

“Gigantic Stilts”: “Prosthetic” Embodiment and the Incorporeality of the Body in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*

Chapter 35 of *Moby-Dick*, “The Mast-Head,” is widely considered by the critics as emblematic of the “metaphysical” Melville. When perched upon the masthead on the lookout for whales, Ishmael tells us, “everything resolves you into languor” (*MD* 153) until you lose your identity. Lulled into listlessness, the masthead stander’s body seems to recede, to lose its contours as his spirit ebbs away to become “diffused through time and space” (*MD* 157). Bent on philosophizing, Ishmael’s mind seems excised from his body and to float freely as it becomes one with the All. Unsurprisingly, the attention of the critics has focused mainly on Ishmael’s mind, and his body has joined the critical discussion only when seen as pathological—when, at the end of the chapter a miscalculated move of foot or hand might cause a fatal fall, bringing back the self back to awareness “in horror” (*MD* 155).

Melville criticism has often stressed the metaphysical drift of “The Mast-Head,” largely ignoring or underestimating its pervading sensorimotor texture. Drawing on philosopher Drew Leder’s phenomenological critique of the Cartesian body/mind dualism (*The Absent Body*, 1990), I will conversely argue that Ishmael’s “absent body” points to the materiality of Melville’s metaphysics. Ishmael’s “corporeal disappearance” (and abrupt “dys-appearance”), in Leder’s terms, reveals actually an instance of deep embodiment—call it “prosthetic” embodiment. Ishmael characterizes the masts as “gigantic stilts” (*MD* 153) that seem to be felt as extensions of his limbs. Not unlike Merleau-Ponty’s blind man’s walking stick, the mast seems to have become “an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch” (*Phenomenology of Perception*: 165) of his perched body. Acting as an everyday artifact that extends cognition beyond bodily boundaries, the “prosthetic” masts channel a continuous flow of kinesthetic, proprioceptive and sensory sensations that enable an organism-environment mutuality that well accords with current views of embodied, embedded and extended cognition.

Seizing on the idea of the “incorporeal dimension of the body” as devised by Brian Massumi in *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), I propose a non-objectivist model that emphasizes the radical openness of the body; its fluid relational and transitional nature. Rather than emblematic of an opposition between the body and the mind, my reading of the masthead seeks to show how Melville constantly blurs the boundaries between the Cartesian categories of being on which he (apparently) insistently relies. In this way, I will propose, Melville (in *Moby-Dick* and elsewhere) calls into question the basic assumption of the Cartesian attitude: the split between sensory perception and higher-order cognition, or abstract thought, suggesting instead an orientation to experience in which categories do not hold.

Bio: Pilar Martínez Benedí holds a J.D. from the University of Zaragoza (2000) and a M.A. in English from the University of Rome "La Sapienza" (2012), where she is a PhD candidate in English. (Defense expected in Fall 2016). She was the Melville Society Archive – Walter E. Bezanson Fellow for 2012. She has spent two residencies at the

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as an IFUSS Fellow, in where she spent a second residency in Spring 2015. Her dissertation focuses on the perceptual-embodied aspects of the works of Herman Melville through the lenses of the cognitive sciences of embodiment.