

"Spaces that before were blank": Truth and Narrative Form in Melville's South Seas Cartography

Robert T. Tally Jr.

Texas State University

Moby-Dick is an anomaly within Melville's oeuvre, and its strangeness stands out markedly when it is viewed next to his previous works. Although the "Call me Ishmael" beginning would seem to herald another personal narrative like *Typee* and *Omoo*, which had met with such success, critically and financially, *Moby-Dick* quickly becomes something else entirely — a sprawlingly complex novel that attempts to encompass "the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the universe, not excluding its suburbs" ("The Fossil Whale" 456).¹ The disparity between the two types of writing within the novel is a key aspect of the famous "two *Moby-Dicks*" theory, suggested by Charles Olson and Howard Vincent in the 1940s, and laid out explicitly by George R. Stewart in 1954. Stewart argues that an "Ur-*Moby-Dick*" tells the Ishmael story, while the later version superimposed a grander vision on the novel without substantially revising the early, onshore chapters (417–418). Although this theory is dubious,² *Moby-Dick*'s anomalous form remains a topic of interest. Why did Melville turn away from the personal narrative form, with which he had been so familiar and successful? Why did he move away from a form based on lived experience to a form that required an almost impossible comprehensiveness? Why did he not write the story of "a whaling voyage by one Ishmael" as promised in Chapter 1, "Loomings" (7), and instead write a work that — as Edward Said has put it — is really about "the whole world" ("Introduction to *Moby-Dick*" 369)?

The answers have to do with Melville's growing concern for what he called "the great Art of Telling the Truth" ("Hawthorne and His Mosses" 244). Melville's obsession with the truth, discovering it and representing it, led him to abandon personal narrative in favor of a form that enabled him to produce a more comprehensive, and therefore truer, picture. In his life, Melville found what he thought were authentic or true places far from home, in the extraterritorial contact zone of the Pacific, with its vast blank spaces on the world map. Melville's enthusiasm for the apparent novelty and purity of Pacific cultures enabled him to write the personal narratives that brought him early fame, but he found that the representational form was not adequate to his task. Such works failed to deliver the whole truth, which for Melville means that they

failed to be true at all. In this essay, I will argue that Melville developed the peculiar narrative form of *Moby-Dick* as a way to represent more accurately the “truth” he felt he had discovered in the South Seas. Melville’s struggles with, and eventual decision to abandon, the narrative form used in his early works are related to issues both epistemic and stylistic, requiring answers to the questions, *How do I know the truth?* and *How do I represent it?* In exploring the blank spaces of his map, Melville tries to find the truth in those exotic places of the Pacific; in his quest, Melville discovers that his cartographic techniques — the narrative form of his writing — had to change in order to present the truth as he saw it.

The comparison to mapmaking is apt, inasmuch as maps offer essentially fictional representations of true places. Melville even includes a chapter that explicitly examines the importance of mapping in the project of *Moby-Dick*. The opening paragraph of “The Chart” — a chapter that, Melville points out, “So far as what there may be of a narrative in this book . . . is as important a one as will be found” in *Moby-Dick* (“The Affidavit” 203) — presents a figure that might stand for the novel’s overall project: filling spaces that before were blank.

Had you followed Captain Ahab down into his cabin after the squall that took place on the night succeeding that wild ratification of his purpose with his crew, you would have seen him go to a locker in the transom, and bringing out a large wrinkled roll of yellowish sea charts, spread them before him on his screwed down table. Then seating himself before it, you would have seen him intently study the various lines and shadings which there met his eye; and with slow but steady pencil trace additional lines over spaces that before were blank. (“The Chart” 198)

This figure appears on numerous occasions throughout the novel,³ but here the cartographic nature of the project is brought directly to the fore. Melville’s desire to create a total world map, to fill in all the blank spaces in order to represent everything about his subject, establishes a nearly impossible task. On its first page, *Moby-Dick* begins with an etymological caveat (attributed to Richard Hakluyt): “While you take it in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true” (“Etymology” xvii). As if fearful of delivering “that which is not true,” Melville’s extravagant work seems to leave nothing out, filling all the blank spaces with novel inscriptions, marking and remarking the figures in his literary cartography of the world.⁴

The etymological caveat also reveals an anxiety underlying the global project of *Moby-Dick*. Specifically, it is the fear that truth will elude him, that despite his desired comprehensiveness, he will leave something out and the represen-

tation will be a misrepresentation. Melville's anxiety is disclosed throughout the novel, from his famous admission in "Cetology" that "This whole book is but a draught — nay, the draught of a draught" (145) to his warning in "Of Monstrous Pictures of Whales" that no true portrait of the whale is possible, that "the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last" (264). *Moby-Dick's* caution registers the uncertainty inherent in its mapping project. In his earlier works, Melville had combined personal experience and secondary sources (travelogues and scientific works) to give "true" accounts of his adventures in the South Seas and elsewhere. Despite his "success," Melville seemed to believe that it limited his ability to find and represent the truth. In *Mardi: A Voyage Thither*, Melville essayed a form — romance, rather than personal narrative — that he thought could achieve his ambitious project. Like *Moby-Dick*, *Mardi* presents a global narrative, where a literal circumnavigation opens up a series of discussions on politics, science, philosophy, and art. A key difference, *inter alia*, is in Melville's tone. In *Mardi*, the world map Melville projects is displayed confidently, declaring its truth vociferously to the reader. After the failure of *Mardi*, which forced Melville to return to the personal narrative form in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* ("two jobs," as he wrote to his father-in-law, "which I have done for the money — being forced to it as other men are to sawing wood" [*Correspondence* 138]), a humbler Melville was much more cautious. *Moby-Dick* would retain the ambition and scope, but would express doubt about the success of its project.⁵

This cartographic anxiety, as Derek Gregory has called it (73), forces Melville to explore the blank spaces of the map, seeking the truth in those extraterritorial zones that he would dub "true places," and trying to find a representational form that would allow him to realize his dream to become a master of "the great Art of Telling the Truth." For Melville, the Pacific provided the geographical space in which the truth — a comprehensive truth that would encompass political, scientific, and the aesthetic worlds — could be revealed; his experiences in the Pacific prompt both his understanding of the world and his craft of representing it. Melville's South Seas cartography registers his struggle to unite form and content. His fascination with blank spaces, true places, and representation opens up both the philosophical mediation on power in the world system, specifically with respect to the Pacific, and the originality of literary form visible in *Moby-Dick*.

Blank Spaces, or, the Terrain of Personal Narrative

Joseph Conrad, in his autobiographical reminiscences, expresses the romantic joy with which, as a youth, he had penciled in spaces that before were

blank on his maps. In "Geography and Some Explorers," Conrad writes of his fascination, first with polar geography, then with Africa, and the connection between the two otherwise dissimilar regions: big, white spaces. "And it was Africa, the continent out of which the Romans used to say some new thing was always coming, that got cleared of all the dull imaginary wonders of the dark ages, which were being replaced with exciting spaces of white." The youthful Conrad paid homage to the discoverers of the great lakes of Africa by "entering laboriously in pencil the outline of Tanganyika on my beloved old atlas, which, having been published in 1852, knew nothing, of course, of the Great Lakes. The heart of Africa was white and big" (19–20). For Conrad, the fascination that geography inspires is directly linked to a spirit of adventure; hence, blank spaces had a special allure:

It was 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now: "When I grow up I shall go *there*" . . . *there* being the region of Stanley Falls which in '68 was the blankest of blank spaces on the earth's figured surface. (*Personal Record* 203–204)

It is clear from Conrad's memoirs that his enthusiasm for geography, inspired above all by "blank spaces," was primarily motivated by a desire, as it were, to *un-blank* those spaces: to inscribe upon their blankness new lines and figures that come with truly *knowing* the place. "Fabulous geography," as Conrad calls it, filled the space representing unknown regions with various drawings, often of monstrous creatures, thereby masking the incomplete or downright erroneous knowledge of the area. Scientific geography — whose advent, according to Conrad, coincides with the discovery of the New World and whose spirit dominates nineteenth-century cartography — restores to maps the "honest" blankness of unknown regions. Such honest cartography, "registering the hard-won knowledge, but also in a scientific spirit recording the geographical ignorance of its time," inspired Conrad and served as a model for all knowledge acquisition.⁶

As Ahab's solitary study of the charts and log-books suggests, Melville's mapping project is also epistemic. Personal narratives are fundamentally about knowing, about discovering the unfamiliar and incorporating it into the known world — filling spaces that before were blank. In *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative*, Jonathan Arac writes that "personal narratives arise from and depend on displacement. . . . their intelligibility and force depend on the difference between the world that the reader knows, and reads within, and the world that the narrator has experienced" (76). The personal narrative form, which rose to prominence in the United States during the 1840s, is deeply

bound up in an excitement or curiosity about a "new world," a world which was to be incorporated into the overall system of political and geographic thinking; put more simply, narratives of the new world placed these regions firmly on the map. There are obvious affiliations between American personal narratives of the mid-nineteenth century and the numerous sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reports from the "New World," which were among the most popular works of literature at the time. As the European nation-state was consolidating its strength (in such places as Spain, the Netherlands, England and France), it was radiating its power outwards, as if by centrifugal force, to the "ends" of the earth and sea. This extraterritorial extension is not, however, secondary to the state's formation; rather, it is a key part of that formation (see Friedrich). Travelogue and utopian literature, the two forms which most directly address the new world phenomena and which are generically close relatives of personal narratives, play a significant part in the integration of the extraterritorial into the imaginary space of the still-forming nation-state, and thus may find themselves incorporated into national narrative as well. It is not surprising, then, that the personal narrative form achieves such popularity in the U.S. during the 1840s. Of course, many personal narratives antedate this moment and the territorial and extraterritorial expansion of the American national space had been well under way for some time, but this decade witnesses a remarkable stepping-up of the nation's own centrifugal forces, through direct appropriation of territory (specifically via the Mexican-American War, for instance, and more generally through the ideological power of Manifest Destiny), through major demographic shifts (a westering population, still largely only Midwestern, but typified by the California Gold Rush), and through mercantile and military exploits outside of North America, such as those chronicled in Melville's early works. It is within this national and international context that personal narratives emerged and flourished.

Related to its exploration of blank spaces, personal narrative also has a profoundly temporal dimension, albeit a dimension that refigures time, projecting temporality onto a spatial array. That is, the new world space to be integrated into the world of nations is understood as somehow frozen in the past, temporally displaced from the ongoing rush of history. As Arac puts it,

A generic appeal of personal narratives in their time and since is their registration of what seems to be a more archaic way of life, a virtual past achieved by travel in space rather than in time, but from the perspective of a narrator who is, like the readership, part of the modern world, making contact with that "other" world and transforming it while integrating it. Personal narratives may act thereby to colonize places and kinds of experience, which are then appropriated into national narrative. (77)

Thus the absorption of these places into the political geography of a world system involved, at least rhetorically, a sense of accelerating the historical development of these regions. This is a main idea of the *mission civilisatrice*: more than bringing salvation to heathens and developing markets or extracting natural resources (yet underlying these practices), the *idea* is that the geographically distant is also historically behind; it is the duty of the civilized to bring these others up to date.⁷ Personal narratives may mobilize this idea in a number of ways, and the narrative form is itself a way of accomplishing such colonization.

In Melville's personal narratives, the descriptive detail is typically interspersed with ironic asides in which the events, customs, or objects of the "exotic" sphere are correlated to those of the mainstream American culture. And Melville, of course, more often than not (at least in the South Pacific narratives) uses the foreign or the exotic to criticize mainstream America or Europe. One might call Melville's method *contrapuntal*, after Edward Said's use of this musicological term in *Culture and Imperialism*. The comparative analysis of cultures typifies Melville's approach throughout much of his career, and Melville frequently attempts to dismantle the opposition between "civilized" and "savage" that so characterizes narratives of the time. In *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville almost constantly bounces back and forth from citations of conventional U.S. or British manners or customs to descriptions of those he finds in the South Seas. This comparison by itself is not surprising, since the personal narrative form is designed to bring modern, "civilized" readers into contact with the remotely foreign culture, and this may be accomplished through analogy, by gesturing towards what the readers already know in order to show them the significant differences of that which is unknown or unfamiliar. But Melville does not so much accentuate the differential identities between the two groups; instead he often chooses to show that the identity is itself hybrid. That is, there is no truly *authentic* culture in Melville's work, notwithstanding numerous references to an idyllic scene or to one culture's adulteration of another. Certainly Melville decries the mistreatment of the Pacific peoples by European missionaries, merchants, and militaries,⁸ but it leads one astray to think of these abuses as the corruption of an otherwise "pure" people or culture. In fact, such thinking is more in line with that of the evangelical critics who worried that the pure of heart would be contaminated by books like *Typee* (see below). Whether dealing with "noble savages," like Mehevi or Kory-Kory, or such celebrated American heroes as John Paul Jones, Melville always affirms the inter-connectedness of civilization and savagery, and in so doing he gently mocks the ruling ethos of the *mission civilisatrice*.⁹ It is this sort of cultural relativism that aroused the ire of Melville's most ardent critics who

charged him with idealizing primitive cultures or "savageism" (see Leyda 211).

The contrapuntal approach highlights the degree to which these extraterritorial spaces were not really blank. As Melville takes pains to point out, the customs and mores of the Marquesans were as historically valid as those of the Americans were. If one could not find in these supposedly blank regions a clean slate, a fresh and unspoiled Eden, one could nevertheless seek a kind of authentic experience, something more real or more true than the experiences of the dominant metropolitan culture — a theme sounded loudly in Henry David Thoreau's personal narratives, for example. This concern for authentic truth is a defining characteristic of the personal narrative form, and this contributed in no small way to the form's popularity. As narratives of displacement from mainstream American life, providing detailed descriptions of worlds foreign to that of their readers, books like Melville's *Typee*, Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, or Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* offered vistas into experiences and places that were somehow more real, more *true* by virtue of the narrator's own authority, than the world to which the readers were accustomed.

True Places, or, the Limits of Personal Narrative

"Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down on any map; true places never are" ("Biographical" 55). Queequeg's biography offers one of many occasions in *Moby-Dick* for Melville to reflect on the inadequacy, if not downright impossibility, of representation. Indeed, this sense that the true cannot be adequately represented, here with direct reference to mapping, is a central feature of Melville's literary cartography. In his early works, Melville grappled with this problem, and the dynamic tension between a faithful recounting of facts and the need for speculative solutions to the crisis of representation animates his personal narratives. In a quite obvious sense, the *place* represented on the map is not *true*; there can be no perfectly mimetic image of the *topos* (Borges's fabled imperial cartographers notwithstanding). In *Redburn*, Melville had provided a comical example of confusing the map with the space it represents, as young Redburn "grows intolerably flat and stupid over some outlandish old guidebooks" while noticing that his map of Liverpool "bore not the slightest resemblance" to "the place itself" (218). The question, then, is how to depict "true places."

It is no accident that the geographical *locus classicus* of this cartographic anxiety is found, in Melville's works, in the South Seas. This "contact zone" (to use Mary Louise Pratt's term) presents greater than usual problems for the

literary cartographer. The sprawlingly expansive region is historically misrecognized, and therefore misrepresented; this is so in part because of the uncenteredness of the place, which, without clear representational focus, appears a kind of *no-place*. The utopian character of Melville's early personal narratives owes much to the utopian character of his subject — that is, the terrain to be mapped. In his lecture on "The South Seas," Melville notes that the very name of the ocean derives from a fundamental mistake owing to its discoverer's flawed perspective. As Melville states flatly,

"South Seas" is simply an equivalent term for "Pacific Ocean" But since these famous waters lie on both sides of the Equator and wash the far northern shores of Kamchatka as well as the far southern one of Tierra del Fuego, how did they ever come to be christened with such a misnomer as "South Seas"? The way it happened was thus: The Isthmus of Darien runs not very far from east to west; if you stand upon its further shore the ocean will appear *south* of you, and were you ignorant of the general direction of the coastline you would infer that it rolled away wholly towards that quarter. Now Balboa, the first white man who laid eyes upon these waters, stood in just this position; drew just this inference and bestowed its name accordingly. ("The South Seas" 410–411)

This passage points to a number of problems inherent to personal narrative, problems that would eventually lead Melville to abandon the form in favor of literary narrative.¹⁰ Personal narrative necessarily involves the individual subject to guarantee its authenticity, and the subject necessarily has an incomplete knowledge (in this case, of geography); moreover, this already incomplete knowledge is further limited by one's particular perspective: as in the case of Balboa's misprision, personal narrative requires a kind of ocular inspection that cannot really comprehend the geographic totality. Hence, the very *seeing*, which had been the authoritative sense (as with eyewitness testimony), becomes an impediment to the "true" representation; this reliance upon individual perspective distorts the truth. When Magellan redubbed the ocean "Pacific," it was merely because, having passed through the dangerous straits which bear his name, Magellan had the good fortune to encounter pleasant weather on the other side. "But the names were owing to first impressions, and the . . . great sea hence will forever be called Pacific, even by the sailor destined to perish in one of its terrible typhoons" (413). Melville's remarks suggest an ironic attitude: to have the authentic experience, you must go there yourself (that is, after all, what made Melville an authority on the South Seas in the first place); but personal experience inevitably provides erroneous or misleading information. One's knowledge must remain incomplete, and therefore untrustworthy.

Knowledge, or rather a certain kind of knowledge, seems to be the real subject of personal narratives. The word *narrative* derives from the Latin verb

narrō ("to make known," as well as "to tell or narrate"), itself closely related to the adjective *gnarus*, or "knowing," which in turn derives from the Greek *gnosis* ("knowledge"). Notably Arac points out this etymological background in the chapter devoted to *personal* narratives (76). Personal narratives are expected to be *true*: so stringent is this requirement that, famously, the manuscript for *Typee* was rejected by Harper and Brothers on the grounds that "it was impossible that it could be true and *therefore* was without real value" (Leyda 196, emphasis supplied). This from the publishers of Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*!¹¹ As is well known, the initial controversy surrounding *Typee* was over its veracity. Melville's London publisher demanded documentation; many reviewers, mostly favorable in their estimation of the narrative, nevertheless concluded that *Typee* cannot have been a true story; and the hubbub over the text's "truth" only settled down after Richard Tobias, Toby of the narrative, emerged in Buffalo and vouched for Melville's account.

Why such concern over the truthfulness of this book? A standard, if partial, answer is that fiction or "romance" had but little value for the readership of the day, a plausible explanation but one whose force is undermined by the generally enthusiastic response to the novels of a Cooper or a Dickens, not to mention the immense popularity of works by Hawthorne's "damned mob of scribbling women." The controversy over *Typee's* veracity is related to a secondary, but no less impassioned, controversy. Tobias's credibility-restoring letter to the editor of the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser* (published July 1, 1846) points to this. Referring to a review of *Typee* in the *New York Evangelist*, Tobias writes: "The *Evangelist* speaks rather disparagingly of the book as being too romantic to be true, and as being too severe on the missionaries. But to my object: I am the true and veritable 'Toby,' yet living, and I am happy to testify to the entire accuracy of the work" (Leyda 220). The question of the narrative's truthfulness is thus complicated with the direct critique in the text of the baleful effects of the evangelical civilizing mission. If *Typee* be mere romance, then — so the anonymous *Evangelist* reviewer suggests — its critical "slurs and flings against missionaries and civilization" (211) should not be taken seriously.

Of course, *Typee* and Melville's other personal narratives *are* largely fictional. Though they are loosely based on personal, lived experience, Melville by no means attempts to set forth "just the facts." On the contrary, it is clear that far more fiction than fact pervades these narratives.¹² Yet, unlike Hawthorne, who peremptorily (in the prefaces to his romances) defends his work against those who would read them as "true," Melville faces the readers and critics as a "truth-teller" (even when he exaggerates the truth quite a bit). Hawthorne's prefaces have a rather defensive tone, warning the reader not to

connect the story with any “real world” experience. For example, in the preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, a novel based in part on his experiences at the Brook Farm commune, Hawthorne writes:

In short, his [i.e. the author’s] present concern with the socialist community is merely to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of his brain may play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual event of real lives. In old countries, with which fiction has long been conversant, a certain conventional privilege seems to be awarded to the romancer; his work is not put side by side with nature; and he is allowed license with regard to every-day probability, in view of the improved effects which he is bound to produce thereby. Among ourselves, on the contrary, there is as yet no such Faery Land, so like the real world, that, in a suitable remoteness, one cannot well tell the difference, but with an atmosphere of strange enchantment, beheld through which the inhabitants have a propriety of their own. This atmosphere is what the American romancer needs. In its absence, the beings of imagination are compelled to show themselves in the same category as actually living mortals; a necessity that generally renders the paint and pasteboard of their composition but too painfully discernible. (21–22)

This passage, similar to Hawthorne’s other disclaimers,¹³ delineates a crucial distinction between what Arac calls *literary narrative* and other narrative forms. Hawthorne seems to imagine two kinds of unsympathetic reader: one who will find fault with the work for its not being realistic enough, and who will thus criticize the plot for its improbability and the characters for their “paint and pasteboard” composition; and another who will charge that the book aims at fact (and fails to reach the mark) or deliberately misrepresents real people and places, a form of perjury or a “literary crime.” These are the same readers with whom Melville had to deal, and the initial criticism of *Typee* reflects this: either the story is too improbable to be true (as Harper and Brothers and many reviewers thought), or it is an attempt to slander real people (as the *Evangelist* review suggested).

T. Walter Herbert reads Melville’s *Typee* as a romance rather than as a strictly personal narrative; Herbert argues that the romantic impulse is by nature geared towards undermining established values — in this case, religious authority, though it is but a short jump from the religious to the juridico-political authorities of an increasingly dominant (and increasingly secular) nationalism. In *Marquesan Encounters*, Herbert maintains that *Typee*’s “romantic” character represented the greatest danger to the dominant social values, a greater danger perhaps than even the direct attack on those values:

At stake in the *Evangelist*’s suspicion that *Typee* is “sheer romance” is the effort of orthodox believers to keep their systems of interpreting moral reality firmly in place. The imaginative freedom of romance, which permits alternative ways of viewing experience to be indulged, threatens to under-

mine the absolute authority that the orthodox ascribed to their moral vision. The deviant forms of thought and behavior represented by romances may describe things that really happen among men, but they should only be acknowledged in the act of arresting or condemning them: they "should be known only to the police." (183-184)

This view of romance does not draw a distinct line between fact and fiction or between the imaginary and the real, as Hawthorne's disclaimers try to do, but rather, romance is here viewed as another, competing form of knowledge-production and dissemination, a form which cannot be trusted when in the wrong hands.

This digression on romance leads me to a paradox: on the one hand, the personal narrative form can be subversive because it is true, an authoritative setting forth of facts, facts that in turn might fly in the face of reigning myths developed in order to hold together a certain vision of society;¹⁴ on the other hand, Melville's personal narratives are also romantic, or at least they may function as romances, and hence they could be viewed as presenting false or misleading information to a reading public whose imagination is stirred by the "pretty lies" of fiction. Whether one is faithfully recounting matters of fact or creating a "theatre" where imaginary characters "may play their phantasmagorical antics," you're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Melville was to find personal narrative's injunction to tell the truth onerous, even though few writers of the mid-nineteenth century could be said to be more concerned with "truth-telling" than he. As a young man, Melville fancied that he had found true places in the South Seas. For Melville, *truth* is always related to *space*, and consequently, the ascertaining of truth, and truth-telling or narrative, are imagined as geographic or cartographic enterprises. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses," Melville writes: "You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the Truth in; especially, when it seems to have an aspect of newness, as America did in 1492, though it was just as old, and perhaps older than Asia, only those sagacious philosophers, the common sailors, had never seen it before; swearing it was all water and moonshine there" (246). If the Pacific contact zone, containing a great deal of water and moonshine, offered Melville a *place* for telling the Truth, literary narrative would present the *form* for telling it. Notwithstanding the clear success he had enjoyed with *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville turned away from the personal narrative form with *Mardi*, an audaciously ambitious romance, set at first in the South Seas but quickly launching into a global circumnavigation. By its attempt, Melville was indicating that the space of his literary narrative was far larger than local or national space.¹⁵ Such a geography would have to go well beyond a narrator's personal experience. The scope would have to be much greater than that which could be seen with the naked eye.

Literary Cartography

The adventurous and scientific spirit that made Conrad pore over the big, white spaces of his "honest" maps, inscribing true places into the spaces that before were blank, is not unlike the spirit animating the literary writer. Both geographer and writer work with imaginary and real materials, raise questions of scope and scale, decide how much detail to include, and so on. Peter Turchi has suggested that all writing is essentially a form of mapmaking, and the writer is thus a cartographer. In Melville's case, the personal narrative form proved inadequate to the task he had set for himself, which involves a comprehensive, global representation. For Melville, the true map would come from literary narrative.

The personal narrative form, depending as it does on the eyewitness account of a single narrative voice, is really more of an itinerary than a map, strictly speaking. This distinction is made by Fredric Jameson in his discussion of cognitive mapping, specifically with respect to Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City*. Lynch had described the sense of alienation felt by individuals in modern cities, particularly those cities that had no clearly recognizable landmarks by which to orient oneself. The ability to map one's environment cognitively would seem to solve that problem. As Jameson puts it, "Disalienation in the traditional city . . . involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (*Postmodernism* 51). But Jameson notes that, in Lynch's formulation, this activity is really "precartographic," resulting in an itinerary rather than a map. Itineraries are "diagrams organized around the still subject-centered or existential journey of the traveler, along which various significant key features are marked" (52). In contrast, maps employing artistic and technical practices (for example, using such tools as the compass and the sextant) introduce a relationship with a non-subjective totality: "cognitive mapping in the broader sense comes to require the coordination of existential data (the empirical position of the subject) with un-lived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality" (52). Finally, with the developments of the globe and the Mercator projection, cartography involves more directly the question of representation itself; that is, mapmaking abandons its "naively mimetic" aspirations in favor of more complicated meditations on representational form. "At this point it becomes clear that there can be no true maps (at the same point it also becomes clear that there can be scientific progress, or better still, a dialectical advance, in the various historical moments of mapmaking)" (52).

Jameson's brief sketch of the history of cartography highlights an issue that Melville was grappling with in his own work: how to connect the individual experience of the world with a larger totality. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville clearly endeavors to go beyond the limits of his earlier personal narratives. The personal narrative that appears to begin with the words "Call me Ishmael" is quickly revealed to be a ruse. As I have suggested elsewhere, such a narrative is overwhelmed by the world system projected throughout the novel, where boundaries are forever crossed, frames perforated, and explanatory categories rendered inadequate (Tally). In attempting to create a comprehensive work, one that could encompass the entire world, Melville had to alter the form and the content of his writing. He had to develop a literary narrative that veered from the truth-telling rules of personal narrative, while projecting a world system beyond any one Ishmael's ken. This would involve excess, exaggeration, and speculation. Melville decided that, to get at the truth, one must abandon one's allegiance to the straightforward setting forth of facts.

The Mercator projection offers an interesting analogy. Mercator's projection was used to produce his influential world map in 1569. Famously (or infamously), the Mercator projection distorted the geographic spaces it purported to represent; objects appeared larger the further they were from the equator, thus making the landmasses near the North Pole grotesquely aggrandized. The Mercator projection is responsible for those maps depicting Greenland as roughly the size of South America, even though it is actually about one-sixth the size of the southern continent. Although such a map may have benefited Eurocentrism in the long run, Mercator's own goal was somewhat more prosaic. The projection was developed in order to solve the technical and practical problem of transferring curved space to a flat chart. This is not merely a mathematical and artistic issue, but essential one for confident navigation over long distances. With maps using the Mercator projection, sailors could set a course using straight lines, thus establishing truer courses. Obviously those navigators would realize that the map was not "true," in the sense of mimetically accurate in its depiction of the places figured on its surface. The fictional map, however, provided the better view of the world.

Melville's literary cartography, like Mercator's, requires the intervention of fancy, of imaginative or speculative writing that looked rather different from the work which preceded it. It is almost a cliché to say that fiction presents a greater truth than fact. But Melville's development of a literary narrative form enabled him to attempt the project that he felt necessary for accomplishing the great Art of Telling the Truth. Like Hawthorne, Melville needed to create a world apart; yet, unlike Hawthorne, who seemed content to present the roadside theater, Melville was to remain assiduously in the world, insisting on the

necessity of a global, comprehensive mapping project, while agonizing over the inevitability of his failure. In another letter to Hawthorne, written after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, Melville sighs, "As long as we have anything more to do, we have done nothing" (*Correspondence* 213). Melville peers into the blank spaces of his map, like the white pages of the manuscript not yet written and like the inscrutable white skin of Moby Dick himself, etches into them lines in spaces that before were blank, and emerges with a form suitable for representing the unrepresentable. There can be no true maps. But through the patient, meticulous writing and rewriting, there can be infinite mappings.

Notes

1. For the convenience of readers with other editions of *Moby-Dick*, I will provide chapter titles as well as page numbers.

2. Stewart relied mostly on what he called "internal evidence" (418) — i.e., close reading of the text — to develop his theory, and Harrison Hayford has since debunked it by showing that the early chapters were revised many times in the course of Melville's writing.

3. Among the examples that leap to mind, Queequeg's tattooing and the transcription of his tattoos onto his "coffin" or canoe, the narrator's comment (in "A Bower in the Arsacides") that, in taking down the measurements of a whale on his arm, the only parchment available, he was "crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was composing — at least, what untattooed parts might remain" (451), and most notably perhaps, the great blankness of the whale itself, on whose blank page is inscribed, literally, a history of its battles (e.g., in "The Blanket"), and figuratively, the multitude of meanings, some of which are mentioned in "The Whiteness of the Whale."

4. For a reading of "Etymology" in relation to the novel as a whole, see my "Anti-Ishmael: Novel Beginnings in *Moby-Dick*."

5. In the same letter to Lemuel Shaw, Melville says of *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, "my only desire for their 'success' (as it is called) springs from my pocket, & not from my heart. So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to 'fail'" (*Correspondence* 139).

6. "[M]ap-gazing, to which I became addicted so early, brings the problems of the great spaces of the earth into stimulating and direct contact with sane curiosity and gives an honest precision to one's imaginative faculty. And the honest maps of the nineteenth century nourished in me a passionate interest in the truth of geographical facts and a desire for precise knowledge which was extended later into other subjects" ("Geography and Some Explorers" 19).

7. Conrad again: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to . . ." (*Heart of Darkness* 9).

8. A telling example may be found in Melville's scathing line stating that the "small remnant of the natives [of Honolulu] had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden" (*Typee* 196); Melville suggests here and elsewhere that the savagery or barbarism of the populations on the islands is the direct result of a civilizing mission, rather than the prerequisite for it.

9. Noticing the strange tattoos on John Paul Jones's arm, Israel Potter muses: "broaches and finger-rings, not less than nose-rings and tattooing, are tokens of the primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind, civilized or uncivilized" (76). *Moby-Dick's* Queequeg is the most obvious example; a South Seas "cannibal," he can nevertheless be compared to no less a figure than the most heroic of all Americans: "Queequeg was George Washington cannibalistically developed" ("A Bosom Friend" 50).

10. I am using the term *literary narrative* in a somewhat technical sense, following Jonathan Arac's usage in *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative, 1820-1860*. Arac distinguishes literary narrative from other narrative forms (notably national, local, and personal narratives) which were more prominent in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Literary narratives were marked by aesthetic innovation, creativity, and originality. Irony, ambiguity, and a sort of philosophical distance from current events are often typical features of literary narratives. *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick* are examples. Unlike such personal narratives as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* or such national narratives as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, these literary narratives avoid taking direct stands on issues of national importance. A fictional intermediary such as Ishmael could not be assumed to be a role model or an alter ego of the author. The elliptical, ironic or ambiguous narration means that the reader cannot always be sure what is meant, and the reading may require active interpretation. In other words, literary narrative required not only a certain kind of writer, but a new kind of reader, one trained to recognize "genius" in what is new or unfamiliar. Although today's readers understand the literary narratives to be the great (if not the greatest) works of the nineteenth century, in their own time they were considered odd. The poetic freedoms gained in literary narratives sometimes came at the cost of popular readership, as Melville and Hawthorne knew and lamented.

11. There is a question here of what "real value" could mean to the editorial council at Harper and Brothers. Apparently the "first copy reader" liked *Typee* very much, asserting that "this work if not as good as Robinson Crusoe seems to me not far behind it" (Leyda 196). But "real value" was also determined by the pressures of the market; Harper leaped at the chance to publish *Omoo*, "a new work from the graphic pen of Mr. Melville, of *Typee* celebrity" (230, 235).

12. Twentieth-century Melville criticism and scholarship has had a hard time dealing with this matter. Early biographers, such as Raymond Weaver, took *Typee*, for instance, more or less at its word, and read the personal narratives as straight-forward, autobiographical accounts. Herschel Parker has explicitly criticized this practice, but even his monumental *Herman Melville* quotes the personal narratives at length as evidence of Melville's lived experiences. But an essentially celebratory stance towards Melville required that he be seen as a great *literary* artist, who does not confine his art to facts. Hence the dilemma for critics: Melville's personal narratives must be both true accounts (to ensure their authority) and fictional or romantic (to ensure that they be valued as imaginative works of literature).

13. In *The Marble Faun*, Hawthorne discovers that desirable "Faery Land" in Italy and asserts that the romance may escape the "insisted upon" actualities of life. In the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne distinguishes between the Romance and the Novel:

the romancer "wishes to claim a certain latitude" unavailable to the novelist, who "is presumed to aim at fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience." The romancer is not so limited; if he be wise, he will not abuse this right, but he "can hardly be said, however, to commit a literary crime, even if he disregard this caution" (1).

14. This aspect of personal narrative is precisely the point in such overtly political works as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. Melville's own *White-Jacket* was cited in debates on reforming military punishments (specifically with respect to the practice of flogging).

15. Franco Moretti has included *Moby-Dick* among his "world texts, whose geographical frame of reference is no longer the nation-state, but a broader entity — a continent, or the world-system as a whole" (*Modern Epic* 50).

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