of mutually informing systems, the “inextricable net-work,” cannot be unraveled. Humboldt’s writing does not mirror back the sequential unity of the self-grounding subject through an unfolded or explicaded chronology of nature. One catches instead a glimpse of a radically democratic sense of time and experience, a symphony of systems without hierarchy, a bodiless self drawn in multiple directions at once. Humboldt’s writing also explicates specific systems, but it avoids reducing them to a causal series by indicating the infinite diversity of systems bordering, or even permeating each other in space and time.

Although not all of Humboldt’s writings may have equally expressed this complication, works such as Views of Nature gestured toward new possibilities for writing his vision of nature. Humboldt’s profound influence on American letters in the antebellum period stemmed from both his novel view of nature as a “net-work” of systems, and from the complicated writing he began to develop in order to express this “mass of force and matter.” His influence is particularly apparent for Thoreau, for whom, as Laura Dassow Walls illustrates, Humboldt’s vision, methodology, and style were of direct and paramount importance (SNW 134-46). Indeed, Thoreau’s style in works such as Walden and Cape Cod creates a similar sense of a mass of complications—of a swarm of distinct bodiless systems sprouting along the littoral regions he explored. Melville’s Moby-Dick,
with its close focus on the numerous material systems comprising the Nantucket whaling profession, strikes the reader with a similarly dizzying effect. Both writers sought to replace a sense of somatically organized nature with one that nevertheless preserved a notion of regional difference—of distinctive but interacting systems—and to develop an aesthetic style, whether fictional or non-fictional, that witnessed this non-somatic life without the hierarchical interventions of the Kantian paradigm.

But this response to Kant, and more specifically to the tradition of Romantic rational holism, also resonated strongly with Schelling’s more speculative vision of a bodiless nature. At the limits of specific systems there always appears a hint of the greater connectivity beyond the observer’s view, as well as the all-consuming productivity of nature that destroys and recreates the world. This impersonal white whale, and the subject’s inextricable origin and participation in its demonic procreativity and destruction are also of major thematic importance for the writers analyzed here. Their writing speaks both to Schelling’s non-somatic vision of the universe, and to his corresponding realization that expressions of nature and the subject’s participation within it must be the task of art and not philosophy. Nevertheless, as Humboldt’s work suggests, this union of conscious and unconscious productivity was for Poe, Melville, Thoreau, and Fuller, an aggregate of different modes of experience—of measurement, close observation, contextual research, and deep feeling—oriented toward a specific range of localized systems. Although certainly a somewhat simplifying characterization, one might productively suggest that these writers function within a sense of nature and a corresponding form of writing tensely resonant with both Humboldt and Schelling, and thus not reducible to either. Both offered a sense of the crisis of the somatic tradition and
responses to it, which when thought together, open a space of possibilities realized by antebellum literature. One is confronted in particular works of the period with both the terrifying and exhilarating imbrication of self in a greater, supersensuous productivity, and the phenomenal expression of this bodiless life in specific systems. As the next chapter suggests, the stakes of this hybrid project are no more dramatically investigated than in *Moby-Dick*, a work in which the full range of somatic and non-somatic thought are expressed within a massive complication of bodiless systems and against the backdrop of the whale’s demonic whiteness.
CHAPTER TWO

MISBEHAVING TOOLS: MOBY-DICK’S MATERIAL FACTORIES

European Romanticism’s identification of life with the human afforded a highly successful means of indemnifying and amplifying anthropocentrism. It also opened a posthuman perspective with radical implications for Western culture’s gendered, racial, and ecologically destructive social systems. The organism, among other influential figures and images of life, provided a ready concept by which to judge the vital worth of beings in terms of existent social and racial hierarchies; man, and more specifically the Caucasian male, might thus be designated as the apogee of creation in as much as he was thought to reflect life’s drive toward individual unity and freedom. From this perspective, all other creations appear either as deficiently vital, or what perhaps amounts to the same thing, as excessively material. However, the equation of man with life, and the general equation of life with nature, also opened the contrary possibility of nullifying the sacrosanct limits of the human. If the organism and its vaunted freedom proved to be nothing more than a socially constructed vitalist myth, “life” threatened to become the concept marking the human’s equal participation in a multiplicity of shifting and amorphous systems. Antebellum intellectuals and writers expressed and defended both senses of life, often producing works expressive of a general intellectual and practical crisis surrounding the category in American experience.
Although the specific understanding of terms such as “life,” “matter,” “spirit,” or “autonomy” varied significantly within different philosophical systems, one tendency predominates in highly influential American articulations of their relations: the sensuous and material aspects of nature must be understood as analogically and literally connected to a supersensuous unity or power reflected most purely in the unity of the human individual and its consciousness. What Emerson described as “reason,” or “spirit”—the evidence of a self-grounding and divine lawfulness—was often seen in all sensuous phenomena, but gained its proper ideality through the purifying operations of the human mind and through the expression of human agency. In *Nature* Emerson described matter, or that which appears as substantially other to the mind, as “a remoter and inferior incarnation of God,” although importantly still the emanation of the divine by which truth can be discovered and measured (42). There is an “eternal distinction between the soul and the world” (41), and not merely an illusion of perception, although Emerson suggests that he harbors only love for material things (38). And yet just a few pages prior he praised Euler’s resistance to empiricism—his capacity to transfer “nature into mind,” and to leave “matter like an outcast corpse” (37).

If this last statement has a ring of celebratory derision, it is because matter or nature occasionally takes on a far more threatening visage in Emerson’s works than these providential characterizations might suggest. In “Fate” Emerson famously described how “every jet of chaos which threatens to exterminate us, is convertible by intellect into wholesome force” (321). Here Nature or matter seem far more ambiguous in their orientation to the spiritual apogee of creation that is man. Indeed, intellect’s role appears crucially to protect the human spirit from terrible psychic trauma, and through physical
manipulation, to protect it by altering those forces capable of “exterminating” humanity. Although there might be ways to synthesize effectively this position with those articulated above, and while the complex nuances of Emerson’s voluminous reflections on these topics cannot be done justice here, these examples demonstrate how “matter” or sensuous “nature” play shifting roles in order to uphold a specific sense of the human individual and its destiny within his thought. Matter is that which reflects the divinity of the human mind—sensuously evidencing the higher truths of the spirit—and the substantial base that connects us to others and to some larger reality beyond the individual’s consciousness. It is also, however, designated as essentially inferior to spirit, and even potentially harmful to it, and thus something to be manipulated in order to reflect the singular cosmic priority that is human development. Matter thus upholds an inviolate sense of human power, autonomy, identity, and a goal of expanding control by connecting the human profoundly to the totality of sensuous nature—to all that appears substantially “other” than spirit—and by situating man as its ideal expression or reflection. Alternately “power” or spirit is differentiated enough from matter to guarantee the former’s autonomy through a contrast with the latter’s “chaotic” anarchy or insipid cadaverousness.

The genius of Emerson’s method consists in accounting for matter without dismissing it as a mere illusion of the mind, but also by never granting it enough substantial alterity to call into question the self-identity or place of “man.” He also grants faculties besides reason meaningful access to sensuous experience, while carefully circumscribing the implications such access might produce. At times Emerson provides a Romantic vision of ecstatic participation in the living whole of being, but at the same
time he champions the American apotheosis of the inviolate individual and its right to
mastery. And while there is an undeniable and rich tension within Emerson’s work
between these tendencies, he often labors to produce a system that indemnifies the unity,
transcendence, and power of the human subject (and in this case a conspicuously male
subject). This emphasis on the self as the locus of power is of course much commented
upon in scholarly work on Emerson, and significantly in work that links Emerson’s
thought to Ahab and his tragic destiny.  

However, general reflections on the parity of the
fictional character’s philosophy and Emerson’s, while undoubtedly productive, neglect a
more specific point of connection related to the issues of materiality and life. For if the
individual man is the purest expression of spiritual autonomy and unity for Emerson, he
is also a being with a physical body, and one that cannot be treated merely as a material
machine or “outcast corpse.” The body, in other words, has some privileged relationship
to the spirit of man, and ideally reflects something of this spirit in its proper functioning
and organization.

This is particularly evident in Emerson’s condemnation of the negative impact on
American bodies and spirits resulting from increasing labor specialization in the early
nineteenth century. In “The American Scholar” he disappointedly observes how: “The
state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk,
and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow,
but never a man” (54). Although this critique seemingly utilizes the analogy of bodily
organization (“trunk” and “members”) to characterize a problem of sociality, the second

________

19 See, for example, Michael McLoughlin’s “Defying Nature: Moby-Dick and the Limits of Emersonian Individualism” in Dead Letters to a New World: Melville, Emerson, and American Transcendentalism (New York: Routledge, 2003), 53-94.
half of the figure contrastingly locates the primary crisis within a somatic imbalance of the *individual*. The social unit is not, in other words, the primary body that properly distributes functions and thereby constitutes the identity of a man. The most essential body is that of the individual, in which we presume the parts ideally form a unified whole from which proper functioning and health result.²⁰ It is because individuals have lost connection with the spiritual unity of which their bodies are the material sign that society suffers. Men have become only a finger, a neck, a stomach, when the unified body contains within itself a diversity of functions, and more importantly, a centralized guiding agency to which they respond.

Implicit to this image of disorganized or monstrous bodies is the notion of the living body’s proper state as a unified whole, and the centralized autonomy it provides. A properly functioning body is one that can fulfill various functions, but which most importantly maintains a capacity to determine its identity rather than being purely conditioned by the “jets of force” surrounding it. For if matter or the “world” is ultimately ambiguous as an image of spirit—appearing at times as brute force and at others as ideal design—the unity attributed to the living body provides a constant material correlate for and expression of spirit’s autonomy and identity. The supposedly seamless connection of somatic part and whole speaks to a self-sustaining agency or plan impossible to imagine as the product of crude determinism. The living body is the sign of

---

²⁰ One does not, in other words, become a complete human being by existing as a well-connected part within the social body; Emerson’s use of the term “man” here demands always a sense of a whole that does not allow for such compartmentalization. The figure does not reinforce a notion of social unity by comparing it to the part-whole unity of a living body as much as it uses this image to replace the idea of the social with that of the individual. By this I do not mean to suggest that Emerson dismisses the importance of social life or the value of past and present tradition as educators of the soul; and yet in no sense can these tools replace the individual as the primordial fount of living spiritual energy and reason from which culture arises.
spirit’s self-originating power and rational lawfulness, and the evidence for its primordial manifestation in the individual. And Emerson’s cure for the maladies of the new nation thus falls back on a sense of bodily unity as the final guarantor of self-determination: “What is the remedy?...that, if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him” (70). Utilize your instincts—those rudimentary faculties that evidence the self-orientation and thus unity of any organism—and you cannot fail. Indeed, all of material nature will “come round” and serve the purposes of such a royal self.

*Moby-Dick*’s main Caucasian characters (Ishmael and Ahab) utilize various concepts or senses of “matter” to substantiate and indemnify an image of privileged personal autonomy and subjective unity, marking Melville’s novel as a complex reflection on the issues haunting Emerson’s thought and antebellum American culture. Ishmael mostly avoids providing a sensuous or material analogue for the sovereignty he arrogates to himself as an artist or thinker, but he frequently draws upon images labeled as “material” in order to contrast matter’s limitations with his sovereignly autonomous self. Emerson contrarily locates a material correlate for the soul in the body, thus seemingly unifying the supersensuous self with the totality of sensuous experience, but in a fashion that complexly repeats a similar division. For if the body’s transcendent formal unity and instinctual resources are the privileged material instantiation of the individual’s spiritual autonomy and its expression, the remainder of nature becomes ambiguously valuable as a guarantor of the same. If “matter” or the “world,” unlike the body, challenge the self’s autonomy or identity, or if they simply fail analogically to confirm this autonomy (as Emerson occasionally fears they do), matter can then be conveniently
A striking analogy in *Moby-Dick* that resonates strongly with Emerson’s use of the body as the image for the individual’s spiritual power. While praising whales for the physical invulnerability granted them by their thick blubber, Ishmael makes a telling observation: “It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls and interior spaciousness. Oh, man! Admire and model thyself after the whale! Do though, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou too, live in this world without being of it” (307). This statement is partly a moral and practical exhortation, but it also reveals a great deal about Ishmael’s ontological sensibilities. He designates the living body as a unity, marked off by a barrier that excepts it from mechanical or chemical changes in the matter surrounding it. It possesses an “interior” differentiated from the external fluctuations of “this world,” and represents a possibility of self-generated autonomy and consistency in an otherwise chaotic and compulsory milieu. And although men do not have thick blubber walls separating “inside” from “outside,” one can hear in Ishmael’s statement something akin to Emerson’s prescription for the individual to “plant himself indomitably on his instincts”—or to rely on the body as a material or sensuous guarantor of centralized order and freedom.

These prominent images of somatic unity speak to the complex tensions and fears informing aspects of the culture of American individualism and transcendentalism, for which the need to experience profound unity with sensuous nature had to be aligned with an equally strong desire to protect a sense of the human individual’s sacral autonomy and higher destiny. The body served as an ideal analogue in this context, for it is both a material object among others, and the most intimate and personal connecting point with
sensuous nature (“the body” being always potentially one’s own body). More importantly, the body’s discrete unity seems to represent a principle of autonomous order that both expresses the supersensuous freedom of nature while confirming the human individual’s place as the superlative realization of this divine autonomy. Rather than representing an ideal analogue for spirit because it is perfectly connected to the sensuous world, the body is prized for its capacity to “live in this world without being of it.” Its ideal unity identifies it as a locus of inner power and stability, and thus potentially always as something dramatically different from the more “material” aspects of sensuous nature. Thus while the somatic analogue provides perhaps some sense of connection to the material world, it often served as a means of significant differentiation from the latter, and the evidence of a border sufficiently impervious to indemnify the self from exposure to an “outside” that challenges its sovereignty or selfhood.

It was not simply any physical body that performed such multivalent analogical work—even if this work is somewhat contradictory in its functions—but specifically *vital*, or *living* bodies. Although neither Ishmael nor Emerson explicitly designates the bodies utilized in their analogies as living, both rely on conspicuously organic imagery to characterize their ideals of robust subjectivity. As the analysis of European vitalism in Chapter One demonstrated, organicism represented a highly influential conceptualization of life for European Romantic and idealist thought in the early nineteenth century. For Kant “life” was the organic unity of part and whole comprising certain bodies—a formulation that reveals a set of assumptions, concerns, and intellectual practices akin to those of Ishmael and Emerson. Kant’s articulation of a concept of life in his third critique attempts, much like Ishmael and Emerson, to locate within sensuous experience not only
a basic analogue for the divine lawfulness of the supersensuous sphere, but an image by which that lawfulness can be identified with the presumed rationality and autonomy of the human individual. The organism thus provided an ideal image, for it represents in its somatic unity of part and whole the type of formal perfection attributable only to a cause functioning outside the crude mechanical causality of matter (CJ 253). The bodily centralization inherent to the idea of the organism—its primordial structural and practical orientation toward itself—furthermore describes a will or self-originating autonomy incarnated as the individual body. Organically structured bodily life thus provides the analogy that preserves a sense of the individual as rationally self-identical and free, while illustrating its sensuous reality and the position of essential superiority it assumes over brute matter. Ishmael’s whale analogy similarly locates in the bodily unity of the whale the image of a unified self bulwarked against an exteriorized material chaos. And the whale’s “strong individual vitality” pictures Emerson’s dream of a future American man—one that amplifies the power and reason implicit to the sacral unity of his body and its “instincts.” In each of these examples a specifically vital, organic body provides the analogy that works to reflect and indemnify a sense of the individual’s spiritual invulnerability and agential capabilities.

However, as the analysis of Kant’s organicism in Chapter One suggested, the attempt to indemnify the spiritual unity and autonomy of the individual by comparing it with a specific sensuous phenomena—with organic-somatic life—proved to be a questionable and rather anxious philosophical endeavor. Ian Hamilton Grant suggests that for Kant’s third critique “Life acts as a kind of Orphic guardian for philosophy’s descent into the physical” (10)—a guarantee of protection for a journey into territory disturbing
to the lawful rationalism he hoped to find evidence for there. And yet by so emphasizing a profound connection between phenomenal and noumenal spheres, Kant opens philosophy to the very threat he was perhaps attempting to avoid—the threat of a materiality understood as incomprehensible alterity. In the realm of pure speculation the concept of “life” could be isolated from anything that might challenge its usefulness as the sensuous analogy for anthropocentric conceptions of rational and purposive selfhood, but the empirical and practical exploration of the concept would produce dramatically different results. Denise Gigante, writing of a broad Romantic literary and scientific trends, suggests that “while the sublime object always threatened to exceed formal constraints, when it slid from theory into praxis, from imagined into actual, animated power, it could also slide out of the sublime and into a distinctly Romantic version of monstrosity” (5). Instead of the physical guardian of subjective unity, life might prove to be the evidence for the human subject’s imbrication in powers or forces without clear boundaries or anthropocentric purpose. Thus Schelling, in sharp contrast to Kant, described all material existence as “alive” (Wirth CL 88), thereby nullifying any separate concept of “life,” and with it a superior and self-grounding position in nature for rational human subjectivity.

Although Ishmael may have dreamt wishfully of “animated power” in terms of robustly bordered and ordered bodies—of selves seemingly sprung from their own internal puissance and bulwarked against the “outside”—Moby-Dick begins with a far slipperier definition of the concept. While musing about the human attraction to water, and especially oceans, Ishmael suggests that they offer us a possibility for veracious reflection on ourselves. However, when he glances into the watery mirror, or figuratively
“reflects,” or contemplates existence, he claims that one sees nothing but the “image of
the ungraspable phantom of life” (5). The phrase describes vitality as always already
sliding beyond any border the human mind might place upon it; our only “grasp” on life
and the human self is thus not only associated with the malleability and impermanence of
the aqueous, but paradoxically constituted by the lack of determined content here
associated with images in general. It is relentlessly formless or monstrous in the sense
Gigante uses, and fundamentally challenging to the narcissistic fantasy of a sensuous
nature that reflects back to the human a stable and unified image of itself. Ishmael’s
reference to a mysterious oceanic “phantom” furthermore directly connects “life” to
monstrosity by referencing Moby Dick, who he describes shortly thereafter as a “grand
hooded phantom,” and with whom the notion of monstrosity is frequently associated
throughout the novel (7). The statement also suggests an important similarity between
“reflection” and Kant’s search for a sensuous analogue for transcendental subjectivity.
Both attempt to isolate a sensuous image or entity reflective of the spiritual self, and both
identify “life” as this “physical” correlate. Perhaps responding directly to vitalist attempts
to indemnify human subjectivity and its supposed position as the telos of creation, *Moby-
Dick* forces this process to produce dramatically different conclusions. Here the ocean
reflects back to our gaze formless phantoms indicative of a life without codified
boundaries or form, and without a clear source oriented toward human reason and
activity.

*Moby-Dick*’s disruption of anthropocentric vitalism takes many forms, but it
focuses importantly on the mythology of the organic body and the American self it was
intended to substantiate. The text’s most focused exploration of a specific somatic-
organic American vitalism appears in the complex figure of Ahab, for whom the identification of self with body becomes a virtual obsession and source of endless trauma. Although Ishmael is deeply troubled by challenges to his personal identification with notions of individualized autonomy, power, and purity, he also importantly explores radical formulations of self and nature that complex or overturn these sensibilities. Ahab contrarily and viciously defends the expectation that nature exist either as a reflection of an assumed supersensuous subjective autonomy and identity—of which the human individual and its supposedly organic body are the basic unit and exemplar—or similarly that nature serve as a mere “mechanical” tool for achieving the latter’s purposes.

This chapter explores the varied objects, creatures, and humans that disrupt Ahab and Ishmael’s attempts to foist atomizing and self-supporting images of life and matter onto their experience. Rather than approaching this analysis chronologically, the following readings explore Moby-Dick’s attributions of vitality and agency to things that would have appeared as dead or lacking life to the antebellum Caucasian male. Through a series of subchapters, each of which focuses on how a different object or system estranges Ishmael and Ahab’s ideal of sacrosanct bodily and subjective integrity, the chapter investigates Moby-Dick’s radical intervention into American debates about life. It demonstrates how the novel sought both to reveal the reigning paradigm of organic and racialized vitalism—one that subtended the biopolitical systems responsible for racial exploitation and the brutal consumption of non-human life—and how it imagines an alternative sense of life as a series of interpenetrating systems without a hierarchical structure. By organizing these analyses around specific thematic, or “material” nodes, the chapter expresses a critical aspect of the novel’s manner of thinking beyond a vitalist
dualism; rather than abstractly attributing “life” to nature, Melville witnesses the diverse agencies swarming through and constructing a world—a world that becomes vertiginously “posthuman” through its recurring focus on bits of bone, skin, and wood.

2.1 Bodies and Bones

Just prior to his final suicidal assault on Moby Dick, Ahab abruptly draws a distinction informing his view of sensuous nature:

And yet, ’tis a noble and heroic thing the wind! Who ever conquered it! In every fight it has the last and bitterest blow. Run tilting at it, and you but run through it. Ha! A coward wind that strikes stark naked men, but will not stand to receive a single blow. Even Ahab is a braver thing—a nobler thing than that. Would now the wind had a body; but all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents (original italics, 564).

Ahab’s speech depicts a universe divided between discrete bodies—capable both of acting and being affected by the actions of other agents—and “bodiless” things or forces. As physical or sensuous things, the latter possess the capacity for action, but their “bodiless” quality prevents them from in turn becoming the “object” of other agencies. The game appears to be severely rigged against “mortal man,” who epitomizes the helpless state of the embodied agent fully exposed to the abuses of its “bodiless” counterparts. Besides conveying Ahab’s generally agonic and tragic worldview, the passage begins to define a concept of somatic life with important interpretive significance for the novel. Ahab does not simply select any formally defined material object as his example of a body, but specifically a “living” body, and importantly a human one. It is not, for example, a ship struck by a blast of wind that suffers a bodily blow, but the “naked” men standing on its
deck. This image also suggests that a living body is a centralized order manifest in the unity of its parts and their obedience to a single will. This unity makes vital bodies supremely vulnerable because, unlike machines, their parts necessarily relate to a discrete self. However inefficacious in the face of “bodiless” agencies the organically organized self might be, its unity describes an internally governed and generated source of power capable of responding self-referentially to its environment. While the living body is hardly impervious to the effects of its surroundings, like Ishmael’s bulwarked whale, it nevertheless represents a distinct division of interior and exterior space. Finally, the passage suggests that Ahab’s “outrage” and “exasperation” result from the profound connection of the body to the human self or soul. Although like Kant he recognizes an analogy between somatic-organic unity and subjective identity and autonomy, Ahab’s trauma and rage are the result of a stronger identification of the body with the self. The Captain does not hunt his “dismemberer” because Moby Dick damaged a mere sensuous analogue or image of his true self; Ahab’s tireless laments for his lost leg evidence instead the indistinguishability of subjectivity from its bodily existence (183).

Nevertheless, if Ahab’s cosmic lament is meant to apply directly to his personal woes, and his attempt to strike back at his “bodiless” tormentors, it seems conspicuously inappropriate as the stated motivation for his pursuit of the white whale. The reader’s understanding of Ahab’s quest has been heavily conditioned throughout the novel by terrifying premonitions of Moby Dick’s immense bodily strength and size. Although

21 Eyal Peretz similarly identifies Ahab’s “madness” with a confusion of “sense” demonstrative of the profound implication of the self in the sensuous: “We might therefore suggest that what comes together for Ahab through long months of subjection as an exposed wounded body and his impotence in orienting the ship is the enigmatic relation between the two meanings of the word “sense...it is the madness of the transition and relation between the physical meaning of sense—the exposure of the tactile surfaces of the body to external provocation, and the meaning of sense as meaning, direction, orientation” (51-2).
possibly invincible or supernatural, the novel represents the monster as a physical body into which Ahab might plunge his puny harpoons. How then can Moby Dick become the representative of “bodiless” forces? This incongruity can be partly attributed to Ahab’s need to utilize Moby Dick as the scapegoat for the agencies that more generally enrage him. He imagines the whale’s great body as the avatar of greater forces—perhaps the ocean itself—that have no organic center to target and attack. But it also speaks to a tendency, repeated in other important oratorical moments, to evince a slight ambiguity or slippage in the concepts through which he justifies his bloody hunt. A surreptitious awareness or fear occasionally emerges from behind the façade of Ahab’s tales of personal tragedy and gestures to a markedly different reality. If the reader refuses to accept the Captain’s carefully constructed tragic and agonic cosmology, a productive confusion of bodily and bodiless life invades this and other passages.22

Here and elsewhere, Ahab’s tragic narrative relies upon and subtends a sharp distinction between bodily and bodiless vitality.23 Ahab appears to emphasize the brutal injustice inflicted on living bodies, but his words function equally, if not more effectively, 

22 The term “bodiless life” or “bodiless vitality” is not meant to suggest a homogenous or transcendental sense of life or creative power. It is used to describe an alternative to schematizations of nature that identify life with the formal unity of bodies rather than systematic processes and forces that construct, unite, and deconstruct bodies. To suggest that Moby-Dick envisions nature as an expression of “bodiless life” is not to say that nature lacks bodies; Ahab’s loss of a leg is, indeed, a severe bodily trauma. It does, however, suggest that nature is not composed of formally complete bodies absolutely divided between an interior and exterior milieu. Bodies are never “complete” in this context, for they are composed of forces and substances traversing their boundaries and uniting them with diverse systems. In as much as these forces, substances, and systems (none of which are fully distinguishable from each other) construct and traverse nature, bodiless life cannot be isolated to a specific type of body, such as the organism. This does not mean that there is no distinction between organic and inorganic life in the novel, but it suggests that the notion of life cannot be excluded from any aspect of nature.

23 Cesare Casarino similarly identifies “Ahab’s cult of psychological depths” as the “emblematic expression of humanist nihilism” that leads to his “isolation from the world” (108).
to uphold the notion of the organically unified body and its difference from bodilessness. This difference must be upheld because it supports the inviolate sense of subjective autonomy and human exceptionalism that—far more than any truly tragic sense of self and world—inform Ahab’s attempts to punish a material reality that refuses to conform to this order. Ahab’s struggle to keep separate the bodily and the bodiless is also an attempt to shield him from terrors arising from the ubiquity of bodiless life. His ostensible persecutor, Moby Dick—who is never the aggressor in his interactions with humans—serves in some sense as the object by which Ahab externalizes, projects, and punishes aspects of his own slippery vitality. Thus Moby Dick’s paradoxical status as both supremely embodied life—the exemplary image for Ishmael’s dream of robust individualism—and the epitome of formless monstrosity reflect the Captain’s most intense desires and fears. Gazing into the ocean for a reflected image of himself, Ahab sees the white whale, the “ungraspable phantom of life,” but he hopes instead to see an image that will support a sense of life as somatically organized. As a measure both of his intense loathing for this bodiless vitality, and his horrified recognition of his inescapable imbrication in its monstrous formlessness, he tellingly refers here to bodilessness with nothing but the empty definite article (“that”). The generality of this word conveys both a sense of horror but also ubiquitous proximity; the “that” of bodiless life is always present, neither inside nor outside the subject and thus fundamentally disruptive to its desire for consistent identity and autonomy. The word minimally registers a desperate need and tendency to externalize or differentiate this ambiguous something from the self—at its most basic the “that” is the indicator of an object identified as other.

Ahab’s empty reference to bodiless life indicates the difficulty of expressing
formless vitality, and Ishmael’s initial reference to the “image of the ungraspable phantom” epitomizes its inherent challenge to visual representations. Ishmael persistently problematizes, if not confounds, the possibility of visually representing life, and especially the whale, which he describes as the “one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last” (264). Nevertheless, there is one moment when the Pequod’s journey is interrupted by a “creature” that seems to suggest visually and corporeally the Captain and Ishmael’s worst fears. Although it would be paradoxical to describe the giant squid as somehow more “bodiless” than other phenomena depicted by the text, its peculiar structure invokes a terror in the men rooted in their intuition of something “formless” and alive:

A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, of a glancing cream-color, lay floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating form its center, 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 (276).

The description of the squid as an “apparition” recalls the phantasmal quality associated with Moby Dick, although Starbuck seems perhaps more troubled by the former when he cries with a “wild voice”: “Almost rather had I seen Moby Dick and fought him, than to have seen thee, thou white ghost!” (276). If the white whale is more readily imaginable as the defined body of an enemy—a “that” demonstrably other from the self—the squid threatens to disrupt all formal boundaries and the visual field itself. As an image of life it disrupts analogical attempts or identifications that would reflect back to the human a sensuous self defined by somatic stasis or unity. Its numberless arms threaten to merge with anything in reach, and its description as “chance-like” suggests a fundamental instability of form or telos.
inherent to life. The immensity of this beast, seemingly “furlongs” in length and width appears merged with the ocean upon which it “undulates.” The whalers’ identification of the squid as “the largest animated thing in the ocean” dwelling in “unknown zones below the surface” gives it a certain parity with its “material” medium. Indeed, with its writhing, circular tentacles and spreading mass, the squid seems to mimic oceanic or liquid forms, readily confusing the line between “animated” and “material.”

What was just referred to as Ahab’s “tragic-somatic” worldview dominates his representation of himself, and heavily influences other characters’ representations of and responses to him. The image that most characterizes Ahab is that of a wounded or incomplete body—a representation that reinforces his belief in the essential organic unity of his own body and analogously the self he takes it to mirror. Ahab is thus first characterized in the novel in terms of bodily incompleteness; no sooner does Peleg mention Ahab’s name to Ishmael than he immediately qualifies the appellation through an act of descriptive subtraction, suggesting that “he has only one leg” (71). The reader immediately learns of how Ahab’s limb was “devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmacetty that ever chipped a boat!” (71). Similarly, the Captain’s first significant act of self-representation to the Pequod’s crew focuses on his absent limb: “it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now” (163). Here Ahab imagines bodies, and by extension selves, analogously as ships with all their functionally and mutually informing parts assembled according to a unifying plan. He can thus only represent himself and his encounter with Moby Dick in terms of incompleteness; his body, a once putatively self-sufficient and bounded whole, has been
“dismasted.” In its place sits a rude prosthesis unincorporated into the living body standing defiantly upon it. This “dead stump,” which responds mechanically to its master’s living motions, marks an essential division in nature: life’s autonomy is expressed in a somatic unity utterly different and distant from the compulsory and cadaverous existence of mere matter.

This injury to the “living” body would seem to mark, metaphorically, a significant impediment to any notion of life’s autonomy, and the autonomy of the subject its somatic order ideally reflects. Might not Moby-Dick utilize Ahab as an image of damaged life, and indicate more generally a sense of human life as constitutively finite? Although Ahab’s psychic trauma and physical pain are undeniably real, interpretations that characterize the Captain in terms of loss accept his logic too much at face value. While there is little doubt that the novel exposes the limitations of human agency might have, this delineation is not the result of imagining life as punctuated or castrated by “lack” or “death.” At least

---

24 Ahab is not the unified bodily self he represents himself to be when he describes his life only in terms of lack. Sharon Cameron’s analysis of Ahab’s somatic crises in her The Corporeal Self, while constituting a rich close reading of the novel, similarly characterizes the problem of life in Moby-Dick as one of lack: “The body is an incompletion, and it desires a wholeness it does not have” (29). She suggest that the text represents bodies as fundamentally lacking a fantasized part (15-16), which they attempt to incorporate into themselves by “dismembering” and “partializing” the outside world such that the “self could magically take the world…into its own body” (5). Although there is no reference here to psychoanalysis’ notion of castration as the condition for subjectivity, Cameron’s focus on bodily lack seems implicitly to rely on a similar sensibility, and thus produces an interpretation that humanizes life in Moby-Dick precisely by identifying it in terms of a constitutive tragic deprivation. This approach fails to ask if the discourse of lack might not be a historically conditioned one related to a larger ontological division subtending the novel’s unique depiction of praxis. It presumes that lack, in other words, is a naturalized condition of existence in the novel, and thus ignores ways in which the notion draws on an enabling vitalist paradigm, the consequences of which are a major focus of the novel. The result is an interpretation that cannot connect the ways in which various repeated tensions in the division of “life” from “death” or “matter” relate to invidious social divisions structuring the drama. Pip’s relationship to Ahab is, for example, interpreted through the lens of Shakespeare’s King Lear (30), without considering how Pip’s blackness associates him with a pejorative notion of materiality, and thus conditions his rejection by Ahab, who utilizes the discourse of lack to justify his attribution of life only to his body—if even one “dismembered” by the white whale. There are a few moments when Cameron’s analysis shifts course, coming closer to the problem of bodiless life discussed here (63), but the overwhelming focus on lack obfuscates other ways in which the text schematizes life.
in this context, such designations serve to produce ontological distinctions that contrarily enable a robust sense of human autonomy and exceptionalism to thrive. The loss of a leg becomes the indicator of a difference between “living bodies” and “dead matter” that preserves a sense of subjective identity and superiority. Nevertheless, from Ahab’s perspective this injured “living” body is as “dead” as his artificial leg. He can therefore defiantly exclaim, after Moby Dick shatters his bone-leg on the second day of the chase, “I account no living bone of mine one jot more me, than this dead one that’s lost. Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being” (610). Even a “living bone” seems a thing too material, too contingent, and thus too vulnerable to be associated with Ahab’s inviolate center. His living bones are, like the ivory ones fashioned by the carpenter, mere prostheses for a vitally immaterial master.

This last quote is one of the most revealing and paradoxical statements made by the Captain in the novel. It captures a sense of subjectivity highly resonant with the one formulated throughout Kant’s third critique, and expresses elements of Emerson and Ishmael’s image of an ideal American ego, although it expands all three beyond their most extreme limits and implications. Ahab envisions the human self as a supersensuous entity invulnerable to material changes, including those affecting its sensuous or bodily existence. Matter appears here as a series of machines operating under the control of this autonomous and self-identical spirit. Implicit to his description is the notion that no such “material factory” could possibly serve as an analogue or image for the supersensuous self. This perspective may strike the reader as surprising, if not preposterous, given Ahab’s persistent grief and rage over the very body he now disassociates from himself.
Only a few pages later he rages over the personal connection between human identity and the “blows” its “naked” body receives from the “bodiless” wind. He also consistently justifies his monomaniacal pursuit of the white whale by identifying his bodily, and thus material dismemberment, directly with a radical debilitation of self: “it was Moby Dick that dismasted me; Moby Dick that brought me to this dead stump I stand on now” (my italics). This ship comparison—a conspicuously machinic example of material order—loses here even a reference to his body, as though self and body were identical. The reader is left to wonder why the whale’s initial wounding “attack” should constitute such an appalling insult to Ahab if all materiality, including that of which his body is composed, is so utterly exterior to his “inaccessible” self. If the “dead stump” is no more a prosthetic machine, and thus no less living than his prosthetic “living bones,” why does the initial shattering of a “living” leg seem to do so much more than simply “graze old Ahab”?

Why does a free and complete subject identify itself with what it designates so pejoratively as material or mechanical? One reason, among many, is that he requires a narrative of profound personal loss to legitimize his absurd and dangerous war with Moby Dick—a narrative that requires identifying himself with a once “complete” and “living” body. This approach nevertheless necessitates the dangerous identification of self with body he equally wishes to avoid—an identification that might ambiguate rather than indemnify the self, in as much as life proves to be “bodiless.” He thus becomes caught in an absurd cycle in which he insists that the whale has fundamentally damaged him by wounding a body he disassociates from himself. There is undoubtedly a strong hint of bad faith in these ratiocinations, but they also indicate a mind formulating various methods for mediating mutually exclusive traumatic or limiting situations. Ahab responds repeatedly
to this allegorical and conceptual aporia by attempting to locate a bounded material object that reflects and substantiates his ideal of autonomous subjectivity, but while making innocuous the threat of bodilessness generally inherent to the sensuous. Rather than attempting to understand what participation in bodiless life might mean, Ahab attempts to produce for himself evidence of its falsity, but can do so only by searching within the materiality that provokes the analogical endeavor. He thus locates numerous material correlates with conspicuously robust somatic qualities, but in a fashion that exposes their “bodiless” aspects or that overturns the binaries constructed to indemnify them.25

This frustrated and futile search prompts Ahab finally to withdraw from his entire analogical project and to seek refuge in the notion, impossible to imagine by the novel’s conclusion, of a self totally differentiated from and “inaccessible” to sensuousness. However, the division emphasized here does not so much escape the problem of sensuousness as much as it recapitulates a form of the primary conceptual divisions between life and matter, life and machines, and life and death that fails when he applies them to experience. Instead of simply asserting that his being is “inaccessible,” Ahab constructs an implicit contrast between the supersensuous unity and power of the human self and a material sphere reduced to the status of a prosthesis. By collapsing the difference between his “living” and “dead” legs, which he labors to reinforce on

25 Cameron’s similarly emphasizes the problem of analogical identification between self and object in the novel: “Ahab’s wish to have things be embodied so he can see and possess them is countered by his rejection of actual embodiments when he finds they are not made to the mind’s specifications” (61). In contrast to Cameron, I think the issue is that things are resistant to their own “embodiments” in Moby-Dick and thus disrupt the expectation that they substantiate a sense of the self as “whole.” In something of a reversal of Cameron’s position, my analysis views the problem not as one of an “incomplete” body attempting to parcel the world in order to complete itself, but that of a “bodiless” self attempting to produce a fiction of total embodiment (even through the myth of lack) that would stabilize its affective and somatic implication in a dynamic vitality driven by ubiquitous and positive or conative creativity rather than absence.
numerous other occasions, he represents materiality in terms of a multitude of machines driven by immaterial subjects. The division strikingly approximates the one informing the earlier distinction between his “living” leg—an integral part of a “living” whole—and the “dead” bone leg that serves as its prosthesis. Although here the living body is not invulnerable or “inaccessible,” it similarly represents a point of autonomous mastery over material resources construed as lacking this internally-derived animating power. Ahab’s “living” body can be injured, but when compared to the compulsory existence of the “dead leg,” the latter’s freedom would seem to reference some immaterial and invulnerable self beyond. Thus while certain telling paradoxes arise from his shifting deployment of these distinctions, a fundamentally vitalist and subjectivist division operates through these binaries, always providing contrasting images or senses of ontological difference by which to apotheosize the human subject.

There seems to be no limitation to the aggrandizing implications of this conceptual procedure—a fact made clear when at one point Ahab applies a similar schematization to characterize the distinction between God and all of creation. In his remarkable speech in “The Candles,” Ahab addresses the sacred fire springing from the ship’s corporants but suggests that a holier and intangible agency stands behind them: “There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it” (my italics, 508). Although sensuous existence may appear to possess its own internally animating vitality, or “creativeness,” to this divine power it appears contrastingly as a dead machine lacking significant agential being. Autonomy and self-governance thus appear as the essential province of a “self” beyond its fiery
analogue—a truly creative but “unsuffusing thing” never disturbed by the sensuous world. Although Ahab appears to address a deity before which he might humbly bow, his terms mirror those he later applies to himself; once again he contrasts an “inaccessible being,” whose autonomy and identity are constant, with a prosthetic material sphere incapable of effecting such a master. The divinity his scorched eyes see through the fire reflects the regal attributes he assigns to himself, thereby confirming its essential contrast with materiality. Ahab is nevertheless willing to identify totally with the sensuous world as long as it appears only to reflect an image of this divine self. When inspecting the gold doubloon hammered to the Pequod’s mast, he sees nothing but Ahab in its complexly decorated surface:

“The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab, and this round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn mirrors back his own mysterious self” (471).

This passage conveys more about Ahab’s desires and demands than it does anything about his “mysterious self”; he can tolerate sensuous experience on the condition that it do nothing more than reflect redundantly his ego. But sensuousness always ultimately indicates some monstrous difference that implicates Ahab in disfiguring processes. Hence the paradoxical cycling between identification with materiality or bodily life, and his dramatic expulsion of any such earthliness from his regal identity.

The crisis of identification or figuration repeated here, as elsewhere, is not the result of the material correlate or Ahab’s imagination, but of the bodiless life from which he cannot separate himself. Ahab’s attempts to utilize material analogies backfire, for every bit of matter—whether distinguished as “living” or “dead”—that he isolates betrays the sovereign autonomy it is utilized to indemnify. When he analogizes his body, and
ultimately his sovereign self with a reference to a ship, he does so while standing upon his 
“dead” stump, which stands in turn upon a deck composed of “dead” stumps of wood, and 
furthermore in a ship in which, as Ishmael’s roving observations indicate, whale bones 
supply a significant portion of the architecture. The assumed formal perfection or unity 
of the machine should provide the image of discrete vital identity for which Ahab 
searches, but it proves to be fundamentally networked with, or composed of, those objects 
he identifies as essentially dead. These objects—the “dead” tree stumps and “dead” whale 
bones—also refer conspicuously to “living” things, producing a basic ambiguity of life, 
death, and the bodies nominally categorized as one or the other. From this perspective, the 
ship becomes a paradoxically “vital machine” without distinct formal limits. The 
analogue that was to indemnify Ahab’s connection to sensuousness, or his distance from 
it, becomes ironically a reflection of his imbrication within the same bodiless life. His 
“dead stump” is no more a prosthesis for a “living” body than are the wooden stumps for 
the ship to which he compares himself. Instead the stump expresses the general intrication 
of bodies in an outside, a non-somatic network of powers constitutive of and disruptive to 

26 T. Hugh Crawford similarly emphasizes the connection between Ahab’s “becoming-whale” and 
the ship’s permeation with bits of whalebone in “Captain Deleuze and the White Whale: Melville, Moby-

27 The confusions of man and ship witnessed here have been richly analyzed from a Latourian 
perspective by Philip Armstrong in an interpretation that resonates strongly with this one (1041-42). 
Armstrong reads Moby-Dick’s “hybrid” figures—individuals that mix traditionally distinct ontological 
categories, such as the “human,” the “animal,” and the “machine”—as collapsing what Bruno Latour 
describes as modernity’s systematic division of the “social” from the “natural” (1042). Life’s formal 
transgressions, its ambiguating imbrication of the human in a multitude of systems, performs a similar 
operation in the novel. While this analysis has much in common with Armstrong’s approach, focusing on 
concepts of life reveals another critical aspect of Moby-Dick’s challenge to the division Latour generally 
identifies with modernity. The novel exposes how life functioned as one of the primary concepts intended 
to confuse modern dualisms, but also how it was readily employed to defend and exploit them. It 
demonstrates that western economic and social modernity relied not only on a general division between 
nature and society, but on a closely related differentiation of “vital” from “dead” bodies.
somatic self-enclosure. It is therefore of great significance that a Captain who has made “forty years war on the horrors of the deep,” finds himself partially composed of whale bone (543).

Ahab’s frustration with this heterogeneous web of creation is unceasing, for his whale-bone leg serves as a constant reminder of his body’s total involvement in the lives of others—both those of the carpenter who fashions his leg and those of the whales, who have both taken his bones and provided their own as substitutes. In a rare moment of awareness he acknowledges this inextricable intrication of vitality in a milieu without apparent boarders:

Cursed be that mortal inter-indebtedness which will not do away with ledgers. I would be free as air; and I’m down in the whole world’s books. I am so rich, I could have given bid for bid with the wealthiest Praetorians at the auction of the Roman empire (which was the world’s); and yet I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with. By heavens! I’ll get a crucible, and into it dissolve myself down to one small, compendious vertebra (471-2).

Spoken as he observes the carpenter fashioning a new leg for him, the passage indicates a prescient cognizance of life’s dizzying reference always to something beyond its immediate somatic manifestations. Every atom of Ahab’s body is at once a part of the world, and thus linked to other agencies and their histories. The reference to the “whole world’s books” indicates the inescapability of this connection, and its seemingly endless diversity and dispersal. There are many books, perhaps even an infinitely proliferating quantity that record the involvement of things in an unceasing web of creation. Ahab’s designation of his physical “tongue”—the one with which he speaks these words—as “down in” the same ubiquitous “books” represents a radical acknowledgment of the intrication of “voice” with “matter.” The voice’s putative status as sensuous representative of the subject’s difference from materiality, from its seeming unintelligibility and lack of
formal identity, appears here to be leveled. Ahab’s voice is contrasted with and ultimately included in another scene of “writing” without an author—the record keeper of the “whole world’s books”—and thus indicates its involvement in a milieu that threatens to draw the identity of its speaker into the latter. This milieu proves opposed to any attempt absolutely to differentiate self from object, or object from object, in as much as it evidences the ambiguating involvement of all things with each other—their unredeemable “debt” to each other.

The discourse of debt and legers serves as another formulation of non-somatic life, in as much as the endless chain of debt recorded in the world’s books bespeaks a life always already traceable spatially and temporally to things beyond bodily boundaries. To “owe” for one’s flesh is not to be or to own one’s self—to always have one’s agency and identity displaced with reference to originary agencies. But Ahab’s rhetoric in this instance also subtly recasts the situation in pejorative terms that render him a victimized subject never fully implicated in the vitality he identifies as his persecutor. He can thus only conceptualize his body in terms of a debt that denies him an agency “free as air,” as though such a self-originating freedom existed independently of its restrictive bodily avatar. Ahab imagines himself to be delimited and circumscribed by a debt, but never ontologically displaced or dispersed by it, and this sensibility is echoed in the rhetoric of debt itself. The minimal condition for debt, or “being in debt” is the existence of a being to whom such a debt falls due. It is conceivable to envision a scenario in which Ahab, potentially as rich as the “wealthiest Praetorians” of the Roman Empire, could purchase the world, making himself the possessor rather than debtor of being. In either case the designation preserves a sense of his “inaccessible being,” and the abundant repetition of
the first-person personal pronoun in the passage seem an attempt through enunciation to ensure its reality.

Ahab’s desperate wish to dissolve himself into a “compendious vertebra” represents a desire to contain the world’s books within himself, and thus to exist without debt or reference to anything beyond the self. This can only be imagined through a winnowing subtraction, by “dissolving” the body into a perfectly condensed and internally unified object. He thus imagines constructing another ideal organic body, but his figure is a peculiar one, for it utilizes the already highly problematic image of bone as its sensuous correlate. If the “dead stump” is the antithesis of his organically unified life, the bare vertebra would seem correspondingly an image of death. Perhaps this ironic identification of his life with what he had previously designated as dead suggests an ultimately suicidal wish—a need for absolute stasis. Even in this instance, as in prior ones, bone refuses to fulfill its purpose as the absolute analogical guarantor of the difference between life and death. This is not only because its use here as an image of perfectly concentrated somatic life clashes with its exclusion from life in other moments, but because vertebra evince a participation in life that confounds the purpose to which Ahab puts them. The notion of a single, isolate vertebra is itself an abstraction if not something of a contradiction, and Ahab’s sense that a vertebra might become “compendious” is similarly problematic. Even a “dead” vertebra bears the traces of being “down in the whole world’s books”—of informing connections to other vertebra, bones, and tissues. The vertebra thus readily leads back to the ambiguously bordered “living” body, the escape from which was the purpose of the analogical operation.
Ishmael hears many voices aboard the *Pequod*. He speaks or writes too much to be an ideal listener, but his loquacity is an ecstatic response to the world’s personalities pouring into his ears. Mighty Ahab speaks; lowly Pip speaks; upright Starbuck speaks; tattooed Queequeg speaks; and Ishmael speaks or writes their voices. And the multiplicity of non-human lives and things encountered on the journey speak, if not through language, then through sound, or perhaps in the silence that speaks and invites the other senses to focus. But these voices are jumbled, competing, indistinct, and threaten to fade into the din of life’s sonic background. Ishmael strains to listen, but finds himself deafened by the constraints of mortality and the dull roar of creation: “the weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened, and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. For even so it is in all material factories” (450).

Ishmael’s morose analogy is a beautiful contemplation of human tragedy, but its speculative richness results from a tension inherent to his attempts to obtain philosophical clarity and control through literature. Like most literary analogies, Ishmael’s figure relies on the isolation and representation of some material or phenomenal object, event, or correlate—in this case the weaver’s loom—in order to speak and to be heard. However, his analogy focuses ironically on the deafening of ears or the silencing of voices resulting from the “materiality” of the great weaving machine. How can Ishmael’s authorial voice speak clearly by selecting a “material” object, the explicit purpose of which, within this
analogy, is to emphasize the inescapable obfuscations of material existence? The industrial din that should drown out voices is mysteriously transformed into a bit of poetic philosophy, as though Ishmael’s singular authorial voice were capable of transmuting base matter into rarefied spirit. Perhaps this is nothing more than a general definition of literature, or its loftiest goals. If so, Ishmael’s weaver analogy locates a tension within this vision of writing, and something bordering on bad faith; Ishmael vacillates between tragically identifying his authorial self with one of the voices in the factory, and with a voice and position somehow external to and ultimately untouched by what he designates as “matter.” This is one of many moments in Moby-Dick in which Melville utilizes Ishmael’s speculative adventures to stage a critique of a privileged authorial voice. For what seems to be on trial here is not the materiality of existence, as Ishmael would have us believe, but contrarily Ishmael’s assumptions about the immateriality of his own voice, and with it the voice of any literature that believes itself to have fully escaped the “material factories” of the world.

The categorical divisions structuring Ishmael’s analogy tersely convey aspects of a worldview that allows for and supports this exceptional position. Although the workers laboring in the factory are difficult to hear, Ishmael distinguishes their voices from the sounds of machinery, suggesting an essential difference between the two. There is a sonic gap, indicative of an essential difference between voice and “material” sound that opens the possibility of Ishmael’s privileged speaking position. Nevertheless, the analogy’s figuring of divine creation in terms of a specific material factory—the weaver god’s loom—complexes or confounds this distinction. How can Ishmael distinguish the voices arising from material production, which given the cosmic scope of the analogy, figures
the generative locus of existence, and thus of all voices?

Ishmael’s bifurcation of matter and voice speaks to anxieties that permeate Moby-Dick, for there is much more at stake here than his or even God’s auditory limitations. How, indeed, can the source of Ishmael’s voice be separated from this impersonal factory? Where does voice begin and material production end? Is the author’s the one voice that escapes the “humming” of the loom, or is it nothing more than mechanical noise? While Moby-Dick does not merely collapse the human into the material, Melville uses Ishmael’s authorial struggles and inconsistencies to refute the notion that literature is something wholly other than the material fabric woven by a material loom.

There is no more provocative and tersely revealing example of this tendency than the title of Ishmael’s first chapter: “Loomings.” While the term commonly denotes the first sight of something indistinct emerging from darkness or mist at sea, given his later explicit association of weaving with creation, this initial “looming” might be understood as Ishmael’s first act of literary creativity. But the passive construction suggests that the author is not the immaterial weaver god standing omnisciently outside his noisy material creations. Loomings are events of the material factory, of which Ishmael is a functioning part, and they are never fully distinguishable from his voice. He nevertheless assumes again a privileged position relative to the materiality of existence:

…the spoken words that are inaudible among the flying spindles; those same words are plainly heard without the walls, bursting from the open casements. Thereby have villainies been detected. Ah, mortal! then, be heedful; for so, in all this din of the great world’s loom, thy subtlest thinkings may be overheard (450).

Ishmael suggests that there is a perspective beyond the material humming—an immaterial sphere in which voice attains a communicative purity. But on which side of the “open casements” does the author imagine himself to exist? Once again he takes up a
position without the factory-prison of matter, while identifying himself as one of its imprisoned mortals.

Although this reading might appear to interpret Ishmael’s analogy with a literality it does not intend, the analogy calls into question its own arrogation of an exceptional authorial position, prompting the reader to extrapolate its possible implications. This one of the more fecund uses of Ishmael’s position as an author or narrator. The perspective we are given on his conflicted analogies (and not all of them need be designated as such) is one aspect among many that makes *Moby-Dick* a revolutionary meditation on epistemological practices that assume a privileged position with respect to what Ishmael ambiguously labels “matter.” Some of the novel’s less narratively driven chapters attempt to perform similar acts of speculative analogy, only to become enmeshed within and ambiguated by the material correlates upon which they depend. It becomes wonderfully unclear, for example, if chapters such as “The Mat-Maker” are speculative exercises utilizing material analogies, or if the material practice or object in question is the source of the speculation. Despite Ishmael’s frequent and cavalier dismissals of

28 In this instance and several others, Ishmael importantly identifies matter with specific human practices, rather than designating it directly as a differentiable entity within an ontological or cosmological perspective. His utilization of the term “material” in these contexts reveals the extent to which he relies upon a concept of “matter” dominated by anthropocentric assumptions, and ones that nevertheless facilitate the exploitation of certain humans. In some sense the confusion of “material practice” with speculative truth that Ishmael both resists and witnesses constitutes an important aspect of his “education” aboard the Pequod; Ishmael and equally Melville’s reader are forced to witness their confusion and thus the specific relations of production and power ordering the New England whaling economy. While this important lesson—one readily identifiable with canonical Marxism—illustrates the dramatic influence of “material” situations or relations of production on the cultural or intellectual superstructure, *Moby-Dick* operates equally against the reduction of “matter” to any simple notion of human practice. Indeed, to label all human practices as foundationally “material,” while an important gesture in a project dedicated to the liberation of particular classes, races, or even species, recapitulates the anthropocentric gesture that grants matter a meaning only with reference to human projects. Here the use of the term “matter” or “material” refers to Ishmael’s understanding of certain human practices, but it should equally mark a conspicuous absence or omission within his discourse, given his involvement in a web of non-human forces.
philosophy, he often approaches the “material factories” of the whaling industry with a speculative compulsion. It is as though the business in which he is engaged—the brutal, technological, and palpably material business of whaling—were something too threateningly “material” to identify with, and yet the life of a sailor aboard the Pequod is one for whom knowledge and specific material practices cannot be readily disassociated.  

This imbrication of praxis and speculative knowledge is what Ishmael’s loom analogy exposes, and by identifying the material correlate of the analogy with the factory mills of contemporary American industry, Melville illustrates the manner in which Ishmael’s specific material and social situation structures the general assumed division between what constitutes matter and its opposite. The initial image of the weaver-god calls to mind a pre-modern craft technology subservient to the god’s creative control. However, the analogy shifts almost unnoticeably, suddenly invoking the impersonality of a walled and roaring factory, and more specifically the “flying spindles” of the power loom. With the remarkable trajectory of material correlates in the analogy, beginning with the mythic weaving-deity and concluding with an industrial textile mill, Melville appears to suggest that speculative adventures that isolate a concept of the “material”  

29 Cesare Casarino thus describes the novel as opening “itself up to the very problem of practice” (77). While Moby-Dick’s fascination with specific practical contexts is part of what makes it a revolutionary text in various senses, Casarino seems largely to collapse “matter” into “practice” in a fashion not unlike Ishmael (as described in the previous footnote). Although Casarino describes Moby-Dick as expressing an “aleatory materialism,” in the spirit of Althusser, his interpretation largely remains within Marx’s sense of the term, which relates it to human praxis, and thus largely disregards the novel’s focus on matter as something both constitutive of and external to such practices (149). Aleatory is taken here to mean the possibility of “chance,” understood as that which might disrupt the repetition of destructive practices and ideologies, and while such chance might be attributable to “matter” in a broad sense, reading it specifically as a potentially liberating force for human relations in the novel minimizes the sense in which “matter” gains a substantial existence exterior to human practicality (149). Indeed, to describe “matter” merely in terms of “chance” seems already a reduction of its meaning to something merely useful in a drama of human liberation or human tragedy.
obtain their constitutive divisions from social and economic context. The weaver god’s relationship to the loom and the fabric is something quite different than the capitalist’s relation to a New England textile mill, just as the “humming” of one form of weaving technology is decisively different from another. It is important to note that in both instances Ishmael associates something deafening with “matter” and material productivity—something that silences those on a lower spatial or ontological plain from their superiors. However, Melville forces the reader to observe the difference between these contextual differences. The sudden transference of the analogy to an industrial situation so foundational to the American and world economy of the nineteenth century ambiguates the speculative capacity of the figure, and more importantly, refocuses our attention on the way in which “matter” gains a specific connotation within the textile mill economy.

Although Ishmael attempts to develop an image of cosmic tragedy from the factory, this does little service to those whose experience of factory work is markedly different from those living without its walls. Perhaps all mortal voices are circumscribed, but some are certainly more circumscribed than others, and this makes a considerable difference. Those voices lost to the “humming” of a textile mill are the voices of those who work on its floor, in the midst of the spindles, and they do so for reasons both dependent upon but exterior to the ubiquity of human mortality. While all “mortals” may be overheard in their contemplation of “villainies” by the Gods, it is striking that Ishmael identifies the specific voices of the textile mill as examples of criminal plotting.30

30 Mathew Cordova Frankel, in an article with substantial relevance for and resonance with this chapter, suggests that it is Ishmael’s reflective capacity as an author, now removed from the immediacy of
Although the sparse details about this imagined mill and its potentially villainous workers warrant only so much speculation as to what crime they might be contemplating, the conjunction of elements suggests a plot to sabotage or otherwise resist the conditions of factory labor. No other specific “crime” readily matches the context here. And those outside the walls of this “material” factory, which is to say those not lost in the din of the same “material” context, are capable of disciplining, like Gods, the possible insurrection.

Although Ishmael hears many voices, and gives them some limited expression in *Moby-Dick*, his weaving analogy prompts questions with critical implications for the novel: Why can Ishmael hear the specific voices that he hears? What voices are muffled by the “material factory” in which he labors? To what extent is his inability to hear certain voices the result of assumptions always already implicated in these material practices and the position he arrogates to himself within them? By formulating his analogy with reference to the weaving industry, Ishmael deflects a consideration of that

the Pequod’s perished crew and journey, that allows him to hear and discern the multitude of voices and motivations structuring his catastrophic journey: “…Ishmael receives what is in effect an object lesson in the power of authorial reflection. As we have noted through the book Ishmael will soon sit down to write, he too may gain access to the “thousand voices” that were inaudible to him while a worker on the whale-boat factory. The walls have crumbled, the casements burst open. Ishmael’s internal study of the whale has taught him that he can never reconstruct perfectly the “voices” of the Pequod; yet, with the confidence that he has been in deep with the crew, as the only surviving member he may detect “on the message-carrying air” the “villainies” that were once so seductive, and overhear from “afar” even the “subtlest thinkings” (126). Although Frankel is otherwise keenly aware of Ishmael’s racial and ethnocentric biases, this sudden attribution of exceptional clairvoyance or enlightened ethical intention to the “power of authorial reflection” seems to place an unwarranted faith, both in this power, and in our narrator. The arrogation of such ability to the authorial self is what is problematic here; it is because Ishmael assumes an exceptional position that he runs the risk of losing the voices to which he gained proximity while in the “material factory” of the ship. Although this might always be a risk run by the authorial distance that allows any novel to become a revealing reflection on a particular event or situation, the manner in which Ishmael’s authorial position here and elsewhere maps onto social and racial exceptionalisms suggests that the “power of authorial reflection” can work in the interest of power rather than against it. Ishmael’s authorship and journey are complexly opposed to these forms of power, but the reader’s exposure to a struggle within the authorial position forms an important aspect of *Moby-Dick*.

31 Frankel investigates the manner in which Ishmael’s partially omniscient narration cannot penetrate certain subjectivities. Ishmael can explore scenes involving Ahab and other Caucasian-American crewmembers, but he runs up against a wall when confronted by Queequeg, and falls silent when face-to-face with the non-human face of whales and other animal life (130).
other titanic industry of the antebellum United States in which he is a laborer, namely whaling. A large portion of the burgeoning American economy, and certainly that of the region, was based in the great textile mills of New England and its enormous whaling fleet. Of course much of *Moby-Dick* might be taken as the account of Ishmael’s intimate encounter with this material factory, but his persistently fickle relationship to “matter,” and more specifically to the spatial locus and specific practices with which it is identified in the mill analogy suggest a need to posit a degree of separation from the industry. This need for detachment has various repercussions for Ishmael and the novel and certainly not all negative ones; one wonders if he were to abandon writing and dedicate himself entirely to whaling if Ishmael would not become entirely deaf to the voices crying out around him. Far more disturbing than Stubb’s sadism, or Ahab’s monomania are those figures, such as the ship’s carpenter, who have become nothing more than tools through which some instrumental rationality operates restlessly and without any clear purpose besides ruthless efficiency (468). Ishmael’s self-imposed status as a wanderer, a “nomad,” as Eric Wilson describes him, or perhaps just as Ishmael, the itinerant biblical outcast—an identity he has assumed prior to his fateful voyage on the *Pequod*—is both the means of his detachment from modern life and the possibility for reflection upon it (71). While prior to this point this analysis has been critical of his authorial tendencies, there is little doubt that Ishmael’s unique position as both intellectual and laborer opens the unique and critically invaluable vision of American modernity that is *Moby-Dick*. However, one of the critical dangers attending any interpretation of the novel—a danger that Ishmael confronts and which at times he cannot avoid—is that while his authorial distance opens the possibility for engaged writing, its less authentic motivations may be
passed over, or even obfuscated by his need to avoid the conservative aspects of his assumptions.

The questions raised by the tensions implicated in his authorial distance are similar to those raised by his conflicted engagement with the whaling industry: is this detachment the means by which Ishmael can hear without bias, and thus potentially join the varied voices in his ears? Or is the distance indicative of the very attitudes that essentialize and hierarchize distance and difference in order to silence certain voices? Does this silencing, or similarly the notion that factories or whaling ships are only “deafening” places for authors like Ishmael, contribute to the systematic exploitation that Ishmael nominally exposes through his journey aboard the Pequod?

While Ishmael’s detachment from the other sailors, and even from his beloved Queequeg, perhaps preserves him from the extreme degradation expressed by the figure of the carpenter, his reason for maintaining distance is related to a general anxiety about the “material” status of labor and race in the antebellum period. By identifying the factory with matter, Ishmael exposes an invidious assumed connection between factory labor, matter, and machines. This is not to suggest that our narrator fully assumes this connection or enforces its invidious distinctions practically. Ishmael’s desperate escape from the American mainland into an intimately “material” form of labor—an evasion from suicide and Manhattan (3)—expresses a profound, even unconscious conflict with this ideology, but his physical voyage away from American shores cannot nullify their lingering influence, both for his assumptions, and for life aboard the Pequod.

Perhaps the most blatant of these assumptions is that whaling represents a form of industry that has escaped the banality of textile mills, or which has preserved a certain
antiquated honor and bravery in comparison with the lives of Wall Street lawyers, such as
the narrator of “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” While the specific differences that constitute
whaling as an industry and a technology are extremely important to the novel, what is
most important about Ishmael’s decision to affiliate himself with whaling is that it
appears to offer him the choice of participating in a form of American labor that does not
simply place him, in some existential and physical sense, on the floor of a material
factory. Much of his unrelenting praise for the bravado of whaling seems the expression
of an anxious need to justify this practice aesthetically—to redeem some aspect of
American capitalism—while much of what his narrative ironically proves is the
industry’s utter reliance on assumptions that perpetuate its worst practices. For what
seems to justify, legitimize, or authenticate this industry is not a relatively greater
concern for the life of its laborers, but its reliance on the silence of the whale’s voice—its
total association with materiality—as the condition for its aestheticization of brutality.  
This connection between the “materiality” of the whale and its value as oil is connected
to the assumed material status of the laborers who labor in a factory disguised as a
chivalric endeavor, and will be explored extensively later.  

32 Just prior to Flask’s sadistic dispatching of a helpless, aging whale, Ishmael describes the
auditory disconnect dividing hunter from prey and sustaining this relation: “As the three boats lay there on
that gently rolling sea, gazing down into its eternal blue noon; and as not a single groan or cry of any sort,
nay, not so much as a ripple or a bubble came up from the 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”
(356). Here the difference is literally that between aqueous and terrestrial life, but the passage can be read,
more significantly, as describing the deafness that results from designating the whale as a simple
instrument in a “material factory.” Although the men cannot physically hear the whale’s agony, as whalers
they have already precluded any attribution of substantial agency or subjectivity to the whale that would
grant it a voice.

33 Ishmael thus describes the ship’s mates and harpooners—significantly divided in rank by
race—as “Knights and Squires” (115-17).
aestheticize the practice of whaling might be taken as a register of the extent to which it disturbs him; he is a man utterly obsessed and enchanted by whales, but little more than a hired hand for a butcher. 34 He treats his endeavor not as an economic necessity, and one reliant for remuneration on barbarism, in the manner that he often casts whaling as a form of daring heroism or robust masculinity.

He therefore can ask rhetorically and cavalierly in the opening paragraphs of the novel “who aint a slave?”—a question to which a Black slave in 1851 might have posed a less rhetorical and general answer—because Ishmael imagines himself somehow indemnified from the reality of slavery, both by engaging in an industry he deems ultimately romantic, and by representing his involvement in that industry in terms of escape and adventure rather than the economic necessity that drove most men to sea, and many men and women to work in textile mills (6). He can describe himself as being different from a “passenger,” and primarily because he happens to have the good fortune of “being paid” for the journey—an elocation that allows Ishmael never fully to identify himself with the intimate and bloody business of harvesting whales, and thus from an understanding of himself as earning a necessary lay of the profits (6). In the novel’s second sentence Ishmael expresses a similarly strained tension between his identity as a laborer and that of a melancholic urban aesthete or flâneur: “having no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and

34 The brutality of whaling is variously represented in Moby-Dick, but the description of the ancient whale butchered sadistically by Flask marks the profession as unmistakably cruel in a fashion difficult to aestheticize: “But pity there was none. For all his old age, and his one arm, and his blind eyes, he must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all” (357).
regulating the circulation” (3). The predominant image or motion suggested here is one of aimless perambulation—of circulation without a goal besides warding off boredom—of an aesthetic expenditure free, and perhaps even disdainful of the singular goal or need of earning a living. Ishmael feels the need to perambulate beautifully with his pen for several pages about the speculative or mystical connection all humans feel with the sea, as well as the benefits of the voyage for his health, as though mentioning his empty purse as the first reason for contracting his labor necessitates the immediate formulation of multiple alternative aesthetic justifications, and in a form meant to reassure the reader or himself that this is not the record of a common sailor.

Ishmael must nonetheless explain how he can maintain this aesthetic distance and superiority when he has placed himself in a position to be ordered and even abused by “some old hunks of a sea captain” (6). For it seems difficult to sustain the illusion of easy freedom he associates with his status as a paid “passenger,” when the social and economic hierarchies of the industry, if not the physical limitations upon mobility implicit to life on a ship, place him in a position resembling that of a slave. Ishmael’s response to this concern represents a remarkable act of further figuration reminiscent of the weaving analogy, although with clearer practical implications:

…however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way—either in a physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed round, and all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content (6).

One wonders if his situation would be equally “all right” if Ishmael were in fact fully to inhabit the identity of a “simple sailor,” to personalize abuses that would fully implicate him in the world of labor, “matter,” and the whales he helps to slaughter. Perhaps because
he constructs enough tenuous gulfs between himself and his position on the ship, Ishmael can bear these slights, if only by performing a remarkable act of analogical resentment, whereby those in positions of power are justly punished by the unseen “metaphysical” “thump” of God.

Once again the analogy functions by attributing a physical condition or material practice, such as industrial weaving, to a universal speculative context, but in such a fashion that the contextual specificity of this term confuses or exposes the speculative gesture as an act of appeasement or avoidance. Everyone supposedly has their voice drowned out by the weaver god’s loom, but only some are truly lost in the din of “material factories,” and this silencing makes a qualitative difference. Those who are “physically” abused are so abused because they have been identified as “physical”—as material, or as labor—in contrast to those who have the privilege of undergoing “metaphysical” sufferings indicating a degree of foreordained tragic spirituality. The hierarchical distinction between metaphysical and physical is drawn from a distinction already implicit to the divisions of power informing the captain-sailor relation. While this does not imply that all sea captains are metaphysicians, it is quite impossible to disassociate a kind of metaphysical suffering and speculation from Ahab. Indeed, Ahab’s position as captain creates a distance and difference from the position of labor that allows as much as it expresses a natural difference between them. It remains unclear throughout the novel to what extent Ahab’s tortured metaphysical speculations are not partly the result of his privileged capacity to withdraw spatially, physically, and intellectually from his crew and their activities. Although this point will be developed elsewhere, it is nevertheless significant to note that Ishmael’s speculative distinctions are here again
linked to a mode of social and economic praxis that facilitates a sense of natural
difference implicated in exploitative social divisions; this is both the inhumane and
general relation of master to slave, or of capitalist to wage-laborer, but also the one
realized in Ahab’s treatment of his crew as mere “tools” for the realization of his revenge
(211). While Ishmael’s distinction between “metaphysical” and “physical” pain is
meant to assert a democracy of suffering, the distinction maps onto a social division
founded on a dramatic inequality of power.

Given his former status as a master—a country school master—and his
understanding of himself as a tourist on a voyage he ambiguously associates with
industrial labor, and to which he attributes a mostly aesthetic or speculative purpose, it is
reasonable to assume that Ishmael identifies himself as one “thumped” by the
metaphysical hand of the divine, and thus in some way leagued with Ahab. As with his
weaving analogy, he proposes the literary figure because he attributes to himself a
privileged position with respect to the material practices in question. To be the one that
can figure the metaphysical thump from the physical, like the figuration of universal
deafness derived from the roar of the textile mill, requires a reflective distance Ishmael

35 The pairing of “master” and “slave” refers here to Ishmael’s implicit invocation of the binary
through his rhetorical question at the beginning of the novel (“who aint a slave?”). Nevertheless, as in
that context, the broad use of these terms to describe disparate economic and social systems with divergent
histories and practices can work to obfuscate rather than to expose abuses of power. Utilizing the binary
throughout this chapter does not suggest that there is no difference between wage labor and slavery, or
between one form of wage labor and another. It is used to call attention to a general crisis of modernity that
Moby-Dick explores, namely the persistence of exploitative hierarchies of power in an age described as
“enlightened.” The meaning of these terms has some variability for describing different situations in the
novel, and these situations are certainly not all equal with respect to the relations of domination or
exploitation they imply. Nevertheless, Moby-Dick explores repeatedly contexts structured by an assumed
division between those possessing a presumed natural autonomy and freedom, and those characterized by
an instrumental and non-autonomous status—those who are thus utilized by the former to extend or realize
their greater possibility of “freedom” or “progress.” Indeed, the pairing of master and slave threatens to
dominate all relations in the novel, as though it were searching for some miraculous break from history.
seems already to have excluded from those who labor. But Ishmael’s participation in labor, even if carried out through a series of nervous distancing gestures, nevertheless must be seen as fundamentally different from Ahab’s position as master of the Pequod. Ishmael’s decision to become a “simple sailor” puts him in a position of common labor, which is to say that it disallows his total withdrawal from the conditions and possibilities of the “material”—the “physical”—thumps he shares with his fellow whalers.36

This participation in labor seems nevertheless to have a mixed effect upon Ishmael’s sense of revolutionary politics—an ambiguity illustrative of a dangerous component of his speculative analogies. It is because physical “thumps” can be analogically applied to those who do not in fact receive them, becoming mysteriously “universal,” that Ishmael rather patronizingly suggests, “all hands should rub each other’s shoulder-blades, and be content.”37 Although Moby-Dick’s controversial exploration of unconventional modes of touch, and homoerotic contact between members of the crew has been correctly recognized by Cesare Casarino to express revolutionary possibilities for male labor (115, 145-83), Ishmael’s concluding demand for universal contentment in a world dominated by Bildads, Pelegs, and Ahab’s seems to nullify the practical efficacy of this project. Similarly, Ishmael’s equation of factory noise with the universal humming

36 C.L.R. James focuses much of his analysis on Ishmael and Ahab’s isolation or detachment from the crew, recognizing a common pathology in their attempts to distance themselves from the men around them (41).

37 Lisa Robertson suggests that the solution to isolation and metaphysical despair in the novel is “physical contact with other human beings” (5). While I agree that the novel explores a crisis of physical, social, and corresponding psychological alienation expressed most intensely in Ahab’s detachment from his fellow humans, Moby-Dick also investigates a further alienation of man from animal and perhaps from the “material” world itself. Physical affection amongst human beings is indeed characterized positively here, but it does not speak to a larger sense of a conflict within humanity’s relation to “nature” that cannot be simply overcome through “physical contact.”
of the weaver-god’s loom appears at best a quietist avoidance of the inequities and revolutionary possibilities implicit to this analogy drawn from a scene of industrial capitalism. If these speculative escapes seem formulated in bad faith, the unique and mixed position into which Ishmael places himself, as both master and laborer, must be recognized as complexly political. Although he evinces a degree of anxiety stemming from an assumed position of superiority with respect to labor and “matter,” his decision to become a menial laborer, a “simple sailor,” is equally a decision to expose his intellectual universe to “material factories.” It is because Ishmael is at least partially in a position to speak from the floor of these factories that they begin to seep into his images and speculations, making Moby-Dick a text uniquely enmeshed in the concrete particulars of “material” situations.

While Ishmael’s actions perhaps speak louder than do his anxieties, the latter nevertheless express assumptions, which although transformed by his experience aboard the Pequod, imply specific limitations on his capacity to hear and express certain voices that need most to be heard. What Ishmael’s weaving analogy unintentionally conveys is that there are material factories in which some voices are not only simply muffled by machines, but in which they are silenced completely because they are not granted the status of voices, and this because they are treated as functioning parts within the material factory. Ishmael’s plunge into the world of labor, whales, and all that is ambiguously designated as “material” is a bold attempt to explore much of what conventionally lacked a voice in nineteenth-century American life, but Melville also utilizes these attempts to explore a chronic deafness at the heart of American modernity. There is one voice that seems implicitly and systematically to go unheard by Ishmael, although its silence
accompanies every moment of the Pequod’s fateful journey. Ishmael explains the origin of the ship’s name only in passing, but in a manner suggesting an assumed set of associations: “Pequod, you will no doubt remember, was the name of a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes” (69).

This description calls conspicuously for much further explanation, as though its terse and satisfied factuality were somehow out of place with respect to the subject matter. This is because we expect a greater explanation of the fateful ship’s namesake, but also because, as we learn much later in the narrative, Melville associates the Pequod’s fate more generally with a fate and history designated as “American.” The Parsee’s prophecies of Ahab’s demise are equally and relatedly visions of national or hemispheric catastrophe: “ere thou couldst die on this voyage, two hearses must verily be seen by thee on the sea; the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America” (499). This second hearse, which from Ishmael’s description we know to be doubly cadaverous—both in its association with an extinct group of Native Americans, and in its fated status as the Pequod—suggests a profound connection between colonial history, nineteenth-century American industry, and Ishmael’s voyage. But this is the connection that Ishmael’s terse description both opens and closes, as though Melville were utilizing his narrator to illustrate the ease with which such a voice or name might slip from memory or awareness. Indeed, Ishmael’s direct address to the reader announces itself as redundant specifically with respect to memory: Why should we be reminded of something that “you will no doubt remember”? Why does the name Pequod require this awkward doubling of memory that would seem to nullify the purpose of its explication? And why the sudden direct address to the reader?—a technique that
surfaces in *Moby-Dick*, but only occasionally and at highly significant moments.

The novel gestures toward a chronic problem of American forgetting. Ishmael reminds the reader of that which is worthy of memory, but which is systemically forgotten, namely the people and events associated with the name Pequot. However, this history appears as significant in as much as it has already disappeared, for while Ishmael’s historical note indicates a degree of thriving vitality associated with the tribe—their “celebrated” status—it does so only in order to draw a sharp contrast with their unexplained “extinction.” Memory of the Pequot is thus shown to be doubly problematic; the tribe is remembered because they no longer exist, but their extinction makes memory increasingly impossible. Ishmael’s hyperbolic comparison of Pequot extinction with that of “the ancient Medes,” creates not only a yawning temporal and epistemological gulf between present and past, but raises the threat of the past’s complete vanishing. Ishmael seems only able to invoke the tribe’s name while putting it under various forms of erasure, thereby creating a spectral present for this proper name—one whose presence is constituted through its disappearance. While he importantly performs an act of remembrance by gesturing toward Pequot and colonial American history, he is paradoxically interested at the same time in avoiding the traces left by this history.

Because this is the novel’s only explicit association of the ship with the Pequot tribe and colonial life, the ship’s virtual omnipresence in *Moby-Dick* replicates this tenuous relation between existence and disappearance for the reader, suggesting that

---

38 Ishmael, or Melville, misspells the Native American Indian tribe name, or perhaps relies on a false phonological translation. The name is now written as Pequot, and from henceforth the distinction between the tribe and the ship will be made on the basis of these different spellings, and by italicizing the ship’s name, as per custom.
Melville utilizes Ishmael’s oscillation between memory and forgetting to stage a larger crisis of American historical consciousness. The ship and its namesake are coterminous with the journey that is *Moby-Dick*, suggesting that Pequot extinction is of central importance to the novel, but Ishmael’s almost total lack of explicit thematization of this event illustrates the same crisis of memory evinced in his initial historical definition. He immediately loses track of the association between the *Pequod* and the body or corpse of the Pequot tribe’s extinct members in the midst of a catastrophe that bears its name, as though this forgetting or silence were endemic to the catastrophe. Ishmael raises the specter of the Pequot people, but his conspicuous and consistent silence on this point marks his inability fully to evade this problem of forgetting, avoidance, or deafness, and while he survives the sinking ship’s vortex he does so as the catastrophe’s traumatized orphan and not as its clairvoyant exegete (625). As in other situations, Ishmael works daringly to analyze and expose those aspects of American history that perpetuate its unique form of barbarism, but Melville seems also to want the reader to witness a chronic struggle within the narrator not to be able fully to do so. Ishmael can only explain his participation in the brutal hunt for the white whale by acknowledging his unexceptional status—his inability to see beyond or recognize the ideological affects of a particular moment governed by Ahab’s brutality: “What skiff in the tow of a seventy-four can stand still? For one, I gave myself up to the abandonment of the time and place…” (187).

The reasons for Ishmael’s congenital forgetting and incomplete memorialization of the Native American past are complex, but they arise from assumptions similar to those about voice and materiality analyzed previously. The specific example of the Pequot tribe’s troubled history provides, however, more than an additional example of
Ishmael’s analogical speculations at work, for it describes a unique and brutal set of assumptions and practices synonymous with the colonial violence through which the American nation came into existence and by which it supported its exponential growth. The Pequots were one of the first groups treated as mere mechanical parts in the “material factory” of the Puritan-colonial “errand in the wilderness,” suggesting a link between colonial violence and that largely Yankee-led errand in the watery wilderness that was the New England whaling fleet. While the two are hardly synonymous, it is nonetheless striking that the fated ship’s namesake references the first people with whom colonists fought a significant and violent war in New England, and largely for economic reasons (Hauptman 69).

The Pequots were a powerful Algonquian-speaking tribe of southern New England, living in a roughly two thousand square mile area encompassing the Thames River drainage basin. It appears that they had lived for some time in this region prior to European exploration (Starna 33). The Pequot war stemmed partly from a rivalry with the Narragansett tribe over the right to trade with the Dutch and English colonials, and from a series of violent encounters with colonists, in many cases precipitated by increasing competition for trade. The Pequot’s were not entirely passive in their response to the colonial presence, but the genocidal war waged against them in 1636-1637 by the English colonists at Plymouth was largely due to a racial and ethnocentric ideology facilitating the Puritan mission to profit from and “civilize” the new world (Cave 12). It is difficult to imagine how a war would have been averted with Puritan settlers, given their firm belief that the peoples of the new land were thoroughly demonic, licentious, and altogether without moral virtue (18).
There is one event of the Pequot war that best characterizes Puritan assumptions about Native Americans, and which further marks the conflict as unfortunately prophetic of European and Native American relations for centuries to come. The conflict is historically important for having been the first extensive war between Puritans and a Native American tribe, and equally remarkable for its genocidal brutality. On May 26, 1637 an English force accompanied by Narragansett warriors attacked the Pequot’s at Fort Mystic. The inhabitants were mostly women, children, and elderly people, all of who were spared no mercy by the English troops. The English’s intention seems not to have been to win a single battle, but to eliminate a large portion of the tribe’s population. Upon entering the fort, colonial forces set fire to the wigwams and then surrounded the structure, killing by sword or musket any who attempted to flee. Between perhaps six and seven hundred Pequots died in the Mystic Massacre, and most perished in the conflagration (Cave 151). In the months following the massacre the English systematically and mercilessly attempted, and with great success, to destroy the tribe, forbidding surviving members to use the name Pequot or to return to tribal lands (161). Many remaining Pequots were killed, scattered, or offered as slaves to tribes allied with the English. Some were sold to Caribbean slave traders (159). Although far from innocent in their participation in the campaign against the Pequots, Narragansett and Mohegan soldiers were horrified by what occurred at Fort Mystic, suggesting that the “Englishmen’s fight” was “too furious, and slays too many men” (Qtd. in Cave 152). Although they received Pequot slaves, and frequently killed escaping Pequots under English orders, the tribe’s traditional enemies and competitors seem to have had markedly different assumptions about the purposes of the conflict. Genocide appears not
to have been the intention of rival tribes, and because unlike the English, the Narragansetts and Mohegans did not approach the Pequots and their territory from a position of presumed ontological superiority. Indeed the English’s brutally punitive suppression of any assertion of Pequot autonomy suggests an implicit expectation of subservience.

There are numerous reasons, given the explicit association of Ahab’s ship with the fate of the American nation, for Melville to have related it to the Pequot tribe and the genocidal war fought against it. The English’s brutal victory in the Pequot war “led ultimately to the successful assertion of English political hegemony throughout southern New England” (Cave 122). Many historians concur that it is “one of the most important events in early American history,” and largely because it shaped views of Native American and colonial relations for centuries—perhaps contributing to the policy of manifest destiny that motivated various assertions of American imperialism in the years just prior to Moby-Dick’s publication (Hauptman 69). The Pequot war can be associated generally with events and attitudes that facilitated the hegemony of English colonists in the resource-rich environs of New England, allowing eventually for the assertion of American national autonomy (an event that cannot be simplistically reduced to a narrative of colonial brutality, but which also cannot be credulously constructed without it). There seems to be a literal connection between the catastrophic Pequot war and the catastrophic voyage of a ship whose wood is identified as “American”—a voyage participating in a form of economic imperialism upon the world’s oceans. But to understand this connection it becomes necessary to ask why Ishmael avoids substantial discussion of this colonial history? Once again we must ask why he cannot hear the voice
of the Pequot/Pequod, when this spectral name is practically ubiquitous with his journey.

One simple answer, and perhaps the one Ishmael implicitly provides, is that no Pequot remains to speak and thus to be heard. By describing the tribe to be “extinct as the ancient Medes” he memorializes the Pequot with a gesture that proves little more than the practical impossibility of their memorialization. But there are a number of reasons to assume that Ishmael’s reference to extinction is suspicious, if it is not deeply implicated in an ideology of American imperialism. Although perhaps merely an error on Melville’s part, the Pequot were neither extinct at the time of Moby-Dick’s publication, nor driven from New England, and the tribe’s descendants are currently formed into federally recognized Native American nations. It is quite possible that what Ishmael meant to suggest by this designation is the extent to which the tribe suffered tremendous, and nearly lethal damage at the hands of the Puritans. This nevertheless begs the question: why does Ishmael not, at the very least, mention the Pequot war—the extensible cause of Pequot “extinction”? To a young American nation, English colonial history of the early seventeenth century might have seemed like ancient history, but the Pequot war remained at the very least a significant event in New England’s regional memory. While his allusion might function simply through indirection, Ishmael’s specific rhetoric of extinction seems intended almost to obfuscate those circumstances of the conflict that would justify such a dramatic designation. Extinction might imply the consequence of active violence perpetrated by an aggressor, but Ishmael’s use of the term is surprisingly passive given the historical context. The lack of any grammatical subject in his statement conveys the sense of a mysterious disappearance in some mythical and bygone era.

Alternately, this passive construction might attribute culpability for Pequot
extinction squarely with the Pequots themselves. In the absence of an identified genocidal agent, their disappearance might be the result of an implied adaptive deficiency in an “evolving” world. Wai Chee Dimock suggests that Melville here—and throughout much of his corpus—expresses an insidious and prevalent view of the Jacksonian era, namely that the “extinction” of Native peoples is an unfortunate but necessary step in a teleology of human progression. Seen in this light, the Pequot’s “extinction” resulted from a deficiency in their capacity to progress with an “enlightened” civilization, and their disappearance might be attributed to their own intractability and the providential or “natural” growing pains of humanity. Writing of this passage, Dimock comments that: “Extinction” is what happens in an autotelic universe: it naturalizes the category of the “doomed,” not only by recuperating it as an evolutionary category but, most crucially, by locating the cause for extinction within the extinct organism itself” (116). Perhaps then Ishmael’s conspicuous omission of the genocide waged against the Pequots is less significant for its obfuscation of a particular relation of aggressor and victim, than it is highly revealing of an assumed absence of any such relation. War, famine, and disease are merely the agents of a destruction that, in Dimock’s description of this ideology, refer “to nothing other than his [the Indian’s] own savage self” (116). Ishmael’s inability to hear the voice of the Pequot might thus be symptomatic of a tendency to, as Dimock describes it, “blame the victim.” This suggests that the victim’s voice can only ever be a tragic one, which is perhaps equally to say that it is always already spectrally disappearing. Ishmael cannot hear this voice because it has never existed as a voice—both for him and relatedly for his colonial ancestors.

And yet there were Pequots demanding to be heard in the decades prior to the
American Civil War. One of these, William Apess, provided remarkable analyses of American imperialism that suggest much about the ideology structuring Ishmael’s assumptions, if not many of his speculative analogies. Born in Colrain, Massachusetts in 1798, Apess was the child of a mixed-race Pequot father and a native Pequot mother. His Caucasian grandfather married a Pequot women who Apess claimed to be a direct descendent of the famous King Phillip (Metacomet) (3). Apess was raised by his grandparents, until their alcoholism and repeated abuse forced his removal to a white family, who while treating him at times with kindness, utilized the young boy primarily as an indentured servant. He was sold from this family to another, receiving brutal treatment, as recorded in his autobiography, *A Son of the Forest*. At a relatively young age Apess discovered and formed a bond with Christianity, and specifically Methodism that persisted throughout his life. Besides experiencing a personal conversion, many of Apess’ comments about Methodism suggest that he intuited strongly the utopian and revolutionary possibilities of Christian doctrine and community (21). His unique position as a Christian and minister of mixed race, and one who had experienced personally the degradation and violence of slavery at the hands of white Christians, prompted Apess to focus many of his writings on the palpable absence of any such egalitarian religious society in the United States. Speaking from within the dominant religious and cultural discourse of Protestant Christianity, and utilizing many of its cherished rhetorical techniques, Apess represents an example of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe as a “minor literature.” Minor writing utilizes the rhetoric and expectations of a dominant or major cultural form, but in a fashion that estranges them from their traditional function as ideological supports for hierarchies of power (25-26).  

---

39 While
Apess turned New England Christianity against itself by speaking from a “minor” position neither external nor purely internal to it, and thereby forced its dominant cultural mode to face its practices in terms of its own rhetorical terms, his critique extends well beyond the hypocrisy of religious practice in New England. For Apess, the brutal treatment of Native Americans by Christians was symptomatic of a much larger dynamic of subjugation and mastery indicative of western modernity.

In his “Eulogy on King Philip,” Apess identifies a voracious obsession with hegemonic power as the driving force of the age: “O thou pretended hypocritical Christian, whoever thou art, to say that it was the design of God that we should murder and slay one another because we have the power” (279). The “enlightened” work of “civilizing” the savage—words that appear frequently in the Eulogy and with bitter irony—is a practice functioning precisely to realize a relation of domination rather than freedom. In this sense, Apess’ indictment of American imperialism closely resembles Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s discussion of modernity’s “dialectic of Enlightenment,” in which rather than realizing its putative mission to overcome the “barbarisms” of primitive cultures dominated by “unreason,” the enlightenment recapitulates relations of domination, and with increasing powers of totalization and homogenization.40 For Apess, Christianity has become one of many forms of ideology coopted by a nearly ubiquitous form of modern power without a moral telos and without

39 Arnild Krupat similarly describes Apess in terms of Antonio Gramsci’s distinction between “traditional” and “oppositional” intellectuals, the former merely supporting the dominant ideology of a class situation, and the latter revealing in a contestatory manner the dynamics of such situations. Krupat associates with Apess the capacity to produce genuine moments of “shame” for a dominant culture (81).

40 Adorno and Horkheimer’s focused articulation of this view appears in their Dialektik der Aufklerung. For an English translation, see: Dialectic of Enlightenment. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
limitations. While recounting several personal examples of prejudice focused on himself, Apess also importantly identifies this systematic violence with the Puritan legacy, suggesting, “these things I mention to show that the doctrines of the Pilgrims has grown up with the people” (305). Indeed, Apess suggests that the initial conflicts between Puritan colonists and Native American peoples—the exemplary expression of which was the Pequot war, with its direct and personal relevance for Apess—defined the dialectic of enlightenment that continues to silence Native voices. This direct connection between a fateful expression of modern domination in the past and the continuing holocausts of the present contrasts strikingly with Ishmael’s avoidance, if not dismissal, of the same legacy. When compared with Apess’ rich and revealing expression of the Pequot and Native American situation, it becomes clear that one reason for Ishmael’s deafness is his implication in a continuous cultural and economic assertion of power with old roots. Ishmael cannot hear the Pequot/Pequod because he cannot hear beyond the frequencies, the limitations, set by the Puritan ideological machine. He silences an already silenced voice, labeling the tribe as extinct in order to justify the perpetuation of an “enlightened” imperialism—an “errand in the wilderness” carried out on the western frontiers of the United States and the oceans of the globe.

2.3 Matter and Mothers

A striking aspect of Ahab’s somatic fantasies, whether mechanical, organic, or involving some peculiar mixture of the two, is their total exclusion of a sense of pre-individual dependency or reproduction. These imaginings evidence Ahab’s need to
support a sense of autarkic selfhood, but their lack of any feminine or maternal element indicates a decisive aporia confronting his analogical attempts. The body’s origins and beginnings constitutes a fundamental problem for his atomizing perspective in as much as it references the ambiguous imbrication of the child within the life of its mother. For while isolating particular bodies in order to reflect the unity of his “inaccessible being” offers temporary support for his myth of invulnerable selfhood, the focus on such bodies begs a full account of their bodily origins. In most cases the problem of origin is simply elided; the reader never learns, for example, of how the “compendious vertebrae” came into being. But in the case of his much desired “complete man,” Ahab envisions reproduction in terms of a purely masculine and technological paradigm. It is only in his conversation with the Carpenter, who he hails as the “manmaker,” and as “Prometheus” that Ahab can safely envision a possible scene of somatic genesis. He employs a notion of masculine productivity, and more importantly the common linkage of technological and masculine-economic productivity in the American nineteenth century—one often contrasted defensively to the biological reproduction assigned to the feminine—to support a delirious fantasy of a-sexual reproduction.\footnote{This characterization of a gendered biopolitical deployment of technology is greatly indebted to Mark Seltzer’s \\textit{Bodies and Machines}, which makes a similar claim in the context of American naturalism (29).} The skilled technician, in this case a Carpenter who stands as a chilling image of instrumental rationality, while utilizing Ahab’s idealized design for a new and mechanical masculine body, seems “miraculously” to construct a man without any reference to the feminine. Although it is the frustrated acknowledgment of such a man’s absence that prompts Ahab to articulate this fantasy, he nevertheless expresses a dream in which the “inaccessible” unity of his subject might be
both materialized, and materially reproduced without imbricating itself in an ambiguously vital and feminine “matter.”

This fantasy resembles closely Kant’s articulation of organic life as both “cause and effect of itself” (*CJ* 251). Of course Kant does not mean to suggest that the child is both the literal cause and effect of its own body, in the way that Ahab dreams of becoming the author of his material avatar, but there is a chauvinistic and formalist tradition upon which his account draws that performs a similar operation. For Kant, it is the apriori formal unity of the organism—the divine structural lawfulness that resembles humanity’s noumenal rationality—that is passed down through matter without, in some sense, being conditioned or differed by it. When thought in tandem with Kant’s infamous comments on women, found primarily in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, which categorically deny women the status of rationality and autonomy while according these supreme virtues to men, one might surmise that Kant identifies the mysterious unity of the organic with a masculine principle, essentially transferred through matter, a medium characterized pejoratively, like the female, as problematically “mechanical.” Because it is rational lawfulness, an inherently masculine trait for Kant, that provides the foundational example of formal order from which the analogue of sensuous organic life is drawn, it follows that the reproduction of life, if it is to reflect the formal unity and autonomy of the subject, occur through an essentially male form of self-reproduction. Although the connection requires more space and consideration than can be possibly provided here, Kant appears to reproduce, in a somewhat modified and less explicit form, Aristotle’s highly influential account of “ideal” biological and human reproduction, in which the superior eidetic male principle, located in sperm, sublimates the “material” and
female principle, and thereby reproduces a male offspring (Protevi 66-7). In this context a “perfect” form of reproduction would elide the feminine entirely, which threatens always to disrupt or differ the passage of pure form from one male to another. John Protevi points out, nevertheless, that this narrative of generation must include, unlike Ahab’s, the potentially deforming effects of feminine matter: “But with ideal patriarchal repetition comes the necessary supplement of feminine teratology: if the repetition of masculine form is ideal, then femininity is the first step to monstrosity, though it is a necessary deviation” (66). Ahab’s fantasy of masculine-technical self-reproduction is a recapitulation of this tradition, if not its fevered and hyperbolic extension. Although Kant and Aristotle still acknowledge a necessary, if not regrettable, relation to the feminine and to matter, Ahab envisions a “superior” future altogether without the putatively ambiguating detour through the feminine. His “complete man” is composed of “matter,” but only those aspects of materiality that would seem to reflect, without a problematic remainder, his “inaccessible” self are drawn upon to support it.

In as much, however, as Ahab’s fantasy relies on sensuous exemplars, if even ones seemingly transmuted into a “purer” form of analogically reflective matter, they contain the traces of a complex if not ambiguous history or origin. He cannot fully obfuscate or forget some implication of self and body in a maternal or “material” origin, which he occasionally references. In “The Candles,” while raging at the “paternal” light of fire, he briefly recalls a lost parent:

Oh, thou magnanimous! Now I do glory in my genealogy. But thou art but my fiery father; my sweet mother, I know not. Oh, cruel! What hast thou done with her? There lies my puzzle; but thine is greater. Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun. I know that of me, which thou knowest not of thyself, oh, thou omnipotent (507-8).
Although this expression of longing for the maternal figure appears to convey a genuine desire for some encounter with this forgotten ancestor, it is structured in terms that deprioritize her position. Ahab’s “puzzle,” a term that might describe his entire murderous obsession and quest, is strikingly construed in terms of the problematic relation to the mother, but the supposedly greater mystery of the “father” abruptly overtakes his focus and interrupts the passage’s momentary maternal detour. The manner in which the feminine suddenly looms, almost unexpectedly into the speech, only to be rapidly replaced by a discourse on the father ironically replicates, formally and syntactically, the problematic of forgetting that Ahab repeats. The vocative structure of the address assumes a privileged possibility of direct communication with the father, while the mother remains a tangential topic, either because of her absence, or perhaps due to some presumption that she lacks the capacity to speak or to listen.

More blatantly, Ahab associates the father with light, “magnanimity,” and “omnipotence,” leaving the reader to associate with the mother’s hidden or lost status a surreptitious, opaque, and limited existence. If the father appears in the glaring but ethereal, almost spiritual light of fire, the reader is left to characterize the mother in terms of the weighty darkness of the earth. The passage nevertheless repeats, through the mixed attribution of these superlative characteristics, its faltering but rich uneasiness with the masculinized apotheosis; Ahab assigns to the father all those attributes otherwise associated in the philosophical tradition with life’s autonomous, unified, and spiritual masculinity, and correspondingly with its mysterious capacity for self-propagation (in contrast to the “dead,” or “mechanical” motions of maternal matter). His very identification of the father with fire, with the source of heat, light, life, knowledge, and
ultimately being, is clearly meant to draw on a gendered and hierarchized cosmological and theological tradition. Thus the male is the “unbegotten” or “unbegun,” an eternally self-sufficient principle of unity without antecedent, although Ahab abruptly questions this arrogation of sublime independence. The fatherly fire is ignorant, it appears, of some vital predecessor that would call into question its position—a position about which Ahab claims contrastingly to have special knowledge. Given that he begins this passage by including, if problematically, the maternal in the story of his “genealogy,” it follows that the flame’s faulty arrogance lies precisely in its forgetting of a female “begetter” that would interrupt the presumed continuity of vital-masculine reproduction. In other words, it is Ahab’s partial identification of genealogy with a differential female element that seems to support his claim to a superior gnosis.

However, like so many of his self-illuminating reflections, this one invariably recapitulates the vitalist binary it might have collapsed. This is because Ahab’s tremendous claim to superior knowledge places him suddenly in a superlative, and perhaps “unbegotten” position with respect to knowledge production, but more importantly because his only recognition of the female in these lines arises from his admonition of total ignorance. Ahab knows only that he does not know his mother, the knowledge of which should provide him with the superior sense of “genealogy” that would contest the myth of an “unbegotten” origin of life and the atomizing ideology of an anthropocentric individualism it has come to support. Although his acknowledgment of ignorance is undoubtedly important, the manner in which he quickly abandons even his ignorance, and simply continues his agonic discourse with the “father,” reveals the limitations of this superiority. It is unsurprising that the lines immediately following
Ahab’s claim to superior knowledge forget the feminine “detour” altogether, and recapitulate the division of life from mechanism from which the invidious masculine-feminine division largely structuring the passage arises: “There is some unsuffusing thing beyond thee, thou clear spirit, to whom all thy eternity is but time, all thy creativeness mechanical. Through thee, thy flaming self, my scorched eyes do dimly see it” (508). Fire has a “begetter,” but its beginnings oddly echo the superlative attributes already assigned to its masculinity. Although the utterly transcendent creator should perhaps be without any sensuous analogue, avatar, and thus sex or gender, it has a “flaming self” already described as male. As fire is to the presumably darker female elements, so to is the “unsuffusing thing,” the veritably self-grounding source of animation to the “mechanical” creativeness of the sensuous and the earthly. The passage exposes the reproduction of the paradigm that reproduces the congenital forgetting or dismissal of the mother and the feminine through the absolute division of life from “mechanical” matter. Ahab returns to a paradigmatic vitalist position that envisions a self-grounding source of “living” power and identity, utterly superior to and divided from all that might interrupt its perfect autonomy, and through which he can analogize and perpetuate the myth of his own uninterrupted subjective freedom.42

42 In at least one other passage Ahab identifies himself with the opposite of “light,” and perhaps thus with the feminine and the material, but his recognition of this position comes again only in the form of an admonition of ignorance: “…So far gone am I in the dark side of earth, that its other side, the theoretic bright one, seems but uncertain twilight to me” (528). Although an interesting identification, the Captain seems to speak here only out of a despairing sense of privation. Ishmael reverses some of these associations, although in a manner that ambiguates instead of nullifying the novel’s sexualized bifurcations of nature: “Hither, and thither, on high, glided the snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds; these were gentle thoughts of the feminine air; but to and fro in the deeps, far down in the bottomless blue, rushed mighty leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks; and these were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea. But though thus contrasting within, the contrast was only in shades and shadows without; those two seemed one; it was only the sex, as it were, that distinguished them” (542).
What Ahab’s fantasy of purely masculine and technological self-reproduction reveals, beyond the influence of a chauvinistic tradition, is the persistent need to isolate life as an autonomous and self-grounding principle from any significant interference or connection to its putative opposite. It also correspondingly exposes the need to support the identification of the supersensuous self with sensuous life through an analogical imaginary that obfuscates aspects of “materiality” that threaten to upset this fragile arrangement. The thought of life’s origin threatens consistently to draw this project into a hopeless convergence with “matter,” or the “feminine,” and thus requires a vigilant forgetting of the mother.

2.3 Skin

Although Dimock correctly identifies Ishmael’s reference to extinction with an invidious ideology supporting American expansionism, her more general claim—that *Moby-Dick* serves as a vehicle for perpetuating the brutal Indian policies of the Jacksonian era—obfuscates the considerably nuanced and troubled relation of the text to those silenced under the auspices of “progress.” Perhaps this is because Dimock neglects to inquire into that element of American imperial ideology around which the novel obsesses, namely the cultural value associated with skin and skin color. While her argument presciently identifies other invidious assumptions about Native American life in the nineteenth century—some of which Ishmael exhibits—it fails to trace the manner in which *Moby-Dick* specifically connects the barbarism of the American enlightenment to the ontological status attributed to skin. There is little doubt that *Moby-Dick*’s
invocation of the name Pequot is meant to relate the history of colonial and imperial aggression against Native Americans to the catastrophic voyage of the *Pequod*, but only Tashtego of all the ship’s crew is in any normative sense an American “Indian” (120). Nevertheless, several other important characters are conspicuously and differently designated in terms of their non-Caucasian skin color—Queequeg, Daggoo, Pip, Fedallah, and Old Fleece (the cook), among others. The manner in which they are used as disposable instruments for the whaling industry throughout the novel suggests that *Moby-Dick* is more interested in contemplating the American ideology enabling racial exploitation as it relates to skin color than it is focused on justifying the legacy of Jacksonian expansionism into Native American territory (although the latter phenomenon was clearly reliant on the former). Seen from this perspective, Ishmael’s suspicious reference to Pequot “extinction” is a historically important example of much more than the perpetuation of Puritan genocide against Native Americans; the Pequot war was equally the first major conflict fought in New England between Caucasians and people of “color.” If there is some parity between the Pequot genocide and the racial situation aboard the ship, it revolves around a similar instantiation of an American dialectic of enlightenment grounded in the distinction between skins.

In his “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man,” William Apess established a similar connection, identifying the hypocrisy of American “civility” with Caucasian exceptionalism. He asks repeatedly why the most basic cosmopolitan

43 Samuel Otter connects Apess’ “Indian’s Looking Glass” briefly to *Moby-Dick*, relating the former’s exploration of skin color to the novel’s analysis of white skin as “the object of discriminating curiosity usually reserved for dark skin” (131). Otter recognizes in Melville, like Apess, an attempt to
programs of the enlightenment—education, inclusion, and representation—seem systematically denied to non-white peoples (156). Although he notes other prevalent justifications for the disenfranchisement or extermination of Native Americans, Apess recognized that behind the rhetoric of American progress lay banal racial prejudices rooted in myths of somatic difference. His critique takes the form of a series of damning rhetorical questions posed to a “civilized” nation:

I would ask if there cannot be as good feelings and principles under a red skin as there can be under a white. And let me ask: Is it not on the account of a bad principle that we who are red children have had to suffer so much as we have? And let me ask: Did not this bad principle proceed from the whites or their forefathers? (156)

This final question is of particular significance, for it relates Apess’ identification of a tradition of American violence expressed in the “Eulogy for King Phillip”—one handed down from Puritan settlers to the present—with a specific somatic justification. What allows Caucasian Americans to dominate others despite their putatively egalitarian social program is, just as Dimock points out, the eliding of blame, the myth of self-perpetuated “extinction,” but the attribution of this tragic narrative rests on an arbitrary assertion of difference that decenters such naturalizations. The “extinction” of the Pequot is supposedly the means by which they reveal their different and inferior ontological status to the empirically observant, but the initial ideological designation of difference constructs the possible space of “empirical” observation. Apess reverses this self-justifying pseudo-scientific game by emphasizing the “bad principle,” the assertion of difference without genuine empirical experience, and its active employment by the “whites” and their “forefathers.”

challenge the myth’s of nineteenth-century racism, and specifically those that focused on body type or skin color as guides to the subjectivities associated with them.
On its surface “An Indian’s Looking-Glass” appears not to inquire into what specific notion of Caucasian exceptionalism the differences attributed to skin color support. This might be understood as one of the essay’s many virtues, for by suggesting that there is no robust concept of whiteness—no content other than the most banal sense of superiority founded on the attribution of superficial differences—Apess effectively exposes the insipid arbitrariness of colonial and Yankee power. There are nevertheless a few moments in which another justification appears, one Apess seems not fully to recognize, and which he fails fully to avoid even while struggling to oppose its implications. Speaking again of the same “bad principle,” he exhorts the listener to:

…do away with that principle, as it appears ten times worse in the sight of God and candid men than skins of color—more disgraceful than all the skins that Jehovah ever made. If black or red skins or any other skin of color is disgraceful to God, it appears that he has disgraced himself a great deal—for he has made fifteen colored people to one white and placed them here upon this earth (157).

While an effective indictment of Christian-Caucasian racism, Apess perpetuates here a distinction between “skins of color” and “white” skin deeply implicated in the assumption of difference he labors to eradicate. By equalizing the diversity of extant creation, and more specifically the diversity of its chromatic qualities with the divine will, Apess intends to equalize ontologically the value of all things expressive of those qualities. But “whiteness” is repeatedly designated as something other than “color,” or as something that lacks color, and which might be interpreted as qualitatively different from the set into which all other qualities are grouped. The passage further attributes a different status to whiteness by homogenizing it relative to the diversity associated with color; whiteness appears to lack variation, whereas when God makes “colored skins” he fashions them at least as either “red” or “black.” While Apess’ reference to the relative
scarcity of white skin among God’s otherwise multitudinous “darker” creations is meant to deflate any presumption of self-importance, it creates equally a sense of exceptional rarity and exceptional value.

The tension this passage traces, between the diversity of divine qualities and their emanation from a single divine source resonates with similar divisions that informed much romantic literature and science. In this context whiteness also often gained an exceptional status in as much as it was thought phenomenally to present the otherwise supersensuous, unifying power of nature. Apess’ differentiation of whiteness from color recalls, for example, aspects of novel theories of light prevalent in his time—theories that attributed to whiteness an exceptional if not unifying status with respect to color.

Coleridge’s “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” conjures a world rich in diversity, but one haunted by the white ghost of the Albatross, an animal whose sacral universality is expressed by its striking white plumage. The Mariner’s senseless violence against the creature elicits a nearly lethal reprisal from all of nature, for his act belies an attitude of general hostility towards the univocal power that founds existence. *Moby-Dick* obsesses more explicitly over these distinctions, and drawing on the theories of “natural philosophers” suggests that the “great principle of light, for ever remains colorless in itself and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge…” Ishmael’s characterization of whiteness as “not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors,” summarizes this philosophy (195). Because this power contains all distinctions

---

44 The connections between Goethe’s color theory and *Moby-Dick* are richly explored in Michaela Geisenkirchen’s “Still Half Blending with the Blue of the Sea”: Goethe’s Theory of Colors in *Moby-Dick.*
or qualities, its phenomenal appearance is conspicuous for its lack of qualities—a seeming paradox in as much as the identity of an object or quality would seem to constitute the conditions of its phenomenal appearance. While the implications of *Moby-Dick*’s meditations on whiteness and their racial consequences will be explored later, these allusions are important in as much as they ally whiteness’s exceptional chromatic status with the superlatively exceptional status of the divine in early nineteenth-century European and American cultures. Whiteness was understood as an immanent expression of sublime mastery, power, and creation, and while Apess’ God appears to exist beyond the distinction between “whiteness” and “color,” the manner in which he excepts the former from the conditions reigning over creation’s heterogeneous products resonates with Romantic dichotomies that were explicit meditations on the divine.

The extent to which Romantic theories of color, whether expressed philosophically, scientifically, or literarily, were motivated by prejudicial racial assumptions is a debatable issue, but when these chromatic distinctions directly influenced senses of racial difference the effect was unmistakably violent. The problem Apess struggles to address is not simply the physical reality of whiteness’s mysterious status in nature, but its use as a designator of a particular human *skin*, and thus with a particular instantiation of creation indicative of humanity’s non-exceptional status in nature. Skin or membranes are the literal links, and not simply the barriers, between organisms and their environments. They exhibit the participatory nature of life, and its

---

*Leviathan* 7:1 (2005), 3-18. For Goethe, white was the representative of light, and black the representative of darkness—the two forming the supersensuous basis of all sensuous qualities, such as color (9-10). Both employ a Neo-Platonic sense of a unified and non-phenomenal force pervading life and gaining expression in the diversity of perception (7). Geisenkirchen thus interprets Ahab’s struggle with the white whale as war against this divine force that gives rise to the phenomenal world (10)—a struggle with the sign of power or mastery.
vulnerable and malleable existence in a diverse milieu. This makes them records of their own creation—changing maps of scars, marks, lines, and colors. These topographies are not simply marks on a pure white surface, but qualitatively or differentially constituted entities throughout their existence—a fact Ahab laments when he asks the blacksmith if he cannot smooth the “seam” of his wrinkled brow—a seam he then describes as “unsmoothable,” because “it has worked down into the bone of my skull—that is all wrinkles!” (488). If whiteness is not a color, like the divine power that creates and is thus not created, but paradoxically “the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors,” in what sense can any skin be white? Just as skin cannot be “smoothed,” for it is never flat but constitutively wrinkled, it cannot be understood as white or as ever having been white. Because skin exists only as something creaturely it cannot express that which is without conditions or qualities, and whiteness cannot equally appear as a quality of that which exists qua conditioned. In the context of this discussion, one might thus suggest that white skin is a blatant contradiction, while “colored skins” is a redundant term.

All skins are colored, or created, and this fact is what Apess wants most urgently to convince us of, but he does so without fully escaping a cultural logic that contests this radical democratization of creation. Apess repeats the word “skin” with mantra-like frequency in “Indian’s Looking-Glass,” as though its echo might convince us of the creaturely ubiquity of all things, and enough even to level the distinction between “white” and “colored” skin he contrastingly reiterates. And while it might appear that his employment of this differentiation is an example of his splendid irony—a “minor” use of the rhetorical distinctions of a “major” Yankee idiom—Apess’s discussion of skin is
explicitly about divine creation and not cultural prejudice. He can thus ask if we are foolish enough to believe that “the white man, being one in fifteen or sixteen, are the only beloved images of God?” but then bifurcate the same God’s creations by suggesting that “he” has created “fifteen colored people to one white” (157). Apess’s writings are of tremendous value because he speaks from both a “minor” position—with a subaltern, silenced Pequot voice—and from a perspective within a dominant cultural institution, namely New England Protestantism, and not always in a fashion that seamlessly mediates them. The result is a discourse at once brimming with emancipative gestures, but also, and perhaps as a result, occasionally and unintentionally revealing of entrenched racial constructs and their supporting discourses. Although speaking from a markedly different background, and a non-fictional one, Apess’ rhetorical struggle resembles Ishmael’s analogical one in a number of ways. Both daringly struggle to negotiate the margins of dominant and minor cultural positions—in Ishmael’s case by assuming and prejudicially resisting the position of a menial laborer and lover of Queequeg. While his analogies work with real sincerity to level traditional hierarchical distinctions they also at times rely on assumptions implicated in the maintenance of those hierarchies.

Neither Ishmael nor Apess is fully comfortable with the implications of these assumptions, and their writings consistently criticize aspects of their own implicit logics. In “Indian’s Looking-Glass,” the differentiation of white from colored skins provokes attempts to nullify this difference and its consequences. This is due to Apess’ keen appreciation for the manner in which racial exceptionalism generates circularly self-sustaining logics that produce relations of domination. For the contradiction expressed by the concept of white skin is only problematic if one assumes that white skin is skin; if
white bodies are presumed not to exist under the same creaturely or material conditions as all other creations, then white skin becomes less a paradox than an emblem of superlative power. When whiteness is understood as a “living” example of the self-grounding status of creative power, white bodies can also be interpreted as expressing a self-legislating creativity free from the contingent, hybrid, and malleable existence of “created” things. While the attribution of these divine qualities to a human group might seem a contradiction in terms, or an impious challenge to any traditional concept of the divine, such is the consequence of formulating a hierarchical ontology with its corresponding social effects.

White bodies can thus come to be understood as the “perfect” sign of “pure” mastery, as they are in some sense for Coleridge and Ishmael, for they do not only signify transcendent power, but refer to their own immanent puissance. This mastery is “pure,” because unlike other signs or things it exists as a self-grounding referent— the referent or master signifier from which the diversity of worldly signs gain their semblance of solidity (Casarino 91).

45 Ishmael writes that the originator of all visible qualities, which are “but

---

45 Cesare Casarino suggests, in the context of a discussion of the commodity form and Moby-Dick, that: “white is among colors what money is among commodities: the material presence of both the absence and the representation of itself—always more than itself and not itself at all” (91). While Casarino’s analysis represents one of the most penetrating and eloquent interpretations of the novel, this description is categorically backwards; he asserts that Moby Dick is the harbinger of a cultural logic of a coming epoch of capital: “I am not saying that the whale is an allegory for the emerging forces of industrial capitalism: I am suggesting, rather, that in the whale Melville produced not the metaphor but rather the concept of the logic governing historical formations that did not yet fully exist, even though they peeked and threw random clues and cryptic messages into his present from the privileged and heavy-curtained balconies of future history” (83). This is a fascinating statement, but the power associated with whiteness in Moby-Dick is not “always more than itself and not itself at all,” like the pure commodity that is money. Whiteness is the one phenomenal experience in the novel identified with power because it appears to be fully itself—a description that is more in keeping with the logic of Romantic natural philosophy, which is the explicit referent for the passages in “The Whiteness of the Whale.” Whiteness has a close and interesting parity with the commodity form, in as much as it expresses a ghostly ubiquity reigning over all things, but the commodity’s instability results from its derived status. Commodity form gains its strength vampirically from the use and exchange values of specific things, and is therefore always beyond itself (“more than
subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without," is the white light whose “muteness,” or lack of identifiable content, makes it the expression of “universality” (193). *Moby-Dick*’s attribution of whiteness to the whale’s great body disrupts and complicates the insidious racial implications that stem from this conceptual trajectory, but in doing so it reveals how the social identification of the same power with particular human bodies can be catastrophic. For the affect attributed to whiteness is neither simply that of the surprise accompanying an epistemic breach of ordinary concepts, nor that of a purely abstract contemplation of divine principles. The novel envisions a tremendous, even infinite power known through its crushing dismemberments and the madness they leave behind. What Apess seems most to struggle against in the division of white from colored skins is a logic that would attribute to white bodies such a naturalized position of titanic mastery over the “colored” bodies of all created things.

Apess appears to intuit and protest this exceptionalism in a remarkable image: Now suppose these skins were put together, and each skin had its national crimes written upon it—which skin do you think would have the greatest?...I should look at all the skins, and I know that when I cast my eye upon that white skin, and if I saw those crimes written upon it, I should enter my protest against it immediately and cleave to that which is more honorable. And I can tell you that I am satisfied with the manner of my creation, fully—whether others are or not (157).

This image of white skins covered with the signs of their own guilt, vividly upsets any presumed connection of moral purity with whiteness, but the passage is most significant for the manner in which it implicates this identification with a simultaneous act of

...
punishment. What Apess appears to envision here is a juridical proceeding, a court in which sentence, crime, and punishment occur simultaneously, offering a justice so palpably denied to Native Americans that it can appear here only as a fabulation. This is because the form of “writing” on skin that would mark Caucasians permanently, and thus equalize appearance with identity—matching signifier with signified—is the tattoo. Apess never uses the word in this context, but his imagery calls to mind the use of tattoos, for which there is a lengthy social history, as the putative guarantors of criminal identity—the ineffaceable stigmata that unite signification with corporeal selfhood.46

What Apess desires is that the record of historical violence tattooed on skin not be the identifier of a perpetrator whose illusory presence is conjured, like that of any signed referent, by the distance that temporal deferral or arbitrary semantic difference structures, but that it overcome this ontological ambiguity, uniting seamlessly the sign of perpetration with the living presence of a perpetrator. Apess desires the existence of an ineffaceable form of “pure” writing—“pure” because it makes present the being it designates without deferral—and “ineffaceable” because it cannot be erased in order to reconstitute the illusion of a “pure” white surface. This imaginary tribunal is contiguous with the life of the skin, for as a tattoo, the sign makes of the self an emblem of injustice always available for judgment. Like the power putatively signified by white skin, this writing would seem to have produced an ideal unity of signifier and signified. The imagined tattoo’s immanent disclosure of guilt reflects the frustration Apess must have

46 Tattoos have a lengthy and complicated global history, but the Greek term stigma appears to have referred at least partly to the use of pricking the skin with needles in order to mark it (Jones, Written on the Body 4). The purposes of stigmata in the ancient Greek and Roman world were variable, but the designation of criminality was certainly one of them. King Xerxes, for example, understood tattoos as marks of punishment for the rebellious behavior of slaves (7).
felt confronting the concept of white skin, with its similar connotations of perfectly self-referential signification. If whiteness is understood as the signifier and signified of power and purity—the immediate and totalizing presence of mastery—tattooing would seem a form of resistance designed to nullify this association, but ironically through the same circular logic of designation and identity. The “national crimes” to which Apess refers are in every sense real, but the fantasy of identification he stages mimics operations that reduce selfhood to a phenomenal attribute, much in the way that the “whiteness” of certain skins was equated with absolute power.

The purposes of this reduction seems purely punitive, and perhaps even sadistically so. While one can sympathize greatly with Apess’ justifiable rage, his image can be interpreted in terms of a violent fantasy of objectifying control. Apess imagines white bodies forced to become writing surfaces, a vision that appears to conjure the kind of totalizing power heretofore associated with the concept of whiteness. If this writing is tattooing, as the context suggests, its effect would indeed be painful and debasing. Tattoos have become at critical moments in history the signs of arbitrary assertions of power that have more to do with fantasies of punishment and mastery than the equitable attribution of guilt. Perhaps the greatest literary exploration of this theme, Kafka’s remarkable “In der Strafkolonie” (“In the Penal Colony”), imagines a penal machine that slowly “writes” the crimes of the accused in their flesh, punishing and brutally executing the “criminal,” who until this process has begun, remains unaware of the nature of their malfeasance (145). Apess’s dream does not conclude with such overtly gory violence, and his anger is hardly arbitrary in its focus, but Kafka’s association of writing, punishment, and the perverse jouissance of absolute power might cause one to wonder if
he does not relish the scene he has penned. The fantasy is one of a power so sublime that Apess does not label or represent it—a power that will assemble the nations and transform their skins, producing a final scene of judgment. While Apess does not represent himself as the titanic judge or ubiquitous punisher of his fictional court, as its author he partially assumes these positions as he writes the fantasy that writes on bodies.

This process of tattooing would have as its further punitive result the ostracizing or stigmatization of every Caucasian skin for the crimes of its entire “nation.” Apess imagines himself fully justified in “protesting” against the Caucasian race in as much as it is reduced to a signification of a particular history, and in severing his associations with it by cleaving “to that which is more honorable.” Like the ostracism and punishment meted out upon the Pequot for their “colored skins” at the hands of Caucasian Puritans, Apess would similarly reject the latter by identifying them in terms of a general epidermal characteristic. But this comparison is hardly just, for Apess’ rage arises from the genocidal effects of prejudice, rather than from superficial prejudice itself. There is no doubting here the justification for punitive rage or action, or at least Apess’ need for a universal recognition of wrongs committed, and often enough by Caucasians and against Native Americans. Nevertheless, the manner in which “justice” mirrors the violent criminality it accuses raises a critical question: does Apess’ protest transcend the total devastation of racial exceptionalism—total because it instills in the victim the need to

47 As this investigation of Apess will soon suggest, there are various ways to interpret this passage, and with dramatically different consequences. Samuel Otter suggests that here “the crimes are historical, not inherently racial” (131). However, the line between race and history is what this specific passage begins to blur. Why is it that the “white” race is overwhelmingly the worst perpetrator? Why are its national crimes attributable to all of its members’ skins, such that Apess imagines ostracizing both criminality and the white skin with which he overwhelmingly associates it?
exercise a similarly totalizing relation of retributive mastery?

It would be strange and mostly suspicious if such fantasies were not entertained by those living under the conditions of expulsion, disenfranchisement, slavery, and genocide. Although Apess evinces a regrettable but symptomatic desire for punitive domination, his fantasy may have more forgiving and pedagogical purposes as well. Apess’ writings generally rely on empathic responses to demonstrations of absolute human equality for their rhetorical power. His desire to tattoo white skin might also be interpreted in terms of a need to disrupt the fantasies that sustain its exceptional status by manifesting its ontological equality with all other skins. Although he feels the need to make a history of oppression and violence visually manifest here, the passage’s substantial subtext is the assumption that white skin is a site naturally free from writing or signs, intimating a presumed prohibition against tattooing it—a prohibition further emblematic of its presumed exceptional status. For Apess, the arrogation of such a position is equally if not more disturbing than the violence it might motivate; in his *Eulogy for King Philip* he fantasizes again about a visual transformation of white skins, but without the same punitive connotations:

> It is with shame, I acknowledge, that I have to notice so much corruption of a people calling themselves Christians. If they were like my people, professing no purity at all, then their crimes would not appear to have such magnitude. But while they appear to be by profession more virtuous, their crimes still blacken. It makes them truly to appear to be like mountains filled with smoke, and thick darkness covering them all around (300).

The reference to blackness clearly suggests that Apess refers not simply to “Christians” but to the assumption of purity that Puritan and Yankee civilization associate with whiteness—an association that Apess struggled fully to discard. Whiteness is here still a sign of moral purity; blackness thus becomes its opposing visual and moral
signification—and these chromatic distinctions are still presumed to indicate differences in natural value that help to structure the racial exceptionalism the passage attempts to oppose. However, if it is allowed momentarily to lose its explicit symbolic references to morality and crime, the passage can be seen as experimenting with this presumption of natural superiority.

This is because the image of white skins now dark like “mountains filled with smoke” would have been a transgressive one for its time with or without its function as a designator of Caucasian violence. This is not because the “darkening” of a “white” body, even in the imagination, would constitute a punitive or retributive action against a “master” signifier; what Apess demonstrates here is a far more effective weapon against racist ideology, for his imagined darkening of white skin is an image of white skin that evinces its status as skin. As discussed previously, what Apess desires most to challenge is the ontological valuation of any aspect of creation over another, and skin, like the quality of color, is equally implicated in this democracy of creation. “Colored skin” is redundant, for all skins are created and thus colored through and through. This image of “white” skin made dark like smoke might be interpreted less in terms of sootiness or moral dirtiness, but as the revelator of skin itself. While skins are chromatically different—a fact Apess celebrates as the evidence of the creative will of the divine—they are not more or less colored. Caucasian skin is a skin like all others, covered “all around” with markings, colors, and folds. It is as dark as night, as dark as any blackness, when compared with that ethereal whiteness that is the phenomenal evidence of the uncreated creator. If whiteness is the sign of this mastery, by demonstrating the constitutively colored nature of all skins, Apess effectively strips Caucasians of their ontological status.
as masters.

He does so, significantly, without retributively attributing to himself or his race the same position of domination. When understood in terms of his discussion of creation, rather than its explicit evaluation of national criminal histories, Apess’ suggestion that his people, unlike Caucasians, profess “no purity at all,” effectively situates himself in a position of common experience rather than judgment. All are created, and all are thus equally delimited by the conditions of creation. The image of Caucasians as “mountains filled with smoke,” might be taken to express an assertion of ontological commonality with the colored or created status of all materiality, rather than an allegory of sinfulness. While Apess’ intent appears not simply to level all distinctions between notions of the human and the inhuman, his image is too ambiguously concrete to cohere simply with the moral evaluation to which he puts it. Smoking mountains at night do not connote evil, as much as they indicate a wealth of creative natural processes and differences. And yet this is precisely what makes the image superlatively effective, for the assertion of monstrous commonality, rather than analogical similarity, displaces the expectation of Caucasian exceptionalism. Like Ishmael’s analogies, the figure fails productively as it confuses territories, producing a surreal image of a human mountain, belching smoke. One might be tempted to suggest that this is precisely a demeaning and thus punitive association, but Apess does not characterize the mountain in pejorative terms, in sharp contrast to the history of criminality with which he awkwardly attempts to equate it. Although he describes his people as “having no purity”—an attribution that would seem only to indicate an essential lack—what he more importantly indicates is their common existence both of and in this creatively-destructive, or destructively-
creative scene.

If Apess took pleasure in constructing such an image, it appears less that of the pleasure enjoyed by the sadist or the judge, and far more the delight of breaking an absurd rule. His image, like the hypothetical scene of writing on skin, violates totally a cultural taboo against marking, tattooing, or dirtying white skin that would have been handed down from Puritan to Yankee. What may have been most shocking to a Caucasian audience listening to Apess’ hypothetical scene of judgment is the image of “colored” markings covering a “white” body. The assumption implicit to this prohibition is that white skin is precisely exceptional, that it is not a skin—not a collection of marks, colors, and signs. By aiming specifically at this presumption, these images make absurd its sanctimoniousness, while bringing all of humanity back down to a level on which Apess situates himself. One laughs at oneself with a trickster, but never enjoys, at least without total masochism or interpolation, the sadist or the judge’s persecution. While Apess’ fantasy of writing on white bodies evinces some of the perverse pleasure of the latter figures, even this image has an equalizing and communitarian motivation.

Here, as elsewhere, Apess’ function as a writer is multiple. He is at once the judge that must identify, label, and punish the exceptional immorality of Caucasians and the exceptional status they arrogate to themselves, and he is the imaginative producer of “improper” images that revel joyfully in the diversity and hybridity of creation. Throughout much of his work he is also a great rhetorician exposing a plague of cultural hypocrisy and violence. It would be difficult and perhaps foolish to attempt totally to synthesize these diverse positions, for while much of Apess’ oeuvre is a pointed, consistent, and effective protestation of unjust domination, its internal tensions prove
equally valuable as they expose his struggle for and against the figure of the white master. He recapitulates the ideology of racial exceptionalism while demanding recognition of our common creation, and he imaginatively enjoys sadistic retribution while laughing compassionately at his deluded Caucasian fellows. While this complex authorial position warrants much further investigation on its own terms, in the context of this discussion it becomes especially significant in as much as Apess’ is a Pequot voice, and one that identifies a reason for its relative silence (or silencing) in Ishmael’s account of the Pequod’s journey. For although the Pequot are represented in the novel as already extinct, and thus denied the possibility of voicing the conditions that led to their putative silence, when given the opportunity to speak, Apess identifies this chronic deafness with the invidious distinction between “white” and “colored skins.”

But to suggest that Ishmael cannot hear the Pequot because he is simply prejudiced against those of a different skin color fails entirely to capture the lesson Apess illustrates: the discourse of “color” or “whiteness” is one that maps onto a more basic dualistic ontology divided between creation and creator. Color becomes a designator for the “created,” relative to the position of “purity” and self-sufficient power arrogated to a white creator or master. These ontological distinctions antedate and found the naturalized distinction between “whiteness” and “color”—one that structure’s Moby-Dick’s cosmology. Ishmael cannot hear the Pequot, who were far from extinct in 1851, because their “colored” skins, in contrast with his “white” skin, are the emblems of a derivative form of being, and thus either without a voice, or without a voice that matters. The difference between the two is unimportant in this context, for the only voice that makes a difference is that of the master, or those associated with mastery through the sign of
power that is whiteness. Cast in the terms of his weaver analogy, one might say that Ishmael is not so much deafened by creation, as he is deafened by the presumed gap between creator and creation. And while he never allies himself explicitly with the divine, the exceptional position Ishmael frequently attributes to himself as an author, as a speculator, relative to those who simply labor in “material factories,” mimics the distanced autonomy attributed here to whiteness.

There is a profound link between Ishmael’s uneasy relation to labor with its connections to “matter” and his anxious hesitancy to draw close to “colored skins.” This point might seem strange, given his obvious affection for Queequeg, but Ishmael’s first encounter with his lover begins with a panic about the nature of the “savage’s” multi-colored skin. Although these hesitations do not map neatly onto one another, in as much as the common laborers of Ishmael’s world were of various racial backgrounds, including Caucasian ones, they coalesce around a common theme, namely the created or “material” status of the people and things falling under these designations. In the weaving analogy, the workers in the “material factory” are depicted not as producers, but as instruments of a factory that is the common product of the superiorly positioned weaver god. One can imagine them playing their parts, moving mechanically with the insatiable roar of machines, and even becoming indistinguishable from this machinery. They express fully the assumed connection between limitation and creation, for as the products of a creative master they lack the freedom, the self-grounding autonomy that distinguishes machine from life. “Colored skin” similarly evidences the absence of whiteness’s transcendent fullness, becoming a marker for the fall into the conditioned, mechanical life of things. Ishmael’s conflicted participation in the multi-racial labor force of the Pequod thus
reveals a common ideology that paradoxically but effectively separates the white master or captain from his simple sailors for the same reasons that might separate “white” from “colored” skin. In either case a notion of free mastery and immanent power is constructed from and against an opposing concept of natural limitation that seems to invite sovereign control.

However, *Moby-Dick* is not merely the expression of such an ideology in action as much as it is a witness to points of rupture in the ontological hierarchy that founds it. Ishmael dismisses the Pequot with his minimal and false description of their “extinction,” but the name permeates the book, refusing to go completely silent. And as Apess’ writings reveal, this persistent reminder is the evidence of a voice speaking from the position of “colored skin,” revealing an agency that disrupts the gap signified by whiteness—the gap between “creator” and “created,” between “master” and “slave.” The stakes are high for Ishmael’s exploration of this rupture, and not simply because it threatens to upend his privileged position as an educated white male. That Ishmael ventures willingly into the subservient position of a common sailor in the whaling industry suggests that he is not interested simply in obtaining the privilege available to him, although, as we have seen, neither is he fully able to abandon the ideology that helps to guarantee it. His decision to form a close, if not romantic relationship with Queequeg expresses a desire to move beyond a narrowly defined sphere of human interaction. Ishmael thus appears less fearful of losing a position of social mastery—although authorial mastery might be a different matter—than he is terrified of what it might mean to accept fully one’s “material” life. While this anxiety is registered in terms of speculative acts of resentment that resist the implication of slavery or limitation, it
focuses more on ceding a myth of self-identical subjective control that cannot be equated simply with a fear of domination. To fully accept the “colored” nature of “white skin” one must accept a position, which while not without agential efficacy, cannot be thought of as external to the “material” shifting diversity that produces skins as marked, chromatic, and folded. Ishmael oscillates between a denigration or fear of the “material” or the “colored,” and his desire, which arises from a sense of profound alienation, to “join” with it. His first encounter with Queequeg is thus split between these attitudes, and tellingly focuses on the status of his bedfellow’s marked and tattooed skin. For in no sense is Ishmael forced by Queequeg to hear the voice of “colored skins” he may have otherwise assumed to be absent. Ishmael begins to see, or hear, because he desires a scene of writing on skin that identifies “color” as neither the sign of crimes written by a totalizing master, nor similarly as a sign of fallen creation.

Even before he encounters Queequeg, Ishmael is confronted with a striking example of the extent to which the ideology of power has been fully interpolated in terms of a hierarchy of color. As he wanders through the streets of New Bedford, searching for food and lodging, Ishmael mistakes a church for an inn, thus describing it comically as “The Trap.” But the appellation becomes suddenly fitting when he stumbles into a sermon:

It seemed the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher’s text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing of teeth-gnashing there. Ha, Ishmael, muttered I, backing out, Wretched entertainment at the sign of ‘The Trap!’ (9-10).

Although Ishmael says nothing more about this remarkable scene, his brief description foreshadows the crisis within related concepts of power, color, and race that haunt the
entire novel. There is a general critique or caricature of Christianity here—one that appears variously in *Moby-Dick*—but the passage serves more importantly as a terse and dramatic example of how majoritarian ideologies come circularly to reflect and support the hegemony of specific racial groups. The scene is certainly reflective of a trap, but not one into which Ishmael, the perambulating flâneur in search of “entertainment,” has wandered. The black men and women of the congregation, who we may presume are “free” citizens of New Bedford, along with their foreboding “black Angel” appear to be the prey caught in a symbolic snare not of their own construction. The word “black” punctuates the description, thoroughly identifying the scene with a particular chromatic quality, only to reveal that blackness is here explicitly associated with sinfulness. While the references to the blackness of damnation, hell, and judgment, would seem to be figurative, the confusion of the figurative and literal senses of the term within the context of New England Protestantism, and more generally within Yankee New England, is what is at issue. For this religious discourse originates from a Caucasian culture for whom chromatic skin distinctions often carried invidious ontological valuations, and this is the sense of blackness that “colors” the biblical scene.

The preacher rails with great violence against the “blackness of darkness,” and not simply against hell or sinfulness, for the color has been made the sign and signifier of immanent deprivation—an assumption the congregation shares. His sermon requires no other object than blackness as its target, and it requires no explanation to the congregation for why this should be so. Black preacher and black congregation gather under the auspices of communal salvation, only to excoriate themselves ritualistically. The “weeping and wailing of teeth-gnashing,” which is supposedly the province of an
otherworldly hell, are imputed to the existential condition of the present moment.

Although we might assume that Melville condemns those who would so condemn their own skin, the scene functions more to expose the manner in which the work of culture may produce impasses to any sense of human progress. While Ishmael describes the church dismissively as “Wretched entertainment,” he is himself fleeing from a suicidal wish, and more specifically from the aporia he associates with Manhattan.

This scene of interpolation is strikingly reminiscent of Apess’ punitive visions of white bodies turned dark, for it witnesses a struggle of a racial minority group to extirpate itself from a racial ideology. The darkness of the markings we can imagine comprising the tattoos written on white skin in Apess’ fantasy are the evidence of its essential criminality, just as here blackness connotes both punishment, judgment, and sinfulness. Of course the scenes are also dramatically different, for while Apess cannot fully evade the symbolic associations with color he attempts to disprove, he nevertheless challenges the presumed mastery of whiteness. The black congregation becomes ever more thoroughly caught in “The Trap” and cannot turn its violence away from itself. This does not mean, however, that some revolutionary potential is completely absent from the scene. The “black Angel of Doom” Ishmael glimpses can be interpreted as either the black preacher who condemns or dooms his congregation’s blackness, or as the threat of a coming uprising. The “weeping and whaling” of which he speaks might be a genuine prophecy of the struggle and retribution that will result from the contest between master and slave. His immediate characterization of the congregation as similar to the “great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet” inflects the image with a sense of magisterial political rather than religious significance. Ishmael retreats, “backing out” of the room,
for “a hundred black faces” fix on him, their number and organization at the very least an
image of a potentially revolutionary force.48

The scene serves to expose the depth of horrendous psychic and social damage
inflicted by racial ideology in a supposedly enlightened New England. It also reveals the
general failure of Christianity to realize an emancipatory or unifying possibility, despite
the revolutionary potential Apess and many others recognized in its doctrines. Ishmael
stumbles accidentally into the church because it is unmarked, a fact that suggests a
clandestine need with many possible motivations. The congregation is not advertising
itself as a place of common Christian worship, and Ishmael’s designation of it as a
specifically “negro church” emphasizes its racial identity perhaps more than its religious
one. In as much as this occurrence takes place along the way to Ishmael’s transformative
meeting with Queequeg, it dramatically elevates the significance of this encounter’s
outcome. Although the reader does not yet know that Queequeg is a man of “colored
skins,” interpreted retrospectively, the church scene raises significant questions for this
impending encounter: will the men simply read each other’s skin as signs of superlative
mastery or creaturely denigration? Will they recapitulate the binary of whiteness and
color, of creator and created? Will Ishmael identify Queequeg’s tattooed and multi-
colored skin as a sign of perversion or criminality, and will he in turn arrogate to his own
skin an exceptional status—one even that would qualify it as something other than skin?
Melville’s ingenious staging of the encounter around a site of potential intimacy—a
shared room and bed—suggests a possibility of veritable equality and relation, which if

48 Casarino, although not speaking of this passage, nor identifying revolution with race in Moby-
Dick, describes a similar sense of revolutionary potential or “potentia” latent in the “living flesh of labor”
(xxii).
realized, would break miraculously with the conditions of an otherwise divided reality.

Peter Coffin thus remarks that it is the same bed that he and his wife occupied “the night we were spliced” (19). Ishmael is not without some anticipation of a sexual encounter, for his peculiar inspection of Queequeg’s belongings prior to their physical encounter evinces a degree of sexual curiosity related no doubt to their strange exoticism (Looby 73). However, the scene is also ideally suited to exacerbate Ishmael’s anxieties, for the consummation of any sexual wish he might have requires the intimacy of contact with the mysterious harpooner’s skin. It is thus not surprising that what Ishmael desperately attempts to know upon first glimpsing Queequeg, is the surface with which he might become most intimate:

It was of a dark, purplish, yellow color, here and there stuck with large, blackish looking squares on his cheeks. Yes, it’s just as I thought, he’s a terrible bedfellow; he’s been in a fight, got dreadfully cut, and here he is, just from the surgeon. But at that moment he chanced to turn his face so towards the light, that I plainly saw they could not be sticking-plasters at all…They were stains of some sort or other. At first I knew not what to make of this; but soon an inkling of the truth occurred to me. I remembered a story of a white man—a whaleman too—who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooneer, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure. And what is it, thought I, after all! It’s only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin. But then, what to make of his unearthly complexion, that part of it, I mean, lying round about, and completely independent of the squares of tattooing. To be sure, it might be nothing but a good coat of tropical tanning; but I never heard of a hot sun’s tanning a white man into a purplish yellow one (21).

The sight of Queequeg’s skin provides a moment of anxious indiscernibility—of categorical and epistemic chaos—that reflects a general limit implicit to Ishmael’s

---

49 Christopher Looby observes that prior to Ishmael’s encounter with Queequeg, he experiments with various “secret sensory explorations” of a sexual nature, such as putting on the harpooner’s clothing (73). The scene is indeed full of sexual innuendo, indicating the extent to which Ishmael’s later nervousness and prevarication are the result of a desire for touch—a desire to begin a new sensory-tactile life different from the one characterizing his life in Manhattan.
understanding of skin and writing, while also offering a trace of a different relationship to and between these spheres of activity and experience. What seems to underlie Ishmael’s confusion is an expectation that his harpooner bedfellow will be a version of himself, which is to say that he will be white skinned and aware of the conventions and significance surrounding this whiteness. When he is confronted by a skin that is clearly not Caucasian in its coloration, Ishmael anxiously attempts to console himself by imagining it as essentially white in nature, or at least white “underneath” its varied colors and markings.

The diction Ishmael initially employs to describe the purple and yellow coloration and dark markings composing Queequeg’s skin indicate that they are products of a superficial accident. They are the wounds arising from a common drunken sailor’s brawl between shipmates, and will fade soon enough with the help of a surgeon. While this clichéd story disappoints and even frightens Ishmael, it provides a physical and causal explanation that maintains the myth of white skin. Ishmael appears disappointed, and even alarmed by the prospect of bunking with a rough sailor, but his interpretive insistence on the whiteness of the stranger’s skin is conspicuous. That Queequeg’s skin is undoubtedly strange and foreign to Ishmael is surely the case, but this does not explain why he cannot resist in this initial voyeuristic moment a need to interpret it only in terms of whiteness, or perhaps to attribute to it a different racial status and cultural significance than his own. This need continues, perhaps growing more desperate as each ratiocination proves itself false. There are no bruises, cuts, or plasters on Queequeg’s face, and Ishmael is forced to resort to a more extravagant tale. Initially Queequeg’s tattoos appear as ambiguous “stains,” a designation that, like his reference to wounds, suggests a superficial mark that
might fade in time or be washed clean. Finally “an inkling of the truth”—a phrase clearly meant to play on the connection of “ink” and tattoo—occurs to Ishmael; the poor white sailor before him was forcibly tattooed by dark skinned “cannibals.”

This extravagant “adventure” story reveals volumes. In Ishmael’s imagination the tattooing of white skin can only be understood as an act of violence inflicted by men without “proper” civilization. The antagonists in this ridiculous plot are not simply Islanders, or “savages,” but “cannibals”—a term that associates their practice of writing on white skin with a tremendous taboo of New England Caucasian civilization. Tattooing thus appears as an act of forced devolution. It also suggests a colossal misunderstanding of the meaning attributed to whiteness by Caucasian cultures, and can only be represented through a scene of compulsion.50 A white man, and even a lowly sailor, is presumed to wish his skin free from markings. Nowhere does Ishmael suggest that tattooing would be equally perverse for a person of “colored” skin; the anxiety focuses on the possibility that his white bedfellow has willfully misunderstood something about his skin color. The tattooed man therefore “fell among” the cannibals, a verb suggesting an accidental descent from an exceptional position of height. The lowly cannibals actively “tattoo” his skin, making of his body an object or surface for writing, and thereby deny him the agency he would otherwise utilize, if presented with the option, not to be tattooed. Ishmael’s narrative cleverly maintains the illusion of a white bedfellow, while maintaining this bedfellow’s proper understanding of his own skin, and thus his rightful

50 This aspect of Ishmael’s anxious explanation seems to refer to an episode in Melville’s *Typee* in which the protagonist is threatened with forceful tattooing on his face. Although cannibalism had been a nearly acceptable option prior to this point in the narrative, the thought of having his white face “rendered hideous for life” causes Toby to fight violently to free himself (218-19).
position “above” his tattooed and dark-skinned captors. And while he appears finally to accept the person before him as potentially honest “in any sort of skin,” Ishmael makes this concession after the mystery of this “white” man’s tattoos have been explained by representing them in terms of an act of violence perpetrated by dark skinned peoples. Everything about the passage’s cascading anxious explanations suggest, indeed, that for Ishmael a marked or colored skin cannot be presumed “honest.”

This image of the forced tattooing of white skin has an uncanny resemblance to Apess’ imagined scene of judgment through writing or tattooing. If the latter expressed a wish to write on white skin in order to express its common status as created, and perhaps also to punish whiteness’s presumption of mastery, Ishmael’s narrative expresses a fear of both possibilities. He is not concerned with tattooing as a means to expose the essential criminality Apess momentarily attributes to whiteness; his anxiety focuses on a possibility of retribution that would invert the position of mastery and subservience here coded in terms of color. Although cannibals in “distant” locales might not be the ideal representatives of antebellum American fears regarding racial revolution, the image’s more general association of dark-skin, here connected with lawlessness and ferocity, and with violence aimed specifically at a “white man” can hardly be dismissed as irrelevant for these concerns either. The imaginary cannibal’s transform the autonomous white individual into a writing surface, assuming a position of total control over his body. The imposition of signs on the flesh, and the presumed painfulness of this tattooing process, suggest, as in Kafka’s fantastic tale, the presence of a supreme authority manifest in the reduction of diverse bodies to the wounding significations on their skin. It is almost as though we behold in this narrative a compact reversal of relations of power in a
colonizing process. And in a more obvious sense, the forced tattooing of white skin with
dark markings visually transforms that skin, confusing its status as white, and thus as the
signifier of purity and power. Ishmael’s concern with his bedfellow’s skin arises precisely
because he cannot distinguish what he presumes is white skin from a surface without
whiteness.

As in the case of Apess, a punitive or retributive image is at work here—in
Ishmael’s case a fearful image—but a greater anxiety arises from what this tattooed skin
might imply about the mythology of whiteness. If one were to assume that tattoos or
colors are not simply aberrations appearing “on” white skin, but the emblems of skin’s
vulnerable, marked, chromatic, and thus thoroughly created status, then the image
represents a different kind of challenge. For Apess, forceful tattooing can be interpreted as
a form of punishment, or as a process by which a false exceptionalism is exposed. What
Ishmael might then fear is some basic sense of commonality with those he designates as
cannibals, for the tattooed “white” skin he envisions exposes the common absence of
whiteness in both Caucasian and “colored” skins. If whiteness, to reference the novel’s
later description of the topic, is not a quality, but the foundation for all qualities, and thus
an exception to the conditions informing creation, the absence of whiteness, and thus the
presence of color in Caucasian skin marks it as equally created with all other created
things. This forced tattooing strips Caucasian skin of its status as a signifier of power, for
it is colored and marked—“wrinkled” through and through to use Ahab’s complaint. In
some basic sense this is precisely what Queequeg, when Ishmael finally accepts the status
of his skin as other than “white,” comes to represent for our narrator. One description of
Queequeg’s arm characterizes it as tattooed with “an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a
figure, no two parts of which were of one precise shade…” (25). While Queequeg is clearly designated as originating from a specific cultural, racial, and geographical background, the seemingly infinite and varied figures and colors that compose his skin become a general expression of skin’s created or creaturely status in the novel. Ishmael explicitly links this remarkable skin to the diversity of earthly regions: “who could show a cheek like Queequeg? which, barred with various tints, seemed like the Andes’ western slope, to show forth in one array, contrasting climates, zone by zone” (30). The “Cretan labyrinth” suggests a variation of line and topography, of differences and qualities without end. And there is nothing superficial—“skin deep”—about this skin, no “pure” white skin or perfectly flat surface beneath it.⁵¹

Nor is it a stable referent, a guarantor of sameness or identity, for the chromatic diversity of Queequeg’s skin is the result of shifting environmental conditions, and especially sunlight (25). When Ishmael attempts to explain his bedfellow’s peculiar skin coloration as “nothing but a good coat of tropical tanning,” he both reiterates his desire for a white companion, but he also expresses a wish for skin to function as a stable referent for identity. By describing alterations in skin in terms of a mere “coat,” Ishmael dismisses the possibility of a qualitative alteration of skin by its environment. A coat is a garment, a tangential accouterment that covers skin, and in this case masks its whiteness. Ishmael seems to wish that underneath the “coat” were a pure white skin that never “falls” into the

⁵¹ Melville appears to reference either a slope of the Andes he saw personally in his travels, or indirectly to reference Humboldt’s description of the Andean peak, Chimborazo. In either case, the connection to a novel sense of objects or living bodies as records of their complicated natural history appears to be made here. Like the great peak rising up from the seashore, Queequeg’s skin is not simply a body that happens to have recorded the effects of environmental change and human culture; more significantly, it is these changes.
diversity and dispersal of creation, and which is never truly “colored.”

This need to look further inward for a sign of whiteness, for an image of self-sustaining power and identity, works only to illustrate the absence of any such sign. Ishmael looks underneath the skin for a second skin that would function like a perfectly impenetrable wall—a wall marking the absolute division of a living subject from the “material” surging around it—but he finds only flesh. White skin functions here not only as the sign of mastery, but understood more broadly, as the boundary that guarantees the bodily integrity meant to resemble and guarantee subjective integrity. Like Kant, Ishmael looks to a phenomenal correlate to reflect back to him the inviolate unity of his consciousness. At one point he idealizes the whale’s seemingly perfect somatic unity: “It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls…Oh, man! Admire and model thyself after the whale! Do though, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou too, live in this world without being of it” (307). Dimock is correct to suggest that this characterization of the whale expresses a myth of the American individual implicated in imperial ideologies, but we have seen already how Ishmael is complexly and problematically involved in such mythologies (112). The novel contrarily evinces the manner in which such “thick walls” are absent in nature, for skin betrays any exceptional position it might be used to defend. Rather than an inviolate barrier, what Ishmael sees in Queequeg, and what he thus accepts about himself when he finally accepts his bedfellow, is an image of the full imbrication of bodies in the forces of creation. Skin, in as much as it is always marked and colored is this image, and it cannot be dismissed simply as a “coat” covering an otherwise unified
If whiteness is understood as a sign of self-grounding power, then the organism, as Kant defined it, with its inviolate inner formalism and freedom is an image of similar puissance. Like whiteness, the organism does not find itself conditioned by the limitations of material creation; it is an analogy for our own free and lawful subjectivity because its structure indicates something that departs from the mechanism of mere matter. Both whiteness and the bodily unity of the organism are thus sensuously available aspects of the world, but also exceptions characterized by their freedom from the conditions otherwise structuring phenomenal experience. This exceptionalism is what allows them to become self-supporting images for those assuming positions of power over the “material factories” of life. It is thus striking that the novel’s image of a titanic power, capable of disrupting anthropocentric and racialized hierarchies is Moby Dick, and more specifically his great white body. Just as the concept of “white skin” proves faulty when confronted with Queequeg’s “Cretan labyrinth,” this displacement of the locus of power from white human bodies to that of the animal—to what has been in modernity understood as an image of mechanical matter and force par excellence—disrupts the very possibility of excepting human and specifically Caucasian subjectivity from the conditions of a common material life. While this does not mean that Melville simply extends the crude

---

52 Although Ishmael’s tactile encounter with Queequeg’s skin is undoubtedly transformative, “reading” or touching this “Cretan labyrinth” does not offer him access to a “primordial” form of non-alienating culture. For Ishmael, the significance of the writing or images on Queequeg’s skin lies primarily in their location, and thus in the assumptions they convey to him about skin and bodies given his culturally conditioned understanding of them. They convey more about the fundamental denial of common creatureliness or materiality constitutive of Caucasian American culture than a pseudo-restorative indigenous naturalism. Queequeg’s tattoos thus need to be recognized as examples of a complex Polynesian writing and literacy tradition—one explored richly by Birgit Brander Rasmussen in Queequeg’s Coffin: Indigenous Literacies and Early American Literature (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
determinism attributed to matter to all of life, neither does he allow an image of the inviolate, self-grounding body to survive, and with it, the sense of human subjectivity as rationally self-grounding. Subjectivity, like nature, must then be understood as “bodiless,” but not without agency. The collision between this novel sense of life and the somatic individualism defining the American self come to a catastrophic point in the figure of Ahab.

Far more consequential, however, than Ahab’s explicit acknowledgment of his and life’s ambiguous and obfuscated origins are the unforgettable physical traces of this genealogy evidenced by his own body. Although his whalebone leg complexes or confuses the distinction between a “living” bodily self and “matter,” the Captain can always utilize the idea of the “dead stump” to construct a myth of originary somatic completion and autonomy. There is, however, a more immediate and ultimately inescapable sign of life’s non-somatic origin than the whalebone leg; Ahab’s body bears a mark, “lividly whitish” in color, and supposedly running through his skin from “crown to sole” (124). Various accounts of this mark’s origin and nature seem the stuff of legend, but a few recurring terms inform this peculiar characteristic; it is described as both a seam, a brand, and as a birthmark (123-4). While Melville appears to have wanted to preserve something of the mark’s initial ambiguity in the narrative, its status as both a birthmark and a seam are emphasized at critical moments. Ishmael writes once of the “ineffaceable, sad birth-mark in the brow of man” and Ahab asks the blacksmith if he can “smooth this seam”—referring to his wrinkled brow, but most likely also to the white mark (464, 488). This birthmark and seam suggest the persistent implication of bodies in
the life of a non-somatic “exterior.” Although a birthmark might be understood as an exemplary sign of separation—a marker of the isolation experienced after birth—it bears constant witness to the body’s originary passive emanation from a space defined neither as internal nor external, and from a host of materials neither fully organic nor inorganic.

The birthmark indicates a time before the time of the body and the atomized self, a period of creation never fully forgotten and perhaps desired, and which interrupts any claim to the body’s ultimate organic self-consistency. It is furthermore the inescapable evidence of Ahab’s “begetting,” of birth itself, and thus of a trace leading to the mother that spoils the fantasy of masculine self-reproduction. Unlike his “dead stump,” the mark nullifies completely the illusion of a possible past or future “complete man.” Shortly after sharing his plans for such a creature with the carpenter, Ahab visits another male technician, the blacksmith, but here he recognizes that no masculine form of technological reproduction might restore to the body an originary wholeness it never possessed. Inquiring if the blacksmith can “smoothe out” the seam of his “ribbed brow” with hammer and anvil, and upon learning that no such remedy exists, he acknowledges despairingly the total implication of the body in this ambiguating origin and its continued complicated relation to an “external” milieu: “Aye, blacksmith, it is…the unsmoothable; for though thou only see’st it here in my flesh, it has worked down into the bone of my skull—\textit{that is all wrinkles!” (488). Although Ahab’s description of spreading wrinkles suggests an invasive threat working from the outside “down” into a once healthy and whole body, he concludes by identifying the most “internal” and traditionally “substantial” somatic

---

53 Although in the novel there is some distinction between these terms, they appear vaguely to refer to the same marking—expressed dramatically in Ahab but present in all men—and are thus treated here as referring generally to skin and its complex ontological status.
element—bone—with a constitutive “wrinkling” or marking. This comprehensive identification of Ahab’s “interior” with the mark mirrors its rumored coterminous identification with his skin; the birthmark supposedly runs from head to foot, making it less an extensive quality attached to his body than the evidence of a basic ambiguity at the level of somatic identity. A similarly inescapable temporal association can be suggested as well. The birthmark does not indicate an event that simply “befalls” a body, but the becoming of a body, or the complicated imbrication of interior and exterior—of living and dead—that remains always an incomplete process.

Despite the mark’s temporal and corporeal inseparability from his bodily life, and thus its persistent witness to life’s originary bodilessness, Ahab abruptly alters the course of his conversation with the blacksmith, fixating again on the white whale as the somatic target of his wrath. Indeed, if there is one sensuous correlate with which Ahab identifies himself, and which might totally upset his self-indemnifying analogical procedures, it is his persistently present, inescapable, and marked body. He nevertheless immediately dismisses his despairing reflections, describing them as mere “child’s play,” and orders the blacksmith to forge a new harpoon of the finest steel (488). At nearly the same time that Ahab acknowledges technology’s total inefficaciousness as a somatically restorative or transformational instrument, he contrarily employs it with a renewed vigor that demonstrates a dissociative faith in the same. Rather than interjecting a viable conceptual alternative—one that might turn him from his fixed course—these moments of hesitating reflection fuel the analogical apparatus raised to mediate the specter of bodiless life they also invoke. The connection between this intractable process and his fleeting acknowledgments of this bodilessness are perhaps clearest here, where the discussion of
the white mark immediately turns, without any explicit transition, to the construction of an instrument designed to butcher the “white fiend” (489). The chromatic connection between the mark and Moby Dick locates the white whale as perhaps the novel’s most focused expression of bodiless life, thus connecting the Captain to his supposed persecutor, but also providing him with a differentiated object through which to externalize or disassociate the mark and all it implies. Although the “seam” cannot be “smoothed” by the blacksmith, a mechanical prosthesis—the new harpoon—seems capable of empowering the body and thus redeeming the myth of its formal unity and corresponding agential power. Ahab weaponizes his body in order to represent it as somatically vitalized, and he can justify this militarism by further representing nature as a conflict of bodies rather than as an expression of bodiless life. Moby Dick is thus both the hated emblem of a mutual intrication in the latter, and the greatly desired organic body par excellence, the violent overthrow of which would seem to redeem Ahab’s sense of somatic unity while nullifying the perpetual disruption of the white mark. That his struggle to produce the evidence for a somatically ordered sensuous world—one to subtend and substantiate the order he wishes to attribute to human subjectivity—relies upon a masculinized implementation of “Promethean” technology, underscores its status as a denial or avoidance of the “feminine” and the “materiality” connoted thereby. Indeed, the scene of the harpoon’s manufacture is perhaps the most perversely communal moment of Ahab’s life amongst the entirely male crew of the *Pequod*. The Captain works alongside the blacksmith to forge the weapon, and “baptizes” it in the blood of his three “pagan” crewmembers.

Ahab’s despair and rage over his white birthmark, and the white whale he
identifies as their objective source, relate him closely to the crisis of life and matter witnessed in Ishmael’s initial encounter with Queequeg. Like Ishmael, Ahab intuits the depths of this crisis in terms of his own skin, and in terms of skin in general; in the most literal sense, the mark’s presence “on” or “in” the skin suggests the absence of any vital soma that might be definitively restricted to the borders of the epidermis. It is what demonstrates that the body is produced and maintained through agencies that cross its thresholds, and which thus complicate its heavily defended boundary with an “outside.” Although Ahab’s concern with his mark, and with marks on skin, is more focused on the manner in which it troubles a somatic mythology than is Ishmael, their respective concerns prove to be highly similar. The “Cretan labyrinth” of Queequeg’s skin troubles Ishmael because it is not white, and similarly, because its markings or tattoos suggest the body’s creaturely or created status. If for Ishmael whiteness connotes self-grounding power and autonomy, then a polychromatic body covered in writing is an image he must either dismiss as pejoratively “material,” or accept as he would a radically new conceptual paradigm. What Ishmael learns from Queequeg’s skin is the fallaciousness of “white” skin as a concept, for all skin is marked, folded, and colored, meaning that all bodies are implicated in a complex milieu of creative forces without absolute boundaries. For Ahab the attribution of life to certain bodies and their assumed organic wholeness plays a similar role to whiteness in Ishmael’s worldview.54 Both are taken as signs of autonomous

54 This coupling of a privileged categorization of whiteness with an atomizing somatic vitalism has remarkable parity with Immanuel Kant’s philosophy of organic life in the Critique of Judgment, and his defense of race in several other works. Kant claimed that race was the result of inherent predispositions shared by all people, but which developed differently due to varied environmental circumstances (Larrimore 344). Skin color is a major index for identifying these developments; Kant celebrated the white race because none of its predispositions, or “seeds” (Keim) were thought to have developed at the expense
power and identity in the midst of dead matter. Ahab’s mark thus calls attention to skin’s complicated status and its resistance to a similar set of assumptions informing both characters’ perspectives.

Given this parallelism between the characters’ responses to skin, and the host of issues surrounding skin in the novel, one might ask what more Ishmael’s perspective can tell us about Ahab’s quest and his brutal methods? Although a comprehensive comparison of the characters would require more space than is available here, an important aspect of their similarities lies in a common oscillation between repulsion at and desire for the objects that best express bodiless life to them. Ishmael and Ahab are both disgusted and repulsed by markings on skin, and they both fantasize about possible solutions to the ontological and somatic crises implicit to them. Ishmael hopes that Queequeg’s colored skin is merely the bruise left by a sailor’s brawl, while Ahab dreams despairingly of a technological panacea for life’s bodilessness. However, both are also drawn back ecstatically and repeatedly to these otherwise repugnant figures and markings, and in Ishmael’s case a profound relationship ensues with Queequeg. Although Ahab despairs of his birthmark, he also desires to know his “sweet” mother, and thus longs for some connection to the origin that he otherwise despises. Like Ahab, Ishmael’s traumatic relationship to the idea of a bodiless origin is projected onto the whale’s body: “I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the
whale, which, having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over” (457). And much like Ahab, he practices an acculturated forgetfulness of such an origin in order to perpetuate a particular somatic, organic, racial, economic, and atomistic American paradigm. Although Ishmael can never forget this origin, in as much as he is drawn to it and pursues it, he also returns easily to utilizing the whale’s body as the ideal somatic analogue for the ideal autonomous American individual. He forgets the challenge posed by skin and the idea of a common bodiless origin, and praises the “thick walls” enclosing the whale’s “strong vitality.” Ahab similarly expresses a wish to draw closer to this origin, but quickly forgets or abandons it in favor of his masculinized and technologized battle with the “father.” While these oscillating responses result partly from a ubiquitous trauma that *Moby-Dick* associates repeatedly with such “unspeakable sources,” they also reveal a desperate defense of a specific sense of American power and the representations that subtend it. They furthermore expose an experience of alienation and depravation for those individuals fighting to maintain a privileged position within that power.55

55 C.L.R. James partly identifies Ahab’s general malady with the isolation arising from his position as Captain (7-8). James also recognizes a similar problem informing Ishmael’s character: “As Ahab is enclosed in the masoned walled-town of the exclusiveness of authority, so Ishmael is enclosed in the solitude of his social and intellectual speculation” (41). While an important interpretation, James’ championing of labor over intellect is both highly simplistic and potentially dangerous. No simple balm or social program fully shields individuals from their traumatic (and at times joyful) relationship to life, and from their violent responses to it in *Moby-Dick*. However, neither does the novel simply depict all relationships to life as equally constructive or destructive. Christopher Freeburg’s excellent recent study *Melville and Blackness: Race in Nineteenth-Century America* represents a highly nuanced consideration of these problems with respect to trauma and race in *Moby-Dick*. For Freeburg, “blackness,” or “whiteness” represent the general violent disruptions to knowledge that threaten all characters in the novel with catastrophic personal and ontological upheaval (22-3). This trauma is relieved to some extent through the relation with a black or white other, but there is no guarantee ensuring that these new relations will assuage trauma rather than provoking it (25).
One aspect of these paradoxical maneuvers deserves further commentary, and especially because heretofore Ahab’s relationship to sensuousness has been referred to in terms of a vitalist anthropocentric subjectivism. This designation is complicated by his frequent identification with machines. Although he distances himself from his “dead” and “living” bones, treating them as temporary prostheses for his soul, he also compares himself to a ship, and this in a novel in which the *Pequod* is the omnipresent image of a complex machine. If the purpose of locating a material correlate for his “inaccessible being” is to justify his sense of unconditional autonomy, why then should Ahab ever think of his body as a “dismasted” ship? When he stares into the fire blazing from the tops of the *Pequod*’s masts, treating it momentarily as the exceptional material manifestation of the divine, he quickly dismisses it along with all material existence as “mechanical.” In several instances he seems to dismiss the idea of technology itself, whilst acknowledging his helplessness without it. He considers his men insipid “tools” in need of his constant manipulation (211).

This fickle identification with machines represents another complex attempt to mitigate mutually exclusive desires and anxieties related to sensuousness. Ahab initially identifies his autonomous and unified self with his “living” body, but finding its vitality monstrously “bodiless” he paradoxically searches for a “dead” body to provide a fitting analogue. However, cadaverous machines are an unlikely image of a subject supposedly defined by inner freedom and power; thus Ahab’s descriptions of them fuses elements of traditional organic and mechanical attributes. By describing himself as “dismasted,” he
seems to imply that a ship expresses a type of order irreducible to mere causal interactions between parts. If a ship can be “injured,” like Ahab’s “living” body, its parts might be said to relate constitutively to a “living” whole. Such “organic machines” appear as the stuff of Ahab’s dreams, for they combine the autonomy and identity attributed to life and subjectivity with the robust fixity of machinic bodies. He thus imagines the blacksmith building for him a “complete man after a desirable pattern. Imprimis, fifty feet high in his socks; then, chest modeled after the Thames Tunnel; then, legs with roots to ‘em, to stay in one place; then, arms three feet through the wrist; no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains…” (470). This peculiar machine-man is the body with which Ahab might ideally identify or analogize his “inaccessible being.” It maintains the vitalist sense of life as a union of part and whole differentiable from base matter with the material toughness of an industrial mechanism. It is at once autonomous but invulnerable to internal confusions of the “heart” and impervious to the transformations that any “exterior” milieu might impose upon it. The roots that tie it immovably to one location suggest its general separation and difference from forces surrounding it. In every sense the “complete man” connotes an isolated and self-identical point capable of effecting its environment without becoming imbricated in a confused vitality that confounds its sense of self.

Despite the image’s status as Ahab’s “ideal” physical avatar, and one supposedly freed from the issues of “bodiless” life that haunt his attempts to find a suitable material correlate, its sheer monstrosity recalls certain aspects of the latter. While Ahab’s golem seems a perfectly self-identical—but material—point in the universe, the roots that would seem to hold him steady extend into the earth, which like the ocean, suggest a vital and
chaotic productivity freed from formal constraints. This implication in an ambiguous origin is made all the more conspicuous by the fantasy’s circumvention of birth and feminine productivity. The “complete man” is one built by men, and thus avoids the complicated ambiguation of interior and exterior, of maternal body and child body, implicit to pregnancy.

In a few moments of rare clairvoyance, Ahab appears to acknowledge both the futility of his quest and the confusion of life, death, and bodies that frustrate his analogical endeavors. Just prior to his final departure from the Pequod, he again draws a comparison between self and ship, but this time in a manner that explicitly draws attention to the problematic differentiation of living and dead bodies:

Good bye, good bye, old mast-head! What’s this?—green? aye, tiny mosses in these warped cracks. No such green weather stains Ahab’s head! There’s the difference now between man’s old age and matter’s. But aye, old mast, we both grow old together; sound in our hulls, though, are we not, my ship? Aye, minus a leg, that’s all. By heaven this dead wood has the better of my live flesh every way. I can’t compare with it; and I’ve known some ships made of dead trees outlast the lives of men made of the most vital stuff of vital fathers (565).

Although Ahab draws a distinction where he originally drew a comparison—a distinction between his “living” body and the ship’s inanimate “matter”—the analogy is prompted by his acknowledgment of a strange troubling of this very difference. His address to the “dead wood” of the mast comes with the recognition of the green moss sprouting from cracks “warped” no doubt by long exposure to saltwater. Ahab’s surprise arises not from observing green life in the midst of death, but from the liminal ambiguity that seems to render them indistinguishable. He thus describes “dead trees” as possessing a “vitality” in excess of the cadaverousness otherwise assigned to them as mechanical parts. He nevertheless severs any substantial identification with this hybrid object by identifying
only with its intact hull, and by reassigning to himself and humanity in general the one truly tragic and thus discrete position in the cosmos. Although Ahab seems to envy the moss sprouting from the ancient masthead, he is equally horrified by the transgressive life it reveals. His initial self-description focused on incompletion and loss rather than a ubiquitous and non-somatic life; he was “dismasted” by Moby Dick, but here the mast provides an image of a life in excess of somatic distinctions. In this instance the ship and Ahab’s response to its multivalent analogical possibilities serve as a summative image of his conflicted desires and repulsions. The ship is the ideal vital machine—living but invulnerable to transformation—and yet its dead but “growing” mast evidence a disruption of the conceptual and somatic ideals motivating them. As soon as he begins to identify with the ship he withdraws from the process by characterizing human existence as a tragedy of dismemberment befalling a “complete” and autonomous living body.

If machinic bodies fail to provide Ahab with a “proper” analogue for his “own proper and inaccessible being,” their literal mechanical failures nevertheless provide striking images of another, far less somatically unified life. Some days after stowing numerous casks of oil in the hold, Starbuck intrudes upon Ahab’s isolation to inform him that one container is apparently leaking (473-4). Fiscally oriented as most whaling voyages are, standard procedure in these situations dictates a brief pause in the ship’s voyage to extract all casks from the hold and locate the spill’s source. Although Ahab angrily and immediately dismisses Starbuck’s concern for the Pequod’s “miserly owners,” his rude rejection of the First Mate’s proposal exposes the crisis of his analogical-somatic endeavors:

I am all aleak myself. Aye! Leaks in leaks! Not only full of leaky casks, but those leaky casks are in a leaky ship; and that’s a far worse plight than the Pequod’s, man.
Yet I don’t stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull; or how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life’s howling gale? (474)

The passage represents a striking reversal of Ahab’s standard fetishistic images of machines. Containers that should separate interiority from exteriority, and like Ishmael’s cetological ideal, produce an “interior spaciousness” with “thick walls,” prove inherently permeable. This admission of structural fallibility runs against his later claim that he and the ship are both “sound in our hulls” (a play on the phonologically similar “whole”). Although Moby Dick’s final tremendous blow to the Pequod’s hull opens a fatal leak in its side, thus demonstrating its fragility, and with it the illusoriness of some mechanical refuge (either literal or figural), Ahab’s identification of the “leak” does not simply reiterate his tragic-somatic worldview—one in which the once “sound” whole of the atomized and “inaccessible” self is dismembered and rendered incomplete.

Persisting as Ahab suggests it does throughout “this life’s howling gale,” the leak seems, contrarily, to be contiguous with bodily vitality itself, although its presence calls into question the identification of life with discrete bodies. If the body is perpetually leaking from the inside out, or like a leaking ship, taking the outside within itself, its function as an image of containment or autonomy fails. Ahab’s description of leaking casks within leaking ships combines these different senses to locate vitality in an unstable, roving position never fully identifiable with a container—some complete vessel indicative of a primordial or prelapsarian self. The characterization of life as a series of “leaks in leaks” replaces a somatic and organic sense of vitality with a dizzyingly diffuse image—one that, like the “image of the ungraspable phantom,” exists in tension with its status as an image. Where lies the body of a leak, or more complexly, of a leak that bleeds endlessly in and out of other leaks? Where lies the line that separates the bodily self from
the endless vital confusion and procreativity of the ocean? Where the line between living bodies and dead matter, or “dead” stumps and “living” bones? In contrast to the rhetoric of debtors and debt, which has Ahab both “down in the whole world’s books,” but still somehow able to complain from the position of a debtor self, this endless leak erases any recuperative possibility of closure through self-identification. The Captain acknowledges that there is no spatial or representational solution to his quandary. The leak cannot be found and plugged anymore than a technical “solution” for life might be located in some instrumental procedure. If life is a series of flowing leaks, one passing without clear division from one to another, how, indeed, could such a severance be imagined?

2.6 Slaves and Whales

The example most indicative of Ahab’s ideological and personal crisis in *Moby-Dick* appears in his relationship to Pip, the young black boy who goes mad when he is abandoned in the open ocean by Stubb. Ishmael identifies Pip’s madness as resulting from his exposure to primal oceanic scenes, perhaps indicative of the “unspeakable source” that troubles the former:

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 treadles of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad (414).

Pip’s remarkable vision, one characterized by a “passive” position in the midst of impersonal and inhuman forces, focuses on a sense of creation that ambiguates the
borders of life, death, and bodies. The source for the “colossal orbs” that construct and enable terrestrial life are designated specifically as “coral insects”—creatures that seem to violate or complex the distinction between living bodies and matter. This image of primal creation is different from Ishmael’s notion of the “material factory” in which power looms spin mechanically, and from which autonomous life is necessarily absent. Pip witnesses his life, and life’s general imbrication, in what is commonly identified as the “dead” or the “mechanical.” He experiences the ocean as a site of perpetual process and production that crosses and creates bodies and substances. The brutal impersonalism of this vision—its lack of any human face or anthropocentric teleology—drives Pip into a productive madness, for his ravings intrigue Ahab, who acknowledges a profound connection to the boy (522). The two soon become inseparable, for each recognizes in the other a similar traumatic experience and the potential for restorative union.

Influential interpretations of this peculiar and profound relationship have largely left unconsidered the manner in which it relates to larger issues of vitality in the novel, reading it instead in terms of more traditionally humanistic and generic themes. Pip and Ahab’s failed union, which concludes with Ahab leaving the boy in order to pursue the white whale, reveals much about the implications of Ahab, and to some extent, Ishmael’s atomizing and narrowly vitalist positions. This is because Pip’s blackness, when understood in the context of Ishmael’s resistance to Queequeg’s “colored” and “marked” skin, unites for Ahab the complex of issues related to bodiless life that haunt and attract him. His relationship with Pip represents most basically an initial sensuous and personal

56 See, for example, Cameron’s discussion of Ahab and Pip’s status as figures of rage and grief respectively (66).
violation of his cherished sense of isolate freedom and self-sufficiency; in combining his life with the boy’s he demonstrates a relational vitality always in excess of the bodies composing it. But Pip is much more than a traumatized sailor with whom Ahab identifies. His black skin performs for the Captain a similar function to Queequeg’s skin. It evinces the status of all skin as “colored” or “marked,” connecting Ahab’s epidermal birthmark with Pip’s skin, and skin in general, and thus evinces the bodilessness of life that Ahab fears and desires. By drawing the boy close to him, Ahab imagines himself as reconciling with life, and more specifically all the aspects of life heretofore excluded from his organic sensibilities. He also appears to betray a cultural and economic logic of power that would identify him as autonomously powerful—both as the Captain of the Pequod—and as a white male. When Pip suggests that the blacksmith “now come and rivet these two hands together; the black one and the white,” he interrupts Ahab’s self-substantiating vitalism with an image of a life that traverses conjoined bodies (522). The suturing of skin to skin envisions grotesquely but brilliantly the general problematic of skin—its ambiguous status as a divider between life’s interiors and exteriors—while confounding any possible attribution of “whiteness” as a sign of power and purity to Ahab.

Just as Ishmael agrees to “marry” Queequeg, and finds that the union has turned his “splintered heart and maddened hand” away from violence (51), the Captain

57 Of course by objectifying and identifying a problematic of bodiless vitality with a racial other, Ahab and Ishmael perhaps never fully escape a mystifying and Orientalizing tendency, but the relationships that ensue nonetheless possess radical potentials. If the exclusion of racial others, of those with “colored” skins, is predicated on their larger exclusion from an imagined self-propagating vital power, the sudden identification, even when hyperbolic or mystifying, of “colored” skin with “life,” may constitute a dramatic realignment of praxis and concepts. It is unclear what Moby-Dick might tell us of the efficacy of such an approach, for it both supports Ishmael’s productive relationship with Queequeg, and drives the ultimately unsuccessful relation of Pip and Ahab. The novel suggests that the ideology structuring Ahab’s quest is simply too strong for whatever possibilities of reconciliation are offered to him.
immediately agrees to the union with Pip, and suggests, in a dramatic role reversal, that he feels “prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor’s!” (522). This statement is especially telling, given an earlier description of Pip as the “most insignificant of the Pequod’s crew,” a designation that reflects a pejorative and collective judgment of his blackness, youth, and minimal labor power. Ahab contrarily invites Pip to live with him in the Captain’s cabin, where the boy sits in his chair and fantasizes about hosting grand dinners for white admirals, captains, and lieutenants (535). Emboldened by his new position beside Ahab, his imagination begins to reverse traditional identifications of power, arrogating to himself the apex position in a vertical ontology that stretches from Pip down through the ranks. However, these dreams lack the violence evinced by William Apess’ vision of white crimes tattooed on white skin, and Pip never attempts to control Ahab in the fashion of the clever Babo of *Benito Cereno*. Indeed, Pip’s fantasy concludes with a communal and authoritative condemnation of himself: “Monsieurs, have you seen one Pip?—a little negro lad, five feet high, hang-dog look, and cowardly! Jumped from a whale-boat once;—seen him? No! Well then, fill up again, captains, and let’s drink shame upon all cowards!” (535). Ahab’s command, that Pip should remain below in the cabin in the days before he fights Moby Dick, expresses a similar double logic of empowerment and enslavement. He is allowed to take up the Captain’s chair, but never to command with efficacy. In as much as he is relegated by command to a merely symbolic position of command, Ahab’s apparently democratic attribution of equality to the “colored” other with whom he might join proves hollow. The spatial location of Pip’s authority is also his prison, for the cabin is bellow deck, and resembles the slave quarters of transatlantic slave
ships bound for the new world. After condemning, along with a host of imaginary white admirals, his black self for “cowardice,” Pip hears Ahab’s ivory leg nocking on the wood deck above him, and tellingly exclaims: “Oh, master! master! I am indeed down-hearted when you walk over me. But here I’ll stay, though this stern strikes rocks; and they bulge through; and oysters come to join me” (535). Ahab’s abandonment of the already once abandoned Pip propagates a set of assumptions in the boy that cause him to associate himself with the dead, or with the slave deprived of life. Rather than constituting an equitable, loving, and sensuously involved relationship, like the one finally achieved between Queequeg and Ishmael, Ahab and Pip recapitulate the division of master and slave witnessed at times as subtending Ishmael’s analogical endeavors.

By imprisoning Pip bellow deck, Ahab communicates to Pip and the crew the latter’s position as slave. In doing so he also acknowledges or relies upon ontological distinctions that make this designation possible. Pip, furthermore, in calling Ahab “master,” and in “accepting” this potentially fatal position in the ship’s hold, interpolates this designation, although it is a designation he has been well conditioned to accept. Pip’s acknowledgment of his position as slave, and his persistent self-condemnation from positions of imagined authority associated with whiteness, should not, however, be seen as indicative of that presumed natural “weakness” of the slave that justifies the perpetuation of the slave-master relation. Pip does not escape from this logic despite his genuine struggle to do so, but this is because he is prevented from doing so by Ahab.

Donald Pease draws the same comparison to slavery and the slave ship in this context, and unites this systematic denial of life to Pip to a larger set of denials analyzed in this analysis: “The image of the plantation, the image of the slave ship, the image of the Pequot massacre, all flash up as Pip drowns...Pip bears the remainder of his life as witness to his demise. Pip does not return as a saved body, he returns as a drowned man” (335).
Neither violent, controlling, nor veritably contestatory or revengeful like Babo, Pip initially seeks to “rivet” his being to Ahab’s in an equitable sharing of life. The Captain’s authoritative rejection of this possibility—his assumption of the position of mastery and the concomitant exclusion of Pip from the realm of the “living”—is what forces upon the boy the position of slave. When isolated and imprisoned in the belly of a ship, this position disallows any selection of alternative positions.

The internal and external association of Pip with death, and the complete evacuation of any agency or power from his person, corresponds to an assumed delineation between the living and the dead, between life and matter that produces the conditions enabling his initial abandonment. Upon jumping for the first time out of a whaleboat—and one attached to a whale by harpoon and line—Pip is saved by Stubb, who cuts the line holding the boat to the valuable whale. But the mate warns Pip of the results of any similar future accident: “Stick to the boat, Pip, or by the Lord, I won’t pick you up if you jump; mind that. We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama” (413). Stubb makes good on his promise the second time Pip jumps, and the resulting abandonment results in his “madness.” Although Ishmael attempts to excuse Stubb by suggesting that such situations are “common” in the profession, and then draws a comparison between Pip’s abandonment and his own eventual abandonment to the sea at the conclusion of the novel, the commodification and racialization of animal and human value might suggest otherwise, or might suggest an enabling denial of “life” “common” to the “fishery” (414). No such threat of the Alabama market lies before Ishmael, and while Stubb seems not to threaten Pip with being sold directly into slavery, his quantification of Pip’s value in
terms of whale oil, the novel’s image of a commodity par excellence, reveals that like the slave, he has been denied the status of autonomy and life. It is Pip’s fungibility with whale oil, with a “lifeless” commodity drawn from an animal thought to be, as Stubb describes Moby Dick, a “dumb thing” acting only out of mechanical, or “blindest instinct,” that enables a calculation prompting him to pursue a greater quantity of the same value (163-4). According to Stubb’s justification, it is Pip’s blackness that excludes him from the realm of “life,” and thus includes him in the sphere of mere matter, of “dumb things” traded amongst the living. Ahab echoes this sentiment when, in his discussion of Prometheus with the carpenter, he describes the soot emerging from his fire as “the remainder the Greek made the Africans of” (470).

The relation of master to slave, and more specifically of autonomous, bodily life to “dead” matter, is implicit in Pip’s relation to the crew, and finds its culmination in his frustrated relation to Ahab, which takes the form of a brutal repetition of these positions. Pip thus strangely but sincerely petitions Ahab, before he imprisons him in the cabin on threat of death, to accompany him: “No, no, no! ye have not a whole body, sir; do ye but use poor me for your one last leg; only tread upon me, sir; I ask no more, so I remain a part of ye” (534). Interpreted often as an attempt to make Ahab whole, or to heal their traumatized selves jointly, Pip’s offer recapitulates the division between life and matter he has been culturally conditioned to perform.\(^59\) Pip offers himself not as a living partner

\(^59\) Although Pease’ reading of this relationship focuses rightly on the systematic denial of life to Pip—the sovereign exception that produces him as a witnesses to his own “bare life”—his analysis situates this denial purely within the political realm of the human (within bios), and thus cannot draw a necessary connection between the death inflicted on whales, and the ontological conditions that enable its perpetuation. Pip’s attempt to become Ahab’s leg is thus read in terms of an act of forgiveness for his eventual total drowning (340). While Pease recognizes that Pip performs an instrumental function in the
with Ahab, but as a prosthetic upon which his “living” body might tread. When Pip
describes the thud of Ahab’s bone leg as his walking “over me” in the next passage, he
reveals the brutal denial of life implicit to his wish. Pip’s desire for Ahab to be made
“whole” thus takes the form of equating himself with the “dead stump” from which the
Captain previously differentiated his “living bones.” He makes Ahab “whole” by denying
to his “black” skin a vitality that would challenge the autonomy attributed to whiteness,
and to the myth of organic unity supported by Ahab’s attribution of life only to self-
grounding and self-sustaining organic bodies. It is a terrible irony, and one the novel
means to expose, that Pip, acting under the identity forced upon him by Ahab and others,
facilitates the illusion of Ahab’s “inaccessible” wholeness by identifying himself as dead.
Thus immediately after begging to be made a “part” of Ahab, he chillingly displays his
qualifications for this employment: “They tell me, sir, that Stubb did once desert poor
little Pip, whose drowned bones now show white, for all the blackness of his living skin.
But I will never desert ye, sir, as Stubb did him. Sir, I must go with ye” (534). Here Pip
directly identifies his body with a dead bone, and one that has lost the threat of “living”
“blackness”—that bodiless “life” revealed in this context by “colored” skin, or as the
“living parchment” of Queequeg’s skin (481). He makes himself the benign offering that
Ahab and others have conditioned him to become, both by promising a loyalty that
displays the total servility attributed to a prosthesis, and by imaginatively erasing the

moment, by not relating this instrumentality to the division between life and “dead” matter the
interpretation obfuscates the extent of the boy’s interpolation. Although Pease’ reading is extremely
elucidating in exposing the problematic of Pip’s non-position on the ship, its consistent lack of
consideration of other non-positions delimits the potential of Ishmael’s “witnessing” of a biopolitical
catastrophe aboard the Pequod, because it does not fully address the paradigm that enables it. There is a
very brief recognition here of the problem Pip’s body represents for Ahab—a problem of the “bodily
plentitude” that Ahab cannot rule (339). One is nevertheless left to wonder about the other body Ahab
cannot rule—the white whale—and how its strange vitality moves beyond a logic of bodies altogether, thus
restituting Pip and Ahab’s relation in terms that go beyond Pease’s reference here to Freud’s death drive.
traces of his black skin, which has now become like the whale bone leg, a subdued reflection of Ahab’s whiteness—the evidence of his mastery over the whale. There is a literal sense in which Ahab “walks” over and upon Pip, as he walks upon a “dead stump” and upon dead wooden stumps that hold a “dead” boy within his cabin, for the Captain and his profession as whaler rely upon the distinct differentiation of “living” bodies from “matter” that prompts Pip repeatedly to call Ahab “master.”

If the language of master and slave surfaced occasionally in the context of Ishmael’s speculations, Pip’s narrative and Ahab’s failed relationship reveal its central importance for the novel’s problematization of certain concepts of life. By aligning black skin with the “dead” or “material” bone, and in the context of the mutual commodification of slave and whale life, a larger systemic issue structuring the novel becomes visible. For the dead stump has already been related to the dead stumps of wood composing the ship’s deck, which is also permeated with bits of whalebone, and which bares the name Pequod—the name of an “extinct tribe” of “colored” Native Americans. In these diverse examples Moby-Dick exposes an American tradition of repeated violence and enslavement waged along lines of “life” and its putative opposite—a tradition structuring American modernity’s practical and conceptual self-reproduction. Although perhaps not reliant upon only these practices for its continued existence, African slavery, the disenfranchisement and genocide of Native American peoples, and the bloody business of whaling were undoubtedly essential supports of the antebellum nation. The novel thus exposes a repetition of the order of masters and slaves as foundational to the realization of liberal American social, economic, and political spheres, and the divisive ontologies that supported this repetition. But it also reveals a problematic of forgetting endemic to these
ontologies, and which greatly supports their intractable grip on the attempts made to escape them. Ahab can therefore choose to forget Pip because he is mere “matter,” a “dead stump” to be buried in the dark of his Cabin. Ishmael similarly forgets the “voices” of the Pequot/Pequod, who like the laborers in the “material factory,” cannot be “heard” from his vital position outside its walls. Although he importantly breaks from this pattern in his relationship to Queequeg, it is unclear by the conclusion of his novel if he has fully “heard” or witnessed these voices, in as much as Melville appears to make such congenital forgetting one of its central themes. One might thus be tempted to characterize Moby-Dick as a record only of failed struggle, of self-perpetuating violence without clear interruption, if it were not that aspects of Ishmael’s book attribute to the “lifeless” “slave” a vitality otherwise constitutively denied it. No explanation is given to the reader as to how, for example, Ishmael can “hear” Pip’s monologue in the belly of the ship, but we read it nonetheless because Ishmael writes this speech of a dead black boy. Although he wrongly suggests that the whale has “no voice,” which is to say that he cannot hear its voice, he also writes a book that exposes the suffering of animals as honestly and forthrightly as few others have (355). The writing of the novel, the tale that he alone lives to tell, is a remarkable act of memory, for it records even his acts of forgetting, and allows something to emerge from the wreckage of the ship whose wood, as the Parsee suggests, “must be grown in America” (499).

It might have been Melville’s intention that Ishmael’s novel not be taken as simply contestatory of this persistent American reliance on various forms of slavery, and equally upon the ontological distinctions that subtend it and the position of mastery. However, besides the acts of hearing or remembering already discussed, Moby-Dick traces an
internal crisis of the master’s position by exposing a sense of desire or alienation plaguing those characters that arrogate to themselves exceptionally vital positions above their “material” or “colored” inferiors. Ishmael’s initial terror at the sight of Queequeg’s body, followed by his quick acceptance and embrace of the cannibal are one important example of this phenomenon. Ishmael joins a profession, and partly due to his sense of bored isolation, that systematically hunts, butchers, and commodifies whales, while finding himself utterly drawn to their vitality—to the life his profession denies them. Ahab speaks longingly of his lost “mother” while cursing the birthmark that constitutes a trace of “her” existence in his flesh. Although his violent non-relation to Pip might seem only the evidence of an intractable positioning of master and slave, Ahab desires companionship with him, and tellingly acknowledges that such a union might be “curing to my malady,” thereby importantly identifying his quest as symptomatic of illness (534).

The complex oscillations between expressions of alienation, desire, contestation, mastery, and slavery that cycle through Moby-Dick relate it profoundly to other discourses that similarly schematize modernity in terms of a struggle for representation or recognition. For while the need to draw closer to bodiless life is very much not the same as a need to be recognized as an autonomous self, the general denial of life to much of sensuous nature founds a form of alienation and contestation with a similar structure. Hegel’s dialectic of lordship and bondage, for example, understands the development of history to take place in terms of life’s struggle for self-consciousness—a struggle that necessitates consciousness’ recognition by another consciousness (111-119). However, this recognition produces a lethal struggle, for at least in the stage of history dominated by relations of master and slave, the master forces the other to recognize himself from a
position of slavery—through the things the slave produces for the master’s enjoyment—and thus negates the equitable status necessary to validate the other’s much needed recognition. The slave, in other words, is deprived of the very thing the master wants from him, namely the recognition of an equal. Both master and slave remain alienated by their relationship, for the slave is fundamentally robbed of his status as a conscious being by the relation to the master. The slave, however, through the very work the master forces upon him, begins to gain a sense of his own subjective power, and eventually achieves a “truly independent consciousness” (117). A similar structure informs Marx’s materialist description of history, which envisions a dialectical struggle to overcome the alienation implicit to the capitalist denial of the proletarian’s right to the value generated by his or her labor power—the very power of production that eventually allows the laborer to recognize his agency in the products produced from his or her labor.

Ahab and Pip’s complex struggle resembles these narratives in a number of striking ways; both seek for some relation with the other that might make them “whole,” and while they seem implicitly to understand that this balm depends upon equality, they (and primarily Ahab) reintroduce a relation of mastery and servitude that perpetuates the alienation driving their desire for union. Although Pip does not appear directly to produce some tangible good for Ahab, his status as a commodity producing like commodities—as labor power in the whaling industry—has already deprived him of that sense of self that would make him the companion Ahab needs in order to relieve the isolation implicit to his position as master. By offering himself up as a new “dead” leg for Ahab, he replicates doubly the position of bondsmen, both by providing the master with a product for consumption, and by offering to become the product itself. Pip might also be seen here as
gesturing, in a problematic but touching fashion, to a need for some form of unity, and
Ahab’s rejection of this proposition—his threatening to murder Pip if he follows him above
deck—is the anticipation of a fight to the death for equal recognition. The interpretive
development of these similarities deserves a separate lengthy study, but even this
preliminary analysis demonstrates *Moby-Dick*’s participation in a tradition of thought that
richly conceptualizes modernity in terms of a struggle between master and slave.

This analysis should also gesture to the manner in which the novel productively
departs from this tradition. What differentiates Ahab and Pip from the dialectic of
recognition found in Hegel, or from the dialectic of labor and capital in Marx, is the
nature of the alienated or forgotten content their relation is meant to expose, if only
privatively. It is not the recognition of human consciousness to human consciousness that
Ahab and Pip seek, but a realization and acknowledgment of the life that implicates them
in a common vitality. For Ahab and Ishmael—the text’s troubled “masters”—their
alienation from life is constituted by their insistence on the identification of life with self-
enclosing bodies, and their attempts to overcome this impasse take the form of embracing
the racial other designated either as lacking life, or whose life seems to express to them
the bodilessness of life in general. They struggle perhaps for slightly different goals; the
“slave” for the most basic acknowledgment of its participation in a vitality shared with the
“master,” and the “master” for a connection to that bodilessness that challenges their right
to lordship. The contestation posed by bodiless life to the master need not take the form of
a demand for equal acknowledgment, in as much as life cannot be reduced simply to
human consciousness, but appears nonetheless in the disruption to the master’s analogical
endeavor to delimit life solely to his or her organically unified human body. *Moby-Dick*
pushes beyond Marx and Hegel’s varied dialectics to include animals and in some sense matter itself within the struggle of lordship and bondage central to modernity. Hence the slave’s association with the latter two “lifeless” machines or substances is not merely analogical in the novel, but exposes a more general problematic of mastery and bondage extending to an ontological division of sensuous nature. The novel’s focus, which is ultimately less upon human relationships, and more upon a struggle between “human” and “animal,” marks it as an exemplary development of an alternative sense of the alienation often attributed to modern modes of life.

Some influential interpretations of the novel heavily influenced by Hegelian and particularly Marxist sources limit the scope of dialectic tensions in the novel to the tensions arising between humans, and in doing so reveal a significant limitation on the revolutionary potential they identify with *Moby-Dick*. C.L.R James thus praises, and to some extent rightly so, the novel’s celebration of the crew’s capacity to form a mutually supportive and revolutionary scene of labor that threatens to break from Ahab’s “totalitarian” purposes (42). But what fails to concern James, as it mostly did Marx, is the reliance of this revolutionary scene on the violent conceptual and literal evacuation of life from the animal, or in this case, the hunted whales:60 “But despite the blood and the much sweat and strain, Melville’s clear strong prose without any sentimentality brings out the essential humanity of the process and absence of degradation” (26). It is only from a paradigm that has already decided to deny animals the status of life that their systematic butchery can be described as free from degradation. While James is correct to see in the

60 In a marvelous essay on the animal in *Moby-Dick*, Greg Pollock points out Marx’s denigration of animals and animal labor (21). Andrew Benjamin has analyzed the manner in which Hegel essentially delineates human from animal along the lines of sheer determinism (100-1).
affective openness of the whalers’ exertions novel possibilities for life—ones, indeed, that display its movement across rather than fixity within certain bodies—his remark describes more the brutal production of a “human” sphere out of animal life than it does the expression of some “essential humanity.” Despite the productivity of James’ general line of interpretation he also fails to acknowledge the significance of the many passages in which Ishmael records the tremendous suffering of harpooned whales, and the hypocrisy of human moralities that “preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all” while lighting their “solemn churches” with whale oil (357).

What Ishmael’s various recordings or remembering of animal suffering suggest is a need to attest to their vitality, and in a fashion without merely figurative significance for the “human” drama played out on the Pequod’s deck.61 This is, however, precisely what Cesare Casarino’s otherwise remarkable Modernity at Sea does to Moby-Dick’s whales. Following in some respects the line of James’ analysis, Casarino also focuses on the crew, locating in them a revolutionary “potentia as that indomitable excess of the dialectic that both Marx and Melville see incarnated in the living flesh of labor” (xxii, original italics). Although Casarino’s interpretation contains moments of breathtaking analysis, and despite his suggestion that Moby-Dick discovers a “nonhuman, nonmodern, nonhistorical and perhaps even atemporal time,” the revolution is predictably human in its scope and focus. While the power that surges through the crew supposedly comes from outside human time, the struggle with the animal is here transformed into a struggle within and

61 Donald Pease also identifies some of the ideological issues related, particularly to Cold War allegorical interpretations of the novel, which attempt to obfuscate the specific American historical catastrophes that motivate it (336). Although Pease avoids the analogical problem by identifying such events or traditions, his interpretation could, to some extent, recapitulate on another level a similar problem of forgetting by excluding the event of whaling as a life-denying practice.
for different systems of exchange within human history, and fails to consider how the
condition enabling the crew’s "potentia" relies on the harvesting of the whale’s life.
Casarino’s considerably more nuanced reading cannot avoid the assumption underlying
James’ celebration of labor, which is the calculated forgetting or exploitation of forms of
life other than the “living flesh of labor.” Casarino furthermore allegorizes the white
whale as the image of a coming age of ubiquitous capital that Ahab both reactively resists
and enables (100), when antebellum whaling—a highly violent and already thoroughly
commodifying practice—is the instigator of the confrontation between the white whale
and Ahab. Whales, whaling, and the white whale are not allegories or figures in Moby-
Dick, which is not to say that they lack allegorical relevance; they are primarily images or
scenes that witness a struggle between life forms for a life that connects them, a life that
cannot be isolated and contained in a single type of body. Although the white whale is the
concentrated expression of this bodiless life and its power—a paradoxical literary figure
or “phantom” image—it is also a whale in a novel that traces the manner in which the
social and economic reproduction of America relied upon the butchering of creatures that
live without concern for human stories.

It is perhaps because a similar allegorical and anthropocentric focus orients the
majority of interpretations that they fail to observe a simple but highly profound element
of the situation inspiring Ahab’s revenge: Moby Dick is, most basically, a whale that
resists the commodifying and violent practice of whaling, and more generally the
“American” reliance upon it for the production of its putatively “liberal” and “civilizing”
mission. The white whale refuses to be quartered, diced, rendered, and reduced to a
fungible commodity—the commodity that could sell, like Pip, on the Alabama market. He
also resists the categorical expectation of the whalers, namely that a whale behave merely as a “dumb brute,” acting from mechanically “blind instinct,” which is to say that he disrupts the conceptual division that subtends whaling, and which would ensure the continued “enslavement” of the whale to its vital “superiors.”

Besides the speculative significance of the white whale as an image of bodiless life, what drives Ahab and the crew to pursue Moby Dick is his resistance to their practices, and more importantly to the conceptual schema supporting them. Moby Dick should be something less alive than a slave, but he expresses a vitality that threatens to overturn the speculative and practical world of the crew and Captain. Ahab’s initial wounding encounter with Moby Dick was no allegorical clash between old and new modes of capital, but a clash between capitalism and a living whale that Ahab intended to butcher and bring to market. What drives him to pursue and punish Moby Dick, beyond the evidence of his imbrication in bodiless life, is that the whale appears to possess faculties it categorically should not have: “All visible objects are as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask!”

62 Armstrong makes a similar point, although cast in terms of the ambiguation of modernity’s distinction between human and natural spheres. He suggests that the whale’s trained resistance to whaling marks it as a hybrid object—something confusingly neither “natural” nor “human” (1044–49). Armstrong’s analysis is compelling, but these divisions, which as Armstrong observes, have further implications for the representation of racial difference, are also heavily informed by the delineation of “proper” from “improper” life. Tracing this distinction opens, however, a basic difference in the sense of crisis expressed in the agential behavior of whales. What agency suggests, in this context, is not the appearance of human traits in the animal resulting from human contact; this claim undermines whatever deconstruction of anthropocentrism the text might venture. Put differently, as long as human and natural, or human and animal, remain the pairs utilized to demonstrate their hybridity, one is left to assume the primacy of one or the other in specific instances of their mixing. The crisis of agency in Moby-Dick is one of a third term, namely the life that makes all things peculiarly agential with or without the example of “human” agency. Indeed, the white whale—the text’s image of primordial or divine vitality—indicates an agency that predates the “human.”
Various reports of Moby Dick’s encounters with his human hunters suggest that he evinces “unexampled, intelligent malignity” in his “assaults” (183). This intelligence, which should never suffuse the “unreasoning” material “mask” of things, prompts Ahab to strike and erase the evidence of that which lies behind it. If he can execute Moby Dick, Ahab imagines that the crisis created by the whale might be resolved or forgotten, and thus that the world of whaling might continue uninterrupted. Rather than opposing the laws of capital through his pecuniarily worthless global pursuit of one whale, Ahab’s quest labors tirelessly to create the conceptual and practical conditions of its perpetuation and expansion. When discussing another dismembering encounter, the one-armed English Captain of the Samuel Enderby informs Ahab that the white whale was seen defending a pod of sperm whales by biting the line securing one of them to a harpoon (438). Ishmael suggests that such scenes and the tales produced by them have apparently also shook “the fortitude of many brave hunters” (180). Whaling expansion is, in some measure, imperiled by the white whale.

Moby Dick violates his position as slave, both by actively rebelling, and by nullifying the naturalized category of slave, to which Ahab responds by reasserting ontologically and practically his position as master. Ishmael describes Ahab as a “great lord of leviathans” who, according to his own description, has made “forty years war on the horrors of the deep” (127, 543). He is the master of whaling, the “lord” who extracts

63 Ishmael’s description of acts of self-defense as intentional attacks on man represent a hollow attempt to impugn the agency he must here attribute to the whale—a perfect but differently employed example of Dimock’s sense of “blaming the victim.”

64 This identification of Ahab as an unwilling perpetuator of capital is made on different terms in Casarino (100).
value from the “bondsmen,” and who must perpetuate the ontological paradigm that supports this arrangement. But like Hegel’s lord, this arrangement leaves Ahab in a form of bondage, or what he describes as the “Guinea-coast slavery of solitary command” (543). Although there is something akin to Ishmael’s insensitive and patronizing use of the term here, Ahab’s identification of the master’s position with the alienation of the slave, reveals the terrible paradox from which he seems unable to escape. By killing Moby Dick he will return the fishery and its subtending conceptual apparatus to a productive state of normalcy, which he also recognizes as perpetuating a “slavery” from which there is no escape. Contrary to Casarino’s analysis, he does not defend the ancient custom of whaling from new economic processes, but suffers within the status quo’s notion of a Captain or master. His predicament and inability to escape it are the result of American modernity’s division of life from matter, and master from slave. Ahab, ironically, hates whaling but knows no other world than the world of war for which he has been trained by many years of systematic butchery and Nantucket sermons. His alienation is thus not only from Pip, but as just profoundly from a larger non-human community of life. His “Quarter Deck” speech abruptly changes from a rhetoric permeated by sheer violence to an expression of desire sprung from despair: “If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me” (164). Ahab’s fantasy is one of destructive piercing and liberation; he understands the white whale to be the wall composing his prison cell—the agent initiating his suffocating obsession—and the unruly slave, who like Pip, might lead him outside.

The “danger” of Moby Dick for the Captain is one of attraction and repulsion on
many levels, for beyond troubling the wall between master and slave, he disrupts the walls that should, according to Ahab, somatically enclose his “inaccessible being.” This occurs most obviously through his dismembering bite, but Ahab’s “lividly white” birthmark connects him most meaningfully to the white whale he pursues. The ineffaceable sign of his origin leads back to a whale, and perhaps equally to the “unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale,” and ultimately to whiteness itself—the sensuous manifestation of a bodiless power or life that builds, connects, and destroys bodies. The white birthmark might thus be taken as the exemplary sensuous manifestation of Ahab’s “leak within a leak”—the image of his body’s imbrication in a life without interior or exterior, or without his cherished “inaccessible being.” That this mark is white, and that whiteness becomes thereby a supreme image of power in a novel that otherwise works to disrupt the iconography of a divisive ontology is perplexing. Why should whiteness be associated again with power? Here the white mark—the one space of veritably “white” skin in the novel, besides that of the whale’s skin—indicates Ahab’s lack of bodily power and agency. The novel’s concentration of whiteness and its terrors around the whale also fundamentally displaces the source of this power onto the whale, the creature most denied life and the status of life in the novel. This association of power with the animal is one of *Moby-Dick*’s veritably revolutionary elements; its reliance on the association of whiteness and power is, however, one its most complexly troubling tendencies.65

65 Toni Morrison richly considers *Moby-Dick* as a text that intervenes in American discourse at the moment when whiteness becomes an ideology, and understands complexly Ahab’s challenge to whiteness as a challenge to the same (142). I think Morrison is generally right to associate whiteness in the novel with the crisis of racial representation in the period, although the suggestion that Ahab might be its antagonist seems to forget the manner in which Moby Dick, as the bearer of whiteness, complexes the issue greatly. Morrison understands the whale as another allegory—an image of the ideology of whiteness and its
The novel’s final image is complexly troubling and perhaps ambiguous as a departing expression of the crises haunting *Moby-Dick*. Ishmael escapes the vortex left by the sinking ship only because Queequeg’s hollow coffin—the ship’s life preserver—keeps him buoyant. For the next three days he floats on a wooden shell on which Queequeg carved the “Cretan labyrinth” of his tattoos. Having floated on a ship, which corpse-like, bears the name of an “extinct” tribe, he is perhaps not in unfamiliar territory. But this journey, while incapable of saving Ishmael fully from the tragedy of the *Pequod* he helped to produce, bears a minimal hope in the midst of catastrophe. Never fully abandoned as was Pip, Ishmael finds to his surprise that the “unharming sharks” pass by “as if with padlocks on their mouths,” and the “savage sea-hawks” pass over with “sheathed beaks” (573). Why these otherwise ravenous creatures leave Ishmael to his sorrowful journey is left unclear; it does not seem coincidental, however, that Ishmael’s desperate grip on the one remaining remnant of his friend—and specifically of his friend’s colored and marked skin—is also a grip on a life-saving “dead stump.”
CHAPTER THREE

MOTION AND MATTER: VITAL DISINTEGRATION IN
THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM

In the final lines of a work that proved to be his last extensive piece of writing, Edgar Allan Poe jubilantly identified “life” as the ubiquitous and evolving foundation of reality: “Think that the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness—that Man, for example, ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah. In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life—Life—Life within Life—the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine” (1359). If Ishmael begins Moby-Dick by characterizing life as a “phantom” always beyond the “grasp” of our discursive faculties, Poe’s Eureka: An Essay on the Spiritual and Material Universe concludes with this contrastingly reassuring deployment of the concept. “Life” not only permeates and synonymizes seemingly diverse facets of experience, but more importantly, it describes a common progressive teleology. Following the rule inherent to this animating principle, Poe foretells how all individual entities will gradually merge back into a state of simple unity like the one from which he envisioned them as initially

66 All references to Poe’s works are from the Library of America’s collection of Poe’s Poetry and Tales.
emerging (1261). Evolution takes the surprising form of increasing simplification, annihilation, and homogenizing amalgamation, but with a supposedly desirable final result: “Life” will become purely self-identical, having returned from its dispersal into objective and subjective multiplicities and phantasms. The final image is one of total spatial containment and ontological consistency; life exists securely “within” life—differences are thus illusions of the present that will be purified through the passage of eons. Although this prophecy would seem to predict the end or limit of consciousness, Poe anticipates the birth of a new posthuman or superhuman ethos. Life’s potential will be fulfilled through man’s collective self-identification with divine power.

But what sort of power, intentionality, or “recognition” will remain after the complete collapse of difference? Although Eureka may seem here to express a variant of progressive idealism, or a kind of millenarianist evolutionism of a decidedly anthropocentric variety, this apocalyptic transformation presents a far more ambiguous possibility. “Man” will lose its sense of individuality and species being as it becomes fully joined with a power that nullifies difference and independence. In as much as “Life” describes a force ever imploding its own forms, the moment of supreme recognition would seem to mark nothing less than our total annihilation. John Limon is partly correct in suggesting that in Eureka “absorption into divine nature rather than quarantined self-protection begins to appear as the proper mode of Poe’s reactionary misanthropy” (80). It would, indeed, be difficult to imagine how, in Poe’s cosmic apocalypticism, man becoming Jehovah represents much more than Jehovah digesting man. Rather than expanding the power and influence of the individual, like Nietzsche’s supremely self-actualizing Übermensch, Poe crowns humanity king whilst erasing the ontological
conditions that would make this designation meaningful. He invites us to imagine unity in its most disturbingly literal, restrictive, and destructive valences.  

Although Limon’s diagnosis of reactionary misanthropy would seem to characterize aptly *Eureka’s* joyful visions of cosmic implosion, it fails to consider how Poe’s insistence on vital unity might suggest socially and ontologically radical possibilities as well. If, as the previous three chapters have demonstrated, the representation of living bodies as discretely defined wholes capable of autonomous action and self-definition supported invidious divisions among human agents and non-human actors, how could Poe’s peculiar reformulation of life fail to challenge the prevailing liberal American Zeitgeist? *Eureka* appears to distribute the notion of life and basic agency to all physical things, and to represent life as a principle of fusion and combination (1358). Poe did not simply envision life as cycling through material bodies, but as collapsing bits of differentiated matter into living force with a striking sense of equality. Although Poe’s suggestion or directive that we “bear in mind that all is Life” may seem like a perversely ameliorative gesture—a promise of eventual sameness in a world riddled with supposedly problematic differences—it might also represent a radical expansion of the borders defining the community of life. And Poe’s representation, here

Matthew Taylor’s recent work on Poe captures this tension succinctly: “This is Poe’s version of the meta/physics of his age, a perverse yet consistent calculus that unites everything in existence under a universal law that, by definition, eliminates all difference—including the human difference. His cosmology is thus an immanent development within romantic and transcendentalist thought, a universalism that assents to the claim that everything is connected but then adds that it’s to our peril, as the strangeness within beckons to the darkness without” (31). I will challenge aspects of this interpretation in what follows, but agree with many elements of Taylor’s rich analysis of the “posthuman” in Poe’s works. Taylor’s emphasis on physical collapse and the estrangement of bodies resonates in certain respects with my own: “Indeed, *Eureka* argues, in being affected by bodies not our own, “we” become something other than we supposed, something less self-sovereign because more alienable. Contact with the universe estranges our bodies from ourselves” (35).  

206
and throughout much of his work, of life as something always unstably transitioning from one physical state to another raises the specter of “bodiless” life haunting *Moby-Dick*. In as much bodies are always already becoming increasingly unified with a greater force of life in Poe’s writing, individual lives are defined by an impersonal motion beyond themselves—a rupturing of boundaries experienced as pure horror or ecstatic release.

This chapter investigates the extent to which Poe’s visions of collapsing life and macabre unity fulfill some aspect of an aesthetic and social program attempting to express a particular iteration of “bodiless” vitality. Although Melville constructed various images and concepts that develop a similar positive formulation of this notion, *Moby-Dick* remains, in many respects, a traditional novel with regards to its representational limitations. The evidence of bodiless life forces itself into the prosaic world of Ishmael’s narrative, riddling it with uncanny moments of supernatural vertigo, but it rarely rears its monstrous head to stare directly at the reader. *Moby-Dick* remains populated with diverse entities, personalities, and processes, which although mysterious, never simply dissolve into a common formless vitality. Poe contrarily seeks to establish prosaic frameworks only to force literature mercilessly into endless ontological confusion and intensity. He makes of literature a semi-personal perspective onto moments of transition from one vital state to the next—the record of life’s defining lack of structure.

Rather than tracing this monstrous vitality through *Eureka*’s cleanly cosmic apocalypticism, I will investigate its more complex dynamism in Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. *Eureka* provides the clearest articulation of Poe’s desire for and vision of life’s ultimate and ubiquitous unity, but the detachment employed to formulate this vision of deep time removed its author from the personal
vulnerabilities and perspectival limitations that reveal more intractable assumptions about
natural difference found in many of his other works. While composed of the decidedly
analytic reflections and remembrances of Arthur Gordon Pym, the narrator’s first person
descriptions of his “adventures” forces the text to formulate a reality uneasily unified
under a guiding abstraction. Although Pym is rightly criticized for its obvious racism and
ethnocentrism, its common prejudices are nevertheless inscribed within a text that seeks
to fold all of life “within” life; like Eureka, Pym works to uncover a unifying vital
principle that would seem to deconstruct the pejorative differences it otherwise labors to
uphold. It frequently does so by transforming or totally collapsing the individual organic
body—or any material body—into a common sea of dynamic vitality. If Melville
interrogates sites of radical somatic openness—the “leaks within leaks” that undo myths
of bodily and subjective autarchy—Pym produces an imaginary in which bodies are not
only leaking but also rapidly melting. Poe barely articulates characters before they are
consumed into larger vital or material processes, which collectively gesture to the
motions of a ubiquitously animating force.

If the identification of life with the formal unity of organic bodies was a
significant support for antebellum individualism, and for its related cultures of
Caucasian-male exceptionalism, Pym’s obsession with bodily disintegration and
monstrous amalgamation would seem, like Eureka, to pose a fundamental challenge to
these paradigms. Agency and identity appear not only distributed or complicated by a
multitude of actors in the text, but generally overcome by an irresistible process without a
human face or providential logic. Things and people pass from one state to the next with
such rapidity in the novel that they appear under a constant process of cosmic erasure. By
focusing on its repeated scenes of bodily collapse and disintegration, this chapter will explore the text’s radical challenge to many of the exceptionalisms that fostered a divided American social sphere. It is my contention that Pym’s obsession with such images, when thought in the context of its other preoccupations—namely dynamic flows and oceanic formlessness—work to collapse distinctions between life forms and between life and its “material” others. In this regard Poe enacts a complication in the sense of life’s origins similar to the one played out in Moby-Dick, but characterized by a more destructive impersonalism. Moby-Dick gestures to an “unspeakable” pre-human beginning, while Pym’s narrative hangs tenuously just above this common source and end, only to fall silent as the narrator plummets abruptly into a divine cataract at the novel’s conclusion. The collapse of all bodies into a divinely common “living matter” constitutes Pym’s dramatic nullification of the somatic schemas subtending American individualism and its various hierarchies of human and physical nature.

By focusing on the tenuous existence of bodies in the novel, this reading also considers two recent and mostly disparate interpretive tendencies informing much Pym and Poe criticism: the focus on racial ideology in his works, and the analysis of unifying cosmological or scientific sensibilities in the same. John Limon reads Pym, for example, through the lens of Eureka’s engagement with nature philosophy (114), but sublimes its most overtly racist aspects to Poe’s critique of antiquated Baconianism. The Tsalalians here become an odd amalgam of Poe’s prejudices—reductive empiricists and Old world millenarians—but not the racial other, and this despite the novel’s insistent identification of them as “black” or “dark” (117). Matthew Taylor reads Poe’s work as exploring a
“posthuman” materialism—a cosmology of collapse and unity—that levels human pretenses (31). Although Taylor has produced a rich reading of the radical implications of Poe’s naturalism, he mostly neglects consideration of the general physical stratifications subtending much nineteenth-century racism. It is thus striking that his analysis fails to mention *Pym*, a text in which, as I am claiming, the problem of cosmological unity collides with a naturalized racism, and perhaps a concomitantly bifurcated sense of matter and life with humanist roots. Marilyn Robinson has recently jumped into the critical fray, suggesting that *Pym*’s supernaturalism ultimately overtakes any “transient human drama”—in this context the drama of racial contention—which she attempts to evade by characterizing the novel and Poe’s later works as invoking scenes of ubiquitous and divine judgment. Although a strikingly different approach from either that of Taylor or Limon, Robinson similarly emphasizes Poe’s apocalyptic visions of sensuous unity as the evidence of a brutally egalitarian sensibility.

The extensive body of criticism that rightly confronts the issue of race in the novel tends, contrarily, to focus on implicit divisions without acknowledging the implications of Poe’s challenge to human mastery. Indeed, if recent materialist or religiously inspired readings emphasize the peculiar equality of collective subjugation to life or the “Spirit Divine,” analyses focused on race often interpret *Pym* as equating natural power with white authority. John Carlos Rowe asserts that the novel functions

---

68 Limon’s otherwise masterful use of *Eureka* to read *Pym* stumbles here, for it asks us to believe that a specific critique of Bacon penned ten years after the composition of the latter—a critique to which there is no clear reference in the novel—warrants interpretive priority over the more likely association of the Tsalalians with contemporaneous racial attitudes. Although the people of Tsalal are clearly not meant simply to represent African Americans, the novel’s emphasis on skin color would seem, at the very least, to demand that the concept of race be considered as central to the intellectual context of the novel. What Limon fails to consider, in other words, is the manner in which the chromatic marking of Tsalalian bodies naturalizes whatever pejorative cultural or scientific attitudes they might hold.
primarily to guarantee a connection between natural reason, white power, and literature itself: “The defense of the poetic narrative…is its argument that language, the essence of reason, is the basis of all reality and thus the only proper “property.” As the “enlightened ruler” of language, its rational governor, the poet works to recontain that savagery—the mob, the black, the lunatic—within poetic form” (127). Although Rowe’s reading offers an extensive interpretation of many facets of the text, it reduces Pym to little more than an allegorical expression of southern racism in a time of growing anxiety about slave rebellions (126-9). Other more nuanced readings take as their starting point Toni Morrison’s rich suggestion that the appearance of the African-other in American fiction is primarily expressive of the authorial self’s fears and desires (17). J. Gerald Kennedy thus places Arthur in the position both of identifying with racial others who rebel against “white, paternalistic hierarchy,” only to then assume fully the role of an exploitative “white colonial scientist as if to save himself from his own romantic fantasies” (“Trust No Man” 244, 248). This approach does far greater justice to the narrative’s psychological complexities than does Rowe’s, but it similarly locates in Pym a fundamental need to divide the sensuous and social worlds along the lines of naturalized racial difference.

Although necessarily brief and truncated, this overview of two influential trends in the critical literature suggests a need to develop approaches capable of speaking to and through both. It is not, however, my intention somehow fully to unite these critical

---

69 It should be noted that this is not Rowe’s only work on Pym, and thus should not be mistaken for his final word on the novel. See, for example: “Writing and Truth in Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym” in Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 91-111.
gestures, each of which contains within itself highly divergent approaches to the novel and to Poe. The ontological dimension—Poe’s notion of a common principle of “Life”—should not be divorced from the divisive essentializing implicit to his racial stratifications, but neither should the macabre equality implicit to an all-consuming vitality lack the capacity to trouble an image of Poe as the purveyor of absolute racial difference. What is missing from the critical debates is a way of characterizing “life” in Pym such that it encapsulates both a principle of unity radically disruptive to various exceptionalisms, and a stratified vitality capable of subtending insidious racial attitudes and a concomitantly violent biopolitics. One cannot, in other words, simply begin a reading of Pym with Eureka’s cosmic assumption of absolute vital unity, and yet neither does the novel simply foretell Ahab’s vicious division of life from matter. The text collapses the somatic-organic mythology supporting Ahab’s cult of individualism, while representing life as internally divided according to its own dynamically impersonal motions.

In Pym life is both the bodiless foundation of bodies—their common source and end—but also a principle of what I shall term motion, or transformation. As the pairing of these terms suggests, “life” does not simply describe changes in the relative positions of bodies, but a relentless qualitative alteration of their condition, and their eventual loss of bodily integrity. Life is thus inseparable from its own deconstructive teleology, which concludes with and in the ocean—Pym’s superlative image of life’s unified and formless energy. Nevertheless, the very motion from one state to another suggests that life is internally differentiated; although bodies are constantly disintegrating, their transient individuality indicates a state differentiable from the oceanic backdrop. In the following
analysis I will describe such recalcitrant stuff as *matter*, although this designation should not be taken, as it is in *Moby-Dick*, to indicate the absence of life or a purely oppositional category. Matter appears as individuated bodies or structures, both organic and inorganic, doomed to an eventual collapse foreshadowed by the dire premonition of divine vengeance read in the canyons of Tsalal—a location the text identifies heavily with matter (1182).

Although *Pym* celebrates aspects of certain material structures, it primarily depicts matter following its proper trajectory toward disintegration, and thus becoming more “purely” living. Characters undergoing this process experience deep and visceral horror, but the text ultimately embraces disintegration and collapse with a giddy sense of affirmation. The distinction between transformation and matter thus expresses a representational schema with implicit value judgments, although this fact should not be understood narrowly to reflect simple apocalypticism. *Pym* poses a basic question about the value of sensuous nature, but utilizes its adventurer’s journey to inquire into what this valuation means for conscious life, and for human sociality. How, for example, can the individual or specific populations reflect and extend life’s power of transformation while resisting the inertia implicit to the body? What can be sensed or known by crossing into the intense spaces that violate the somatic and rhythmic borders of the organism? Given a certain ideal of overcoming and disruption implicit to these questions, another important question of value arises: how does the novel represent those that resist or fail to engage with the power of transformation? While *Pym* develops a vision of life radically disruptive to the somatic-organic schemas subtending American liberalism and many of its exceptionalisms, it nevertheless labors to conjure an “improper” mode of life strongly
associated with race. *Pym* thus works to translate an internal cosmological division of life into socially, and I will argue, biopolitically operative terms with disturbing implications.

Does this internal exclusion produce anything more than the preconditions for *Moby-Dick*’s vortex of endless violence? The latter witnesses the catastrophe resulting from the total exclusion of certain life forms or races from a possible community of life, while *Pym*’s ubiquitous attribution of vital destruction would seem to offer an inclusive ontological alternative. But the reader of *Pym* also cannot avoid the implications of its semiotic and sensuous divisions—whiteness and blackness—and their divisive connotations. The following discussion of matter, motion, and race in *Pym* will argue that our narrator’s adventures nullify American myths of vital individualism, placing the self in a richly ambiguous constructive and destructive space. The novel thus deploys a particular iteration of bodiless life to challenge a dominant Caucasian regime of sense and identity, but the same paradigm also implicitly divides life according to its capacity to disrupt its organic structures and normalizing tendencies. It is along these vital lines that racial whiteness and blackness are separated in the text; it is the white self’s natural proximity to life’s capacity for self-transformation and annihilation—its pursuit of “aesthetic” or “spiritual” epiphany, or “adventure”—that differentiates it from the “colored” other. *Pym* is not simply a reactionary fantasy designed to indemnify prevailing myths of individualism, although it does carefully police other distinctions informing the biopolitical division of human life in the antebellum period. The novel begins to construct a new aesthetic ideal of impersonal life beyond the individual, but relies on the same impersonalism to naturalize divisions that immunize the deconstructed self from its most
radical implications.\textsuperscript{70} In sharp contrast to \textit{Moby-Dick}, which develops a non-organic vision of life in order to expose the vitality in so much of what antebellum culture deemed to be dead, \textit{Pym} employs the non-organic to reinforce an insidious sense of racial division and hierarchy. The following close readings move through the text, interpreting its major episodes in their order within the novel, and gradually developing a sense of its complex racial and ontological vision.

\textit{The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym} begins, much like \textit{Moby-Dick}, with a description of a human desire for proximity to the sea. While disparaging the state of life on land, Ishmael gestures to a reason for our almost magnetic attraction to water—one related to the possibilities it offers for alternatives to the enervating routines of “civilized” urban modernity: “…these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?” (4). The land has become a place where men die slowly, while the sea’s chaos seems to offer eternal revitalization. Far less reflective in its approach to a similar issue, Poe’s novel draws a strikingly similar set of distinctions. The tale begins with Pym’s description of a night when, after a particularly drunken party, he and his bosom friend Augustus set out upon a sailing voyage in a hurricane off the coast of Nantucket. Just prior to this mad voyage, Pym provides a brief autobiographical description with some telling details. Pym is the son of a “respectable trader in sea-stores,” who stands to inherit a large sum of money from his grandfather—“an attorney in good practice” (1009). He has been well educated in local schools, and appears well

\textsuperscript{70} Maurice Lee makes a similar point in a discussion of Poe and Schelling, suggesting that Poe desired the transcendental unity of nature implicit to Romantic cosmology, but was unable to abandon the dualism of racism (38).
positioned to take up his family’s reputable legacy in their native Nantucket. In every way conditioned to be a man “clinched” to a desk, a routine, and to a single geographical location, Pym’s decision to set out on a tumultuous sea in his small sailboat, the Ariel, seems of a kind with Ishmael’s sudden foray into whaling, although with a degree more of youthful rebelliousness and foolishness.\footnote{Geoffrey Sanborn suggests that Pym’s desire to leave behind the established life prepared for him resonates with growing anxieties about youthful rebelliousness in the 1830s. Young white males were becoming more mobile and less tied to familial traditions during this period; Pym’s rejection of his parents’ wishes, and his impractical wandering thus “makes him an icon of cultural dissolution: the white boy who will not accept his patrimony, who represents the end of the familial and national line” (165). J. Gerald Kennedy, as previously noted, makes a similar argument about the protagonist’s adventures: “Pym defiantly frees himself from family obligation and the patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century mercantile capitalism” (“Trust No Man” 245).}

Although these social conditions undoubtedly contribute to Ishmael and Pym’s decisions to abandon their lives as “landsmen,” in both cases the author also imagines a more essential link between their attraction to water, and water’s relationship to life. For Ishmael, water reflects the “image of the ungraspable phantom of life,” and while this association hardly equates the two, it suggests a more primordial connection with aqueous environments than with terrestrial ones. Pym’s peculiarly automatic affirmation of Augustus’ wild suggestion to embark from the safety of land and home into a roaring hurricane, expresses a similarly ontological identification: “I can hardly tell what possessed me, but the words were no sooner out of his mouth than I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure, and thought his mad idea one of the most delightful and most reasonable things in the world. It was blowing almost a gale, and the weather was very cold—it being late in October. I sprang out of bed, nevertheless, in a kind of ecstasy…” (1010). This description conveys a general loss of subjective agency too mysterious and totalizing to have arisen merely from Pym’s dissatisfaction with his
parochial and bourgeois future. The heavily intoxicated Augustus, whose reports of exotic experiences on his father’s whaling ship connect him in Pym’s mind to the ocean, proposes a plan that demonically takes possession of our protagonist. Pym is seized with a feeling of inexplicable “ecstasy” and “springs” from bed, as though he were a wound mechanism suddenly incited to motion by external forces. The idea appears, furthermore, as perfectly “reasonable” to Pym, suggesting a deeply unconscious, even “natural,” identification of the self with the ocean in chaos.

Augustus and Pym’s common desire to lose themselves in the storm reveals the effects of an impersonal logic and teleology guiding them to the brink of personal destruction. Augustus steers the ship into the open sea in a kind of trance, and responds to Pym’s queries about their course by reiterating a basic division: “I am going to sea—you may go home if you think proper” (1011). Whatever ineluctable force guides them does not, however, simply take them away from home and the land, but into a storm in which the stable and discrete identities associated with the former quickly disintegrate. Not long after the gale strikes, Augustus collapses and the ship begins to run wildly in the wind before a passing whaling ship smashes it “to pieces” and casts Pym, unconscious, into the sea (1016). Both boys are saved by the whalers, although not before Pym undergoes his own vital deconstruction. The rescuers discover our protagonist in a hyperbolically lethal situation: a bolt on the whaling ship’s underside pierces through his neck, pinning him to the ship from which he is eventually freed (1015). Pym and Augustus are revived, but the extraordinary details of their wreck and rescue seem intended to strain our credulity. Rather than conveying the details of a near-death caper, Pym’s account records moments of ontological ambiguity between life and death, and between bodies and their oceanic
environment. Like their ship, the boys become submerged in and permeated by the water and its chaotic energies. The ocean threatens to subsume their bodies, as it does their vessel, into its homogenous background. Pym’s peculiar injury has the effect of both temporarily extinguishing consciousness, and with it any sense of isolate selfhood, while tellingly piercing his body and opening it literally to the surrounding fluid milieu.

The abrupt transformation witnessed in Pym’s opening pages—a shift from states of psychic self-possession to demonic dispossession, and from a solidly defined terrestrial landscape to watery chaos—describes the teleology of life manifest in psychic and physical phenomena throughout the novel. What initially possesses some discrete and stable identity seems drawn through a natural process into states of disorganization and threatens, finally, to collapse into a uniform background. Although expressed repeatedly through linear narrations that emphasize the processual aspect of nature, the differences between beginning and ending points also describe essential divisions in Pym’s cosmological imaginary. These differences are registered in terms of a set of qualities that include speed, location, and material environment—none of which are simply relative to the perspective of an observer, although the observer-narrator’s states of mind correspond to these material conditions and the changes they undergo. Pym thus begins on land, and with a description of defined locations and patterns in the midst of relative subjective and material stability. The first paragraph consists of a list of names and places, and Pym’s identification of a defined self through these fixed coordinates. It describes, furthermore, a reality constructed by the notion of property, understood in terms of the belonging of child to parent and to a family line, and the ownership of objects such as Pym’s sailboat, which he describes as “worth about seventy-five dollars” (1009). Within the next few
pages the terrestrial world’s discrete and solid bodies, objects, selves, and their propertied relations suddenly unravel as they move into a distinctly different environment. Uncanny agencies take possession of the boys and drive them into a space defined by speed, fluidity, and destructive transformation. If land manifests its logic through a multiplicity of diverse things and their regular movements, the ocean functions as a homogenous flow careening in every direction. Neither simply a void nor an abyss, Pym’s ocean is an image of energies set free from bodily structures and motions—a unified field of forces working to collapse material differences. Terror, confusion, ecstasy, and ultimately unconsciousness and death comprise the experience of those whose bodily and psychic identity are speedily merged with this anonymous mass.

It is as though Poe were experimenting with Eureka’s vision of life’s destructive teleology but on a localized scale, and from the first-person perspective of one repeatedly consumed by the process. Eureka’s imagining of cosmic collapse nevertheless describes a totalizing process in which all of nature shifts gradually from multiplicity to oneness. In a fashion perhaps more indicative of Naturphilosophie’s emphasis on natural polarity and conflict, Pym envisions contrasting tendencies of life existing in parallel. Its synchronous and spatial sense of nature nevertheless share an important aspect of Eureka’s diachronic and destructive fantasy. Nantucket and its multiplicity of stable objects and patterns are

---

72 John Limon similarly recognizes the novel’s initial emphasis on property, and its concluding nullification of this relationship: “The story commences with an identity at the center of the universe conceived of as inherited property…The story culminates, however, with Pym’s identity-threatening approach to a giant snowman…” (112).

73 Limon identifies Poe’s thought with the focus on multiplicity and conflict within Naturphilosophie but suggests, similarly, that he ultimately emphasizes combination as the basic impulse of life: “Conflict (polarity) is what it takes to have life (and unity). Poe yearns for the end of the world of
in no danger of disintegrating and collapsing into the ocean, but a peculiar desire to go to
sea, and often in highly dangerous circumstances, takes possession of Pym and guides
him repeatedly to the brink of destruction. It is as though Eureka’s giddy affirmation of
universal collapse were realized in the unconscious forces driving Pym away from land
and into the heart of the maelstrom. Although this compulsion might be understood as a
simple suicidal wish, what the novel seems more interested in exploring are the
experiential possibilities lying on the intensive boundaries between individuated organic
life and its impersonal vital backdrop. By representing Pym’s life as driven by a need for
experiences that disintegrate the individual psyche and body, the novel expresses Poe’s
idealized vital teleology in terms of the human capacity to break from temporal and
material environments that indemnify atomizing and repetitive regimes of sensation. Pym
becomes the representative of life—the one capable of realizing its developmental
possibility—which in sharp contrast to predominant vitalist ideals of the period, consists
of merging individuated beings into the anonymous oneness of primordial energy. 74 If the
novel seems to convey an anthropocentric sensibility by tasking humanity in this fashion,
it proves to be a peculiar if not paradoxical honor; as in Eureka, the human represents
life’s highest experiential possibility by actively pursuing a passive submission to forces
that nullify its separateness and identity. 75

---

74 Frank S. Frederick, in a reading that draws parallels between Pym and Gothic quest narratives,
suggests similarly that the final goal and reward of the protagonist’s wanderings are “the sacrament of
eternal liberation from self” (23). Frederick interprets the texts various moments of near-death experience
as the ego’s preparations for its final dissolution (23).

75 Although I have suggested some of the differences I think to be operative between Pym and
Eureka, John Limon makes a similar point about the desire for passivity subtending both narratives: “If the
Within its first pages *Pym* questions the proper place or home of the human, and life more generally, in a cosmos divided between material fixity and fluid holism. Augustus raises the issue directly just before he loses consciousness and control of Pym’s sailboat:

“For God’s sake, Augustus,” I screamed, now heartily frightened, “what ails you?—what is the matter?—what *are* you going to do?” “Matter!” he stammered, in the greatest apparent surprise, letting go the tiller at the same moment, falling forward into the bottom of the boat—“matter!” why nothing is the—matter—going home—d—d—don’t you see?” (1011)

Understood superficially this passage would seem to convey Augustus’ intoxicated confusion about his location, but it suggests a great deal about the stakes of the novel’s identification of the “home” described here. Is “home” the raging sea, into which the boys have been led by demonic or unconscious forces, or the normative “home” Pym initially describes in terms of Nantucket, his family, and the land? Augustus’ sneering suggestion, appearing just prior to this peculiar statement, would seem to answer the question simply enough: “I am going to sea—you may go home if you think proper” (1011). The distinction between sea and home is, however, what has become reversed in Augustus’ stammering reply to Pym. Here “Going home” means embarking from the land into the sea, and finally embarking from one’s boat into the storm. The half-conscious Augustus expresses the normative reversal Poe attempts to convey throughout the novel. The sea’s hostility to the boys might appear as the quintessence of the foreign, but as the object of their wish, it reveals itself to be the essential home to which the novel...

---

world, in *Eureka*, is “sinking into Unity,” then we are entitled to believe that that is the subject of *Pym*’s allegory: We stop being erect, we become supine, we surrender, in terms relevant to sexual-disciplinary politics, to gravity (and to objective nature and to science)—as Pym, in fact, perversely swoons off the cliffs of Tsalal, a prefiguring of his willingness will-lessness as he drifts toward the snowman” (115). I disagree with Limon’s equation of this process as simply reactionary, but fully agree with his identification of a “willing” or active search for passivity as the subjective ideal of both texts.
commits them. As it becomes particularly clear on the island of Tsalal, the novel envisions land as a potentially enervating trap preventing humanity’s realization of its vital potential.

Augustus’ revealing statement also raises a concept with significant implications for *Pym*’s bifurcation of life into terrestrial and oceanic zones. When Pym demands to know what “is the matter” with Augustus, the former responds by repeating back the word “matter” with emphasis three times. The term appears to represent a deeply significant notion, for simply hearing it shocks the otherwise incoherent Augustus into a sudden response. If Augustus’ plan to sail into a hurricane prompts a strangely automatic reply from Pym, “matter” has a similar effect on his friend. Pym utilizes the term to mean a problem or “matter” of concern, and apparently without any intention of suggesting a connection with its other denotations. Augustus’ sudden exclamation of the word in isolation, “Matter!” implies, alternatively, the term’s function as the signifier for physical substance in general. He immediately repeats the word in the same exclamatory fashion, and while his next stammering sentence seems to return it to Pym’s initial meaning, Poe visually isolates the term with dashes in order to confuse the sense of Augustus’ usage. The change in signification between question and response, rather than simply switching abruptly from one sense to the next and then back, momentarily crosses the two meanings. Although the implications of this mixing will be developed at length, Poe’s semiotic play expresses a negative judgment of matter informing the novel’s division of earth from ocean. Appearing as it does beside Augustus’ reversed identification of home with the sea, it further connects the passage’s two pejorative associations. Matter, with its common connotations of multiplicity and inanimate solidity, and the text’s representation
of land as thoroughly atomized and lifelessly repetitive converge here. But rather than merely contributing to *Pym*’s apotheosis of fluid environments, the association indicates the text’s participation in a debate about the general divisions informing nature itself. Water and land, although more than merely symbolic, function as the text’s images of a larger distinction between matter, and what it later designates as “motion” (1079). Both might be said to represent different and unequal states of the vital force *Eureka* identified as ubiquitously composing nature. As in that text, “all is life,” but life appears in “greater” and “lesser” manifestations—with the greater forms realizing more authentically life’s general tendency to disrupt and merge its individuations (1359).76

*Pym*’s dramatic opening passages introduce a microcosm of the events, objects, and landscapes repeated throughout its distinctly episodic narrative. Compared to *Moby-Dick*’s exploration of a multitude of diverse implements, life forms, and practices, *Pym*’s world is, like its teleology of collapse, relatively simple and sparse. The objects that most persistently and significantly constitute its imaginary, and which form a critical link between its juxtaposition of terrestrial and watery zones, are ships. From its first pages until its last dramatic moments, the text’s image of technology is that of the boat.

Considered in the context of the novel’s envisioning of human life’s “proper” home,

---

76 Unlike Ahab’s vitalism, Poe thus includes the “lesser” forms within his notion of life—a fact that allows for their inclusion in the final homogenous state of the universe. This point proves important for understanding *Pym*’s division of the sensuous world, which should not be thought in terms of an absolute bifurcation of life into aqueous and terrestrial forms. That this pair is an expression of a more basic distinction between “matter,” and “motion” should indicate Poe’s intention to move beyond a simple representational or elemental division that would seem to codify itself for the reader. Although I will clarify this point further, Poe’s concept of “motion” suggests a category inherently resistant to representations, and thus irreducible to a single object association. Water is not “pure” life in this context so much as a state of life expressive of its self-deconstructing “motion.” As the final moment of the narrative indicates, pure life is beyond representation because it is not an object, and also because it proves to be anathema to consciousness.
ships represent a peculiarly ambiguous intermediary in *Pym*’s schematization of nature. Understood in terms of its negative characterization of terrestrial life, the ship would seem an expression of developmental inertia; ships attempt, in other words, to replicate the conditions of life on land, and primarily for commercial purposes that support its forms. In this sense, the ship conveys an association of home with the land, and becomes a temporary floating home, or more accurately, a commercial vehicle that will return the sailor to his “proper” home where life can recommence. Alternatively, ships become the means by which life embarks, like Pym and Augustus, into the sea and its zones of ontological ambiguity. Maritime technology provides the basic conditions necessary for the human to sustain a transformative voyage into the unknown, although one whose transformations move along a line of disintegration. This double logic perhaps makes ships neutral entities—technologies judged according to their use in the novel—and yet the “proper” use of technology proves integral to the realization of life’s purpose.

*Pym* imagines human life as essentially technological, but in a fashion that supports its development into extreme or intense states, the instability of which threatens to collapse human and machinic individuations. In a context in which escaping the enervating routines of terrestrial life, and even escaping the delimited life of organic bodies constitutes the goal of evolutionary processes, the ship expresses the general purpose of technology, and constitutes its highest realization. Pym’s sailboat is not meant to survive the storm, but to provide passage into it, and each successive vessel he commandeers, whether a large whaling ship or small canoe, faces a similar cataclysmic moment or gradual process of destruction. As my previous discussion of Pym’s injuries suggested, the splintering of the *Ariel* parallels the peculiar piercing of his body, and
foreshadows several other scenes in which humans literally disintegrate along with their ships. This comparison suggests an analogue between the role of the human body and the ship in *Pym*’s destructive teleology. Like their vessels, human bodies are products of terrestrial life, but both are, in some sense, intended for the sea. Their linked dissolution in the ocean envisions life’s transformation from materially individuated forms to a single mass of homogenous force. The body is meant, like the ship, to extend life beyond its initially delimited forms, marking ships as both the prostheses by which this extension is realized, and the text’s analogue for a sense of the body as a vessel for life. This parallel is not meant to suggest an absolute parity between the two, for life does not simply inhabit bodies as bodies spatially inhabit ships. *Pym*’s portrayal of mutual psychic and bodily collapse is an excellent example of how Poe’s fiction generally opposes the notion of a bodiless ego or deus ex machina. Even if it strains the boundaries of human representations and norms, life is a physical phenomena in the novel, although one that restlessly uses its individuated physical instantiations to overcome its dispersal into these isolate fragments.

*Pym*’s initial encounter with death, or at least with the very porous boundary between individuated and amalgamated life, proves surprisingly to energize his desire for similar experiences. *Pym* and Augustus recover immediately and improbably from their night in the hurricane, such that both attend breakfast the next morning without arousing suspicions about their activities (1017). Just one week after being practically drowned and skewered, *Pym* exclaims that he has “never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator” (1018). He even identifies himself as unconsciously pervaded by the destructive urge that led him to sea: “my visions were
of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown” (1018). Moving beyond a mere childhood fascination with the grotesque, he begins to understand his life as fated for “a destiny” that will take him into watery destruction (1018). Perhaps as a result of his supernatural vitality, which seems strangely to feed off death, and because of his macabre obsessions, the text marks its protagonist as singularly related to its vital hierarchy. Disinterested in the life of commerce and familial respectability that he stands to inherit, Pym becomes the text’s image of a superior human type—one that draws closer to life’s essence by abandoning the solid terrestrial world as a matter of principle.77 As the representative of humanity’s evolutionary possibility, and thus the one fated to demonstrate its proper relation to the technological, he seems to have been gifted with extra-mortal power that preserves him through repeated encounters with death. But the power that allows Pym to survive and thus to intensify his relationship to life’s deconstructive logic does not make him an ideal of self-sufficiency or heroic action. His strength resides, as suggested previously, in actively making himself a passive body through which life’s extra-bodily forces become destructively manifest. He might therefore be characterized as a figure of the undead—a being that expresses life’s processual movement from individuation to formless decay, and who thus cannot be destroyed in any ordinary sense because he is partially “dead.”78

77 This reading of Pym as fated or destined for some divine purpose has also been explored in the context of the novel’s resonance with mythological hero figures. Carol Peirce and Alexander G. Rose III identify various resemblances between Arthurian legends and Pym, not the least of which is the hero’s name. They point out that in most mythologies, Arthur is identified as both human and divine (61).
The connection between Pym and death, and more specifically between Pym and scenes of dramatic physical deterioration, is readily solidified in the novel’s next lengthy episode. If the wreck of the *Ariel* briefly exposed Pym’s logic of bodily and technological collapse, the next catastrophe puts this logic on macabre display over the course of one hundred pages. In order to fulfill his “destiny,” and to avoid his parents’ prohibition against taking to sea, Pym is surreptitiously stowed by Augustus in the hold of his father’s whaling ship, the *Grampus*, as it embarks on a commercial voyage. The ensuing series of calamities aboard the ship deserve a brief overview, for Pym’s baroque narration confusingly strings together several related and highly complex events. Pym begins the trip safely hidden in a large box in the *Grampus*’ hold, unbeknownst to its crew or captain, and with the intention of revealing himself when the ship is too far out at sea to return the stowaway. When he hears nothing from Augustus for several days, he attempts to gain access to the deck, but finds himself sealed in the hold. Pym eventually discovers a message from Augustus—attached to his pet dog, of which no mention is made in the narrative prior to his sudden appearance in the hold—obliquely informing him that a mutiny has taken place. Augustus and Pym are soon reunited, and we learn that many of the crew died in the bloody struggle for control of the ship. The ship’s Captain, Augustus’ father, has been set adrift. Plotting with a half-Indian seaman named Dirk Peters, the boys overtake the other mutineers and kill all but one, Richard Parker. A severe storm soon damages the ship, and the men resort to cannibalism to survive, killing

78 In the midst of the terrible starvation and death experienced aboard the *Grampus*, Pym seems to grow stronger while others physically and emotionally deteriorate: “For myself, although at the commencement of the voyage I had been in bad health, and was at all times of a delicate constitution, I suffered less than any of us, being much less reduced in frame, and retaining my powers of mind in a surprising degree, while the rest were completely prostrated in intellect, and seemed to be brought to a species of second childhood.” (1092).
and consuming Parker. Augustus eventually dies from an infected wound, and Pym and Peters are saved by a passing British merchant vessel, the *Jane Guy*.

In the midst of what might seem a meaningless concatenation of chaotic episodes, the *Grampus* narrative contains a single moment of speculative expression suggesting, contrarily, that its events are the result of a totalizing order. Just as Augustus paused in the midst of a raging gale, Pym finds himself strangely fixated on a single idea while dreaming in the midst of a storm:

> I fell into a state of partial insensibility, during which the most pleasing images floated in my imagination; such as green trees, waving meadows of ripe grain, processions of dancing girls, troops of cavalry, and other phantasies. I now remember that, in all which passed before my mind’s eye, *motion* was a predominant idea. Thus, I never fancied any stationary object, such as a house, a mountain, or anything of that kind; but windmills, ships, large birds, balloons, people on horseback, carriages driving furiously, and similar moving objects presented themselves in endless succession (original italics, 1079).

Although his initial list of “pleasing” moving objects would seem to identify the dream with an unexpected pastoral fantasy, the second list reveals a far different idealization of the vital. The listed objects have no association with each other, besides their common link for Pym with motion. In as much as these objects serve to demonstrate motion in general, they suggest that motion is more than a mere predicate of things; motion might be revealed through the changes wrought in and to objects, but here the concept gestures to a separate force or process without a representational corollary. Motion is directly inexpressible because, unlike the objects used to signify it, it means nothing other than pure change or difference. Pym therefore characterizes motion as an “idea,” in contrast to an “object,” which gains its discrete and localizable identity by persisting in time. The pleasure he associates with his dream state indicates, furthermore, an unconscious desire for motion, although one distinctly different from a common inclination for possession.
If the text begins by identifying “matter” as a central cosmological category, here it reveals a second term defining a binary pairing. “Motion” indicates life’s tendency to resist its actualization as a multiplicity of different objects or subjects. While the presence of this binary might suggest a stable division within life, as indicated previously, the forces repeatedly guiding Pym toward the sea indicate Poe’s prioritization here, and in *Eureka*, of its amalgamating tendency. Hence, the sea and motion become ideas charged with a kind of autotelic desire, while “matter” connotes what is problematic or inhibitory. Pym’s journeys from land to boat, and from destroyed boats and bodies into the sea, mirror life’s “proper” teleology, which labors to collapse individuals into a homogenous ocean of energy. Although “motion” gestures to the sense of qualitative change implicit to this process, the term “deconstructive transformation” perhaps describes better the operation employed ruthlessly throughout the novel. The immediate context of Pym’s dream solidifies this connection, for it occurs while he and the remaining crew of the *Grampus* witness the disintegration of their ship. After they mutiny against the original mutineers, Augustus, Pym, Peters, and Parker find themselves in a terrible storm that gradually tears the ship apart, leaving behind nothing but a “complete hulk” of wood (1075). Their final desperate attempt at survival consists of lashing themselves to the deck as the waves break violently over them and their fragmenting craft. With the exception of some hollow oil-casks, without which it would have sunk, “every inch of the vessel” is filled with water (1076), and the men are similarly inundated: “Our deck lay level with the sea, or rather we were encircled with a towering ridge of foam, a portion of which swept over us every instant. It is not too much to say that our heads were not fairly out of the water more than one second in
three” (1077). After a small abatement in the storm, Pym falls into the “state of partial insensibility” out of which his dream of pure motion arises. The concept occurs to him as the sea’s violent motions deconstruct the men’s bodies and their ship, threatening completely to merge them with it.

As in the wreck of the *Ariel*, these scenes function to presage life’s transformation from material individuation to a state of conjoined energy or pure motion. They do not merely figure this transition, for the fluid forces of the ocean literally permeate the men, and by the storm’s conclusion they lie half-dead on the ship’s deck. Although they survive the hurricane, throughout the episodes composing the tale of the *Grampus* many individuals are bodily deconstructed, like the ship, to the point of no return. Perhaps in order to illustrate the finality of life’s processual transition from one state to the next, Poe forces upon the reader numerous images of bodily putrefaction and decomposition. Pym’s proximity to these processes contributes greatly to a sense of his preternatural relationship with death. He begins the voyage confined to an “iron-bound box, such as is used sometimes for packing fine earthenware,” and after falling into a death-like sleep for several days awakens to find that the leg of mutton left for him by Augustus is “in a state of absolute putrefaction!” (1022, 1024). His primary role in the uprising against the mutineers consists of disguising himself as the decayed corpse of one of their group in order to frighten them, and Pym’s graphic description of the decaying body after which he models his disguise details its rapid transition to a state of unrecognizability. His disguise

79 In an excellent essay J. Gerald Kennedy focuses on bodily decomposition in *Pym*, observing that the text’s fixation on the theme responds to a communal terror over the threat of a “formlessness which erases the distinction between life and death” (“Decomposing” 172). Cast in terms of my reading, one might say similarly that death is the transition point of individuated life into its “proper” formless state.
is so convincing that his sudden appearance before the crew terrifies one man to death (1072). After their near drowning the men are left to starve and die while drifting on the remains of the Grampus, but momentarily think themselves saved upon sighting an approaching Dutch vessel. In one of Pym’s truly macabre scenes, they discover that the ship’s crew is entirely dead and lying on the deck in “the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction!” (1086). The approaching craft appears, furthermore, to be steered by a smiling and gesticulating figure, who upon closer inspection proves to be an upright corpse with no lips, and upon which a seagull is gorging itself (1086). When the seagull drops a bit of decaying human flesh on the Grampus deck, the men realize that their only chance for survival is cannibalism, and Parker is selected through a random process to be killed and consumed (1098). In each of these examples Poe emphasizes not merely death, but the fact of decomposition—the inevitable fragmentation and subsidence of the individual. Set against the backdrop of the sea, these images further develop the sense of life’s passage into a state of homogenous energy, for in each example the ocean constitutes the common background of the drama and the final sink into which these bodies will fully decompose.

Amongst Pym’s panoply of putrefactions, the death of Augustus perhaps best expresses the link between bodily decay and the primordial mass of life’s energy the text links with the ocean. The wounds Augustus sustains to his arm in the fight for control of the ship become severely gangrenous, and the infection eventually begins to consume his body. Pym describes Augustus as literally disappearing: “He was frightfully emaciated; so much so that, although he weighed a hundred and twenty-seven pounds upon his leaving Nantucket, he now did not weigh more than forty or fifty at the farthest. His eyes were
sunk far in his head, being scarcely perceptible…” (1106). The passage marks or
measures Augustus’ distance from land in terms of a loss of bodily self; at this juncture he
begins to recede even from perception and recognisability. Death comes quickly on the
next day, but Pym continues to describe the body’s decomposition and final dissolution:

It was not until some time after dark that we took courage to get up and throw
the body overboard. It was then loathsome beyond expression, and so far
decayed that, as Peters attempted to lift it, an entire leg came off in his grasp.
As the mass of putrefaction slipped over the vessel’s side into the water, the
glare of phosphoric light with which it was surrounded plainly discovered to us
seven or eight large sharks, the clashing of whose horrible teeth, as their prey
was torn to pieces among them, might have been heard at the distance of a mile
(1107).

Just as Augustus ceases to be an individual—a fact made evident by Pym’s ceasing to use
his proper name—his physical remains begin to lose any sign of somatic unity or
definition. As the limbs decay and separate they no longer exist as the parts or fragments
of a recognizable whole; Pym thus rapidly transitions from describing a “body,” to
referring only to an empty pronoun (“it”), and then to “a mass of putrefaction.” This final
grisly phrase suggests a nearly total loss of definition or material solidity. Augustus’
remains become fluid, “slip” over the side of the decaying ship, and merge with the
oceanic mass they now resemble. The release of phosphorescent light marks the final
transition of somatic life into its opposite, and lends the otherwise gruesome process a
sense of the ethereal or the holy—perhaps foreshadowing the blinding whiteness reported
at the novel’s conclusion.

Pym’s depiction of life’s developmental opposition to the individual constitutes a
radical break from the organic individualism structuring Ahab’s sensibility, and the
antebellum vitalist ideal it represents. The American appropriation of Romantic
organicism was, as discussed previously, the ontological and representational support for
a cult of the autarkic individual. The organism’s centralized unity of part and whole was thought to manifest, as it did for Kant, Coleridge, and Emerson, a divine order guaranteeing the primordial autonomy and power of the self. Although many of these and other organicist thinkers attempted to envision a self profoundly imbricated in the life of sensuous nature, their accounts also identify the individual human subject as the evolutionary apogee of creation. While *Pym* does not especially denigrate humanity, by envisioning life as developmentally antithetical to the individual, and to the organism, Poe ultimately nullified any claim to natural superiority for the human self. More importantly, he disrupted the very notion of a self and the organic body by representing them as always already disintegrating—as never unified or self-identical because always unraveling. Although *Pym* imagines some space for human agency, in the face of the oceanic sublime and the totalizing forces it represents, the novel insists on our inevitable passivity.

The text’s unique vitalist imaginary suggests a complex relationship with the ideologies and institutions supported by common antebellum vitalist sensibilities. In one sense the novel resoundingly calls into question any attribution of power to the self. By collapsing the body repeatedly into its milieu, it demands that the individual understand itself as epiphenomenal, and thus recommends against the violent indemnification of the ego. Neither transcendental subject nor organic body proves to be internally unified or self-possessed in *Pym*, a fact that would seem to oppose any naturalization of proprietary rights over the lives of others. Matthew Taylor, although not focusing on *Pym*, recognizes a similar mutual deconstruction of individualism and anthropocentrism generally at work in Poe: “Rather than optimistically assuming that such powers must serve human ends, Poe concluded that an all-encompassing cosmic energy inevitably troubles human-being
by suspending the autonomy and interiority of individual humans” (29). By essentializing
and foregrounding this inevitable disturbance, and by situating it as the primordial
tendency of life, *Pym* strikes at the core of an organic individualism that represents
sensuous nature as a reflection of subjective power, and which violently responds to any
deviation from its expectations. While in this sense it might be read as celebrating a kind
of egalitarian fusion of traditionally differentiated entities, and thus encouraging an ethical
stance toward that which appears as different from the self, the apocalypticism by which
this fusion is imagined might also mark the limit of its progressivity. Poe reminds us that
the self, and the human, are products of external and impersonal forces, but by
characterizing this point so absolutely, he limits our sense of meaningful agency. Indeed,
as seems the case in *Pym*, actions gain relevance not by effecting change in the social
sphere, or through interpersonal relationships, but by facilitating the intense experience of
life’s transformational logic. Just after being rescued from his situation on the sinking
*Grampus*, Pym quickly forgets Augustus and his terrible fate, focusing instead on the new
opportunities for adventure now afforded him (1114).80 Because Poe’s cosmology
prioritizes homogeneity over difference, it is unclear how an ethical relation with others,
or even the significance of singular others, might be construed. In *Moby-Dick* life is
represented as similarly lacking organic consistency, but it is dispersed between

80 The novel’s almost total lack of traditional characterization echoes this impersonalism on the
level of form. *Pym* provides a few descriptions of characters, such as Peters, but it mostly avoids
developing a sense of defined personalities—a technique that makes their sudden exit from the narrative
relatively insignificant for reader and protagonist alike. Indeed, the amount of dialogue spoken by other
characters is minimal and often situational, providing little access to whatever might mark them as singular
individuals. Pym is a similarly blank figure throughout the narrative; besides a few biographical facts
related in the first chapter, his descriptions of his experiences are so focused on intense affective states or
contextual details that he becomes little more than an empty placeholder through which general complexes
of terror, disgust, and exhilaration pass.
multitudes of diverse agents. These actors prove to be fused and networked in a fashion irreducible to the atomizing representations applied to them, but never to such an extent that they collapse into a single undifferentiated mass.  

Dominic Mastroianni argues, contrarily, that *Pym*’s depictions of animal life suggest a blurring of distinctions between animal and human with deeply ethical implications. He focuses specifically on the scene in which the seagull feasts on the decomposing Dutchman in order to illustrate how the bird’s consumption of the human witnesses a figurative parallel between human and animal. Mastroianni suggests that the men’s sudden fit of madness upon seeing the decaying corpse, and the bird’s shrieking replies to their calls for help, destabilize the simple equation of humans with rationality (194). Although I agree that *Pym* importantly ambiguates these traditional ontological limits by representing animals as occasionally evincing rational behavior, and humans as often lacking it, within the larger drama of life depicted in the novel, it is unclear if the capacity for ethical judgment is of real importance. The decision to draw straws when selecting the sailor to be cannibalized might constitute, as Mastroianni claims, a profound political act (192), or it might simply ironize the social processes that apotheosize the human individual. Nothing about the process changes the fate of Parker, the individual selected, killed, and voraciously consumed by the other men. Given the text’s disinterest in the lives of individuals as individuals—indeed its use of individuals to illustrate the

---

81 Taylor summarizes the limitations implicit to Poe’s vision in a fashion that resonates with this comparison: “There is thus no room in this vision for a positive ethics…Even if we recognize, with the narrator of “The Black Cat,” that harming others injures our own estranged being, we would be helpless to act otherwise because the universe’s contraction requires the destructive conjunction of ostensibly discrete bodies (atomic, human, planetary). The Many must be sacrificed at the altar of the One. This fatally consistent working out of transcendentalism’s logic is both the power and the limit of Poe’s cosmology” (56).
supremacy of the vital processes that decompose them—this reliance on random selection seems at best a form of scapegoating their participation in life’s inevitable and impersonal self-cannibalization. Rather than delineating a trans-species notion of “humanity,” understood as the capacity for equitable giving and cooperation, as Mastroianni describes it (195), the scene collapses the difference between human and animal by implicating both in life’s equitable decomposition of individuals.\textsuperscript{82} The various scenes of human and animal consumption in the\textit{Grampus} episode frequently equate decomposition with eating, demonstrating how individuated lives rely on the dis-individuation of others. In as much as eating builds up individuals by decomposing other individuals, it represents a combination of the contrasting processes\textit{Pym} identifies with life; the growth and maintenance of individuals reflect matter’s tendency to disperse, stabilize, and differentiate life, while the killing and digestion upon which this operation relies exhibit motion’s homogenizing transformation. Although the balance between these opposing forces is, in some sense, what\textit{Naturphilosophie} recognized as the proper state of nature, the novel’s championing of the combinatory and deconstructive drive evinces a dissatisfaction with this eternal cycle of individuation (Limon 95). Thus while\textit{Pym} participates in the maintenance of the self through consumption, his purely non-economic journeys into the sea—voyages that push the body to the point of decomposition without any promise of revivification—represent life’s proper course of development. Cycles of

\textsuperscript{82} It is unclear why “humanity” becomes the operative term in Mastroianni’s account of the text’s idealization of an extra-human ideal. Although “humanity” might represent a possibility that is not the province of humans, and thus something that human and animal are capable of achieving, the redundancy in terminology here is telling. Why, indeed, should this possibility not be labeled “animality”? At the very least, the explicit association of the human with this ideal suggests a greater ontological proximity to this ideal on the part of one species—a division threatening to recapitulate the divisiveness Mastroianni suggests is here being deconstructed.
life and death appear throughout the novel, but the ultimate return of life to a homogenous state is ever foreshadowed by the ocean’s omnipresence.

My critical focus on Mastroianni’s interpretation is intended more to provide an example of a generally problematic tendency in some *Pym* criticism than a developed critique of his reading. As I previously suggested, the novel has the important effect of radically calling into question the naturalization of individualist ideologies by representing vitality as essentially antithetical to the life of organisms. However, the notion that its specific attack on anthropocentrism, or on the American cult of autonomous subjectivity, recommends a particular ethical program or conclusion strikes me as missing the text’s larger interest in life’s brutal impersonalism. Marilyn Robinson’s characterization of *Pym* as expressing a sense of divine judgment seems another attempt to identify the novel, as she does Poe’s tales, with a moralizing sensibility (“On Edgar Allan Poe”). A striking element of these examples and the general line of interpretation they represent, is their need to dismiss or complex a common identification of the text’s racist sensibilities. Mastroianni thus claims that while the text employs “racist caricatures,” its troubling of anthropocentrism might also disturb the pejorative animalization of racialized human otherness common in the period (198). Robinson seems strangely to dismiss the issue by emphasizing the omnipresence of divine judgment as a totalizing condemnation of normative categories in the novel (“On Edgar Allan Poe”). In some respects my response to these readings resembles Taylor’s ontological approach to the question of ethics in Poe; the inevitable collapse of life into itself nullifies the ethical question—a question that assumes a universe interested in the stability of individuated life forms. However, Taylor’s identification of Poe’s “posthumanism” as a form of moral and
social quietism seems dramatically at odds with *Pym*’s obviously negative characterization of the Tsalalians, a people repeatedly associated with blackness. In a universe in which, as Taylor suggests of Poe’s, difference has little significance, why did he represent life as essentially divided along racial lines in *Pym*? Similar questions can be put to both Mastroianni and Robinson’s approaches to the racial question: If the specter of divine judgment nullifies the veracity of human judgment, why does the text perform an implicit but obvious representational judgment of racial difference? If *Pym* troubles normative conceptions of the human-animal ontological divide in a fashion that should generally disturb violent responses to our perceptions of alterity, why does it develop and emphasize overtly violent “racist caricatures” of the “Other”?

Rather than avoiding the issue of race by prioritizing other aspects of the text, or by focusing on Poe’s general cosmological apocalypticism, I propose that his representations of racial difference in the novel are closely related to its divided cosmological schematization of life. Although *Eureka* imagines life collapsing into unity, in the world of the novel, reality remains divided between forces and the degree to which they approximate or realize this collapse. As discussed previously, *Pym* represents this hierarchized division between “matter” and “motion” in terms of differing material states, objects, and locations. It furthermore deploys this difference, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, through representations of racial otherness. Many of the characteristics informing *Pym*’s bifurcation of life into matter and motion appear in its vision of “lesser” and “greater” races, with the addition of antebellum America’s central ideological guarantor of “natural” difference—the distinction between “whiteness” and “color.”
Pym’s first depiction of race comes in Augustus’ description of the mutiny aboard the Grampus, which is partly lead by a vicious “negro” cook (1041). Although the ferocity and treachery attributed to this figure presage, to some extent, the Tsalalian’s surprise attack on the white colonialists of the Jane Guy, the descriptions surrounding this minor character, while comprised of sensational racial stereotypes, are so minimal that they do little to reveal the logic subtending racial difference in Pym. However, the initial description of Dirk Peters, the half-Indian sailor who accompanies Pym throughout the remainder of the voyage, quickly introduces a series of distinctions central to the novel’s racial and material imaginary. Peters is here and elsewhere defined by a few physical characteristics and capabilities, namely his overwhelming strength and solidity:

Peters himself was one of the most ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature—not more than four feet eight inches high—but his limbs were of the most Herculean mould. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain human shape. His arms, as well as legs, were bowed in the most singular manner, and appeared to possess no flexibility whatever... The mouth extended nearly from ear to ear; the lips were thin, and seemed, like some other portions of his frame, to be devoid of natural pliancy... (1043).

These clinically detached observations, which pass from anatomical part to part with a strange systematicity, seem more a zoological description of an alien species than the descriptive register of character, with its implication of a shared subjectivity in the object under scrutiny. But elements of the passage are too fantastic only to reflect the animalization of race common to the biopolitics of antebellum culture. Peters’ compact density and inertial inflexibility suggest some parity with a stone securely fixed in place. His limbs seem almost to merge with his torso, forming a solid squat mass. In many respects Peters’ form expresses the material tendency of life against which the novel defines its dynamic ideal; his body is a solid atom differentiated from its surroundings,
but also planted in the ground. He is geographically associated with land, for he originates from the American interior and settles in Illinois, as we learn from the “Note” at the novel’s conclusion (1043, 1181). Throughout much of *Pym* his physicality and strength remain constants, giving the impression of an object impervious to the effects of environmental change.

*Pym* focuses on one other related physical characteristic in descriptions of Peters, namely his immense physical strength and its practical efficaciousness (1072). Although his “Herculean” brawn contributes to a sense of his material solidity, it also illustrates a contrasting capacity for dynamic action—an ability that helps to save *Pym* from death on several occasions. Indeed, the novel explicitly identifies Peters as a “hybrid,” a general term linking his mixed racial background with the differing physical tendencies expressed in his somatic makeup (1058). Peters is a combination of material and transformative powers—a representative of “primitive” terrestrial life and oceanic fluidity—and, concomitantly, a fusion of Native American and Caucasian races. It seems implied that Peters has obtained his earthy strength from his “Upsarakas” mother, and his technical skill as a sailor and line manager from his Caucasian father (1043). He is both aligned with the mobility native to the advanced technology of modern sailing ships and the stereotypical image of indigenous peoples as non-technological, and thus as geographically and developmentally fixed in place. While this combination of traits proves useful for *Pym*, it represents a basic racialization of the novel’s representation of life. Poe identifies the Caucasian race with a capacity, not simply for economic development and technological sophistication, but for active transcendence of life’s terrestrial individuations. *Pym* is the half-living, and thus half-embodied white specter.
representative of this evolutionary possibility. As it becomes most apparent on Tsalal, Poe represents non-white races as lacking a sense of life’s motion toward self-transcendence; the “black” or “colored” peoples, like the Earth around them, remain locked in a world of thingly multiplicities that pass through cycles of destruction and creation, and which thus never transform into life’s “proper” oceanic state.

This polarizing racialization is more complicated in its normative implications than that of some banal defense of colonial racism or anti-abolitionism, but its troubling ethical implications are, nevertheless, partly revealed in Pym’s relationship with Peters. Robinson suggests that Peters “saves” Pym and Augustus out of “sheer kindness,” and then becomes the “resourceful, insightful, protective companion of Pym’s harrowing travels” (“On Edgar Allan Poe.”) Peters is undeniably kind at moments in the narrative, but the boys are equally critical in the fight for survival aboard the Grampus, and Peters agrees to their plans in part because he fears facing future charges of mutiny without their exculpatory testimony (1063). Robinson’s description of Peters as a constant and “protective companion” nevertheless captures the strange dedication he evinces for Pym—a dedication more indicative, however, of servility than deep friendship. Indeed, Peters is described, like his dog Tiger, in terms of his “instrumentality” (1054, 1044). Unlike the ferocious “negro” cook and the “black” Tsalalians, Peters is capable of friendship, and no doubt because, unlike the former examples, he is a “hybrid” of white and colored races. But the same mixture of blood equates him with matter, such that the superiorly vital Caucasian man, Pym, utilizes him as a blunt instrument to further his purpose. Like the ships Pym boards and drives into storms, Peters serves as a technological support for a journey into the all-consuming vital ocean. His cheerful willingness to serve this master
suggests a salutary recognition of his place and role in the orders of life as one neither fully relegated to the land nor specifically destined to lead. With his inflexible limbs, stony solidity, and automatic servility, Peters resembles more a golem than a human companion.

Although Pym’s use of Peters represents his most blatant instrumentalization of others, our protagonist’s mysterious influence soon extends over those that rescue him. The British vessel that saves Pym and Peters, the Jane Guy, has as its primary goal profitable trade throughout the South Seas (1113). Its Captain—referred to simply as “Captain Guy”—nevertheless decides to pursue a voyage focused both on commerce and discovery. He proclaims his desire to reach the then undiscovered South Pole, but upon finding his supplies low and his crew ill from scurvy, suggests that they turn back. In keeping with his mysterious inclination to avoid the safety of land, and to push forward into regions of watery destruction, Pym scoffs at Guy’s concern over his and the crew’s desire for self preservation. While merely an adolescent without significant nautical experience, Pym’s criticisms of the Captain’s “timidity” induce him to continue (1134). A similar situation is repeated after the ship arrives at Tsalal, when rather than continue southward, Captain Guy wishes “for a thorough investigation of the country, in the hope of making a profitable speculation in his discovery” (1139). If his initial desire to return to land expressed a desire for organic health and security, here land promises opportunities for material wealth implicated in the novel’s association of terrestrial life with the eternal

83 John Carlos Rowe similarly characterizes Peters’ role in Pym in terms of the “good” servant or slave, some of whom were granted freedom in Illinois by their owners for their lifetime of service. Rowe refers to Poe’s identification of Peters’ final location in Illinois as evidence for this connection (“Poe, Antebellum Slavery” 130-2).
circulation of objects. Guy’s waver ing attraction to sea and land, to discovery and economic profitability, make him another “hybrid” figure—a combination of opposed vital tendencies. As with Peters, Pym’s role as the representative and instigator of life’s deconstructive teleology grants him a certain power over the Captain’s “higher” inclinations, and in a fashion that puzzles even Pym: “for in some way, hardly known to myself, I had acquired much influence over him” (1139). Under Pym’s direction, Captain Guy quickly changes his plans and intends only to stay on Tsalal for a week before voyaging further south. Although the Tsalalian surprise attack on the ship destroys all but Pym and Peters, the episode provides another example of Pym’s peculiar power to enlist others in his general movement from land to sea. It also explicitly invests Pym’s journey with grand purpose; the South Pole becomes the final desired point of intense transformation—the locale to which Pym has been drawn irresistibly from the beginning of his adventures.

Rather than turning the narrative promptly to this final destination, Poe seems to have felt the need to reinforce dramatically his hierarchical bifurcation of life, and to remove any question of its racial meanings. Pym’s depiction of the island of Tsalal, and its inhabitants, functions as the novel’s summative judgment of matter, land, and the non-white races. The first descriptions of Tsalalians thus emphasize a basic connection between blackness, solidity, and the Earth:

They were about the ordinary stature of Europeans, but of a more muscular and brawny frame, their complexion a jet black, with thick and long wooly hair. They were clothed in the skins of an unknown black animal…Their arms consisted principally of clubs of a dark, and apparently heavy wood. Some spears, however, were observed among them, headed with flint, and a few slings. The bottoms of the canoes were full of black stones about the size of a large egg (1136).
Like Peters, the Tsalalians are marked as non-European by physical characteristics suggesting immutability and stony rigidity. Nevertheless, descriptions of the “hybrid” Peters convey a sense of ontological ambiguity, whereas this passage repeats a series of similar traits reduced almost to the status of abstract qualities. Tsalalians are somatically compact and tough, just as their implements are “heavy” and barely show the signs of sophisticated artistry. Indeed, in order to seal his absolute identification of these people with matter and land, Poe represents them as carrying simple stones. In a later account of their village, Pym describes Tsalalian homes as “of the most miserable description imaginable,” following which he depicts many of them as “mere holes dug in the earth,” or as “small shallow caverns, apparently scratched in the face of a precipitous ledge of dark stone” (1142). Beyond being surrounded by earthen objects, Tsalalians seem nearly interchangeable with them; stones, clubs, and “brawny” bodies simply repeat the island’s defining material logic.

They also repeat its totalizing chromatic logic. The redundancy of blackness here reflects the objects’ common ontological status, and consequently equates the black race with the dumb inertia of terrestrial things in an otherwise dynamic universe. Although Poe clearly draws on pejorative assumptions about primitive cultures in his depiction of Tsalal, the color’s peculiar ubiquity throughout the episode suggests that there is much more at work here than a scene of anthropological or ethnographic judgment. Beyond identifying them as coarse or unsophisticated, this chromatic bond with the land suggests

84 Geoffrey Sanborn argues that the final chapters of *Pym*—those focused on Tsalal and the white world to its south—become fixated on formal qualities, especially whiteness and blackness. Sanborn suggests that this tendency has possibly opposed results, either reinforcing cultural assumptions related to a particular quality, or opening a space in which these associations become confused (173-6).
a monstrously literal equation of the two. Unlike Pym’s Caucasian family, who might, if they chose to follow their natural desire for the sea, depart the terrestrial world’s atomizing spatiality and codified routines, the Tsalalians are of a kind with the land and inseparable from it.\(^8\) Their belonging essentially to the dark earth marks them as the text’s nightmarish vision of a people for whom the land is a privative and absolute “home.” The judgment implicit to Pym’s abandonment of his Nantucket birthright expresses a condemnation of a people capable of greatness, while the people of Tsalal are immediately delimited through their naturalization as expressions of life’s “lesser” form. Poe has been associated with an “average racism” common in the antebellum period, but his use of a fantasized black race as the novel’s crowning image of matter performs an extraordinary gesture of racial essentialism.\(^8\) Rather than employing the common biopolitical animalization of non-Caucasian races, or the comparative anatomical pseudosciences of the nineteenth century, Poe translates racial difference in terms of his idiosyncratic ideal of energy dynamics—an ideal disruptive to the organicist evolutionism

---

\(^8\) Pym describes Tsalal in terms of some fantastic natural features, the most extraordinary of which is its purple and striated water: “Upon collecting a basinful, and allowing it to settle thoroughly, we perceived the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of distinct hue; that these veins did not commingle; and that their cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighboring veins” (1141). While undoubtedly intended to intrigue the reader with its exoticism, these characteristics imaginatively combine the text’s focus on water’s homogeneity and matter’s individuations. Here, in the land that expresses most intensely the principle of materiality, even water proves to be internally differentiated into distinct parts.

\(^8\) Terence Whalen suggests that due in part to his wish to reach a large reading public, Poe’s work could not express a particularly extreme stance on race or abolitionism for the antebellum period (16). It thus relied on common stereotypes without suggesting opinions on divisive political or social issues in order to reach the “neutral territory of mass culture” (30). Within the larger context of Poe’s oeuvre this interpretation does a great deal to explain his representations of race, but I find it highly dissatisfying when applied to *Pym*. Whalen describes blackness in the novel as merely “allegorical,” although fails to mention the object or idea for which it stands (29). In the absence of any clear allegorical function, the text’s totalizing representation of Tsalalians in terms of blackness becomes a form of pure association that functions to support the sense of natural difference implicit to the notion of race.
upon which the former two paradigms drew. The moment of their initial meeting already stages a dramatic contrast between the Caucasian crew of the *Jane Guy*, who although physically weaker are capable of transformative motion on the ocean, and the Tsalalians, who appear bound to circulate eternally, like so many black stones, in the fallen world of their island.

This difference manifests itself conspicuously in the races’ dissimilar relationships to technology, and in their respective technological instruments. As suggested previously, the ship represents the novel’s technological ideal in as much as it is utilized to facilitate the experience of life’s proper state of unity. It recreates basic elements of the terrestrial milieu, but in order to extend terrestrial life into the deconstructive power of the oceanic maelstrom. This technological paradigm finds its purest expression in Pym’s final embarkation from land—in this case Tsalal, the novel’s reductive image of terrestrial life—on a native canoe bound for the divine white cataract at the South Pole. Although Pym and Peters steal the canoe while fleeing from the Tsalalians, they soon learn that their new ship is not of Tsalalian make: “We never did believe them the workmanship of the ignorant islanders who owned them; and some days after this period discovered…that they were in fact made by the natives of a group to the southwest of the country where we found them, having fallen accidentally into the hands of our barbarians” (1175). What means of aqueous transportation the “barbarians” possess are not of their own make because they are essentially of the land, and thus incapable of developing or utilizing technologies that would take them away from it. The Tsalalian caves and hovels are not judged merely for their lack of sophistication or ornament, but for their implication of spatial rootedness and immutability. Lacking the capacity and desire for technological
development, and thus for the transformation inherent to motion, this black race is
doomed to remain in a state of evolutionary stasis.

Their relationship to technology of nominally Caucasian invention is therefore as
hostile as their response to the Caucasians landing on their shores. Upon first boarding the
Jane Guy the Tsalalians treat the ship and its instruments with “profoundest reverence and
awe,” but soon display their essential inability to utilize the most basic devices (1138).
Their chief, Too-wit, finds a mirror below deck from which he tellingly hides in utter
terror, refusing, despite the crew’s persuasions, to look into its surface a second time
(1138). Although a seemingly inconsequential or humorous moment, his response to the
mirror exposes a basic lack of reflective capability; the Latin term for mirror, speculum,
also relates to the English term speculation, with its connotations of theoretical activity.
Poe literalizes this connection by representing the mirror as essential to speculation, and
thus as an activity available only to those who can build and utilize this technology. The
novel thus imagines a rather redundant loop in its understanding of technology and
Caucasian evolutionary superiority—those with the capacity for speculation are capable
of building the tools that enable further speculation and transformation, while those
lacking this innate superiority never enter its progressive upward spiral. Rather than a
civilizing mission gone wrong, the Jane Guy’s encounter with the Tsalalians, and their
response to its “advanced” technology, reveals the latter’s intrinsic incapacity for
education or change.

Functioning as an expression of matter’s opposition to “proper” life in Poe’s vitalist
imaginary, and prevalent antebellum anxieties over racial uprisings, Poe represents the
Tsalalians as dramatically hostile to Caucasians and the technologies enabling their
Some form of violence would seem a reasonable response to the economic imperialism and exploitation the Jane Guy’s crew intends to enact on the island, but the novel instead stages a total massacre suggestive of mindless and instinctual hostility toward the vitally and technologically superior Caucasians. This is not to suggest that the text victimizes the whites without any reservations; Pym’s criticism of the economic motivations prompting the ship’s stay at Tsalal reflect his general condemnation of terrestrial life. Nevertheless, he represents the Tsalalian attack as an outpouring of inherent perversity: “In truth, from everything I could see of these wretches, they appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe” (1174). Utilizing the substance with which they are overwhelmingly associated, the Tsalalians murder most of the Jane Guy’s crew by collapsing the dirt wall of a narrow ravine through which the men are passing (1150). The sudden avalanche of stone and earth instantly kill all but Pym and Peters, who are temporarily buried in the debris. A swift and effective method of extermination, the man-made rockslide furthermore erases any trace of the Caucasians and the tools they carry. This assertion of the powers of earth and matter over the “properly” mobile and oceanic white men also presents Pym with a highly literal manifestation of the threat posed to his quest by land. Trapped in the Tsalalian earth, he struggles to free himself in

87 The Nat Turner rebellion of 1831 significantly flamed southern whites’ fears of slave retribution, and particularly in Poe’s Virginia in the years just prior to Pym’s publication in 1838 (Edwards 4).

88 J. Gerald Kennedy also focuses on Pym’s resistance to this imperial operation, but equates it with his antipathy to white paternal authority, and goes as far as suggesting that his motivations are related to those prompting the Tsalalians to rebel (244). I agree that Pym resists his parentage, but not simply as a youthful rebel. Indeed, what makes him resist Captain Guy’s dreams of pecuniary gain are what cause him to dislike the Tsalalians, and to leave his family: their common association with land.
order to return to the ocean, and to recommence a journey that will lead to a final divine vision in the violent waters at the Pole.

Having killed the crew, the Tsalalian army next attacks the *Jane Guy*, and with the simple intention of destroying the ship. Another example of their mindless hostility toward technology, and specifically the technology most associated with the evolution of human experience in the novel, the Tsalalians obliterate the sophisticated ship rather than seizing the vessel and attempting to sail it away from their barren island. Their violence against this technological object results, ironically, in a conspicuously technological catastrophe; the fire set on the *Jane Guy* eventually ignites the ship’s powder keg, producing an immense explosion that kills or mangles thousands of Tsalalians (1161). Dissatisfied perhaps with allowing the dark race such a decisive victory over the white, Poe takes decisive imaginative revenge, describing an almost divine “stream of vivid fire to a height, apparently, of a quarter mile” issuing from the explosion (1161). Here the blame for all the wrongs ensuing from the colonial encounter rest squarely on the shoulders of the “barbarians:” “The havoc among the savages far exceeded our utmost expectation, and they had now, indeed, reaped the full and perfect fruits of their treachery” (1161). By so attributing their punishment to the Tsalalians’ inherent ignorance and brutality, *Pym* effectively avoids a scene of Caucasian imperial violence while furthering its negative naturalization of the Tsalalians as a vitally inferior group. Almost presaging some future scene of self-inflicted extinction, the explosion marks the natives as the autotelic source of their own destruction and privation.89 *Pym*’s description of the

---

89 The self-destruction meted out on the Tsalalians might thus relate to Dimock’s identification of a Jacksonian technique of “blaming the victim;” although *Pym* does not explicitly elude to extinction, as
chaos ensuing in the catastrophe’s wake, rather than conveying sympathy, only contributes to this impression: “The whole surface of the bay was literally strewn with the struggling and drowning wretches, and on shore matters were even worse. They seemed utterly appalled by the suddenness and completeness of their discomfiture, and made no efforts at assisting one another” (1161).

Despite Poe’s overwhelmingly invidious representations of a black race on Tsalal, the normative implications of situating race within his schematization of life are complex. Perhaps because, as Terence Whalen suggests, Poe wrote for a mass antebellum audience, a narrative unambiguously supportive of slavery was simply out of the question (16, 30). However, by depicting the Tsalalians as the violent ontological antithesis of Caucasian evolutionary potential, *Pym* seems almost to desire a concomitant and total separation of the races. The encounter between white and black at Tsalal thus reads almost as a first encounter between the Earth’s races—a fantasized retelling of history in which blackness is identified as a lesser form of life, but one geographically and ontologically self-contained. Indeed, given the text’s generally negative appraisal of terrestrial life—both on Tsalal and at Nantucket—slavery’s association with agriculture and land, and its bringing of the races into proximity, would render it a highly problematic institution for the novel. Slavery appeals to the appeal of terrestrial life for the white race; it promises wealth, security, power, and the resulting preservation of self through the family name. *Pym’s* envisioning of a nearly total catastrophe ensuing from contact between black and white suggests perhaps an implicit racist condemnation of the practice, although the text cannot

does *Moby-Dick* in the case of the Pequots, this scene suggests the unfolding of the imperial logic Dimock attributes to Ishmael’s occlusion of colonial genocide: “Extinction” is what happens in an autotelic universe: it naturalizes the category of the “doomed,” not only by recuperating it as an evolutionary category but, most crucially, by locating the cause for extinction within the extinct organism itself” (116).
of course be simplistically labeled as abolitionist. The black cooks’ bloody control of the mutiny aboard the *Grampus*—a ship sailing from a conspicuously northern location—indicates that any inclusion, forced or otherwise, of the black race in white society will lead to catastrophe.⁹⁰

Peters’ status as a hybrid of Caucasian and Native American races grants him conditional acceptance, for unlike white and black, these groups appear provisionally capable of coexistence. He is quasi-accepted because he evinces an automatic servility in response to Pym, in contrast to the Tsalalians and the cook, whose natural lack of such recognition is demonstrated in their brutal violence against Caucasian authority. Once again the text avoids a simplistic normative identification of the racial other as a mere instrument, but it does so by formulating the subjectivity of Native Americans in terms of their capacity to recognize themselves as instrumental. *Pym* cleverly and insidiously evades representing an overtly exploitative relationship by assigning Peters the ontological status of a servant. But the text sits in an uneasy relationship to this “deformed” anthropoid, for what makes Peters highly useful is also what marks him as an accident of life (1043). His stony strength betrays a connection to the terrestrial world that presents the double threat against white life *Pym* attributes to blackness and to slavery. Were he to rebel, his awesome strength would destroy Pym, and Peters’ usefulness tempts the white ego with complacent security. In many respects the text’s extreme racism might be measured by the extreme anxiety it applies to the notion of any established relationship.

⁹⁰ If *Pym* does obliquely recommend against slavery its overtly racist depiction of non-white peoples might nevertheless have supported anti-abolitionist sensibilities in a time and place in which a total separation of the races had become the stuff of fantasy.
between white and non-white races. Although undoubtedly symptomatic of its age, this attitude also reflects the idiosyncratic vitalism structuring the novel’s vision of divine self-destruction—a vision that marks the text as generally antithetical to white bourgeois norms.

If Tsalal reiterates and encapsulates the text’s understanding of matter while indexing it to racial difference, and specifically blackness, *Pym’s* concluding pages similarly express its idealization of motion. After seizing a canoe and fleeing from Tsalal, Pym, Peters, and their Tsalalian prisoner, Nu-Nu, find themselves in the open Antarctic Ocean. For the third time, the text envisions an escape or flight from land into sea on a ship—a particularly meaningful recasting of its evolutionary ideal, given its depiction of Tsalal as the terrestrial trap par excellence. The tiny crew is soon struck by the swift current drawing them ineluctably in a single direction (1176). The surrounding water temperature also rises, and a massive wall of flickering vapor appears in the distance (1177). Soon the water color and texture change, “being no longer transparent, but of a milky consistency and hue” (1177). Within a few days this general whitening of the sea increases, along with the water’s temperature, and disturbances in the water seem to transfer directly to the vapor in the atmosphere. “A fine white powder, resembling ashes” begins to fall across the sea-scape, and soon the wall of vapor appears as a “limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some rampart in the heaven” (1179). Pym and Peters are pulled at a “hideous velocity” toward the “summit of the cataract,” soon discovering that Nu-Nu has died from fear while cowering in the bottom of the canoe (1179). *Pym’s* account ends abruptly as the increasing environmental tumult gives way to an image of divine whiteness: “And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract,
where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow” (1179).

The god dwelling in the midst of the ocean, and at the human world’s unsurpassable limit, is defined, in contrast to the Tsalalians, not only by “perfect whiteness,” but a whiteness identified as specifically epidermal. The forces of life leading Pym from land into the sea have ultimately led him here, to this image of an immense Caucasian self. Although these concluding moments indicate the journey’s passage into a space of the fantastic, the racial meaning of this image is underlined by Nu-Nu’s sudden death. The Tsalalian seems to die either of sheer fright, or because the vital forces and processes realized here are antithetical to his existence. These explanations are related, for the terror characterizing Tsalalian responses to whiteness, here and in other moments, are evidence of their essential difference from it, and their insipid incapacity to explore the unknown (1162). 91 They either oppose whiteness with violence, destroying their “betters,” or they cower before it and retreat into their caves. While this final image of life’s apogee is clearly an overwhelming confirmation of the text’s racialized vitalism, it also combines this insidious hierarchy with its unrelenting deconstruction of bodies and selves.

It may be tempting to interpret the white figure as a naturalized image of white selfhood, but the environmental conditions under which it appears work precisely against

91 Toni Morrison utilizes the image of the dead Nu-Nu to open an extensive series of reflections on whiteness and blackness in the American literary imagination: “These images of impenetrable whiteness need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency. Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing” (Playing in the Dark 33).
this reading. This white god, whose size marks it as transcending the limits of ordinary human power and biology, exists either as an essentially aqueous being, or similarly as an expression of the forces the text allies with the ocean. If Pym repeatedly associates land with the organism and its sustenance, this watery god marks life’s fullest realization of its non-organic development. It is thus less an image of an organic body and self, than an image of the motion that deconstructs selves and unites them in a common undifferentiated body. While a semi-human form appears in the white mists, the nearly total whiteness of the water, vapor, and falling powder threaten to collapse of visual field into a single formless quality. Similarly, the immense turbulence, burning water, and atmospheric disturbances indicate chaotic forces working against the formal regularity of bodily vitality. Here the ocean and the atmosphere nearly merge as water becomes vapor only to fall back to the surface and to continue a constant cycle of transformative motion. As in earlier moments of intense contact with life’s disintegrating power, motion is one of the defining characteristics of these passages; Pym and Peters experience a “hideous velocity” that increases as they are drawn into the broiling cataract. Although Pym obviously lives to tell the tale of all that led them to this moment, the text’s sudden silence suggests another slip from consciousness here—a traversal of the line between organic life and life’s liberated formlessness. The disintegration of bodies so graphically detailed in earlier episodes is missing here, but the same turbulent violence forces the characters into a state presaging death. Indeed, the abrupt cessation of the text expresses the ideal of passivity implicit to Pym’s peculiar heroism. Rather than guaranteeing the autonomous powers of the discrete individual, the white figure’s appearance immediately cancels its capacity to perceive, act, and think.
The racial and ontological function of whiteness in this scene relates to aspects of *Moby-Dick*’s complex focus on the quality. The white whale, like the white figure, echoes whiteness’ status as the visual sign of the superlative natural power arrogated to the Caucasian race, and in *Moby-Dick* its displacement onto an animal profoundly complexes this association. *Pym*’s white giant conveys a sense of “pure” vital power and one that works similarly against fantasies of individual bodily and psychic unity and power. In both texts the discourse of life is utilized to implicate the human in a process that nullifies the ideology of autarkic individualism, and a primary visual association for this process is whiteness. While *Moby-Dick* never fully disengages from its haunted obsession with whiteness and power, the text problematizes life’s reduction to the organic individual by imagining vitality as connecting myriad bodies in a complex web of ambiguating relations. *Pym* contrarily opposes the mythology of organic individualism by collapsing life’s monstrous multiplicities into a homogenous vital force. Its celebration of total amalgamation makes its celebration of homogenous whiteness less insipidly ideological than one might expect, but it builds an indemnifying backdoor into an otherwise radical literary cosmology. Although the white individual’s highest possibility is a form of mediated self-destruction in *Pym*, he or she can accept their fate because the image of divine non-individuated life is also whiteness. This fact functions to guarantee the Caucasian use of “material” others, with which it is never vitally confused, as it is in *Moby-Dick*. Thus the final image of the novel is one heavily significant in its racial ramifications; the dead Nu-Nu mimics the canoe floor upon which his body lies, and upon which Pym rides towards his destiny. The ever-useful Peters sits beside him in the boat, but only in order to facilitate Pym’s passage to the divine white cataract. Poe
imaginatively collapses the individual, and with it any pretense of human superiority in the universe, but this never equates to fully equalizing life’s internal differentiations and hierarchies in a world awaiting annihilation.\footnote{Pym’s peculiar final “Note,” reiterates the importance of maintaining these distinctions. Written by an “anonymous editor” of the text (Narrative Kennedy 77)—one that explicitly distances himself from Poe (1181)—the “Note” offers a philological interpretation of the strangely shaped canyons through which Peters and Pym wander in their time on Tsalal (1162-68). Pym and Peters discover that the shapes of these canyons resemble letters, which the editor confirms by describing them as a mixture of “Ethiopian,” “Arabic,” and “Egyptian” “verbal roots” or words. They are interpreted to mean “darkness,” “whiteness,” and “the region of the south” (1181). The canyons’ also form a human figure that appears to be pointing in a southerly direction. The text’s purest example of natural writing—of a writing that issues from nature itself—suggests the absolute division of white and black. It furthermore implies the division of matter from motion, in as much as the canyon-letters both graphically and semantically point away from themselves toward the southern region where the ocean’s white god resides. Hence the text’s basic vital distinctions are maintained and essentialized while gesturing to the supremacy of one term.}

Eureka’s final line nevertheless suggests that the bifurcated world, while not a mere illusion, is constituted by a common force: “In the meantime bear in mind that all is Life—Life within Life—the less within the greater, and all within the Spirit Divine” (1359). Poe maintains his sense of “lesser” and “greater” expressions of life, but the concept’s use suggests, as it does in Pym, the inclusion of all difference “within” itself. It is this insistence on life’s ubiquity, not merely as a concept, but as an unsparing process, that prevents Pym from becoming a proto-fascist vitalist fantasy. Indeed, the text’s imaginative amalgamation of the individual with a white force, superior to its dark antithesis, would seem to mark it as belonging to the apocalyptic racial fantasies of early twentieth-century biopolitics. Although Pym marks the non-white races as inferior expressions of life, it is ironically Poe’s totalizing vitalism that prevents them from being utterly externalized from the category. Whiteness and blackness, matter and motion, participate in a common teleology that operates beyond the powers or intentions of individuals or groups. Poe’s dramatic nullification of the individual and the human, while
cast in terms of a cosmology meant to reassure us, makes life the uncontrollable excess that totalizing social movements seek to contain and control. *Pym* nevertheless fails simply to provide an example of the quietism Taylor associates with Poe’s materialist apocalypticism. Although expressing exploitative racial fantasies and representations, *Pym*’s primary ideal of human action is one focused on states of intense experience occurring conspicuously outside social spaces. It thus maintains a racist fantasy with dangerous implications, but its rebellion against life’s resolution into absolute forms or norms prevents it from transferring these representations into immediately recognizable social directives. At once expressive of a need to stabilize insidious antebellum social categories and to reconceptualize radically the meaning of selfhood and bodily life in the period, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* remains ill at ease with its own unique vitalist imaginary. Unwilling to embrace fully the absolute alterity of death, but also resistant to the ontologies of everyday American life, the novel imagines the undead excesses it both desires and fears.
CONCLUSION

When, at the beginning of Moby-Dick, Ishmael stated that the human attraction to water arises from its capacity to reflect back to us an “image of the ungraspable phantom of life,” he indicated vitalism’s central place in antebellum American understandings of self and experience (5). He also revealed the extent to which the idea of life inevitably disrupts the promise of totalizing understanding it seems teasingly to proffer. Life proves here, and throughout Moby-Dick, not to be the solution to the question of how transcendent power relates to immanence, but a term marking a problem that restlessly provoked Western thought throughout the nineteenth century.

If the European Enlightenment produced a cosmology sharply dividing divine freedom from the mechanism of material nature, and concomitantly the soul from the body, the concept of life seemed to provide a possible point of connection that might integrate the self with sensuousness. The discussion of Kant, Emerson, and to some extent Coleridge, demonstrated how this integration demanded an escape clause—a bit of insurance leveraged ironically against the belief in immanence that life was designed to foster; life was the solution as long as it both pictured the unity of self and nature while supporting a sense of the self’s autonomy (and particularly the Caucasian male self) as the crowning achievement of nature. The results of this view were both extreme violence against those deemed inferiorly vital—or inferiorly autonomous—but also a conceptual aporia within vitalism itself. As empirical research continued to complex accounts of
nature in the nineteenth century, often demonstrating the proximity of the human to other material systems, and thereby challenging senses of human exceptionalism and liberal autonomy, vitalism proved to be an intellectual and practical enterprise at odds with its immanentist intentions. As can be seen in Kant’s Third Critique, in as much as vitalism begins with a demarcation of life from that which it occupies, it comes no closer to crossing the divide separating spiritual freedom from matter, or soul from body, than the explicitly dualist cosmology of Newton, or the dualist ontology of Descartes. Ishmael’s description of life as a “phantom” indicates the struggle to complex and distribute the notion of life, and in doing so to oppose bio-political violence, but also to gesture to an understanding of nature in which creative power and freedom are synonymous with nature in all of its extra and intra-human strangeness. Although I have divided European from American responses to this problem, placing them adjacent to but separate from one another, this study exposes how a group of thinkers writing on opposite sides of the Atlantic were engaged in a common project: they sought to use life as a concept marking the absolutely equal participation of the human in a creatively non-human nature. In doing so they revealed the extent to which the concept of life, understood in its vitalist sense, had come to produce something radically new.

I approached these traditions separately in order to demonstrate how antebellum culture experienced an intense practical crisis stemming in part from European vitalist concepts it had implemented with racially and ecologically dire consequences. There is something distinctly American about the bald contradictions that confronted the country’s liberal aspirations in the nineteenth century, but the ontological divisions informing these contradictions and the varied responses of Melville and Poe to them served also as a
continuation of a European crisis in concepts of life and embodiment. Indeed, while the problem of race and racial exploitation were far more central to these literary attempts to intuit a violent conceptual division of vital force and matter than they were in Schelling and Humboldt’s responses to a similar division, all experimented with views of self and nature in which this dichotomy and its anthropocentrism had collapsed. While these responses diverge in fascinating and consequential ways, they connect strikingly in their various attempts to oppose the Kantian version of vitalism and its numerous formulations.

Kant found in living organisms the only material “analogy,” as he termed it, for the unity and freedom of the rational human self (CJ 255). The seamless combination of part and whole exhibited in the organic body could not, according to Kant, result from the motions of mere matter anymore than could human freedom. Beyond the dramatic division posited between life and matter here, Kant’s vitalist turn proved important because it suggested a link—one worked out more literally in Emerson’s “American Scholar”—between organic bodies and discrete, autonomous human selves. Coleridge made this connection more explicit with his “principle of individuation,” which described nature as developing increasingly refined wholes, the culmination of which is the individual man who develops his sacred sense of independence (49). Although Coleridge and Emerson developed complex and multifaceted philosophies of nature, their attempts to make the individual and its putative autonomy the apogee of vital development reveal a pattern of thought directly related to Kant’s restriction of life to the individual organic body. Schelling’s critique of this tradition thus took the form of distributing creative power to all of nature, and by reimagining the body as a vortex of forces lacking an
absolute physical boundary or center (FO 18). Perhaps intuiting that the organic body had
become the image of life that dangerously asserted the individual human self’s priority in
the cosmos, Melville made Moby-Dick a veritable demonstration of its participation in a
vitally material world. The novel stages the violence implicit to the ascription of life only
to the human self in a fashion that might have served as a literary expression of
Schelling’s condemnation of human egoism (EHF 55). Ahab’s attempts to imagine
himself as a complete individual by envisioning his body as a whole organism expose the
vitalist perspective that prompts his violent quest to assert mastery by killing the whale
that reveals life’s ubiquity. The novel’s exploration of strange vital assemblages—ships
of bone and wood, and human bodies patched with whale bone—picture Schelling’s
vortex bodies and their lack of any proper vital center.

Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket afflicts its characters’
organic bodies with relentless disintegration from within and without. As explored in
Chapter Three, Poe launched his assault on liberal vitalism by imagining nature as a force
set on dissolving itself—on collapsing the individual into an ocean of homogenous life.
Although maintaining an insidious racial dichotomy in his depiction of this process, his
focus on scenes of collapsing organic bodies unites his critique of anthropocentrism
closely with that of Schelling. Poe may have read some of Schelling’s works after
composing Pym, but he surely came into contact with the latter’s ideas through
Coleridge, for the influence seems unmistakable (Limon 201). Coleridge had drawn from
nature philosophy a sense of life as divided between opposite impulses—the impulse
toward “individuation” and “combination”—but he had emphasized the former in order
to support an anthropocentric individualism of a Kantian variety. In sharp contrast,
Schelling depicted nature as focused more on disintegrating its individualized bodies and combining them. He conjectured, in a formulation remarkably resonant with Pym’s ontological program, that life “endeavors to liquefy everything” solid within itself (FO 27). Indeed, Schelling presented an ontology redolent with the language of vortices and fluid dynamics, and one tending toward dissolution. Like Poe, he used this macabre vision to subvert modern thought’s apotheosis of the human subject, but both also maintained a formalist approach to nature’s impersonal motions. Schelling schematized nature in terms of ubiquitous polarities, and Poe’s Eureka envisioned a universe in the process of rhythmic expansion and collapse. Neither appears entirely to have allowed empirical research to guide their thinking on nature’s diverse creativity; instead they imposed a series of binaries indicative of a lingering anthropocentric tendency.

Melville, Poe, and Schelling shared a common critique of Kantian organicism and the social systems it influenced, and they did so by envisioning the individual body as linked with or dissolving into a common life of nature. They made vitality and nature synonymous, and in doing so they imagined humans as merged with diverse material systems. In this respect their work reflects Alexander von Humboldt’s reformulation of nature as a series of dynamic systems, although these three never broke from vitalism to the extent that Humboldt did. Humboldt understood nature as intrinsically self-creative and thus alive, but he prioritized empirical research as a guide for understanding its diverse productivity. He thus turned away from the formalism and purity of Schelling and Poe, and while he recognized the danger of anthropocentric vitalism, he combated this tendency by investigating and communicating the diversity and history of nature rather than staging human tragedies in the style of Melville. While I do not mean to celebrate
Humboldt over the other authors discussed here, his complete rejection of vitalism in *Views of Nature* differentiates his project, and marks it as the realization of something Melville, Poe, and Schelling strove to express in their somewhat vitalistic challenges to vitalism. Humboldt recognized that the concept of “vital force,” even when invoked as a force uniting humans to nature, always threatened to produce hierarchized views of nature in which life is separated from some cadaverous remainder (380-385). His practice of careful observation and empirical measurement suggested that celebrating nature’s living creativity should take the form of contacting it directly in its diversity without any preconceived ontological notions.

Henry David Thoreau had direct access to Humboldt’s writings around 1843 but he had imbibed Humboldtian ideas that became popular in the United States much earlier (Walls, *SNW* 95, 103). Putting aside the important history of Humboldt’s significant influence on Thoreau in the years leading up to *Walden*’s publication, one can see in Thoreau’s methods a strikingly similar and intentional turn away from speculative vitalism. Like Melville, Poe, and Schelling, Thoreau described nature as ubiquitously alive, but he found this life not *in*, but *as* the singular systems it endlessly produces. Near the conclusion of *Walden* he described the forms produced in sand upon a thawing bank in spring as a “prototype” for the forms of all organic life, and as the evidence of a living planet: “The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit—not a fossil earth, but a living earth…” (207). Inspired as this passage was by a direct observation of a delimited and specific example of an earth system, one might conclude that Thoreau’s statement signals
a profound shift in American understandings of “life.” The search for vitality does not lead to an archetype or a ubiquitous transcendental form; it leads to the earth’s individual systems, which have no source other than themselves. Life is this autopoetic production of system, and importantly, different systems, each of which is differently living. To seek life is thus to witness and engage with these systems openly, and to preserve and express their specific differences. One does not find life somewhere within or behind the systems lying at one’s doorstep, as though it were a “phantom” always just escaping our detection, and yet neither can we sever one system from another or encapsulate its history in one view.

Telling the full story of American vitalism in the nineteenth century will require analyzing closely Thoreau and Humboldt’s unique interventions, for they recognized in vitalism a certain bad faith—an egotistical toying with immanence—that required vitalism’s deconstruction and not a more nuanced version of the vitalist project. Telling this story, as I hope soon to do, will also help us to understand American and European cultures of the nineteenth century as bound to one another by a common transatlantic response to vitalism and its catastrophic outcomes. *Walden* was both Thoreau’s experiment with an alternative to vitalist philosophies of nature, but it was equally his diagnosis of a crisis in American liberal culture—a crisis in the system of American life. Around the same time his contemporary and friend, Margaret Fuller, provided a radical new assessment of the human individual, understood as a mixture of male and female characteristics, and thus as irreducible to a single gender. Another important chapter of American vitalism’s story will be told by reading Fuller’s thought as the deconstruction of an ancient vitalist division of nature between a formative-male force and a feminine-
material receptacle. Fuller supplanted this binary with a vision of individuals as singular systems, no part of which is more or less creative than another. This reformulation of the self lead her to envision a new frontier for American social life—one in which social bonds between individual and community might become generative nodes of liberating influence and experimentation.


