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A Whale is a Palimpsest: Dismembering and Remembering in *Moby-Dick* and *Fighting the Whales*

Kelly P. Bushnell

“But when Leviathan is the text, the case is altered.”
Moby-Dick, Chapter 104, “The Fossil Whale”

Off the coast of Utqiagvik, Alaska in June 2007 a group of Alaska hunters took a forty-nine-foot bowhead whale. Monitored by the International Whaling Commission, ten Alaskan villages were permitted to hunt a total of 255 whales over a period of five years provided they kept the meat for their own consumption. When the hunters began to cut up the fifty-ton whale they found something embedded in the thick blubber between the neck and scapula: the sharp point of a harpoon from the 1880s (Elsworth 2007).

Archaeological analysis traced the 3.5-inch barb to a harpoon manufacturer in New Bedford, Massachusetts who had made it for a shoulder-mounted harpoon gun patented in 1879. Unlike earlier hand-thrown harpoons, the explosive projectile was fired from a shoulder-mounted gun and contained a bomb on a time fuse designed to kill the whale without the necessity of a lengthy chase followed by bloody battle with the lances. The bomb in question likely did explode, but struck the whale in a non-lethal area and he escaped and recovered. And while it is possible that the antique weapon was in use later than its manufacture, biologists who studied the whale dated its injury to between 1885 and 1895 based on how the blubber had grown around it, making the whale between 115 and 130 years old. Between 2001 and 2007 six other nineteenth-century harpoon barbs were discovered in Arctic bowheads. These whales may live as long as two hundred years and are still recovering in population from the large-scale commercial whaling of the nineteenth century. This is an incredible story, but one that nineteenth-century whale hunters knew well, as they regularly “read” the bodies of whales, tracing their histories through embedded harpoons and other characteristics. These empirical and imaginative readings also loom large in the novels of the era.

This essay will focus on the men and whales of two nineteenth-century novels: Melville’s mega-behemoth *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the lesser-known *Fighting the Whales* (1863) by Scottish novelist R.M. Ballantyne, which reinterprets many elements of *Moby-Dick* into a didactic adventure novel for British boys. There is much to gain by reading the two novels together, not the least of which is their use of similar events and ideas which they adapted to very different audiences. The two novels explore multiple modes of remembering and

dismembering in the literature of the whale hunt. Both *remember* and *dismember* are rooted in the Latin *membrum*: a term of constituency, whether physically (a limb or part of the body) or socially (a member of a group), and provide the ultimate irony in the literary interpretation of the whaling venture: the whalers of the novels read the whale's flesh like a text to imaginatively "*remember*" (put back together) its life story while industriously *dismembering* its body. The whale's biography is put together as its body is taken apart.

Whalers read the text of the whale's body as a palimpsest: harpoons embedded in the whale from previous skirmishes with whalers in addition to scars and distinguishing marks all help craft this life story (which also materially contributed to early scientific knowledge about whales). The whale is endowed with this "memory" and funereally commemorated after the cutting-in (removal of blubber from the body) and trying-out (melting into oil). This act of "remembering" is then set against the constant danger of the whaler's life—the dismembered body is sometimes his own—and the familiar nineteenth-century trope of burial at sea in which the lack of a fixed grave marker necessitates alternate forms of commemoration for the slain whale hunter.

A further level of irony lies in the act of commemoration. *Moby-Dick* and *Fighting the Whales* commemorate and memorialize dead whales as well as dead whalers; however, only the whale is brought back to land (in the form of its oil), while men killed at sea never return to land and are buried at sea (if a body is recovered at all). In the vivid print culture of nineteenth-century sea stories, a reader may read about the whaler's burial at sea by the light of a lamp or candle made from the blubber of a whale—both of these forms (the literature and the light) issuing from the dangerous job of the whale hunter.

The concept of *palimpsest*—a manuscript or text that is written over multiple times, sometimes obscuring what is beneath—is a useful way to think about this phenomenon. The word never appears in *Moby-Dick* or *Fighting the Whales*, but the image of the palimpsest was a common metaphor in Victorian literature, one often used in regard to memory. In 1828 Coleridge wrote "I have in vain tried to recover the lines from the Palimpsest of my memory" (*Poetic Works* II.107), while Thomas De Quincey asked rhetorically in 1845: "What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain?" (*Suspiria de Profundis*). Between the publication of *Moby-Dick* and *Fighting the Whales*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* characterized the soul thus: "Let who says 'The soul is a clean white paper' rather say / A palimpsest ... / Defiled." In 1879 G.H. Lewes (also famous for writing about the sea) wrote in his *Study Psychologica*: "History unrolls the palimpsest of mental evolution" (i.30).

The whale as a palimpsestic textual body with multiple layers of physical and semiotic inscription also constitutes a new ecomaterialist approach to these novels. In an seminal collection on this new theoretical mode, they write: "*material* ecocriticism examines matter both *in* texts and *as* a text," exploring "the way bodily nature and discursive forces express their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality" (2). Building on Donna Haraway's *naturecultures* (the inextricability of nature and culture, environment and society), Iovino and Opperman position *bodies* in particular as "living texts that recount *naturalcultural* stories" (6). In Chapter 104 of *Moby Dick*, "The Fossil Whale," Ishmael pronounces the leviathan a "text" which alters its own interpretation. The body of the whale indeed tells its own story while also chronicling the violence of the whaling industry, a violence which was visited not just upon the bodies of the whales but also of the men who pursued them.

In this essay I first read harpoons lodged in whales' bodies as concentrated narrative histories of skirmishes with whalers around the globe, and as touchstones of early

scientific knowledge about cetacean biology and migration, even as they also signal the immortality and global ubiquity of whales like Moby Dick. The essay then considers “inscriptions” on the textual whale which do not penetrate as deeply as the harpoon. Whales’ scars and markings craft a different sort of narrative (battle among huge bulls, brushes with ice) that ultimately proves “indecipherable” to literary whalers as—unlike the harpooning—it occurs out of view of humans. Finally, the essay refocuses around the whaleman’s death narrative and burial at sea as imbricated with that of the whale. As a burial at sea has no permanent physical marker like a gravestone, I consider literary whalers’ alternate physical, textual, and imaginative memorials to their sunken comrades. These texts also often indicate a rough parallel between the fate of the whale and the whaleman, which is made gruesomely clear when characters are impaled on the implements meant for the whale.

“Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons?”: Reading Harpoons¹

Mocha Dick, the famous albino sperm whale after which Melville’s white whale is fashioned, supposedly had at least twenty harpoons lodged in his back. Melville’s whalers likewise encounter the phenomenon of old harpoons embedded in whales multiple times. In Chapter 81, “The *Pequod* Meets the Virgin,” the crew of the *Pequod* kills a whale whose story especially resonates with the 2007 Alaska bowhead:

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 hump before described. But as the stumps of harpoons are frequently found in the dead bodies of captured whales, with the flesh perfectly healed around them, and no prominence of any kind to denote their place. 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.

Ishmael pronounces these discoveries “frequent,” though this whale’s description differs from Moby Dick, whose barbs (at least the three thrown by Ahab) remain visible outside of his body. The “lance head of stone” embedded in the blubber near the “buried iron” particularly captivates Ishmael and he reads its implicit narrative. In the penetrated and healed skin of this whale he interprets its age as potentially hundreds of years old, reflecting the technological development from stone to iron “darts.” His description provides both a hyperbolized sense of the ancientness of whales and an example of the early data used by nineteenth-century scientists to learn about cetacean biology. The stone lance head thrown perhaps by “some Nor’ West Indian” also alludes to the ancient nature of the whale hunt itself, underscored by the proximity of the stone and iron barbs within the whale. The contemporary and the narratives collapse into each other in the brutality of the whale hunt.

Moby-Dick teems with these allusions. In Chapter 3, among the decor at the Spouter’s Inn is a “harpoon—so like a corkscrew now—[that] was flung in Javan seas, and run away with by a whale, years afterwards slain off the Cape of Blanco. The original iron entered nigh the tail, and, like a restless needle sojourning in the body of a man, travelled full forty feet, and at last was found imbedded in the hump.” In Chapter 36, in providing

the first physical description of Moby Dick, Queequeg asserts “And he have one, two, three—oh! good many iron in him hide, too, Captain,” and Ahab confirms, “aye, Queequeg, the harpoons lie all twisted and wrenched in him.” (During the gam in Chapter 100 this pattern is one of the ways Ahab can tell that the other captain has seen Moby Dick: “...harpoons sticking in near his starboard fin.”) In Chapter 41, titled simply “Moby Dick,” Ishmael relates, “It is a thing well known to both American and English whale-ships, and as well a thing placed upon authoritative record years ago by Scoresby, that some whales have been captured far north in the Pacific, in whose bodies have been found the barbs of harpoons darted in the Greenland seas.” (Scoresby is William Scoresby, whose *Journal of a Voyage to the Northern Whale-Fishery*, published in London in 1822 is one of Melville and Ballantyne’s most important respective source material.) These harpoons thus served an even more biographical and cetological function: they provided some of the first data about whale migration, speed, and navigation. Ishmael notes that “in some of these instances it has been declared that the interval of time between the two assaults could not have exceeded very many days” suggesting the speed with which a whale might move from the Atlantic to the Pacific, by reading the “text” of each individual whale as data points to understand cetacean biology and behavior at large.

Some harpoons were even more particular, brandishing marks (“cyphers”) that could be attributed to specific ships or even individual harpooners. This specificity allows even greater depth to the whaler’s interpretation of the textual leviathan, as it may be possible to determine which ships (and possibly even which exact men) had previously “darted” a whale, and where these encounters had taken place. In Chapter 45, “The Affidavit,” Ishmael relates such a story:

I have personally known three instances where a whale, after receiving a harpoon, has effected a complete escape; and, after an interval (in one instance of three years), has been again struck by the same hand, and slain; when the two irons, both marked by the same cypher, have been taken from the body.

In the intervening years the harpooner travelled the world (“joining a discovery party” in Africa and “penetrating far into the interior); “meanwhile, the whale he has struck must also have been on its travels; no doubt it has thrice circumnavigated the globe, brushing with its flanks all the coasts of Africa” (*Moby-Dick*, Chapter 45: “The Affidavit”). This speaks to the three harpoons lodged in Moby Dick by Ahab, and prefigures the captain’s inability to accomplish the same feat.

In *Fighting the Whales*, narrator Bob Ledbury also describes the phenomenon of embedded harpoons several times. In Chapter VIII, “one or two [whales] bolted so fast that they broke loose and carried away a number of harpoons and many a fathom of line.” Bob relates the stories of several famous “fighting whales,” including the whale that sank the *Essex* (a whale which also inspired Melville—Ishmael describes the encounter in depth), and New Zealand Tom: “an old bull whale that had become famous among the men who frequented these seas for its immense size and fierceness, and for the great trouble it had given them, smashing some of their boats, and carrying away many of their harpoons” (*Fighting the Whales*, Chapter VII).² More generally: “Fighting-whales, as they are called, are not uncommon. These are generally old bulls, which have become wise from experience, and give the whalers great trouble—sometimes carrying away several harpoons and lines” (ibid).

The literary whalemens of *Moby-Dick* and *Fighting the Whales* read these harpoons as “storied matter,” to use Iovino and Opperman’s ecomaterialist term. Through their barbs they can interpret a whale’s age, distance and trajectory around the oceans, and reconstruct what amounts to “memories” of skirmishes with other whalers. The image of the embedded harpoon is also a metaphor of human industry penetrating nature in the nineteenth century, as factories proliferated and their gears were illuminated and lubricated by whale oil.³

The “*mystic-marked whale*”: Reading Flesh

The whalemens of *Moby-Dick* and *Fighting the Whales* do not just read the *implements* lodged in the whale’s flesh, but the flesh itself, creating the palimpsestic text comprised of many layers of inscription. In Chapter 99, “The Doubloon,” Ishmael turns this interpretive eye toward the body of his former bunkmate Queequeg: “There’s another rendering now; but still one text. . . . here comes Queequeg—all tattooing—looks like the signs of the Zodiac himself.” This “rendering” connects artistic and literary rendering (that is, interpretation) with the gruesome physical rendering of oil from the whale. “Still one text” engenders a further connection, as Ishmael reads Queequeg’s tattoos just as he does the “hieroglyphics” of scars on whales; the palimpsest of his skin is “still one text” even as it undergoes layers of new inscription.⁴

In Chapter 68, “The Blanket,” “the *visual surface* of the Sperm whale is not the least among the many marvels he presents” (emphasis mine). Ishmael calls these marks on whales’ skin “hieroglyphical”; the skin “almost invariably” is “all over obliquely crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array.” In addition to the harpoons, Ishmael uses these marks to construct the whale’s life story, assuming that “such scratches in the whale are probably made by hostile contact with other whales; for I have most remarked them in the large, full-grown bulls of the species.” He describes the fights in Chapter 88: “They fence with their long lower jaws, sometimes locking them together, and so striving for their supremacy like elks that warringly interweave their antlers. Not a few are captured having the deep scars of these encounters,—furrowed heads, broken teeth, scalloped fins; and in some instances, wrenched and dislocated mouths.” Similarly, in *Fighting the Whales*: “The lower jaw of one old bull of this kind was found to be sixteen feet long, and it had forty-eight teeth, some of them a foot long. A number of scars about his head showed that this fellow had been in the wars. When two bull-whales take to fighting, their great effort is to catch each other by the lower jaw, and, when locked together, they struggle with a degree of fury that cannot be described. Ishmael agrees as to the animal, as ultimately “the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable” (*Moby-Dick*, Ch. 68: “The Blanket”). The “cypher” by which the harpooner realized he had darted the same whale twice is reworked by Ishmael here into its antithesis: the “undecipherable.” Though whalemens read the whale’s textual body prolifically, they do not always understand what they read, particularly those layers of the palimpsest which are inscribed far beneath the surface and out of their view. In speaking of these hieroglyphics Ishmael pokes fun at the “passing fable” of physiognomy, playfully asking

Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man’s and every being’s face. Physiognomy, like every other human science, is but a passing fable. If then, Sir

William Jones, who read in thirty languages, could not read the simplest peasant's face in its profounder and more subtle meanings, how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.

This passage is a memorial to a whale vivid descriptions (and the lovely assonance of “but put”) invite the reader to “read” the whale alongside Ishmael and his shipmates. And Ishmael should perhaps have given his brethren more credit, as much early cetological knowledge came from the observations of the men who killed whales for a living. Some of the earliest cetological treatises on the physiology, biology, and behavior were written by physicians aboard whaling ships, the intuitive and inherited knowledge of whalers providing the basis for much of their research. The evolutionary biologist and poet Jennifer Calkins puts it this way:

The continued relevance of the whale embodied in *Moby-Dick* is, in part, a result of the fact that sperm whales are long-lived, marine and therefore cryptic, highly social, wide-ranging, and socially flexible organisms—in other words, notoriously hard to study. Much of what we feel we “know” about the whale currently is based upon the observation drawn from whalers prior to and during the time of Melville's writing.

A further paradox of whalers reading the skin of the whale is that their very aim is to *remove* this skin from the carcass altogether, as below it is the blubber for which they have traversed the globe risking life and limb. (In the case of the sperm whale, they will also be after the even more valuable spermaceti oil in the head and ambergris in the stomach.) The huge sheets of flesh and blubber of this cetacean text are appropriately called “bible leaves,” (“Bible leaves! Bible leaves!” calls the mate to the mincer in Chapter 95) and they are indeed read with religious attention. The mincer, responsible for slicing the blubber as thinly as possible for the enormous try-pots in which it will be melted into oil is “arrayed in decent black; occupying a conspicuous pulpit; intent on bible leaves,” and when this process is finished and the whale has been stripped of its flesh it is time for the “funeral,” as Ishmael terms the releasing of the corpse in Chapter 69: “The Funeral.” Just like a burial at sea (and prefiguring the burial at sea in Chapter 131 when the *Pequod* meets the *Delight*), the order is given: “Haul in the chains! Let the carcass [sic] go astern!” On the “peeled white body of the beheaded whale” there is nothing left to read. The skin gone, and the whale's hieroglyphics melted down into oil, story concentrated into the barrels of oil and memories of whalers, some of which will be printed and read by the light of whale oil.

The dead whale does retain a certain ecological agency even beyond its ubiquitous oil: “For hours and hours from the almost stationary ship” the crew watches the “hideous sight” of the birds and sharks tearing at the nearby carcass (*Moby-Dick*, Ch. 69: “The Funeral”). Remarks a disturbed Ishmael: “There a most doleful and most mocking funeral!” Ishmael commemorates the whale, however: “Nor is this the end. Desecrated as the body is, a vengeful ghost survives and hovers over it to scare” (ibid). He writes that other ships, “some timid man-of-war or blundering discovery-vessel,” perhaps, will see the whale's carcass, believe it to be a dangerous rocky shoal, and add it to the ship's log and perhaps

even maps: “*shoals, rocks, and breakers hereabouts: beware!*” The whale will thus be misunderstood yet commemorated again, this time cartographically, where “for years afterwards, perhaps, ships shun the place.” The memory of the whale becomes a “ghost” which haunts men and maps: “Thus, while in life the great whale’s body may have been a real terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a powerless panic to a world.” (Ishmael then asks the reader, “Are you a believer in ghosts, my friend?”) Ultimately, like the “undecipherable” intact flesh of the whale, other ships will read and misread the memorial impression of floating corpse long after it sinks into the depths

“Deep memories yield no epitaphs”: Reading Burials at Sea

The whale is, of course, not the only dismembered body. And just as the whale’s “funeral” creates a similitude between the commemorations of whale and man, so Ahab’s body is similarly dismembered by the whale hunt. In Chapter 37, in an aside from Ishmael’s narrative, Ahab says to himself: “The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer.” Ishmael’s depictions of memory, and commemoration of humans keep with *and* depart from that of the whale.

Of commemoration and death at sea, Jessica Roberson notes that “the loss of a corpse at sea makes visible the extent to which any act of posthumous identification relies upon a complex network actively maintained by the living... death and burial at sea deny the living corporeal access to the dead through conventional mediums like the grave or urn, demanding *alternative methods* of memorialization” (Roberson 30, emphasis mine). Ishmael embodies this memorialization while in the Whaleman’s Chapel:

Oh! ye whose dead lie buried beneath the green grass; who standing among flowers can say—here, *here* lies my beloved; ye know not the desolation that broods in bosoms like these. What bitter blanks in those black-bordered marbles which cover no ashes! What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave.Ch. 7: “The Chapel”

Those “immovable inscriptions” are the antithesis of the total mutability of the sea, the “placelessness” of the place in the sea where a corpse is committed to the deep. The whale’s body may be commemorated (however inaccurately) on maps as a dangerous shoal, but the body sinks right away, marked thereafter only in the “alternative” abstract memorials of his shipmates. Chapter 7, “The Chapel,” is all about literally- and figuratively-inscribed memorials and commemorations of Yankee whalemens killed on the hunt and Ishmael lists several (though he “[does] not pretend to quote” these “frigid inscriptions”). Other alternate memorials in the novel include Ahab’s and Fedallah’s terming the ship a “hearse,” and in the novel’s final line the sea itself becomes a burial shroud for the “uncoffin’d” (to borrow Byron’s word) dead whalemens: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” In the burial shroud of the sea the whalemens have become as immortal as the sea

itself, just as Ishmael jokes in Chapter 7, “The Chapel,” that in the whale hunt there is a “fine chance for promotion, it seems—aye, a stove boat will make me an immortal by brevet” and the crew regards Moby-Dick as “ubiquitous” and “immortal.”

The figure of Bulkington, whose story Ishmael relate in Chapter 23: “The Lee Shore,” is yet another example of the conflation of immortality, memorial inscription, and the sea in *Moby-Dick*. Of Bulkington, Ishmael writes: “deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington” and “Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing—straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!” Bulkington’s memorial *is* Ishmael’s narration—the novel itself. The retrospective first-person narration of both *Moby-Dick* and *Fighting the Whales* also renders the entirety of the novels both memory and commemoration of life at sea.

Fighting the Whales also commemorates the commercial whaling industry of the British Isles and the British whaleman’s way of life, which was declining rapidly at the time of its publication. In 1859 the last casks of sperm whale oil fished by British vessels arrived in London after a slow decline in the size of the fleet, which could not compete with the Golden Age of Yankee whaling.⁵ The same year, however, petroleum was discovered in Pennsylvania, which spelled the end of sperm whale oil as America’s choice illuminant and shifted fishing interests to whale species that could produce “whalebone”—baleen—instead of oil. In 1861 the United States became mired in the Civil War, in which the Confederate Navy all but crippled the Yankee whaling fleet, relocating American whaling to San Francisco. Not long after, the invention of the explosive shoulder-mounted harpoon like the one found lodged in the 2007 Alaska bowhead revolutionized the whaling industry by exposing new species (such as the blue whale, largest on Earth) to exploitation. This new weapon ended the need for intimate, practically hand-to-hand skirmishes with the most famous and aggressive species, the sperm whale, while the discovery of petroleum removed the need to engage him at all. Ballantyne’s novel is an unwitting salute to the golden age of whaling on both sides of the Atlantic.

The motif of the coffin in *Moby-Dick* makes material these anxieties. In the very first paragraph of the novel Ishmael introduces himself by telling the reader he knows it is time to go to sea once more “whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet” (Ch. 1: “Loomings”). The life at sea is Ishmael’s “substitute for pistol and ball”; Ishmael goes to sea to *live*, in a brutal environment where plenty perish. The next coffin Ishmael encounters is not a casket, per se, but *Peter Coffin*, the proprietor of the Spouter Inn in New Bedford where Ishmael lodges while waiting to book passage on a packet to Nantucket. Ishmael notes the homonym: “Coffin?—Spouter?—Rather ominous is that particular connexion [sic], thought I. But it is a common name in Nantucket, they say, and I suppose this Peter here is an emigrant from there.” Just as Ishmael asserts in Chapter 60 (“The Line”) that “all men lived enveloped in whale lines,” so too are the tenants of the Spouter Inn already associated with a coffin/Coffin before they even set sail. The coffin, however, is more than just *memento mori*. After Queequeg survives his nearly-fatal fever, his unneeded coffin is sealed shut and turned into a buoy whose true irony becomes manifest in the final scene, as Ishmael becomes the sole survivor of the *Pequod*’s voyage because he is able to float on the coffin. The funereal, memorial object is thus reimagined as Ishmael’s physical salvation, by which Ishmael lives to craft the extended memory which is the novel.

In Chapter 131 the *Pequod* meets the “most miserably misnamed” Nantucket whaler *Delight*. As the *Pequod* nears, “the life-buoy coffins still lightly swung” aside the *Delight* and

Ahab inquires only about the location of Moby-Dick, whose handiwork is visible on the the ship's shears: in the "shattered white ribs, and some few splintered planks, of what had once been a whaleboat." Instead of a profitable whale corpse hanging beside the *Delight* it is the corpse-like skeleton of a boat, and the carcass the *Delight* will cast into the sea will be not that of the whale but one of their shipmates. Ahab either does not realize or does not acknowledge that the *Delight* is preparing for a burial. Her captain answers Ahab's questions about the white whale with "I bury but one of five stout men, who were alive only yesterday; but were dead ere night. Only *that* one I bury; the rest were buried before they died; you sail upon their tomb." As the *Pequod* turns away from the *Delight* it is "not quick enough to escape the sound of the splash that the corpse soon made as it struck the sea; not so quick, indeed, but that some of the flying bubbles might have sprinkled her hull with their ghostly baptism." And not before one of the *Delight's* men calls out in a "foreboding" voice: "In vain, oh, ye strangers, ye fly our sad burial; ye but turn us your taffrail to show us your coffin!" There are, of course, usually no coffins for those die at sea and are instead sewn into canvas, but the *Pequod* unintentionally flaunts its unused coffin at the *Delight*, foreshadowing the three-day battle with the white whale which will soon take the lives of every man aboard (save Ishamel, who is saved by floating on the coffin). In his mania Ahab further solidifies this deathly connection between men, the white whale, and the sea, in which he commits his own bodily fate to that of Moby-Dick in keeping with Fedallah's prophecy: "Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale!" Ahab acknowledges that he will never have a proper burial, and thus wishes only to be memorialized as attached—literally and figuratively—to Moby Dick.

Like the *Pequod's* crew, Ballantyne's whalers read the palimpsestic bodies of the whales as texts prefiguring their own demise, as *Fighting the Whales* also suggests a parallel in the fate of man and whale in the South Seas. The most striking element of memory and commemoration in *Fighting the Whales* is the parallelism between the death of Fred Borders and that of the whales he hunts. Bob is no Ishmael, and while in *Moby-Dick* there is but one survivor, in *Fighting the Whales* there is only one death: Bob's dear friend Fred Borders. After a boat is stove by a whale all the men are recovered, but Fred Borders is mortally wounded: "The worst case, however, was that of poor Fred Borders. He had a leg broken, and a severe wound in the side from a harpoon which had been forced into the flesh over the barbs, so that we could hardly get it drawn out" (Chapter 8: "Death on the Sea"). Both the whale and Fred Borders meet their demise on the barb of the harpoon, are brought back to the ship, and after several days their corpses are released overboard. Fred lives for about a week before he dies and his body buried "in the usual sailor fashion" where "in deep silence, we committed his corpse to the deep," echoing Bob's earlier description of releasing the whale carcass from the side of the ship after the cutting-in and trying-out. Unlike the floating carcass in *Moby-Dick*, the whale carcass in *Fighting the Whales* "sank like a stone," prefiguring the cannon ball the men would later attach to Fred Borders's corpse. Furthering the similarity between the corpse of the whale and that of Fred Borders the text suggests that both will be fodder for ocean scavengers: Fred's corpse is "committed to the deep" and the sharks therein, while the whale's corpse is lost to the scavenging seabirds at the surface, "but what was loss to the gulls was gain to the sharks, which could follow the carcass down into the deep and devour it at their leisure" (ibid).

But why zoomorphize Fred Borders in this particularly gruesome way? The zoomorphized man reinforces the humanized whale; that is, Bob Ledbury spends a significant portion of his narrative on the human qualities of the whale, only to underscore

the whale's humanity by showing the vulnerability of man to the same fate as the whale (death on the end of a harpoon). To kill a man with the same weapon used to kill the whale offers a further commonality between whale and whaleman, blurring the line between zoomorphized man and anthropomorphized whale. Fred Borders's demise may also signal skepticism of the view espoused by many of his whaling and writing contemporaries that whaling demonstrates man's primacy over nature. Fred's death on the harpoon is a reminder that the barb which pierces the flesh of the whale can pierce men too, and that even Victorians are not exempt from the pointed spear-tip where nature and culture, subject and object, come together.

"But when Leviathan is the text, the case is altered," Ishmael tells his reader in Chapter 104, "The Fossil Whale." The harpoon barb recovered from the Alaska bowhead in 2007 is now in the collection of the Iñupiat Heritage Center in Utqiagvik, Alaska, which is now a National Park affiliated with the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park.⁶ And just as early cetological treatises were based on the lived experience of the men who hunted whales, today the cooperation between the Indigenous whale hunters and whale researchers continues to yield new information about these animals.⁷ Leviathan is *still* the text. The case is *still* altered. And the flesh of the whale contains as many stories today as it did in Chapter 79 of *Moby-Dick*: "Read it if you can." Or, perhaps, if you dare.

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¹ “*Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons?*” appears in, *Moby-Dick*, Ch. 81: “The Pequod Meets the Virgin.” As the chapters of *Moby-Dick* are all relatively short (and editions so diffuse), I have cited chapters instead of page numbers.

² New Zealand Tom was a particularly famous whale, mentioned by Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 45: “The Affidavit.” As is no longer in print I identify passages by their chapter numbers (all of which are manageable in length). The novel has been both scanned and transcribed on Project Gutenberg and Archive.org.

³ I take this up in a forthcoming essay, also arguing for the try-works as a corollary to industrial Britain.

⁴ It is important to note that although Queequeg can read whales, he cannot read English. In Chapter 7, “The Chapel,” Ishmael notes that though Queequeg is in the chapel he cannot read the inscribed memorials to Nantucket’s dead whalers on its walls. Thus, he does not commemorate them. (“This savage was the only person present who seemed to notice my entrance; because he was the only one who could not read, and, therefore, was not reading those frigid inscriptions on the wall.”)

⁵ Robert Hamilton calculated in 1843 that in 1791 seventy-five British vessels fished the Southern grounds, but by 1830 the fleet was comprised of just thirty-one ships from London with 937 sailors aboard and a burden of eleven thousand tons (Hamilton, 175).

⁶ Please visit the Inupiat Heritage Center at www.nps.gov/inup.

⁷ See Haag.