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## **In the Belly of the Whale: Archive and Access in Melville's Moby-Dick**

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In the Belly of the Whale: Archive and Access in Melville's *Moby-Dick*

by

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## Abstract

This thesis examines Melville's depiction of archival anxiety as it appears in *Moby-Dick*. This narrative is fixated on the archive, brimming with motifs that equate whaling with the creation of an archive—and which associates the hunt for the whale with an obsession resembling Derrida's vision of archive fever. As Melville depicts it, the archive is rooted in a fundamental anxiety concerning inaccessible and unknowable information. Ishmael constantly presents whales as physical repositories of information, attempting to archive the social and historical contexts of every scrap of flesh on them and every substance they produce. Yet his archival mission is perpetually troubled by the issue of inaccessibility, because to retrieve information on the whale is also to destroy it; the whale must be slaughtered to produce the materials of study. Ishmael's ideal archive, requiring the whale to be alive, derives from the biblical story of Jonah and its portrayal of the whale as an architectural structure—a place to be physically entered and exited, and observed from within. Ahab, conversely, becomes archival violence incarnate. Motivated by a vision of the whale as an archive of all the world's evils, he pursues the white whale's destruction. Ishmael's quest to capture the whale in writing and Ahab's obsession with vengeance against Moby Dick reveal an alternate construction of archive fever, one concerned less with the recording of knowledge than with its access, and the difficulties of retrieving information encoded within the archive.

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## Introduction

*Moby-Dick* is a novel of substance. In its American first edition printing, it contains 635 pages and measures 18.4 centimeters in length, 12.2 in width, and 4.7 in depth. It smells like dust, and it feels soft yet flaky, like old leather. If I were to drop it from a standing height to the floor, I imagine that it would produce a satisfying *thunk!* and perhaps a not-so-satisfying *crack*. What I'm getting at here is that this is a book with presence, a weighty shell for an equally weighty tale. Its heft is commensurate with that of the great creature pursued in its pages. Melville presents a narrative of mad obsession and hopeless desire: the witty, irreverent sailor Ishmael and the fiery, dark, insane Captain Ahab stand united in their pursuit of the legendary leviathan, Moby Dick. Ishmael presents the moment of its breaching in monumental, borderline *geographical* terms:

[T]he Sperm Whale thus booms his entire bulk into the pure element of air, and piling up a mountain of dazzling foam, shows his place to the distance of seven miles and more. [. . .] So suddenly seen in the blue plain of the sea, and relieved against the still bluer margin of the sky, the spray that he raised, for the moment, intolerably glittered and glared like a glacier, and stood there gradually fading and fading away from its first sparkling intensity, to the dim mistiness of an advancing shower in a vale.

(415)

In such a substantial volume, and concerning so immense a creature as that described above, how curious it is that its opening pages dedicate themselves not to any of the whalemens whose story unfolds within the text, nor to the pale monstrosity whose name haunts the very title of this work; rather, upon opening this intimidating slab of a book, the reader finds himself confronted by the notes of a Late Consumptive Usher, “threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain” (7), and those of a Sub-Sub-Librarian, a “mere painstaking burrower and grub-worm of a poor devil of a Sub-Sub [. . .] belong[ing] to that hopeless, sallow tribe which no wine of this world will ever warm” (8). And yet, in spite of their own diminished magnitudes, this Sub-Sub and this Usher together produce a veritable Alexandria of quotes and references, fifteen pages containing thirteen languages of names for the whale, three etymological derivations of its name, and eighty individual extracts documenting the historical record as it concerns the figure of the whale. *Moby-Dick* thus opens not with the beginnings of any individual for whom its later pages may show any specific consideration, but rather with the whale itself, and the archival aggregate emerging thereof. Such a decisive emphasis on the archive calls for explanation. What is it about the archive that drives Melville to spurn his characters and setting, spurn the *Pequod*, Captain Ahab, and Ishmael together, in deference to this wisp of a Sub-Sub-Librarian, this withered Usher, and their collective encyclopedic cetology?

The answer, I submit, lies in the architecture of the archive itself: beginning in these initial portions of the book and extending throughout, Melville develops a fixation upon the archive that, like Derrida’s own conception of archive fever (*mal d’archive*), identifies the act of archiving as simultaneously a source of and a reaction to the anxieties

of knowledge and memory. In the Derridean model, the archive engenders a fascination with the reclaiming of the origin, rooted in the constant threat of amnesia, the loss of what has already come before. However, Melville takes a different tack; he grapples not with anxieties concerning the inevitable loss of information involved in the act of archiving, but with the fundamental physical and spatial limitations of humanity's archival pursuits. At the heart of *Moby-Dick* is a fundamental anxiety concerning not lost information, but rather information that cannot be reached in the first place: an archive of the inaccessible.

## Chapter 1: Ishmael and the Archive

The motif of the archive, of information evaluated, accumulated, and disseminated, winds throughout *Moby-Dick* in the form of Ishmael, whose narration composes the sum of the text, and is itself composed of a wide range of scholarly, firsthand, and secondhand accounts. In many respects, Ishmael is the archetypical scholar: a schoolmaster-turned-sailor, his account of the *Pequod's* ill-fated pursuit blends conventional (more or less) narrative forms with an extensive catalog of academic fields and interests, cetology and philosophy chief among them. Despite its fictional core, *Moby-Dick* is itself an archive, a compendium of the scientific and philosophical knowledge of its day, and was indeed recognized as such, with sources such as the New Haven *Daily Palladium* acknowledging this information as integral to the novel's narrative form: "The work possesses all the interest of the most exciting fiction, while, at the same time, it conveys much valuable information in regard to things pertaining to natural history, commerce, life on ship board, &c." (715). Given the intimate relationship between *Moby-Dick's* narrative and the gathered information from which it is constructed, there is naturally a great deal of subject matter regarding the sources, both physical and otherwise, of this information—which is to say, the archive. Melville's most consistent vector for expressing this vision of the archive is Ishmael, whose observations, both inside and outside the central narrative of the text, naturally encode in themselves a degree of reflexive commentary on their origins. Ishmael's central position as the text's narrative voice foregrounds his definitions of the capacity and function of the archive, as

well as the act of archiving, as they exist in *Moby-Dick*—especially in encoding the physical form of the whale as an archive in itself. His observations define Melville's portrayal of the archive in this text.

Replete with authorial anxieties, Melville's archive invites analysis along lines proposed by Derrida in his study "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." In the first of the three exergues within this text, Derrida identifies a particular force lurking behind the concept of the archive: namely, the Freudian death drive.

[T]he archive, if this word or this figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory. (14)

For Derrida, archive fever is all about this effacement of origins, or more specifically about the *denial* of this forgetting: through the archive, the death drive "can be disguised, made up, painted, printed, [and] represented as the idol of its truth" (14). However, as he indicates, this archival act is just that—only a disguise. Carolyn Steedman summarizes these views succinctly in her own reading of Derrida: "to want to make an archive in the first place is to want to *repeat*, and one of Freud's clearest lessons was that the compulsion to repeat is the drive towards death" (6). Hence the "*mal*" of Derrida's *mal d'archive*: "trouble, misfortune, pain, hurt, sickness, wrong, sin, badness, evil . . ." (Steedman 9). For Derrida, then, the archive takes the form not of a place, but of a function, "the *concept* of the archive" (57, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the Derridean archive sets itself specifically against the materiality of the local and the real; indeed,

Derrida deconstructs the archival relationship with the origin. The archive is in fact “radically incompatible, *heterogeneous*, that is to say, *different with regard to the origin*, in *divorce with regard to the arkhē*” (Derrida 58): it can never attain the reality, the identity, of that point of origination.

Although similar in many respects, Melville’s depiction of the archive is quite different. Rather than a mere conceptual approximation of the originary ideal, Melville’s writing reveals an archive possessing a physical reality of its own, and an accompanying archive fever rooted not only in the unarchivable nature of the origin, but more specifically the inaccessibility of the origin. For Melville, the unarchivability of the origin is not directly determined by the fallibility of human memory, but is rather located within the spatial, local, and geographical difficulties endemic to human existence—the barriers of physical access. Even in the cases in which he does focus on the conceptual rather than physical limitations of the archival project, Melville couches these obstacles in the language of the geographical. Such locally-defined informational origins as occur in Melville’s writing are archives of the inaccessible: repositories of hypothetical knowledge to which any attempt at access is ultimately futile. Through the anxiety produced by these inaccessible archives, acting in the same manner as the anxiety produced by the unarchivability of Derrida’s feverish origins, both Ishmael and Melville himself together find themselves driven towards the archival act, the encoding of the titular white whale within this novel.

Emblematic of this archival turn in Ishmael’s narrative is the phenomenon of accessibility as it relates to his depiction of whales: they are repositories, containers of both physical and phenomenal realities. Although these whale-archives are problematized

by uncertainties concerning true accessibility, Ishmael certainly presents them as objects of ostensible access and retrieval: these archival functions recur in the text, as the whale is constantly hunted, dissected, and transformed into substance through processes of retrieval. Moreover, this function of physical archivization quite frequently encodes the historical and social contexts of these subjects. Thus it is that when Ishmael tells us in “Cetology” that the sperm whale is “the only creature from which that valuable substance, spermaceti, is obtained” (118), he nigh-immediately elects to inform us also how “Some centuries ago [. . .] it was the idea [. . .] that this same spermaceti was that quickening humor of the Greenland Whale which the first syllable of the word literally expresses” (118), and that “in those times [. . .] spermaceti was exceedingly scarce, not being used for light, but only as an ointment and medicament. It was only to be had from the druggists as you nowadays buy an ounce of rhubarb” (118). When Ishmael’s pen cuts into this repository of spermaceti, what comes dripping out but the etymological, biological, social, cultural, and medicinal contexts surrounding this spermacetic fountain? This is Ishmael’s archive of the whale: in it lies all the history of the world.

Ishmael does not limit himself to the historical archive alone. In the chapter “The Sperm Whale’s Head—Contrasted View,” Ishmael begins one of his descriptions by recounting how the sperm whale’s lower jaw is brought onboard ship for the collection of its teeth but concludes it by observing that out of this whalebone “the fishermen fashion all sorts of curious articles, including canes, umbrella-stocks, and handles to riding-whips” (264). In such a context, the whale becomes an archive of modern production in addition to that historically productive dimension previously established. In the chapter “Ambergris,” by the same token, Ishmael’s account of that eponymous substance

becomes a record of its sociocultural dissemination: “[A]mbergris [. . .] is largely used in perfumery, in pastiles, precious candles, hair-powders, and pomatum. The Turks use it in cooking, and also carry it to Mecca, for the same purpose that frankincense is carried to St. Peter's in Rome” (317). Just as the whales, in their migrations, set out to circumnavigate the world, so too do their component parts, humors, and various viscera—and Ishmael’s pen follows.

If these accounts were all Ishmael's whale-archive were to provide, it would still be reasonable to doubt the breadth attributed to the cetological archives heretofore depicted. If the whale’s archive consists only of bone, oil, spermaceti, and so forth, then what is archived is merely the trace of the whale, dissected and disseminated throughout the world. And yet this is not the whale that Ishmael presents to us; although the whale’s substantive production and subsequent commodification is certainly a vital component of this archival turn, Ishmael takes care to elaborate upon the whale as an archive of substances, objects, and items of entirely foreign origin as well. Thus, in the same passage examining ambergris as an archival object, Ishmael notes that it, too, functions as an archive: “there were found in this ambergris, certain hard, round, bony plates, which at first Stubb thought might be sailors' trowsers buttons; but it afterwards turned out that they were nothing more than pieces of small squid bones embalmed in that manner” (318). Juxtaposed with objects of human design in order to highlight their foreignness to the whole mass of human history and time, these squid bones defy human experience, production, and consumption—and yet here they are, archived deep within the belly of the whale, ready to join the aggregate of human knowledge. Nor is this inhuman context the only set of histories that the whale has to offer; as seen in the chapter “The *Pequod*

Meets the *Virgin*,” the whale provides access to information objects of human origin, ones which had as yet been utterly unknown:

It so chanced that almost upon first cutting into him with the spade, the entire length of a corroded harpoon was found imbedded in his flesh, on the lower part of the bunch before described. [. . .] But still more curious was the fact of a lance-head of stone being found in him, not far from the buried iron, the flesh perfectly firm about it. Who had darted that stone lance? And when? It might have been darted by some Nor' West Indian long before America was discovered.

What other marvels might have been rummaged out of this monstrous cabinet there is no telling. (283)

Whether a record of the inhuman depths of the ocean or of the uncharted depths of our own human history, the whale possesses an unbridled potentiality, an archival holism that promises to contain within itself the ineffable mysteries of human existence. Through access to the whale, this whole world's archive is opened, consumed, and made manifest within the sum of all human knowledge.

## Chapter 2: The Inaccessible

Melville's whales are archives without peer. Through Ishmael's eyes, they take on a universal significance, bearing within themselves the aggregated history of the world. Materially, they preserve the artifacts and commodities of the human race, the secrets of the deep, and the mysteries of their own species: a full breadth of information to be plundered at the hands of harpooners and scholars. Beyond this, the *idea* of the whale encodes myriad other concepts and subjects, elaborated on at length by Ishmael during his time on the *Pequod*. Between the physical and the immaterial, the figure of the whale becomes Melville's holistic eidolon, a skeleton key to lead the reader through countless doorways into a labyrinth of information, with Ishmael as a guide. But in spite of these glimpses of archival access, the whale remains an enigma to Ishmael, and (as he notes) to others:

“No branch of Zoology is so much involved as that which is entitled Cetology,” says Captain Scoresby, A. D. 1820.

“[. . .] Utter confusion exists among the historians of this animal” (sperm whale), says Surgeon Beale, A. D. 1839.

“Unfitness to pursue our research in the unfathomable waters.”

“Impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacean.” “A field

strewn with thorns.” “All these incomplete indications but serve to torture us naturalists.” (115)

So, why this disconnect? What is it about the whale, so ripe with information to be accessed, that resists the archival harpoon, and thus feeds Ishmael’s and Melville’s fascination?

For all its promise, the whale’s archival potential is wholly problematized by the hovering shadow of inaccessibility. Despite the archival function of the whale, and despite the instances of access already covered, I nonetheless contend that true access and retrieval from the whale is a wholly different image for Ishmael than that which we’ve already seen: despite the clear examples we’ve seen of the retrieval of both substance and history from the whale, such instances are in actuality failures of access, because they do not preserve the archive itself. When accessing a textual archive, do we withdraw one book and set fire to the rest? Or when we download a document, do we take the one we came for and delete all others? An archive fails in its function if it does not fulfill both the requirements of preservation and retrieval. As *Moby-Dick* reveals, however, the hunted whale is incapable of fulfilling both of the above: any attempt at retrieval from the whale must culminate in its slaughter. The preservative function of the whale falls short of the requisite retrieval-functionality of the archive. Not only are all substances contained within subjected to processes of decay "worse than an Assyrian city in the plague, when the living are incompetent to bury the departed" (313), but the whale itself, in all its vivid life, must also be lost in the struggle, reduced to the state of carrion. As Ishmael depicts it, this process is an inevitability: the whale “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” (282). Only through wholesale slaughter does some portion of the archive of the whale surrender itself into human hands.

Thus, the retrieval of the whale’s archive thwarts it in its preservative function; the reverse proves true as well, in that the continued preservation of the whale precludes retrieval of its archival substance or information. In any circumstance short of mortal battle, the figure of the whale wholeheartedly resists any attempt at access; inherent to its identity as the whale is the concept of distance, a state of removal from human existence and knowledge. Any access to the whale is problematized by the physical and conceptual barrier of the sea, dividing the human race from the whale’s abyssal depths. Ishmael shows himself to be well aware that previous to any human agency, it is the whale’s proximity to the surface that determines the possibility of access:

How obvious is it, too, that this necessity for the whale's rising exposes him to all the fatal hazards of the chase. For not by hook or by net could this vast leviathan be caught, when sailing a thousand fathoms beneath the sunlight. Not so much thy skill, then, O hunter, as the great necessities that strike the victory to thee! (291)

Nor is this the only barrier that the waters form to oppose any attempt at accessing the great leviathan; the sea also serves as a barrier to human knowledge, and therefore to any organized attempt at access to the figure of the whale: as Ishmael recounts in the chapter “Moby Dick,” “the secrets of the currents in the seas have never yet been divulged, even to the most erudite research; so the hidden ways of the Sperm Whale when beneath the

surface remain, in great part, unaccountable to his pursuers” (154). The innate biology of the whale conspires against human access to its archive, frustrating the need for knowledge that Ishmael tirelessly documents. The tension between Ishmael’s compulsion to anatomize the whale (both literally and figuratively) and the creature’s inherent resistance to access and retrieval thus produces an anxiety of inaccessibility, the immediate result of the “hopeless, endless task” (98) that is the cetological archive.

The precise character of this anxiety emerges in Ishmael’s “Cetology” chapter, in which he speaks plainly concerning his own quest to catalog the whale and all it contains or subsumes:

It is a ponderous task; no ordinary letter-sorter in the Post-Office is equal to it. To grope down into the bottom of the sea after them; to have one's hands among the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world; this is a fearful thing. What am I that I should essay to hook the nose of this leviathan! The awful tauntings in Job might well appal me. “Will he (the leviathan) make a covenant with thee? Behold the hope of him is vain!” But I have swam through libraries and sailed through oceans; I have had to do with whales with these visible hands; I am in earnest; and I will try. (116)

The very resistance of the whale-archive to retrieval is precisely what impels Ishmael to pursue it; through his self-admittedly useless attempts to capture the whale on the page, Ishmael's determination to press on mirrors the archival researcher’s need, as described by Derrida, to “justify the apparently useless expenditure of paper, ink, and typographic

printing, in other words, the laborious investment in the archive, by putting forward the novelty of his discovery, the very one which provokes such resistance” (Derrida 15). Although the origin of this resistance differs, the anxiety remains, incarnate in a new and terrible form. The literal, physical inaccessibility of the archive thus proves more than sufficient to provoke the same unsettled response as Derrida’s feverish fear of “the thing refuting the economic principle of the archive, aiming to ruin the archive as accumulation and capitalization of memory on some substrate and in an exterior place” (15). For Derrida, the source of this refutation is amnesia, the process of forgetting that effaces the archive, undoing all the expenditure of work and effort that established it in the first place. Ishmael goes one step further: his anxiety stems from the inaccessibility of an archive within an element uncongenial to humanity’s intellectual curiosity. Bereft of the archival function, such inaccessible repositories are barren hollows from which no sub-sub may return.

The whale’s inaccessible potential lies at the root of Ishmael’s archival motive, and nowhere in the novel is this more prominent than in his engagement with the figure of Moby Dick, the prototypical leviathan that gives the book its name. A monster and a treasure, the object of the *Pequod*’s grand hunt, Moby Dick is a being of obsession, of horror, of impossible pursuit: Captain Ahab fixes his monomaniacal gaze upon him, the crew of the *Pequod* forfeit their lives to pursue him, and Ishmael dedicates hundreds of thousands of words in an attempt to capture him—and yet the white whale eludes them all. Every aspect of Moby Dick seems to render vain any chance at possibly killing him. Physically, he is immortal. His form, “bedraggled with trailing ropes, harpoons, and lances” (422), stands as a testament to his seemingly supernatural longevity:

Though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks, he would still swim away unharmed; or if indeed he should ever be made to spout thick blood, such a sight would be but a ghastly deception; for again in unensanguined billows hundreds of leagues away, his unsullied jet would once more be seen. (155)

But beyond the impossibility of killing the white whale is the simple impossibility of reaching him. Not merely ghostlike in shade, Moby Dick seems capable of a supernatural disappearing act. Ishmael recounts sailors' testimonies that "that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time" (154). Although Ishmael rejects the sailors' supernatural interpretations of these phenomena, the accounts from which they derive nonetheless seem to persist as fact. In the experience of all who've encountered him, Moby Dick has indeed proven himself utterly unassailable. But according to the system of motifs by which Ishmael presents the whale-as-archive, the hunt for the whale is at its core a hunt for knowledge. Moby Dick, in his immortality, is thus a bearer of knowledge which can never be retrieved. As an archive, the white whale is the essence of inaccessibility, a figure whose existence torments his pursuers with the prospect of impossible knowledge.

"The white whale"—Moby Dick's most characteristic trait establishes his symbolic role as an icon of the inaccessible, as Ishmael explains in his opening to the chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale." With this passage, Ishmael unites the horror of the whiteness of the whale with the compulsion to write, to explain—that is, to produce an archive:

“What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid. Aside from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick, which could not but occasionally awaken in any man's soul some alarm, there was another thought, or rather vague, nameless horror concerning him, which at times by its intensity completely overpowered all the rest; and yet so mystical and well nigh ineffable was it, that I almost despair of putting it in a comprehensible form. It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled' me. But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught.” (159)

An archive is precisely the venture that Ishmael proceeds to embark upon: a catalog of the horrors of the color white, from the terrors brought on by an ocean of endless fog, to the inhospitable whiteness of the snowy mountaintops, and finally to the “dumb blankness” (165) of colorless white light. Ishmael’s “whiteness” is an all-consuming void, a black hole in negative—a space, natural, expansive, and distant, that’s been stripped of any distinguishing features by a homogenous shroud. Such a space is an archival horror, flooded with information that cannot be retrieved, stored, or distinguished at all from its surroundings. The whiteness of the whale is the blankness of the unknowable, and in choosing to project this feature onto the archetypal whale, Melville creates in the figure of Moby Dick an icon of unarchivability. Moby Dick is the physical incarnation of the whale-archive’s resistance to access.

Which leads us to a final point: Moby Dick resists the archive, yet *Moby-Dick* is an archive. Both as a cetological enterprise and as an account of the *Pequod*’s doomed

voyage, Melville's novel pursues the impossible whale, announcing its intent to capture the whale within its pages by taking the name "Moby Dick" as its own. *Moby-Dick* is Moby Dick—or, as the novel's prototype (and later subtitle) names itself, "the whale" (Parker 438). The three are synonymous. Melville thus grants his title the same breadth of symbolic meaning that he layers over the many allusive figures contained within that selfsame text: with this name, Melville announces an aim to archive the very entity he represents as a pinnacle of inaccessibility, an apotheosis of incomprehensibility. By so characterizing this novel, he creates an archive that in its title, in its narrative, in its thematic construction—in its very nature—foregrounds its own opposition to the archival ideal. In this way, *Moby-Dick* is not merely a work driven by archival anxiety, but one which acknowledges and defines these origins as belonging to a contextual environment defined by discourses of informational access and inaccessibility.

### Chapter 3: Architecture and Access

As an icon of informational storage and access, the figure of the whale haunts Melville's novel in its entirety. Shrouded in motifs of unreachable knowledge, its portrayal fills the novel with an archival anxiety that comes most sharply into focus in the titular white whale and its unfathomable existence. This anxiety is the motive force that, as with Derrida's conception of archive fever, drives the compulsion to turn to the archive. I've established that Melville uses Ishmael's narration to describe the compulsion to access the whale-archive, and that in his depiction of the whale as an archive resistant to access, he explores the root causes of this compulsion. This unreachability of knowledge is the key: so long as the whale is home to a wealth of information that cannot be accessed, it produces the same archival anxiety that the search for the whale is meant to quench. And yet Ishmael's journey is not taken in vain. His two-years' voyage behind him, with his captain, shipmates, and ship all swallowed up into the sea, Ishmael alone emerges in an epilogue prefaced with a direct quote of the messengers of the biblical story of Job: "And I only am escaped to tell thee" (427). Somehow, despite the apparent futility of any attempt to archive the leviathan, Melville allows Ishmael to escape with the full text of *Moby-Dick*, an impossible archive of another impossible archive. There's a disparity here, one which the depiction of the whale-archive as we've explored it so far cannot account for—an unreachable archive grasped at last. But there is a bridge between this seemingly irreconcilable beginning and conclusion, a second half to Melville's depiction of the whale as an archive. His

descriptions of the whale as the object of a hunt both physical and intellectual intermingle with a secondary set of spatial motifs, the whale-as-a-place, which steadily redefine this image of unreachability, placing the whale into a new paradigm that suggests the possibility of successful access and informational retrieval. By employing a system of devices which equate the physical presence of the whale with the spatial layout of an architectural information-object, Melville strives to allay the anxiety generated by the whale's resistance to the hunt.

This spatially-oriented approach to mitigating archival anxiety begins with Ishmael's perpetual obsession with the story of Jonah—or, more specifically expressed, with the archival authority of Jonah. Ishmael takes great care early on to establish Jonah's figure in the reader's mind, dedicating one of the most memorable of the novel's early chapters to a New Bedford sermon on this figure. I find it no coincidence that Father Mapple here opens his sermon with the lines “Beloved shipmates, clinch the last verse of the first chapter of Jonah—‘And God had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah’” (49), for indeed Ishmael does clinch fast to the image of Jonah throughout his narrative. For Ishmael, Jonah is the miraculous fulfillment of the sheer potentiality of archival access, standing in defiance of the inaccessibility surrounding the cetological archive. Jonah's miracle is this: that in the face of the leviathan, he succeeded not only in entering the whale-archive (in the most literal way possible, at that), but also in a successful and complete retrieval of definite knowledge from the normally inescapable maw of that great fish. His is the miraculous retrieval of the whale's true, inner self, and with it an authority over all knowledge of that beast. So it is that Ishmael reprimands himself on his own analysis of the whale's form, “have a care how you seize the privilege of Jonah alone; the

privilege of discoursing upon the joists and beams; the rafters, ridge-pole, sleepers, and under-pinnings, making up the frame-work of leviathan” (344); likewise, Jonah is granted similar authority over the whale in Ishmael’s taxonomical enterprise, his discussion over the whale’s identity as mammal or fish: “Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me” (117). In this particular telling of the Jonah-narrative that runs through the entirety of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael’s narrative conflates structural and physical access with access to knowledge. Such is Melville’s image of ideal access to the whale-archive, a process of retrieval that captures the whale in its entirety—the archetype in the architecture of the whale.

Ishmael’s solution to the problem of the inaccessible archive of the whale borrows from this vision of Jonah by depicting the whale as a place to be inhabited—in short, he imagines the whale not merely as archive, but as architecture. Drawing on his conflated images of physical access and access to archival knowledge, Ishmael presents the reader with a motif of architecture, the realm of physical access, which implicitly highlights the kind of impossible access to archival knowledge necessary to assuage the anxiety of the inaccessible. We’ve already seen the way that Ishmael describes the inside of the whale as “the joists and beams, the rafters, ridge-pole, sleepers, and under-pinnings, making up the frame-work of leviathan” (344); he continues that sentence by describing “the tallow-vats, dairy-rooms, butteries, and cheeseries in his bowels” (344). In looking into the Right Whale’s head, Ishmael continues this architectural motif: “The roof is about twelve feet high, and runs to a pretty sharp angle, as if there were a regular ridge-pole there; while these ribbed, arched, hairy sides, present us with those wondrous, half vertical,

scimeter-shaped slats of whalebone” (265); its baleen mouth is a set of “Venetian blinds” (265), its sides girded with “colonnades of bone” (266) and floored with “a rug of the softest Turkey—the tongue, which is glued, as it were, to the floor of the mouth” (266). Ishmael’s language reveals a compulsion to portray the whale as architecture, a location of human habitation: a place to be entered and exited—to be accessed.

Architecture promises to resolve the underlying anxiety defining both Melville’s fear of the inaccessible and Derrida’s fear of amnesia: a return to the origin, the ideal, the archetype. This is the etymological promise of the word, bearing the same root *arkhē* (OED) discussed at length in the opening of “Archive Fever.” In Derrida’s words,

This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*—physical, historical, or ontological principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given—nomological principle. (9)

The *arkhē* describes the position of origin, where authority and beginning unite. It is the principle assaulted by amnesia and inaccessibility, and it is the state to which both archive and architecture attempt to return. This connection between architecture and origin is not unknown to Melville; indeed, he celebrates it. In *Timoleon*, his poem “Greek Architecture” reflects upon this very principle:

Not magnitude, not lavishness,  
But Form—the Site;

Not innovating wilfulness,  
But reverence for the Archetype. (60)

As we see in Melville's conception of the architectural function, architecture carries within itself a temporal historicity, an establishment as a place *in time*, transcending its own present. Architecture and the ideal whale-archive thus unite to transcend the barriers of time and distance and return to the origin of the knowledge encoded in the archival-architectural form. In applying such a quality to the whales of his narrative, Ishmael creates a point of entry through which the ubiquitous whale-archetype becomes open to access, retrieval, and therefore archivization. Thus, by portraying the form of the whale as an archive in the architectural mode, Melville transforms his icon of utter isolation into a form primed for access, defying the relentless inaccessibility at the root of his archival anxiety.

This historico-archival tendency attributed to Melville's whale-as-architecture anticipates a deepening gap between architecture and art originating in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the early 20<sup>th</sup>: for many, architecture began to develop a distinct identity as, in the words of Austrian-Czechoslovak architect and architectural theorist Adolf Loos, “unzeitgemäßen arbeiten [works that are inappropriate for our time]” (qtd. and trans. in Kleinman 57). Within this conception of architecture, the architect ceases to exist in a productive function, but exists instead within the replicative function. To quote Loos again, “Genug der originalgenies! Wiederholen wir uns unaufhörlich selbst! [Enough original genius! Let us repeat ourselves endlessly]” (qtd. and trans. in Kleinman 57). An architectural structure, bearing in its own construction the archetypal form of its predecessors, becomes more than an archival vessel—it becomes a historical object in

itself, disassociated from the originality—the *origin*-ality—of its own present. Within this school of thought, architecture defies its own temporal origin, taking on the same historico-archival role expressed by Melville and Derrida's conceptions of the archive: through the medium of architecture, history is directly encoded within the architectural form, obviating the problem of the lack of first-hand access to the past.

Kent Kleinman applies this same architectural means of addressing conceptual and informational inaccessibility to the problem of literal inaccessibility. In “Archiving/Architecture,” he discusses the growing distinction between use-objects and art during this period; when unused, as in the context of architecture-as-art (e.g. restorations), such a building (as exemplified by Loos’s Villa Müller)

is no longer a house. It is not even architecture, certainly not a Loos. It has undergone an ontological shift. It has instead all the trappings of an oxymoron: an original Loos.

Worse still, it has become a work of art. We know that the villa is aspiring to the status of art for the following reason: *we can no longer touch it.* (58, emphasis mine)

Architecture and access are fundamentally interrelated in a quite literal manner; if a building desists in providing the function of access, it ceases being architecture altogether. Furthermore, if a piece of architecture ceases to operate in a historical context—if it exists within the authorial ‘now’ rather than the archetypal ‘then’—it evinces precisely this failure. For both Kleinman and Melville, the anxiety of inaccessibility is meliorated by the archival function on both a figurative and a literal

level; by granting material, architectural presence to the archive, it becomes a place where we can believe in the direct re-incarnation of the physically and the temporally inaccessible.

Such is the central distinction between the architecture of Melville's whales and the archive of Derrida's feverish obsession: while Melville's architectural-archive is depicted as something to be accessed and used, the Derridean archive is always a place of stasis, as untouchable as the Villa Müller described above. In *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, Carolyn Steedman observes that for Derrida, "the fever [is] not so much to enter [the archive] and use it, as to *have* it, or just for it to be there, in the first place" (2). As expressed in Derrida, the archive is always a place that must not, *cannot*, be touched, because to touch, to access, to use the archive would be, by our own proximity, to diminish the ends of the archival mission—it would restore the archived object to the present. As Steedman observes, "Derrida showed us a *place* in *Mal d'archive*, a building, with an inside and an outside, which is often a house [...]. He suggested that in an archive we are under some kind of house arrest" (11). Such an archive attempts to capture the archetypal origin through representation under a guise of reproduction; in doing so, the archive ceases to be a place of its own, but becomes itself the place of the *arkhē*, from which the origin may neither proceed nor otherwise be removed. And yet Steedman's reading expresses a materialist strain that emphasizes the fundamental importance of use in the same manner that Melville emphasizes the role of access in the archive. For Steedman, archive fever is not merely an illness, but a joke, the darkly comic way that we, upon having "inhaled the dust of the animals and plants that provided material for those documents [w]e untied and read; the dust of all the workers whose trials and

tribulations in labour formed their paper and parchment" (152), declaring that, in the words of Jules Michelet, we have "breathed in their dust" (qtd. in Steedman 17), the tangible expression of the historical mode described. Such is the archive expressed in *Moby-Dick*: an archive not merely of history, but also of production, place, and materiality. By expanding the archive into the realm of architectural function, Melville presents us with an archive of access and of use, one that emulates rather than preserves.

## Chapter 4: Ahab and Archival Violence

To Ishmael, the pursuit of the whale is always an extension of the Jonah-born ideal of perfect access to the whale. But in direct contrast to this alternative, meliorating mode of conceiving the whale-archive, Captain Ahab's unwavering gaze refuses to look upon the whale as anything but an object of the hunt. For what is the whale, and the white whale in particular, to Ahab? "All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought," Ishmael responds (156). Ahab does not see the white whale as the archive of infinite potential that Ishmael dreams of entering, but as an opponent, something to be grappled with and subdued—for to Ahab, his vengeance against the white whale serves one motive alone: to do battle against the unknown, and emerge a victor. He expounds on these motives at length in chapter thirty-six, "The Quarter-Deck," when responding to the incredulity of his first mate at pursuing such an unattainable goal:

All visible objects, man, are but 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! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's

naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (130)

Ahab's fixation with killing the whale is a flat rejection of Ishmael's architectural-archival ideal; for him, the only way to assuage the smothering grip of archival anxiety—"the inscrutable thing"—is to pierce the brow that contains it. There is no peace, no preservation of the original vessel in this vision—and when faced with Moby Dick, the whale that cannot be hunted, the archive that cannot be opened, his obsessive struggle drives him to the precipice of madness. And look where it leads him! Ship and crew lost, family abandoned, and Ahab himself dead in a gallows of his own devising. Consumed by the maddening compulsion to reach the impossible origin, Ahab becomes a hyperbolic illustration of the overwhelming power of archival anxiety left unchecked.

The specific character of Ahab's madness is, in a word, monomaniacal. "The final monomania seized him" (156); "that monomaniac thought of his soul" (167); "to any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles conspicuously carry messages" (195); "all that would not one jot advance his grand, monomaniac object" (236); "the monomaniac old man seemed distrustful of his crew's fidelity" (402)—the list goes on. Between "monomania" and "monomaniac," this term appears a full fifteen times in *Moby-Dick*, and each time, without fail, it refers specifically to Ahab and his mad quest to slay the white whale. Melville's constant, consistent, and therefore deliberate choice of words diagnoses outright the most fundamental quality of Ahab's insanity: Ahab's singular obsession is indeed *singular*—it will not allow for plurality. Indeed, there is a distinct difference

between the manners by which Ishmael and Ahab approach their respective fixations on the whale. Where Ishmael sees in the whale the convergent archive of history, nature, and knowledge both earthly and divine, Ahab sees only an abomination, a thing to be cut down. “In his frantic morbidness he [Ahab] at last came to identify with him [Moby Dick], not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies” (156). Moby Dick, the grand blank archive of inaccessibility, is to Ahab a devourer without distinction, literalizing the same consumptive “violence of the archive” (Derrida 12) explored in “Archive Fever”: “it [the archive] saves, but in an unnatural fashion” (Derrida 12), destroying original context and meaning in the creation of its own order of consignment. Ahab’s obsession returns this archival violence upon the archive itself, seeking to return to the impossible *arkhē* through the destruction of the entity that dismantled and consumed it in the first place.

Thus, the archive to Ahab is inherently a place of violence. Beyond retrieval and idealized access, Ahab’s antipathy towards the archive rejects all of Ishmael’s redefinitions and compromises with regard to it. Here, violence abounds, both in consignment and in reciprocal opposition to the archival function. The white whale devours Ahab’s leg and sanity alike, an act which he repays with a quest of extermination against that selfsame whale. Ironically, despite its bloodthirsty manifestation as the desire to put an end to, rather than access, the archive, this unmeliorated conception of the archive hews closest to Derrida’s model of archive fever. Unlike Ishmael’s model, characterized by the impossibility of simultaneous access to the information object and preservation of the archive, Ahab’s equates inaccessibility with violence towards the

information object. Ahab's whale-archive does not render information inaccessible by distance, or technology, or any other such benign factor—it does so by dismantling and consuming the object being archived, uniting it with the unmitigated malevolence at the heart of Ahab's quarry. But this antagonistic principle applies to more than the white whale—Ahab engenders thoughts of violence on all fronts, even against the authority he himself commands as captain of the *Pequod*. In the chapter “The Musket,” Ahab's first mate, Starbuck, contemplates his assassination and with it the dissolution of the old order: “Not reasoning; not remonstrance; not entreaty wilt thou hearken to; all this thou scornest. Flat obedience to thy own flat commands, this is all thou breathest. Aye, and say'st the men have vow'd thy vow; say'st all of us are Ahabs. Great God forbid!” (387). Violence, order, and the archival modes of understanding inherent to such systems of power intermingle aboard the *Pequod* as it ventures ever closer to its final tragic encounter with the white whale.

In the three-day span leading up to the *Pequod*'s fated end, the ultimate failure of Ahab's quest (and thus the reciprocal failure of his engagement with the archive) becomes more and more apparent: Ahab's attempts to engage the impossible archive on his own terms, those of violence, prove entirely self-destructive. From the first sighting of Moby Dick's spout to the final descent of the *Pequod*'s mast into the gaping maw of the sea, Ahab's hunt is all dodgings and unsuccessful battles. As Starbuck observes on the second day, “Two days chased; twice stove to splinters; thy very leg once more snatched from under thee [. . .] What more wouldst thou have? [. . .] Shall we be towed by him to the infernal world? Oh, oh,—Impiety and blasphemy to hunt him more!” (418). Each day of the hunt reveals in increasing measure the futility of Ahab's quest and the self-

destructive passion of his pursuit. But he does not stop. To Ahab, all engagement with the archive ends in violence, and so, just as Ishmael does, when faced with the impossibility of his own model to stand up against the inaccessible archive, Ahab tries to redefine what's before him—in this case, the white whale's continual evasion of their pursuit becomes a sign of his own doom.

Believe ye, men, in the things called omens? Then laugh aloud, and cry  
encore! For ere they drown, drowning things will twice rise to the surface;  
then rise again, to sink for evermore. So with Moby Dick—two days he's  
floated—tomorrow will be the third. Aye, men, he'll rise once more,—but  
only to spout his last! (418)

But unlike Ishmael's redefinition, which lasts indefinitely throughout the text and ultimately results in the creation of the book *Moby-Dick*, Ahab's is swiftly disproven. He does not accomplish his aim—he does not kill the archive. In fact, the only things he puts an end to are his ship, his crew, and himself. The same omens Ahab takes as signs of his own success turn against him, until at last his death becomes inevitable—and even then he lashes himself to the leviathan. Entirely carried away by the archive in the most literal of senses, Ahab becomes a symbolic inversion of Ishmael's ideal vision: an individual who, rather than accessing the archive, becomes a part of it. His rejection of the concordant system of thought that extends throughout Ishmael's conception of the archive ultimately leads him to failure and death, bound to the same archive he meant to subject to ultimate censorship.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

As an archive of whaling, cetology, and nautical miscellanea, and as a narrative about the archive, *Moby-Dick*'s engagement with the psychology of archival access is nuanced and precise. The distance between the archive and those who wish to access it pervades the text as a motive force, impelling the pursuit of the impossible—the white whale. What remains to be discussed is the distinction between the two modes of pursuit at the core of the text, which is to say, the interpretive schemes posited by Ishmael and Ahab in defining their own archival obsessions.

Ishmael's Jonah-derived ideal of coexistent access to the whale-archive and Ahab's mad quest for vengeance against the white whale aren't two distinct narratives, relegated to two disparate texts—they're a full, interconnected system of contradictory impulses, justifications, and actions, which shape the final text presented to the reader as the story *Moby-Dick*. From the time that the *Pequod* sets sail from Nantucket's shores to the moment of its final doom, these two men share the same ship, the same journey, and the same narrative space in which to plumb the depths of their archival anxieties. But by their nature these are two views which cannot endure in coexistence with one another. One exists in concord with the archive, while the other demands its obliteration. The two views naturally combat one another, and the underlying structure of *Moby-Dick* supports this struggle by equalizing them with specific narrative privileges and authorities. To Ishmael is granted the role of narrator, with which he filters all content that makes it to

the reader's eye, while to Ahab goes the authority of the captain, with which he directs the narrative of the story and commands the hearts of its cast. As a result, we're presented with a text divided in perspective and aim: Ishmael's sections promote one archival view, while Ahab's promote the other. The two operate alongside each other, each shaping its own narrative, until at last the white whale itself, the ultimate obstacle of each of these paradigms, appears to test them both.

When Moby Dick at last departs from the scene, Ishmael's conception of the archive endures and Ahab's does not: Ishmael alone survives the disaster, set adrift upon "the great shroud of the sea" (427), stranded, alone, yet alive. Despite the desolate canvas that the novel provides in its closing moments, what can this be but the ultimate triumph of the architectural archive? Of course, for all that the pursuit of the architectural figure of the archive meliorates the anxiety of the inaccessible for Ishmael, that anxiety can never be truly assuaged. Nor should it be, for after establishing the barriers surrounding the material reality of archival potentiality, to allow Ishmael the same miraculous access granted to Jonah would be to deny the very quality that makes such an ideal miraculous: the unachievability that lies supervenient upon its own inaccessibility.

Nonetheless, even in withholding from Ishmael the Jonah-ideal he seeks, this narrative passes judgment on his archival vision in a much more ambiguous manner than Derrida's harshly monologic "*mal*." Even though he never makes the final journey into the belly of the whale and then out again, Ishmael nevertheless enacts a moment of archival triumph by journeying into the hellish battle against the leviathan and escaping intact. Rather than the ideal success of the Jonah-narrative, Ishmael presents to us a

vision of successful retrieval from the archive of mortality itself. What he retrieves is the narrative of *Moby-Dick*, the archive's very *mise en abyme*.

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