Précis: This thesis conducts “post-human” readings of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, searching for interactions between humans, animals, and machines that result in fundamental and often mutual changes to their modes of existence. It analyzes these interactions through a machine-like lens of “automata,” emphasizing the hidden forms of agency exhibited by traditionally disempowered, non-human subjects, especially whales. Because the characters of *Moby-Dick* each occupy distinct roles within multiple social, economic, and physiological power structures, this post-human repositioning leads to an array of unique “assemblages” of human and non-human bodies and ontologies. These emergent collections of entities demonstrate both individual and group agency and purpose (“telos”), informing our understanding of the novel’s descriptions, characterizations, and narrative developments accordingly.
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Introduction

This thesis is concerned with post-human readings of *Moby-Dick* (1851), including the breakdown of discrete boundaries between human, animal, and machine. *Post-humanism* is fundamentally “a rejection of the old classical insistence that ‘man is the measure of all things’” (Paes de Barros 55), offering us a vision of *Moby-Dick* that is not centered around human definitions of identity, agency, and power. Instead, it seeks to better integrate these notions into active conceptualizations of animals, tools, and matter. I investigate the interplay between *Moby-Dick*’s human and non-human entities within *subject–object relationships*—how they dynamically show malleability, movement, and role reversal as they interact. The resulting entities are characterized by a free-form *ontology* (manner of existence) that may not be exactly human nor inhuman, but an entirely new category: post-human.

I am also concerned with the agency these subjects and objects exercise as and after they become post-human, the *telos* (purpose) of these broken-down subjects and objects, and their senses of self within the overarching narrative of their existences. The term *telos* offers a convenient way to embed a pseudo-narrative structure in both animate and inanimate entities. Alasdair MacIntyre states that for the “narrative” of a person’s life to have meaning to themselves, it must have some “point [or] movement towards a climax or a *telos*” (217).

*Moby-Dick* is flush with characters for whom this theory is reality: Captain Ahab, for example, makes it his sole mission in life to slay the whale Moby Dick in revenge for biting off his leg.

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1 “Ontology” is the study of existence, so we can call “human ontology” the manner of existence that humans express or embody, including their biology, psychology, and lifestyle.

2 From the Greek τέλος, often used by Aristotle, referring to an end, purpose, or goal: “Further, the Final cause of a thing is an end, and is such that it does not happen for the sake of some thing else, but all other things happen for its sake” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2.994b).
My argument is that by describing entity interactions in a postmodern subject–object dichotomy, we can understand many subjects (characters) of *Moby-Dick* as biological and pseudo-mechanical *automata*—entities which can *act* in and of themselves and which have some self-defined or imposed *telos*. The language of subjects and objects crystallizes the power dynamics of these automata and allows us to focus on the way they exercise their agency in pursuit of an end. Subject–object interactions are often reflexive in unpredictable ways, leading to complicated and often mutually reliant relationships and conglomerations of figures. An automaton is mechanical in how it operates to turn its figurative “gears,” consume fuel, and allow itself to reach some objective—like an engine’s pistons firing to lurch it forward. Automata become post-human as they embody literal and metaphorical machines while engaging with or simulating human ontologies, taking the places of and/or fully “mantling” the objects they act upon. They restructure themselves, switch roles with each other, and combine to identify as new automata called *assemblages*, which have different and more complex ontologies.

The agency and *telea* of post-human automata as individual or collective subjects are variable; the liminal identity and status of such a subject implies a change in their *telos* over time. Assemblages can accommodate the agency of their constituent parts while also giving life to an emergent will. An entity’s shift in purpose and identity may occur once, several times, or continue endlessly as characters act and inter-react in different contexts. Some of this interplay even supersedes an entity’s *telos* in favor of an alternative one, especially within hierarchical power dynamics like those between a ship’s captains, mates, and crew. In these situations, the engine may pause, stop, or explode to correspondingly alter the nature of the automaton.

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3 “Mantle” as in “take up the mantle of” and/or “become.” See: Elijah in 1 Kings 19:19–21 and 2 Kings 2:13–14. See also: “walk like them until they must walk like you” (Michael Kirkbride, “Nu-Hatta of the Sphinxmoth Inquiry Tree”), as in to take up and eventually define a role.

4 I pluralize *telos* as *telea* rather than *teloi* or *teloses*, as it more closely resembles the Greek τέλη (*tēlē*), and *tele* looks singular in English (Expedito et al.).
I focus on understanding whales, humans, and social superstructures as automata. In particular, I explore the post-human meaning of Ahab’s injury by Moby Dick (and his subsequent ontology as part human and part whale), his interactions with the crew and the instruments of the ship, and his monomaniacal quest to enact revenge. Within the industrial paradigm of the whaling industry, Ahab’s telos re-establishes the mechanical framework of the voyage as a simultaneously personal, human, and inhuman retribution against the White Whale; warps reality; and challenges his implicit assertions of creation and control over his own destiny. Other characters, including Ishmael and the whales the Pequod hunts, also experience multiple redistributions of power, placement, and agency across the narrative. These processes demonstrate the complex, non-static web of interpersonal and structural power dynamics in Moby-Dick.
The Automaton; or, the Engine

Melville quotes Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651) in the “Extracts” of *Moby-Dick*: “For by Art is created that great Leviathan, called a Commonwealth or State—(in Latin, Civitas) which is but an artificial man” (9). Hobbes chooses this metaphor for the ideal political state because the leviathan embodies physical immensity more than anything else alive—and the state is a kind of pseudo-living creature that imitates the movements and form of humankind. Thus the state, to Hobbes, is two things: part monster (in its size) and part human (in its motion). But the original quotation in the *Leviathan* suggests further connections between state, monster, and human:

“Nature (the Art whereby God hath made and governes the World) is by the Art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an Artificial Animal. For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs, the begining whereof is in some principal part within; why may we not say, that all Automata (Engines that move themselves by springs and wheeles as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the Heart, but a Spring; and the Nerves, but so many Strings; and the Joynts, but so many Wheeles, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer? Art goes yet further, imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, Man. For by Art is created that great Leviathan called a Common-wealth, or State, (in latine Civitas) which is but an Artificiall Man…” (9).

Hobbes argues that all “automata” possess some form of life. This term comes from the Ancient Greek *automatos*, meaning “self-acting, thinking, animated, willing” (Etymology Dictionary); Hobbes describes them as “engines that move themselves.” Whether the life-force of an automatic creature originates from God or the art of human invention is irrelevant to Hobbes’ metaphor because, in this context, the *imitation* of life is as significant as life itself. Artificial
engines are not soulless husks of material but rather automata expressing vitality. If we anthropocentrically take the artificial engine to be “dead” by definition—inert and implicitly lacking agency—we overlook the many ways in which it parallels human initiative. The state is not biologically alive, and yet its limbs routinely influence individual and societal behaviors far beyond what any one person could do; the automaton of the economic state, for example, powers the sub-automaton of the whaling industry, the premise of *Moby-Dick*.

The American whaling venture in 1851 is enormous. The United States’ continental expansion, population growth, and emerging consumer class nourishes an overwhelming demand for sperm oil for use as a machine lubricant in industrial factories, fuel for household candles, and ingredients in textiles and household products. The ideology imbued in the *capitalistic automaton* values an ideal of “human progress” that is synonymous with economic development, technological advancement, and abandonment of traditional ways of life. In fact, industrialization becomes the overwhelming purpose and mission\(^5\) of upper American society:

> “Melville writes in the mid-nineteenth century, when confidence in economic development is at its highest, [and] the prevailing icons are strong-willed men who seize the land and gut the forests. These men, like Ahab, seem to be impervious to enjoyment and blind to everything but their pursuit, undaunted by fear or sympathy, and or confident that their will coincides with human destiny” (Ruggiero 98).

The *whaling automaton* is an extension of its capitalistic parent engine; the “exploitative, unsympathetic labor practices” (Schuller 5) of the era certainly extended to the harvesting of spermaceti at sea. While Ishmael spends much of the voyage idle, he also details the gruesome, systematic process of killing and processing whales. Both the scale of death and the bodily intimacy in which the sailors engage with the whales (and their carcasses) are impossibly

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\(^5\) In this context, humanity’s *telos* is or aligns with continued economic and technological advancement.
vast—they are only possible to actualize through an industrial imperative. In “Stubb Kills a Whale,” Ishmael witnesses a leviathanic spout of death as the whale chokes on its own blood:

“...the whale once more rolled out into view; surging from side to side; spasmodically dilating and contracting his spout-hole, with sharp, cracking, agonized respirations. At last, gush after gush of clotted red gore...shot into the frightened air; and falling back again, ran dripping down his motionless flanks into the sea. His heart had burst!” (Melville 222).

When the beast is dead, the sailors set up an elaborate system of tackles and hooks and methodically haul up pieces of the whale, each a “blood-dripping mass” (Melville 233). In the try-works of the ship, where strips of blubber are cooked to extract the valuable oil, the boiling try-pots emit “smoke [that] is horrible to inhale, and inhale it you must, and not only that, but you must live in it for the time. [...] It smells like the left wing of the day of judgment; it is an argument for the pit.” (Melville 312). Ishmael describes the blubber processing as hellish—all but unlivable—and yet the entire process is careful, organized, and efficient. It is utilitarian; the financial impulse behind the voyage means the whalers kill at this scale for economy, not sport, and are constantly aware of the pressure of the automaton looming over them. Even Ahab, in spite of his burning desire to kill Moby Dick specifically, is careful not to forget the “collateral prosecution of the voyage” (Melville 168). He fears revolt if he redirects the Pequod from its economic telos and toward his own. In wholly giving themselves over to the industrial demand for oil, the sailors forgo emotional intimacy with the whale as a species; their intimacy is with the factory. They violently familiarize themselves with the whale’s physical interior—blubber, blood, intestines, gears, springs, and all, but not with the whale as a functioning automaton. For their purposes it is merely an object, inert and destined to be taken apart by humans and re-manufactured as a product for the sake of the industrial machine.
Unlike industry, the leviathanic monster—to Melville, the whale—is biologically alive. If we consider the whale or a human a natural automaton, it is also a natural engine. Under Hobbes’ definition, not only does the engine power the automaton, but the engine constitutes the automaton in its entirety; or, more accurately, the automaton constitutes the whole of the engine. When the leviathan moves, its gears, wheels, and joints move as a collective body—and so too does its being, or its “artificial life.” The engine is not subordinate to the leviathan; it is the leviathan. The engine provides self-locomotion but also self-sustenance, self-regulation, and self-will. These characteristics enable it to demonstrate individual agency, “endowing a commodified animal with subjectivity” (Schuller 6) in the case of the whale, which experiences the world personally and uniquely. We can think of the engine’s “soul” as the emergent sum of its wants, decisions, body, and motions. Its metaphysical essence as a self-operating machine or automaton is identical to every aspect of its ontology as a whale.

This sailors’ treatment of the whale as a commodity rather than a self-defined creature speaks to their broader rejection of sentience having essential, inalienable value in any living thing—it is easily defeated by an economic objective. This is appropriately demonstrated in “The Castaway,” when Stubb, irritated at having to set loose a whale in order to rescue Pip, crudely invokes his monetary value if he were enslaved: “We can’t afford to lose whales by the likes of you; a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama” (Melville 307). The second time Pip leaps from the boat, Stubb abandons him outright. To the mates of the voyage, the dividing line between saving and leaving a castaway is not predicated on the castaway’s human ontology but rather on their immediate benefit to the economic automaton, and any cost incurred by rescuing them. Melville continues, “though man loves his fellow, yet man is a

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6 I visualize the “engine” as something conceptually resembling the grotesquely industrial and semi-living locomotive fortress depicted in Howl’s Moving Castle (Hayao Miyazaki, 2004). It may or may not also physically resemble it, but the point is that it has a complex, liminal presence.
money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence” (307). The automaton that is the whaling industry has embedded itself in the whaler’s psyche, at the expense of all those who obstruct it.

Kyla Schuller argues that *Moby-Dick*’s commentary on the whaling industry reveals “the contradictions between the virtuous emotional ideals and compromising material demands” (Schuller 5) of the early United States. The whale is a living creature with enough agency to be easily personified, and this ought to necessitate the same inalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” that humans give themselves. The sailors of the *Pequod* never fully reach this conclusion. Ishmael frequently gives human characteristics to the whale in his descriptions, but his anthropomorphizing observations do not stop him from continuing to obey the industry’s demands; he is still a whaler killing whales for profit. The sailors only truly recognize the leviathan’s agency when they are literally unable to contribute to the economic automaton or when something about it so tangibly overpowers them that they forget their abstract mission.

In one such moment, when a failed darting rips a hole in the whaleboat, “it almost seemed that some spell had suddenly domesticated [the whales]. Queequeg patted their foreheads; Starbuck scratched their backs with his lance…” (Melville 289). Here, as the sailors are physically unable to continue their hunt and their small boat floats relatively helplessly in the midst of a “grand armada” of whales, they participate in an intimate exchange with the whales as creatures—not objects. They see mothers nursing newborn calves, some with an umbilical cord still attached: “Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond. We saw young Leviathan amours in the deep” (Melville 290). This scene offers a recognition not just of the whale’s brutish beauty, but also of its parental compassion and
“peaceful concernments” (Melville 290). Time almost stops as something serene awakens inside Ishmael: “while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy” (Melville 290). The outside world does not matter. The whales take the sailors completely beyond the sphere of the capitalistic automaton they have so long been beholden to and into their own sphere. The sailors are entranced by what they see in the nursery because it parallels their own lives and modes of being in a radically different setting; it inspires them. From this perspective, the whale is just as valuable an entity in its essence as the sailors are in theirs.
The Whale; or, Moby Dick

Hobbes’ mechanical leviathan is a beast no matter what form it takes, whether political, industrial, or biological. The final, literal category is the root of human understanding of life but can also be the most visibly hostile to us as a species. Humans nominally design their “Artificial Animals” for subservience: a state to enforce law and an economy to support it. Set loose, these automata develop various emergent behaviors, but their telos is still of human origin. By contrast, the biological automaton in general has its own “certain aims and goals” (MacIntyre 148) and is not necessarily interested in acceding to the anthropocene and its automata.

Melville’s concern is with the whale. This is a complex living organism with its own history, routine, and preferences, which are generally peaceful unless provoked; Moby Dick in particular represents a potentially violent challenge to human dominance at sea. According to Paes de Barros, “Melville's whale possesses an agency equal to our own” (54). This agency manifests most immediately as movement. The automaton is “self-thinking” and “self-animating”; its natural state is almost always transitory, traveling from one part of the ocean to another. The firing pistons and rotating axles of the whale-engine propel it forward, giving it the experiential knowledge that cements its agency as a subject.

The whale maintains its enormous stature through its skeleton, a series of bones and “joynts” which, attached to flesh, allow it to swim. Ishmael derives his knowledge of the whale skeleton partially by “breaking the seal and reading all the contents” (Melville 330) of a whale cub once brought aboard the ship. He uses the language of a book to describe the beast; to the human observer, the lifeless corpse of a dead whale is a reliable document from which authentic meaning may be obtained. In “Writ in Water: The Books of Moby-Dick,” Wyn Kelley compares
the wake of the whale in the sea to *Moby-Dick* (the text) itself: each is “a fluid object and owes its genesis to fluid, not fixed sources” (395). She writes that Moby Dick (the whale) is, through the “evanescent” (Melville 397) trail he leaves in the water, the true author of the text. The wake signifies physical authorship while maintaining the slippery and malleable physical qualities of the water on which it is written. But the whale in general is also its own author—through motion, the whale writes its personal narrative. Ishmael’s metaphor of the whale as a book suggests that the reader of such a text can identify the interior experience of the author. By reading the whale, one reads the “book”; a history more tangible than the wake. However, the still corpse of the whale is no automaton; no engine. Unable to move, the corpse is not “self-acting,” and is therefore a necessarily incomplete narrative.

Yet a post-human, non-automatic reading would suggest that there is more to the automaton than movement. The whale’s bones are a unique part of its body for their resilience against the destructive power of entropy. While flesh rots and oil burns, the bones of the whale remain essentially as they are. In Chapter 102, “A Bower in the Arsacides,” Ishmael recounts his visit to the reconstructed skeleton of a whale some time ago washed upon the shore of the island:

“The ribs were hung with trophies; the vertebrae were carved with Arsacidean annals, in strange hieroglyphics; in the skull, the priests kept up an unextinguished aromatic flame, so that the mystic head against sent forth its vapory spout; while, suspended from a bough, the terrific lower jaw vibrated over all the devotees, like the hair-hung sword that so affrighted Damocles” (Melville 330).

The story of the whale continues in its bones, albeit in a different form. After the whale dies, its “wake” continues to ripple through its own body because in writing its narrative, the whale is also writing itself—the subject writes the object writes the subject. The wake now also refers to the whale’s metaphysical funeral; of the transfer of authorship from one subject to another. Here,
the new author is actually many authors: the court of king Tranquo, members of which have moved the skeleton away from the sea and to the glen “Pupella”; who have decorated the bones with hanging ornaments, carved drawings and writings, and candles. The whale’s new authors disagree about the story: Ishmael witnesses a “fierce contest” (Melville 331) between the priests over the whale’s measurements. Evidently, the automaton’s history and ontology need more than one perspective to be reliable. The story of the leviathan, or at least this leviathan, decentralizes and becomes just as much the story of the Arsacides as the whale.

But while the whale yet lives, it manages to pen its narrative by means of a powerful double-fluked tail. These “wheele[s]” propel the engine forward and, through this motion, allow the whale to find sustenance in the ocean and continue with its life’s forward trajectory. Ishmael states in “The Tail” that:

“…the whole bulk of the leviathan is knit over with a warp and woof of muscular fibres and filaments, which passing on either side the loins and running down into the flukes, insensibly blend with them, and largely contribute to their might; so that in the tail the confluent measureless force of the whole whale seems concentrated to a point. Could annihilation occur to matter, this were the thing to do it” (Melville 281).

Ishmael is entranced not only with the strength of the tail, but also the grace with which the whale utilizes these intertwined muscles and tendons. In his view, much of the whale’s beauty derives from its strength. When the whale swims, “infantileness of ease undulates through a Titanism of power,” whether “in sport, or in earnest, or in anger” (Melville 281). The whale’s two large side-fins allow it to change direction, the rudders of the biological ship. While Ishmael appreciates the natural beauty of the whale’s motion, this motion also has a great potential for violence in a confrontation with humans. A single strike can destroy a whaleboat. Ishmael is especially taken with the peaking of the flukes: “Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic
tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven” (Melville 283). The point at which the flukes are most visible and most emotionally powerful corresponds to the moment the whale becomes least accessible, when it dives deep into the sea. This inaccessibility manifests both industrially and spiritually: one cannot kill a whale that is too deep to harpoon, and one also cannot recognize the aesthetic beauty of a whale that remains hidden by the darkness of the ocean.

The tail is therefore important to the engine for several reasons: it provides the immediate force behind the whale’s self-locomotion, it serves as a physical defense mechanism against human attacks, and its operation inspires a deep sense of respect in onlookers. The latter quality is not significant enough for the whaling enterprise to find a different fuel source, but it gives Ishmael some pause. The “flukes” of the whaling vessel are perhaps its masts and sails; and it is a terrible sight for the sails of the ship to be submerged. While the whale’s dive gives it an opportunity for continued life—a chance to acquire food, or an escape from a threat on the surface—the ship’s dive spells certain doom. As attractive as it may be, the ship cannot possess the same level of grace in motion as the whale because its beauty only extends to its operation as a whaling vessel. The whale can jump, turn, play, and dive; the ship can either sail (and kill) or sink (and be killed). Its narrative relative to the whale is not one of beauty, but of industrialized violence.

The whale’s eyes give it the means to discern its surroundings. However, Ishmael states that the whale’s subjective qualia of experience in the world is fundamentally unlike that of its human counterpart: “Now, from this peculiar sideway position of the whale’s eyes, it is plain that he can never see an object which is exactly ahead, no more than he can one exactly astern.” Melville describes the body of the whale using imagery of the maritime vessel: the whale’s blind
spots are “ahead” and “astern.” The engine is not all-seeing and relies instead on the disconnected images produced by each of its eyes. As the whale, “you would have two backs, so to speak; but, at the same time, also, two fronts (side fronts): for what is it that makes the front of a man—what, indeed, but his eyes?” (Melville 251). Sighted humans intuitively and anthropocentrically recognize that a body’s eyes and its front are the same. But as the human moves forward, their eyes ahead, the whale moves similarly forward, its eyes aside. Neither does so with difficulty. Ishmael states that the whale’s opposite eyes give it two fronts, but it really has three: each eye provides a sight-front, as with human eyes, but the combination of these distinct images is sufficient for the whale to swim forward. It moves not in either of the directions its eyes point, but rather toward the “profound darkness and nothingness” (Melville 251) between them. The whale swims both from and toward the unknown.

Of course, we know that whales actually can determine what is ahead of them through vocalization-based echolocation (Luo 1997), though Melville did not. Thus the whale’s true source of knowledge about the future it swims toward is not its eyes, but its ears; it swims in the darkness while constructing mental impressions of what lies ahead and approaches from behind. Visually, with forward motion corresponding to the passing of time, it only experiences this narrative in the present, its eyes to either side. When, through a passing motion, an object is oriented entirely beyond the scope of either eye of the whale—behind it—the whale has written that object into its narrative and no longer experiences that object in the present. The whale does not necessarily forget the earlier parts of its narrative, but it does not constantly experience its entire history at once.

In this sense, the whale experiences the world and writes its watery story simultaneously and utterly in conjunction through that experience. As the experience passes, so does that portion
of the narrative. The whale does not reflect before it writes; its existence is a self-narrative. The
narrative is effectively automatic, or self-writing, because it is a function of the forward motion
of the engine—the automaton. Further, the story does not appear ahead of the whale in perfect
clarity. From its perspective, with eyes pointed sideways, its destination exists in “profound
darkness,” so it does not anticipate exactly what it will write until it reaches that point in its
narrative-future. The whale might have some ultimate destination in mind—a geographical
telos—but it is as evanescent as its wake.

By contrast, the whale ship structurally minimizes such blind spots. The “eyes” of the
ship are in one sense the eyes of each of its sailors. Unlike whale-eyes, these ship-eyes can point
themselves in almost any direction, being automata themselves—from bow to aft and up to the
top-mast, the visual range of the ship as a whole is immense. Its only blind spot is directly
beneath; the depths of the ocean remain an unknown body. The dead whale contains a seal that
Ishmael can break with a knife, but the sea remains effectively unsealed. Thus the sailors cannot
truly “read” the ocean-narrative or anything within it, including any whale that swims beneath
the ship.

The whale addresses its blind spots through biosonar, receiving a sense of object
placement through its ears. However, those ears are on the side of its head. Though it reads
forward, it comprehends sideways. The whale’s experiential “front” is still twofold and lateral.
Regardless, for such an important function—and on such an enormous creature—the ear is
especially small. Ishmael takes particular interest in this disparity as he writes:

“Is it not curious, that so vast a being as the whale should see the world through so small an eye,
and hear the thunder through an ear which is smaller than a hare’s? But if his eyes were broad as
the lens of Herschel’s great telescope; and his ears capacious as the porches of cathedrals; would
that make him any longer of sight, or sharper of hearing? Not at all.—Why then do you try to ‘enlarge’ your mind? Subtilize it” (Melville 252).

Literally, Ishmael’s claims about physics are questionable. But he is not making a scientific argument so much as a metaphysical one. He emphasizes that these two instruments of the engine, the eye and the ear, contribute only partly to its “self-animation.” No matter how large the lens of the telescope, it is always the astronomer who interprets the light it reflects. That is not to say the ears and eyes are insignificant; only through data can the scientist draw conclusions, and only through the instrument can they collect that data at all. The engine is the automaton, and the automaton is the engine; its instruments are fundamentally interconnected in such a way as to create an emergent whole. Instead of “enlarging” one’s mind, Ishmael dryly comments that one ought to “subtilize” it, refining those existing qualities that make it useful rather than stretching it out for the sake of size alone. The whale, Ishmael suggests, is large where it counts.

Ishmael classifies whales as great fish in “Cetology,” even as Linnaeus observes their “warm bilocular heart, their lungs, their movable eyelids, their hollow ears, penem intrantem feminam mammis lactantem […] whereas, all other fish are lungless and cold blooded” (Melville 110–111). Ishmael remains unconvinced, citing some Nantucket acquaintances and the Book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible. His characterization of the whale as a fish, not a mammal, emphasizes his perception of it as an “Other”—something explicitly non-human and in fact outside the realm of humanity, and to which conventional human morality therefore does not apply. God says to Moses in Exodus, “Thou shalt not kill [another human],” but remains silent on the monsters of the deep. The Bible does not forbid the commodification of any animal, like the ox—but Ishmael’s treatment of the whale as a fish, like the great fish that swallowed Jonah,
not only Otherizes but Monsterizes the whale. It becomes a leviathan in the true Biblical sense: a violent, terrifying sea monster capable of sinking ships and killing innumerable sailors.

Christopher Freeburg provides commentary on a similar interpretation of the ocean: “Face to face with the water’s edge, one cannot avoid the weighty impression of the unforgiving abyss—endless depths without a trace of light—a literal scene of blackness where one cannot help but agonize in blindness, smallness, and powerlessness” (20). Ishmael’s observations of the whale’s beauty apply in spite of this description; the whale has no fear of the dark. Its human pursuers, overcome with terror at the thought of entering the deep, are unable to comprehend the aesthetic greatness of the whale in such a context. Up close, they associate the leviathan foremost with the horrifying darkness of the ocean, and this is the perception they hold onto for the rest of their voyages.

The whale’s potential for violence threatens the human enterprise of whaling, and by extension, as far as Ishmael is concerned, the civilization that relies on whale products for fuel and ultimately capital. An evil creature, the monster of the dark ocean, this potential offers a greater justification for the whaling industry’s literal commodification of the animal and the violent process necessary to obtain those commodities.

But the whale in Moby-Dick is not a straightforward creature. As much as Ishmael Otherizes the animal, his descriptions are filled with humanizing remarks. In “The Tail,” he writes, “As Ptolemy Philopater testified of the African elephant, I then testified of the whale, pronouncing him the most devout of all beings. For according to King Juba, the military elephants of antiquity often hailed the morning with their trunks uplifted in the profound silence” (Melville 283). To Ishmael, the whale’s peaked flukes are not just a sign of beauty, but one of active reverence. The whale thus humanized recognizes and pays homage to God. However, it
do not engage with humanity’s religious institutions, instead engaging in a special process of
whale-worship in which its communication with a higher power is rooted directly in its
physicality. The leviathan’s organic gears and pistons propel it through the sea, and its apparent
reverence speaks to a greater ability to make decisions as an agent.

Moby Dick’s apparent intentionality in biting Ahab’s leg is the source of the captain’s
discontent: “such seemed the White Whale’s infernal aforethought of ferocity, that every
dismembering or death that he caused, was not wholly regarded as having been inflicted by an
unintelligent agent” (Melville 148). Ahab takes his dismemberment as an insult to his very being,
believing that Moby Dick is more than what Starbuck calls a “dumb brute” acting from “blindest
instinct” (Melville 133). However, Captain Bunger of the *Enderby* claims that the whale is
physiologically incapable of digesting a human limb, and that “what you take for the White
Whale’s malice is only his awkwardness” (Melville 325). The whale’s attempt to “terrify by
feints” (Melville 325) is an intelligent form of self-defense, but self-defense regardless. The
whale may not be the “dumb brute” Starbuck claims, but it is not some monomaniacal sea
captain out for murder either.

Benjamin Doty writes that Bunger’s claim “contradicts Ahab’s conception of the whale
as a moral agent” (97). However, it primarily contradicts Ahab’s understanding of Moby Dick’s
existential *value*, not so much its ability to make decisions. Ahab definitely perceives wicked
intentions and, by extension, necessarily thoughtful agency in Moby Dick. However, he fails to
appreciate the implications of that agency—that the whale is like him, and similarly deserving of
life. The whale is not an equal. 7 In fact, Ahab is unable to see Moby Dick as anything other than
the *object of his vengeance*. The White Whale’s supposed intentionality is effectively a stand-in
for the personal injustice that the dismembered Ahab feels has been committed against his

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7 Ahab is nominally Quaker, but any pacifistic beliefs he holds evidently do not extend to whales.
identity as a complete human. His feelings are not based on the whale per se. Ahab and the crew also grant little especial agency to whales in general, hunting them in subservience to the economic automaton and without regard for their subjective whale-lives. As Deborah Paes de Barros argues:

“Ahab's error lies in his objectification of the whale. Further, the Pequod itself is doomed by insistent obedience to the dominant hierarchies: by the sailors' celebration of Ahab's errand, by their acceptance of authority, and, finally, by the crew's unwillingness to comprehend the separate agency of the whale” (Paes de Barros 55).

The sailors of the Pequod participate in a systemic objectification of the whale and deny it the agency demonstrated by its status as an automaton. The “dominant hierarchy” referred to here is not just the hierarchy aboard the ship, but a greater metaphysical belief in the superiority of humans over all other creatures. In this line of thinking, humans are rational animals, and keen enough to know that however clever the whale may be, it has nothing on the logical prowess of the human race. But “Melville offers an alternative semiotic space where we and the whales operate as post-human equals [...] Swimming the seas, shifting from sign to presence, from prey to predator, the whale Moby Dick insists on this lesson” (Paes de Barros 55). The whale is far from incapable of thought and certainly not powerless.
We understand subjects to act upon objects: “Ahab hunts the whale.” This structural ordering (“subject–verb–object”) creates an implicit hierarchy based on the perspective of the subject. The object receives the action and does not act. When we understand the subject–object paradigm to linguistically represent the placement of discrete entities, we can begin to analyze those entities conceptually. According to Deborah Paes de Barros, in Ahab’s post-human ethics, “Subjects and objects mutate and change place, reminding us that they are always nomadic, ‘transversal, relational, affective, embedded and embodied.’ Nothing is fixed; subject becomes object, while object replaces subject” (55). In the traditional sense, Ahab (from Ahab’s perspective) is a subject acting upon an object, perhaps Moby Dick. Conversely, Moby Dick (from Moby Dick’s perspective) is also a subject acting upon an object, perhaps Ahab. However, the post-human ontology Melville creates—the manner of existence he defines for Ahab, Moby Dick, and others—both intermixes, combines, and redefines these subjects and objects.

An intermixed set of subjects and objects represents a new, collective entity—an assemblage of individuals operating in such a way that the body as a whole acquires emergent characteristics of selfhood. In this vein, Jane Bennett describes a theory of “distributed agency” (21) in which “bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage” (23). She defines assemblages as “living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23). Entities in an assemblage are not reduced to identical zombies. These bodies fold into the assemblage but do not necessarily dissolve, and are still capable of influencing its behavior in subtle ways, hampering

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8 This principle is not specific to English. A less syntactically structured language—one without explicit subjects, verbs, and/or objects; or in which they have different roles—may lend itself to further postmodern analysis of entity interaction.
or strengthening it. They maintain an “energetic pulse slightly ‘off’ from that of the assemblage, [so] an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a ‘non-totalizable sum’” (Bennett 24). The assemblage is “non-totalizable” in that it is always more than just one singular object or creature. It is one unit, but also many.

The post-human assemblage in *Moby-Dick* manifests in several forms. One is a human-to-human assemblage mediated by an inanimate object: a partnership between two people that transcends a normal interpersonal liaison by interlacing itself with characteristics of the mediating object. Ishmael participates in such an exchange merely by narrating the story of the whale. Jennifer Doyle states, “He presumes that to write of the whale one must, in essence, be like the whale—a cetological identification carried out in the phrase ‘a whale author like me.’” Does he mean a man who writes about whales? Or a man like whales who writes?” (7). The phrase is ambiguous. Indeed, Ishmael writes *about* whales, but to do so effectively he must understand them; and to understand them, he must live like them. He must *be* them.

“At the opening of the novel, Ishmael appears to possess a strongly personal voice characterized by a consistent perspective on events,” Tara Robbins Fee claims, but “this voice soon gives way to a more complicated one, with evident concealments, evasions, and fantasies” (140). Ishmael’s experience is deeply traumatic, as Fee argues, and yet its inconsistencies and strange deviations from general knowledge also signify the assemblages he participates in over the course of the novel. Ishmael uses his voyage to develop a close metaphysical relationship with the whale for the purpose of the tale. He also finds himself inextricably linked to his fellow sailors, giving him a supernatural insight into their internal thoughts and bodily mechanisms. The novel is full of oblique references to shifting and merging automata, pieces of knowledge he could never have acquired as an individual. As the narrator, he also imbues the entirety of
*Moby-Dick* with a whale-like essence: “We expand to its bulk” (Melville 334). Even the reader absorbs some aspect of the whale’s magnitude.

Ishmael assembles himself elsewhere too, such as his metaphysical marriage to Queequeg in “The Counterpane.” In the lead-up to this chapter, he watches Queequeg intently, hostile to his presence: “I was so afraid of him that I was not game enough just then to address him, and demand a satisfactory answer concerning what seemed inexplicable to him” (Melville 31). When Queequeg notices his observer, he reacts defensively: his “lighted tomahawk began flourishing about me in the dark” (Melville 33). In their first interaction, Ishmael and Queequeg are categorically discrete individuals. However, this dynamic quickly evolves once they sleep together. The bed, and specifically the sheet (“counterpane”) that covers them, informs the new interconnectedness of their relationship and allows their persons to merge in a way that their default over-individualism could not allow.

The next morning, Ishmael wakes up with his companion’s arm around him, and observes that “The counterpane was of patchwork, full of odd little parti-colored squares and triangles; and this arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure…looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt” (Melville 34). The counterpane leaks into Queequeg’s tattooed arm, and vice versa; through osmosis it leaks into Ishmael as well. This pseudo-matrimonial scene represents a supernatural merger of the two humans into a unified assemblage; and though the output does not *overpower* either individual, they are deeply bound to one another from this point onward. Their connection is not just emotional but spiritual: Ishmael remarks that the two now have so much trust in one another that Queequeg’s religious idol “Yojo earnestly enjoined that the selection of the ship should rest wholly with me” (Melville 64). Thus their marriage, mediated by the counterpane, is also enforced through Queequeg’s idol;
this hybrid human–object relationship is an illustration of “an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity” (Bennett 31). Ishmael and Queequeg, living their own individual lives, exhibit physical and intellectual distinction but agentic correlation.

*Moby-Dick*’s post-humanism remains explicit when we consider the assemblages created between humans and whales during the hunt and subsequent industrial processing of whale body parts. Schuller writes that “The bodies of whales and whalers interpenetrate as whales chew human legs and humans chew whales for supper, humans wear whale-bone prosthetics and whales carry lances embedded in their flesh” (9). Humans and whales become literally entangled in each other’s ontologies as they absorb the whale body into their own, and vice versa, changing the nature of their internal mechanical processes and the nature of their lives. Further, whale and whaler also emotionally and sexually interpenetrate “through the very intimacy of the hunt” (Schuller 4). Existential, moral, and societal boundaries disappear as human and whale flesh become indistinguishable. Philip Armstrong refers to this “endless and occult permeation between the natural and the social, the non-human and the human domains” (95) as translation. This post-human dynamic connects otherwise disparate entities, effectively reidentifying their ontologies within an upgraded framework and allowing them to mutually explore each other’s various indescribable modes of existence.

Melville continues to lay out a post-human conceptualization of digestion. In consuming the flesh of a creature like the whale, the human automaton absorbs not only its nutritional contents but also the animal’s extant agency. An assemblage of living cells—each a miniature automaton—collectively makes up the animal’s tissue. By swallowing chunks of these assemblages, the human becomes that much more linked with the non-human. Not only that, but the sailors of the *Pequod* “experience eating as the formation of an assemblage of human and
nonhuman elements, all of which bear some agentic capacity” (Bennett 49). When the sailors consume assemblages of foreign, agentic matter—combining it with their own matter, which also constitutes a cellular assemblage—they create a new one altogether:

“…human and nonhuman bodies recorporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and both offer themselves as matter to be acted on. Eating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry: my meal both is and is not mine; you both are and are not what you eat” (Bennett 49).

The automata-consuming human does not grow fins and start producing spermaceti. However, the resulting assemblage is an ontologically distinct entity whose history is digestively attached to the whale. Through a violent sort of intimacy, the consumer still acquires characteristics of the whale and allows their own internal machinery to continue operating. In this sense, they act on the whale. But they are also acted upon. Their machinery metamorphoses to accommodate the new assemblage as the body’s gut bacteria takes a liking to the new fuel and signals to the brain to get some more; as raw material finds itself distributed across the body as fat; and as any refuse is excreted. The whale finds itself at the forefront of the human’s alimentary cravings and even physical appearance.

We see this process unfold in “Chowder” as Ishmael and Queequeg eat at the Try Pots inn: “Fishiest of all fishy places was the Try Pots, which well deserved its name; for the pots there were always boiling chowders. Chowder for breakfast, and chowder for dinner, and chowder for supper, till you began to look for fish-bones coming through your clothes” (Melville 63). Is Ishmael still essentially and universally Ishmael after eating at such a place, or does the very substance of his existence change the longer he remains? The thought perturbs him, especially as he tastes “a fishy flavor to the milk” (Melville 63), only to discover the proprietor’s cow “feeding on fish remnants, and marching along the sand with each foot in a cod’s
decapitated head” (Melville 63). It appears that the cow has already experienced a metamorphosis and is a new assemblage. Via the cow, Ishmael realizes that his diet is essential to who he is as an assembled entity, even if he feels individually and mentally self-assured. In order to keep the machine going, he must continue eating *something*, and that means giving up some of his essential “humanness” and agency in favor of whatever he consumes.

The cow, “looking very slip-shod” in its makeshift footwear (Melville 63), also invokes similar questions about what it means to enwrap one’s body in the pelt of an animal or to coat oneself in its byproducts. Doty writes that because “food’s psychological effects begin with its effects on the eater’s body, Ishmael’s question of whether the chowder has affected his head is bound to the question of whether it has changed his body” (93). But these “effects on the eater’s body” do not only have to come from eating. Internal cellular reformation is only one mechanism by which the automaton reinvents itself to become a new assemblage; the external alternative even more tangibly presents a changed being. A human who wears a whale oil cosmetic, for example, can nominally take it off at any time, but their intentional use of the material speaks to a psychological imprint the product has had and continues to have on them. The human benefits from modifying their skin in some way, and the whale extract fills the role—they are at least superficially reliant on the cosmetic. They can and will come back for more, as the economic automaton demonstrates. Thus the whale continues to exert influence over another body even after its own death.

In “Stubb’s Supper,” Melville creates a multi-layered assemblage through the mate’s direct consumption of the whale and its paralleled consumption by the sharks in the water. Stubb metamorphoses with the whale by consuming it, integrating its ontology with his on a cellular and psychological level. He chooses to eat the whale not for sustenance, but for pleasure, and
becomes angry at the cook for not perfecting the meal. But as Stubb gleefully eats his whale-steak, Melville writes, “Nor was Stubb the only banqueter on the whale’s flesh that night. Mingling their mumblings with his own mastications, thousands on thousands of sharks, swarming round the dead leviathan, smackingly feasted on its fatness” (226). Melville finds similarity between Stubb’s feast and the sharks’ despite their very different motivations. By introducing this parallel, he prescribes shark-like qualities to Stubb. Indeed, Stubb also personally acknowledges the mass of sharks swirling around the ship: “There are those sharks now over the side, don’t you see they prefer it tough and rare?” (Melville 227). He wants to be like the sharks below, both entities devouring the whale together and in almost the same manner. Stubb relies on the rare whale meat to satisfy his gut bacteria and his own psychological conceptualization of a good meal, and is perfectly content to berate the cook at midnight to get his way. Stubb is the hungry shark of the ship, but also the whale of the ship. This assemblage is multi-faceted: human, whale, and shark, but also interlaced with the yearnings of sub-automata like his individual psychological preferences and the gut bacteria influencing them. His agency as an eater exists across a spectrum; his humanness is undoubtedly altered.

In “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael and his crewmates are tasked with squeezing lumpy globules of spermaceti that had crystallized in the air to return the material to its original shape. The chapter is one of Moby-Dick’s most erotic as Melville mixes earnest and ironic sexual language to create an assemblage of human, whale, and sperm⁹:

“I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving

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⁹ Whale spermaceti is not involved in sexual reproduction. It is so named because it was mistakenly thought to be semen when it was first discovered (Harper).
feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (Melville 309).

In this moment, feeling his hands “serpentine and spiralize” with each motion, Ishmael describes his experiential intimacy with the whale in a very different way than the encyclopedic chapters and whale anatomies he devotes himself to elsewhere in the novel. He enters a “post-human” state in which his reality is bonded and/or equal to that of the whale, or this part of the whale, which in either case is decidedly unhuman. In doing so he osmotically adds to his own “whaleness.” The resulting Ishmael–whale automaton self-reinforces his enamorment with the spermaceti; as he becomes more whale-like, he slips further into a purely affective state in which physical and emotional coexistence perfectly align. This means that as Ishmael becomes entangled with the whale, he also becomes spiritually entangled with his fellow seamen. He feels as though they ought to “squeeze ourselves into each other,” which we can read literally as having sex and metaphysically as entering a super-human dynamic of mutual intimacy mediated by the soft, squishy spermaceti in front of them. Ishmael’s invitation to “squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” speaks to a desire to be spiritually unified with his comrades in a polyamorous human–whale assemblage of tactile bliss—to subvert any and all social boundaries between them (sexual, racial, religious, etc.)—because their new mediator, rather than being the laws and expectations of landlubbing society, is this whale spermaceti.

But the machine of the human economy runs continuously in the background. Ishmael returns to his encyclopedic narration in “The Cassock” as he circuitously describes the utilitarian
repurposing of the whale’s “strange, enigmatical object” (Melville 310)—its phallus—as heat-resistant clothing. The mincer literally wears the whale’s genitals, translating his humanity into the mutated and—ironically—destructive essence of a whale-person: “Whalers become agents of (re)production through a laborious exchange that climaxes as the whaler and whale penis dissolve into one another when the mincer dons the animal foreskin to protect his human flesh from the fires of the try-works” (Schuller 10). This process resembles a sort of “swallowing,” not entirely unlike Father Mapple’s description of Jonah in “The Sermon,” who “drops seething into the yawning jaws awaiting him” (Melville 48), nor unlike Ishmael’s exploration of the skeleton of the beached whale in “A Bower in the Arsacides.” Peter Wayne Moe refers to this relationship as a form of “in utero entombment” (45); an ingestion, entombment, and/or imprisonment within the whale that reflects elements of both captivity and reproduction. By surrounding his own flesh with whale skin, the mincer self-inserts himself into the whale’s interior. In doing so with the whale’s foreskin specifically, he invokes the whale’s reproductive aspect. The object that formerly served the biological purpose of creating new automata now contributes to the physical deconstruction of such an automaton. Recall that the ship’s try-works are where the whale’s blubber is fried down to extract valuable whale oil: this scene therefore has a recursive aspect—the whale cooks itself. In sum, the whale occupies multiple sexual and asexual roles in conjunction with the mincer: inseminatory father (via the penis), gestating mother (via the uterus), and self-destroying instrument (via the emergent use of the whale’s skin to more effectively break down the whale’s body). This whale–human assemblage is a new automaton, a further mechanized beast that transcends species, gender, and function.
Ishmael first hears about Ahab from Captain Peleg, who calls him “above the common” (Melville 73) and invokes his Biblical namesake, an ancient king of Israel. He does so to assure Ishmael that Ahab—who is nowhere to be seen, and “ain’t sick; but no, he isn’t well either” (Melville 73)—is still an admirable, sea-worthy captain. When Ishmael skeptically remarks that the “Ahab of old” was a “very vile [and] wicked king” (Melville 73), Peleg pulls back the metaphor and distances Ahab from his own name: “Look ye, lad; never say that on board the Pequod. Never say it anywhere. Captain Ahab did not name himself. ’Twas a foolish, ignorant whim of his crazy, widowed mother” (Melville 73). Peleg attempts to decouple Ahab’s person from any “wicked” intentions or actions; Ahab’s name may carry an evil connotation, but it was really his “crazy” mother who chose it, so he can still be good at heart.

Melville does not elaborate on her insanity. However, this quality of Ahab’s blood relation entrenches Ishmael’s view that there is something supernaturally unusual about him. He comes from a mad line and a wicked heritage; is he cursed with malevolence too? Peleg further remarks that “the old squaw Tistig, at Gayhead, said that the name would somehow prove prophetic” (Melville 73), but offers no explanation. Is this prophecy imposed on account of the name and its history, or does it derive from something deeper? Fedallah’s prescient comments later in the novel—such as that “hemp only can kill thee” (Melville 362)—are echoes of the prophetic name Ahab was born with. In this case, the Fedallah’s prediction emboldens Ahab; because he believes it, he follows it, and because he follows it, he dies. Ahab is a man bound in every way to prophecy; destination; telos.
Peleg’s subsequent assurances that Ahab “was a little out of his mind for a spell” (Melville 73) and has lately been “desperate moody, and savage sometimes” (Melville 74) are not the most persuasive follow-ups to rumors of wickedness and madness either, and he knows it. To argue for Ahab’s “humanities” (Melville 74), Peleg cannot invoke lineage—which is both hereditarily and theologically suspect—so he invokes Ahab’s wife and child, dependents with whom Ahab presumably shares warmth and intimacy, and for whom his “humanity” has some truer purpose. Ahab’s described identity is therefore split between the nominal legacy he inherits from his mother and from scripture, and the cultural associations he exhibits for being a husband and father. In either case, he is defined vicariously: his character is that of his relations. This quality is emphasized by the fact that it is Peleg describing Ahab to Ishmael, not Ahab describing himself. Ahab’s character is his reputation as much as it is his internal person, and that reputation is reinforced by both hierarchy and the supernatural—Ahab as king, and Ahab as the target and instrument of unstoppable prophecy.

Ishmael walks away from the ship with “a wild vagueness of painfulness” (Melville 74) and “a strange awe of [Ahab]; but that sort of awe, which I cannot at all describe, was not exactly awe” (Melville 74). Ishmael literally cannot explain his feeling toward the captain; it is alien, otherworldly, perhaps inhuman. The description he hears from Peleg is overdefined with scrambled contradictions, and his impression is subsequently undefined. He sympathizes with Ahab; he admires Ahab; he pities Ahab; he worships Ahab. Without ever meeting, seeing, or hearing him, Ishmael creates a mystical, awe-inspired image of the captain in his mind. Ahab is on a strange pedestal, a victim of fate and circumstance but also effectively a stand-in for God.

Melville also gives us a more direct description of Ahab’s character, but it is as complex as his reputation: “He’s a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab,” says Captain Peleg to
Ishmael. He is “a good man—not a pious, good man, like Bildad, but a swearing good man” (73). Peleg describes Ahab ambiguously enough to approach self-contradiction. Ahab is at once “ungodly” and “god-like”; “good” but not “pious.” Ahab’s goodness is defined not by his deferential adherence to religion, but by the grand, god-like ego contained in his soul. He is impious or irreverent not necessarily atheistically, but more because God to him is at most a spiritual rival, if any concern at all. As he declares to Fedallah, “I am immortal then, on land and on sea” (Melville 362). Any God-fearing sea captain would know better than to tempt fate with such a proclamation, but nothing can kill Ahab, says Ahab, because he is the deity that decides who lives and who dies. His “one cogged circle fits into all [the universe’s] various wheels, and they revolve” (Melville 136); he can control the hemispheres and heavens; he is in his very essence the skeleton key to all the locks; and he will achieve his telos: “What I’ve dared, I’ve willed; and what I’ve willed, I’ll do!” (Melville 136). Ahab rejects the bounds of earthly mortality because such expectations do not contribute to his teleological quest to enact revenge upon Moby Dick. He rejects the authority of God in general for the same reason: all that matters is Ahab.

When strikes of lightning in a typhoon reverse the ship’s compasses, forcing Ahab to construct his own from scrap, his “fiery eyes of scorn and triumph” (Melville 374) in the face of natural disaster counter both the skepticism of his crew and the slight on his telos imposed by the supernatural. He claims to be “lord of the level loadstone” (Melville 373), his terminology implying divine mastery over the magnetic needles in his compasses. This implication of deification is emphasized by the fact that Ahab is creating an object to carry out his will, like God creating the Earth in Genesis. Ahab believes that his ability to reshape physical items to suit his telos proves that his telos is still achievable. He displays his new tool to his crew, and as “one
after another they slunk away” (Melville 374), satisfied by his dexterity, Ahab is only further emboldened. He truly is “Old Thunder” (Melville 82)—older than humankind—because he channels the supernatural power of God through his hands and into the objects he manipulates. His divine skill thus unchallenged, he holds true to his self-proclaimed apotheosis until Moby Dick kills him.

Ahab is not unaware of his own pride. Inspecting the gold doubloon he has fastened to the ship’s mainmast, Ahab remarks to himself, “There’s something ever egotistical in mountain-tops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things; look here,—three peaks as proud as Lucifer. The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that, too, is Ahab; all are Ahab” (Melville 318). The gold doubloon is the physical representation of his quest to hunt Moby Dick (and the prize of the sailor who spots the whale), so its engravings feed his monomania. Ahab sees exactly what he wants to see. The “firm tower” is naturally Ahab, for its steadfast resolve throughout the hunt. The volcano reflects to Ahab his own fiery eyes and, beneath them, his explosive desire for revenge. The rooster’s courage apparently implies victory, which Ahab also believes is his. He suggests that he *embodies* these objects—the mountain-tops and towers have a “grand and lofty” stature that is inherently self-serving. Ahab identifies not just *with* them, but *as* them; his ego “scales up” (Hurh 1783) to include inanimate objects. In this sense, Ahab's very spirit becomes *post-human*.

In “Surmises,” Melville writes, “To accomplish his object Ahab must use tools; and of all tools used in the shadow of the moon, men are most apt to get out of order” (168). This description reinforces the postmodern interchange between subject and object and implicitly defines Ahab as a post-human automaton. In pursuit of his *telos*, Ahab-the-automaton acts on the
instruments at his disposal, like the compass, harpoon, and crew. These instruments are the objects of his action as an agent, and are thus imbued with his telos—overriding any previous function they had. That is to say, in the process of a specific action, the object’s own purpose changes to reflect that of the subject. Because the object is of course the object in this dynamic and not the subject, it does not possess the agency to change its telos on its own, so its new telos is an imposed one. For instance, when Ahab builds a harpoon with “the true death-temper” (Melville 356) in “The Forge,” he combines objects like shaving razors into a single super-object, erasing their mundane telea in favor of his monomaniacal one: to kill Moby Dick.

But to make that very harpoon, he requires the assistance of the blacksmith and harpooneers. When Ahab commands the smith to forge it, he establishes himself as subject and the smith as the object of his telos. Even though the blacksmith is also an automaton, capable of self-recognition and personal decisions, he capitulates to Ahab’s will and momentarily becomes a tool. If we recall that the agency of the automaton to establish its will is one of its defining features, the blacksmith-as-object is a dehumanized automaton because its own telos has been pushed aside for Ahab’s. However, the fulfillment of Ahab’s telos is subject to the blacksmith’s agreement to follow orders. In agreeing or disagreeing with Ahab’s request, the blacksmith establishes himself as the subject and Ahab as the object in the same relationship. Their abstracted roles have exactly reversed. We can easily imagine how this potential for uncooperative sub-telea to a given telos can go awry. Melville writes that as they forge the weapon, Fedallah “seemed invoking some curse or some blessing on the toil” (356). Starbuck suspects the former, and seeing as Ahab never kills Moby Dick with it (or at all), it would appear that the telos Fedallah imbues in it is enough to override Ahab’s.
The material Ahab uses to craft his instrument of death is not inherently an automaton—metal is inert. Yet by imbuing it with his telos, Ahab also imbues it with a part of his humanity. No harpoon could fly without a subject to throw it; that action is what allows the subject to realize their immediate telos through the object. As Paul Hurh writes,

“Humans in *Moby-Dick* are joined, conjoined, by a host of material objects […] the descriptions of them often trouble the distinctions between where the human body ends and the other material entity begins. […] the humans of *Moby-Dick* equip themselves with material extensions: a pole for an arm, a lance for a hand. And from this angle, the ship itself – from its timbers to its crew – becomes an extension of Ahab” (Hurh 1790).

Ahab considers his own limbs tools of a sort; objects over which he has complete authority and which capitulate to his telos. He also evidently envisions tools like his harpoon as “material extensions” of his body and therefore as objects that must obey his will. During the final chase for Moby Dick, he extends this thinking to his crew: “Ye are not other men, but are my arms and my legs; and so obey me” (Melville 406). In doing so, Ahab folds them into himself. By describing them as tools and not agents, he takes away their individuality and subjecthood in order to better power his own engine and reach his own telos.

This theme is present throughout the novel. When Ahab initiates the ritual in “The Quarter-Deck,” and his harpooneers and the rest of the crew swear “Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!” (Melville 135), he imbues them with his individual prophetic drive. Ahab’s quest or telos is now theirs, and likewise is his reputation as a prophetic instrument. This gives him a special power over the crew: he reiterates in “The Candles” that “All your oaths to hunt the White Whale are as binding as mine; and heart, soul, and body, lungs and life, old Ahab is bound” (Melville 368). Ahab and the crew are now linked in entirety—via the spiritual and the physical. The sailors have absorbed Ahab’s telos and so
have absorbed a part of Ahab himself. The ritualized crew is a New Ahab, one subservient to his monomania through spoken and acted ritual. They are the new bearers of prophecy.

Ahab’s ritual in “The Quarter-Deck” signifies a transfer of prophetic meaning from himself to his crew, forming the post-human entity of Ahab and His Ritualized Crew. This entity is post-human in that it represents an amalgamation of teleological personhood: Ahab’s life-narrative, leading to his telos, is supernaturally combined with and ultimately overrides the individual life-narratives and presumed telea of the crew. Ahab as a self-consciousness sublates the individual self-consciousnesses of his crew, metaphorically absorbing them even as they continue to operate as discrete physical bodies. This is a mutation of subject (Ahab) and object (the crew) into a single post-human super-subject, a massive human assemblage.

Before that process can be completed, the ritual also requires the exchange of subject and object, because for Ahab to enact his supernatural, ritualistic will on the crew, the harpooneers must become cup-bearers who “Commend the murderous chalices! Bestow them, ye who are now made parties to this indissoluble league” (Melville 135). The objects upon whom Ahab is acting (his crew, via the harpooneers) in turn have to become subjects to act upon objects of their own (the chalices). In this shifting of subject and object, the idea of any individual’s perspective is disrupted as they acquire a new narrative placement and eventually telos. Consider “…one and one, eleven, an inelegant number. Which of the ones is the more important? Could you ever tell if they switched places?” (Kirkbride, “The 36 Lessons of Vivec”). Subject and object are so shifted and reimagined through this process that Ahab’s sublation of the entire group into the super-subject of New Ahab continues exactly as he desires, even as he remains a part of it.

This super-subject is more than just a biological automaton; it is a super-automaton. Its traits and consciousness are the liminal sum of Ahab’s and the crew’s, and its internal processes
are multifaceted. As both a set of discrete, self-willed parts and the emergent sum of those parts, its agency is “distributed across a mosaic” (Bennett 38), a continuum of individual will transmogrified into a newly encompassing but familiar agent. The super-automaton is encompassing because it represents the successful merger of human identities into a singularizing power structure, but also familiar because they are physically distinct bodies, still sailing aboard the Pequod. This New Ahab represents an assemblage of automata: it is the sum of his telos, his body and those of his crew, the tools they use aboard the ship, and the artificial leg Ahab walks on. His form realized in a post-human framework is a machine built patchwork for the sole purpose of killing Moby Dick: Mecha-Ahab.¹¹

Ahab’s prosthetic ivory leg is one of his defining characteristics. When Ishmael sees Ahab for the first time, he attributes much of his captain’s “overbearing grimness…to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood” (Melville 103). The leg wildly distinguishes Ahab from the rest of the crew by its inhuman color and shape in relation to his body, and also because of how it continually and necessarily manipulates his surroundings. Ishmael observes that each side of the ship’s quarter-deck features “an auger hole, bored about half an inch or so, into the blank. His bone leg steadied in that hole; one arm elevated, and holding by a shroud; Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship’s ever pitching prow” (Melville 103). Ahab’s stance is confident and serious. The auger holes give him a reliable station from which to oversee the daily operations of the ship (and to brood unrelentlessly over his plans). Melville writes that he feels the “mechanical humming of the wheels of his vitality in him” (131), a highly machinic description that emphasizes his status as an automaton. The captain

¹¹ Compare Mecha-Ahab to Pelinal Whitestrake, “[whose] facets could [un-sector and form] into a man whose every angle could cut her jailers and a name: PELIN-EL [which is] "The Star-Made Knight" [and he] was arrayed in armor [from the future time]” (Kirkbride, “The Song of Pelinal”) and who “[was] an insane collective swarmfoam war-fractal from the future” (Kirkbride, “Posts from 2007–2009”).
accepts the reality of being part whale in his quotidian existence, modifying his environment to better suit his new identity instead of pretending as though his changed body can manage his former routines. As a post-human automaton, Mecha-Ahab has to be able to “shift gears.”

The leg’s environmental manipulation extends beyond deliberate adjustments for convenience and into more indiscriminately destructive ones: “Soon his steady, ivory stride was heard, as to and fro he paced his old rounds, upon planks so familiar to his tread, that they were all over dented, like geological stones, with the peculiar mark of his walk” (Melville 130). This passage is followed by whispers between Stubb and Flask, who watch as Ahab’s methodical steps lay the groundwork for his scheme in “The Quarter-Deck.” The frequent, repetitive, thumping noise of Ahab’s leg even throughout the night—distractingly non-human, almost like a machine—prompts Stubb to ask him to pad his leg to dampen the sound. Ahab, incensed, retorts, “Am I a cannon-ball, Stubb, that thou wouldst wad me that fashion?” (Melville 105) and engulfs him with “such overbearing terrors in his aspect, that Stubb involuntarily retreated” (Melville 105). Ahab fully embraces his bodily modification here, refusing to change for anyone else. He leaves marks on the automata he interacts with: his mates, who are constantly aware of his non-human, machine-esque qualities, also the ship itself, one of the largest automata in the novel. The ship almost resembles a whale that has breached the surface, mechanical in nature; but it is translated into an servant of the economic automaton with its established social hierarchy, controlled systems of whale-killing, and its forge, carpentry, and try-works. The ship as an automaton is as malleable as any person, including Ahab; with every step he marks it more extensively as the vessel to hunt Moby-Dick.

But the leg is not just ghastly in itself or in the ways it manipulates its environment; Ishmael is shocked by “the whole grim aspect of Ahab” (Melville 103):
“There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrenderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance. Not a word he spoke; nor did his officers say aught to him; though by all their minutest gestures and expressions, they plainly showed the uneasy, if not painful, consciousness of being under a troubled master-eye. And not only that, but moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe” (Melville 103).

Ahab maintains a countenance of “firmest fortitude” and “forward dedication”; an almost “painful” gaze. There is something about his grimness, which originates in large part from his leg, that conveys an unusual emotional package of willpower and grim moodiness. Captain Peleg and others state that Ahab’s change in temperament resulted from his encounter with Moby Dick, but Ishmael reaches the conclusion that the physical loss of his leg caused a “sudden, passionate, corporal animosity” (Melville 148) and an “agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more” (Melville 148). The pain was pain, his body’s instinctive response to external harm. Ishmael believes that his monomania truly set in “on the homeward voyage, after the encounter” (Melville 149), though he does not specify exactly when. However, an old Gay-Head Indian in the crew states, “Aye, he was dismasted off Japan, … but like his dismasted craft, he shipped another mast without coming home for it. He has a quiver of ‘em” (Melville 103). The implication is that Ahab’s leg is interchangeable; that it can be swapped out like a modular component in a machine. Further, if what he says is true, Ahab received his ivory leg on the very homeward voyage that drove him insane; the one on which “his mates were forced to lace him fast, even there, as he sailed, raving in his hammock. In a strait-jacket, he swung to the mad rockings of the gales” (Melville 149). Ahab’s monthslong period of anguish was evidently intensified not solely by the misery of losing a limb—though that was probably a contributing factor—but by the replacement of that limb with a foreign object, the carved whalebone peg.
This is also to say that Ahab’s *missing* leg—the *space* formerly occupied by his human leg—is an entirely distinct entity from his prosthetic leg. Ahab’s ivory limb creates an additional meaning to him about Moby Dick: he begins to feel a “wild vindictiveness” (Melville 148) toward the whale and injects “all the subtle demonisms of life and thought […] [and] the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race” (Melville 148) into his personification of the beast. Every step he takes is noisy, heavy, and literally impactful; a series of great shaking, clunking motions compared to the light footsteps of a less artificially augmented person. This actively reminds him of his disability and of the affront made to his honor by Moby Dick: “Did you fixedly gaze, too, upon that ribbed and dented brow; there also, you would see still stranger foot-prints—the foot-prints of his one unsleeping, ever-pacing thought” (Melville 130). Ahab’s physical movements dent the ground and in turn his mind, constantly reinforcing his monomania. Moby Dick, represented by his leg, is worse than hell incarnate.

The source of this rage is the conflict between the (human) *leg that once was*, the (empty) *space that is*, and the (ivory) *leg that occupies the (once occupied) space that is*. No two of these entities can exist in simultaneity without inflicting an unanswerable ontological question of (in)humanness upon the subject. While Ahab is understandably incensed at the replacement of human leg with empty space, he is truly shocked by the reverberations of his limb even after the wound has healed and the empty space becomes genuinely fixed; and especially the presence of these reverberations after he takes on the whalebone prosthetic. As he says to the carpenter:

“Look, put thy live leg here in the place where mine once was; so, now, here is only one distinct leg to the eye yet two to the soul. Where thou feelest tingling life; there, exactly there, there to a hair, do I. Is’t a riddle? […] How dost thou know that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly standing precisely where thou now standest; […] And if I
still feel the smart of my crushed leg, though it be now so long dissolved; then, why mayst not thou, carpenter, feel the fiery pains of hell for ever, and without a body? Hah!” (Melville 345). Ahab’s real leg has not disappeared from his spirit, even if it is no longer part of his body. The “tingling life” that he feels represents what is now a separate entity from him, because he has abandoned his human leg in favor of an artificial one. His old leg haunts him “in thy spite” but also *in spite*, as if it has a mind of its own. In this sense, Ahab’s leg is an agent and a subject acting upon him; a subject replaced sequentially by several objects (the empty leg, and the ivory leg), and, in this scene, the carpenter’s leg too. These objects become agent-subjects as they enact Ahab’s monomania, but the shifting experience of their combined presences means that he has “one leg standing in three places, and all three places standing in one hell” (Melville 346). His limb is ternary: human, void, and whale. Now, “That before living agent, now became the living instrument” (Melville 149). Ahab-agent has become Ahab-instrument by the conflict of his devoured leg and its successors; the (three) “thousand fold more potency than ever he had sanely brought to bear upon any one reasonable object” (Melville 149) is now directed exclusively toward the act of “audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge” (Melville 150) against Moby Dick.

Ahab’s prosthetic leg affects him in more ways than the monomaniacal interior. The most obvious is that by replacing his human leg with a foreign object, Ahab has literally decreased his humanness by body weight. The body mass once comprised of flesh and blood is now just bone—and not even human bone, *whale* bone. So not only is he mathematically that much less human, he is mathematically that much more whale—“gnawed within and scorched without” (Melville 150), a sort of Moby Dick in and of himself. By accessorizing himself with ivory, Ahab represents an inverted whale, another example of *Moby-Dick’s* post-human subject–object reversal. Ahab is the very thing he hunts, and the hunted whale has now become part of the
hunter, thus hunting *itself*. Ahab, as the whale, therefore hunts Ahab. His monomania is all-consuming and self-consuming:

“Therefore, the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates” (Melville 161–162).

Ahab is a self-destructive subject. Not only does Ahab the subject switch places with Ahab the object, and vice versa, but Ahab the subject *destroys* Ahab the object—who, by virtue of this role reversal, is also the subject. Thus the subject annihilates the subject, and the object annihilates the object, leaving “but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being.” Ahab’s mechanical husk effectively sleepwalks across the deck, his whale leg coming down harshly on the wood and his overwhelming *telos* burning straight through his soul. Ahab is “a blankness in itself”:

extending beyond the simple emptiness of his leg, his madness has absorbed his entire being. In his search for Moby Dick, Ahab sublates himself.
Conclusion

*Moby-Dick* ends with the sinking of the *Pequod* and the death of everyone aboard except Ishmael. Edward Dahlberg remarks that “at the conclusion of this heavy dirge, Ishmael is as alone as he was in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick*” (121). His seamates lost to the depths of the sea, it might appear that Ishmael’s intimate post-human contrivances with them are at an end. But the White Whale lives on, as does Ishmael’s narrative. So too do the principles that enable our post-human reading of the novel: an extended understanding of what constitutes human, animal, machine, automaton, assemblage, and agency; our ability to determine the extent to which each of these are embedded in one another; and our appreciation of the dynamic and often reflexively modifying or self-modifying processes that define interpersonal, inter-species, and inter-animate relationships. The “intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, and culture-making human beings” (Bennett 39) of *Moby-Dick* give us an extraordinary capacity to engage in critical analysis of interior and exterior presentations of self and identity, individuals and collectives, and hierarchies and power structures. This analytical framework of pseudo-mechanization allows us to consider the agentic and teleological implications of human and non-human expression in relation to the industrial economy, employment, comradeship, sexuality, religion, physiology, affect, and so on, especially as disparate entities participate in distributed assemblages. In any case, the audience themselves is marked by Ishmael’s narrative of whales, whalers, and whaling in *Moby-Dick*. In this sense, Melville creates an assemblage between himself and the reader, mediated by the novel. Agency is ours to exert, and it is up to future readers to explore the post-humanism of *Moby-Dick* further.
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