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‘I must calculate over again’: Measures of Pain in Melville

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Abstract:

This essay investigates the fraught question of the measure of pain in a selection of Melville's writings and examines how the articulation of pain is underwritten by a contest between the claims of arithmetic and the claims of literature. Closely reading scenes of thwarted measurements of pain in 'The Encantadas' (1854), *Moby-Dick* (1851), and 'Bartleby' (1853), it argues that, while the problem of pain for Melville may begin on the terrain of epistemology, it ends in the realm of literary representation, as the language of pain moves from figures to figuration.

Keywords:

Herman Melville; pain; measure; calculus; figures; figuration

‘To have pain is to have *certainty*’, Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*; ‘to hear about pain is to have *doubt*’.¹ The gap between the felt evidence of pain for the self-in-pain and its unverifiable opacity for the observer is the fundamental problem of pain, which denies a common ground between self and other while calling for a language to articulate and share its experience.² One of those languages is that of measurement. In its simplest and now ubiquitous form, it consists in rating one's pain on a scale from zero to ten, from no pain to the worst pain imaginable. ‘No measurement is ever exact’, however, Eula Biss observes in ‘The Pain Scale’, a 2005 lyrical essay in which she meditates on the dubious efficacy of numerical scales and arithmetic measures to describe her condition of chronic pain, both to others and to herself.³ Biss's critique of the calculus of pain—of measurement as a mode of approach to pain—resonates in many ways with Herman Melville's own account of the difficult measure of pain, which this essay explores through close readings of ‘The Encantadas’ (1854), *Moby-Dick* (1851), and ‘Bartleby’ (1853). For Melville, as for Biss, pain is a matter of figures, I contend, a phrase which indexes the contest between numbers and tropes, between scientific measurement and literary writing, as a way to relate (to) the experience of pain. In order to flesh

out this claim, this essay begins with an introductory section which is both theoretical and historical. There, I discuss briefly Biss's 'The Pain Scale' and its relevance to recent interventions in Melville scholarship on the subject of pain, before sketching out the major transformations of the measure of pain in the mid-nineteenth-century US, in the wake of the invention of anaesthesia and the sustained interest in aesthetics. In the following sections, I then turn to three scenes where Melville problematizes the possibility to scale pain through numerical figures, while pointing towards the potentialities of literary figures as an alternative way to register its experience.

Pain Scales

In Biss's 'The Pain Scale', structures designed for the measurement of pain are simultaneously conjured and rejected, a paradox which is highlighted in the interplay between the essay's form and its claims about the workings of pain itself. 'The Pain Scale' is indeed organized in a way that replicates its titular object, with individual sections ranging from zero to ten. Yet the scale's promise of legibility is rapidly challenged, as Biss emphasizes the many aporias that undermine its deceptive simplicity. 'Where does pain worth measuring begin?' she asks.⁴ And how does one choose between rating one's pain at 1, 2, or 3? What are the determining criteria and how can one guarantee their accuracy and their portability? Can my 5 be somebody's 2, and vice-versa? Besides, the numbers themselves are less transparent than their regular progression may suggest and their relations to each other is often fraught with unfathomable complexity. 'There is a mathematical proof that zero equals one. Which of course it doesn't', Biss notes, before adding: 'Although the distance between one and two is finite, it contains infinite fractions'.⁵ If under certain conditions zero may equal one and if it is possible to collapse the difference between the finite and the infinite, then the very idea of a scale of discrete and discriminate values becomes moot. Given these mathematical contradictions, it is no wonder that the effort to rate one's pain should always remain 'a blind calculation'.⁶

Undercutting the heuristic value of the numbers she nonetheless must posit as a series of fixed points to hope to solve the problem of her pain, Biss's essay reveals that 'a pain scale [...] is both a fiction and a fixative'.⁷ It affixes the self-in-pain with a figure which, though it identifies her to her pain, is doomed to remain inaccurate. The proliferation of alternative scales of measurement throughout Biss's essay only compounds this tension, as she invokes in turn the Wong-Baker Faces scale, intended for young children to rate their pain; Robert Forslund's

Alternative Number System, where the letter A replaces the number ten; the Fahrenheit, Celsius, and Kelvin temperature scales; as well as the Beaufort scale, designed to measure wind speed. Somewhat unexpectedly, that last scale turns out to be the most generative as a gauge of chronic pain. Although it too proves numerically inadequate, the Beaufort scale doubles its arithmetic gradation from zero to twelve with a series of ‘twinned descriptions’ of the effects of increasing wind forces ‘on the physical world by land and by sea’.⁸ This doubling, or tripling, is also a challenge to the principle of scalability itself, insofar as, Biss concludes, ‘[the] description of hurricane force winds on the Beaufort scale is simply, “devastation occurs.” Bringing us, of course, back to zero’.⁹ Eventually collapsing twelve and zero, hurricane and calm, the worst pain imaginable and no pain, Biss’s ‘The Pain Scale’ exposes the limitation of the language of measurement, even as it evinces its attraction to the descriptive notations of the Beaufort scale and its labour of verbal figuration. Abstracted from the literality of phenomenal designation, these notations progressively take on a figurative resonance, which provides a paradoxically accurate account of interior, chronic pain, oscillating between ‘leaves [rustling]’, ‘large branches in motion’, and ‘devastation’.¹⁰ Pain emerges therefore, against the science of numbers, as that which ‘somehow only exists as the likeness of metaphor, the unlikeness of contradiction’, that is, as a force whose elusive intensity may nonetheless be described and discriminated, recognized and communicated, through aesthetic images.¹¹

Developed in 1805 by the Irish hydrographer and Royal Navy officer Sir Francis Beaufort, the Beaufort scale was first adopted officially by Captain Robert Fitzroy on board the HMS *Beagle* during his voyage with Darwin in the 1830s. Melville, for his part, never references the Beaufort scale, even if ‘it was in use among some American mariners’, Richard J. King reminds us in *Ahab’s Rolling Sea: A Natural History of Moby-Dick*, ‘although seemingly rarely used, if ever, by the whalemens’.¹² Yet Biss’s complex investment of its evocative, tropological power as a mode of approach to, if not as a measure of, her singular pain intersects uncannily with Michael D. Snediker’s recent, adjacent attempt to extract ‘figurations’ of chronic pain from descriptions of the sea’s ‘membranous surface’ and its disruptions in Melville and, analogically, from the ‘membranous surface’ of Melville’s style itself, in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* (1852) especially.¹³ Snediker’s emphasis on figuration aims to challenge the way disability studies often approaches the representation of chronic pain by focusing on how characters in pain are supposedly able to articulate their pain ‘from the vantage of [...] a coherent self’, thereby offering mirrors in which we may recognize the lineaments of our own pain.¹⁴ Disputing the ‘presumed correspondence between characters and persons’, Snediker directs critical attention away from characters, plot, or narrative and towards the

surface of writing as the site where pain is both ‘given and withheld’ and where it can be, like *Moby Dick* on the surface of the sea, intermittently sighted.¹⁵ Taking exception to the separation between narrative content and figurative presentation that some disability scholarship enacts, such an approach posits on the contrary their profound inextricability. While mindful of the specific scholarly context of Snediker’s intervention and of the way it inflects his understanding of figuration, I also take his notion, more simply perhaps and for the purposes of this essay, to register the catachrestic force of language, the labour of troping, as well as the material work of the letter, whereby literary meaning is always in excess of its signification. Read alongside each other, I submit, Biss’s and Snediker’s overlapping deployments of pain, wind, and waves—of scales and gauges, of numerical and catachrestic figures—illuminate some of the literary parameters of the problem of pain in Melville. Building on both these essays, I thus investigate the vexed question of the measure of pain in a selection of texts by Melville as ‘both a fiction and a fixative’ and as underwritten by a contest between the claims of arithmetic and the claims of literature over the representation of pain.

The numerical scale of pain as we know it today was designed in the 1970s. Yet the idea of measuring pain already animated conversations around pain and suffering in the antebellum period in the United States, among medical practitioners and laymen alike. In the mid-nineteenth century, scales and thresholds of pain—‘Where does pain worth measuring begin?’ to borrow once more Biss’s pointed formulation—effectively became central to the nation’s transforming culture of pain.¹⁶ Indeed, the Protestant framework that had prevailed until the first decades of the nineteenth century progressively gave way to a worldview steeped in Utilitarian philosophy. This shift changed the meaning and the functions of pain. Rather than a sign of divine election, and a mystery not to be questioned but accepted and suffered as a token of individual redemption, pain was increasingly viewed as the inverted index of collective happiness, the negative measure of communal bliss.¹⁷ It essentially became an aversive experience that could, and therefore should, be avoided—at least for some, as the ‘calculus of suffering’ and its attendant, hierarchical politics continued to operate along predictable lines of race, gender, and class.¹⁸ The invention of general anaesthesia in Boston in 1846 was both an effective instrument and a powerful symbol of this relative transition from acceptance to avoidance. It sparked a series of controversies around the nature of pain, its function in life, its relationship to health, but also around the potential dangers of the new discovery, as well as its availability. Unresolved questions included: Are pain experiences comparable with each other and according to what measure? Is it true for instance, as Ishmael seemingly claims in *Moby-Dick*, that ‘one deep pang’ in ‘great hearts’ is strictly equivalent to ‘the sum total of those

shallow pains kindly diffused in feebler men’?¹⁹ Furthermore, should all kinds and degrees of pain be eradicated? And if not, what would be the criteria that could help determine the consequent hierarchy of suffering? In short, the discovery of anaesthesia initiated a profound ‘crisis of knowing’, in which pain and pain relief became the object of intense speculation and calculation.²⁰

Medical history credits polymath Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. with coining the word ‘anaesthesia’ to name this new condition of temporary insensibility in a letter he sent to William T. G. Morton in November 1846, after Morton demonstrated publicly for the first time the use of ether during a surgical operation.²¹ A Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, first at Dartmouth then Harvard, and Dean of Harvard Medical School, as well as a poet and a novelist, Holmes was also for a time Melville’s physician, whom he treated in the summer of 1855 for a case of back pain and sciatica.²² For men of letters like Holmes and Melville, the stakes of anaesthesia were inseparable from questions of aesthetics, which were themselves a major concern in antebellum literary circles, as attested by the example of *Aesthetic Papers* (1849), Elizabeth Peabody’s short-lived periodical experiment.²³ At the time, the word ‘aesthetic’ was as ubiquitous as its meaning was contested, yet its etymological sense of referring to the realm of sensory perceptions was more prevalent than it is today, thus rooting value judgements into the operations of both mind and body and linking the appreciation of beauty or truth to issues of ableness and health. The interrelated registers on which the value of aesthesis or lack thereof—of intense sensibility or utter numbness of feeling—played out thus made of the experience of pain a key locus to investigate the relations between medicine and literature, between science and art in the mid-nineteenth-century US.

In *The Confidence-Man* (1857) for instance, Melville’s quack herb-doctor claims that, contrary to opiates, the ‘Samaritan Pain Dissuader’ he hopes to sell on the *Fidèle* does not produce ‘insensibility’ but ‘kills pain without killing feeling’.²⁴ However spurious it may be, his sales pitch suggests that Melville, like many other writers and thinkers then, was acutely aware of the debates surrounding the development of pain relief medication and the emergence of an American culture of health predicated on scales and hierarchies of pain. Yet, his writings do not only bear witness to his contemporaries’ efforts to define, measure, and compare various experiences of pain; they also frustrate these efforts by foregrounding the limitations of arithmetic measures of pain and by suggesting that literary or artistic representation might be a more appropriate conduit for making sense of the experience of pain. As the next sections turn to scenes of thwarted measurements of pain in ‘The Encantadas’, *Moby-Dick*, and ‘Bartleby’, this essay argues therefore that, while the problem of pain may begin for Melville on the terrain

of epistemology, it ends in the realm of literary representation, as the language of pain in his fiction moves from figures to figuration.

‘Misery’s Mathematics’

In the archipelago of sketches that make up ‘The Encantadas’, Melville’s tale of lives of isolation, suffering, and inhumanity on the Galápagos Islands, one story stands out for its focus on the various kinds of calculi that lie beneath the difficult labour of representing pain. It centres on Hunilla, a Chola Indian widow stranded on one of the islands after her husband and her brother accidentally drowned. Waiting in vain for the French vessel that contracted them to process tortoise oil to come back for her, Hunilla spends her days ‘busy numbering’ her ‘impassioned pain’ by cutting lines into a reed to record the passage of time.²⁵ Tracking time literally becomes her business at first and a life-preserving counter-measure, as the reed serves as the supporting staff of both her body and her mind. Indenting it keeps her ‘busy’ with ‘numbering’ and allows her to project herself ahead, towards the prospect and the hope of rescue. Yet as the captain of the ship on which the narrator is sailing observes, ‘there were more days [...] many, many more’, which went unrecorded on the reed (‘E’ 157). At this point, Hunilla’s fragmented account breaks off once more, as the captain and the narrator hint at the acts of rape she was the victim of when passing whalemens would come ashore. Compounding the ‘nameless misery’ of her grief, the ‘unnamed events’ of sexual violation interrupted the counting of the days, as well as Hunilla’s initial attempt to compute her suffering, just as their interdicted mention interrupts the narrative with a dash that materializes a pain which can neither be told nor tolled (‘E’ 155, 158). Hunilla stopped counting the days when she experienced a pain that she could not name. Numbering thus appears, in retrospect and once it has been abandoned, as a form of naming which may register, if not alleviate, the pain of grief, but cannot withstand the pain of rape.

The transfer of the mark of pain from reed indentation to typographical dash not only results in the partial elision of rape, which the reader is called upon to supplement. It also creates a misleading sense of a hierarchy between those pains that, like grief, one could hope to tally and those, such as rape, that would forever stymie calculation. Yet Hunilla’s account of her grief already demonstrates the overall failure of ‘misery’s mathematics’ (‘E’ 157). Indeed, no less than six layers of time are superimposed on her reed, where records of chronological time overlap with archives of meteorological time, and levels of stocks and supplies, like a counter-

almanac of sorts. These competing measures bear little relation to one another, however, ‘as if counting birds flown by in air would hasten tortoises creeping through the woods’, the narrator notes rather blithely (‘E’ 157). ‘Half effaced, as alphabets of the blind’ (‘E’ 157), the notches on the reed echo Biss’s recognition, in ‘The Pain Scale’, that the effort to measure pain always entails a ‘blind calculation’.²⁶ The barely visible marks confuse, rather than compute, the times, in whose ‘labyrinth’ Hunilla is ‘entirely lost’ (‘E’ 156). The accumulation of unrelated and incomparable tallies and statistics on the reed only intensifies her pain, instead of relieving it. It also signals the failure to inscribe grief within a temporality of linear progress, within a future-oriented narrative of ultimate recovery, of the kind Melville will ironize in *Clarel* (1876) as ‘the hallelujah after pain, / Which in all tongues of Christendom / Still through the ages has rehearsed / That Best, the outcome of the Worst’.²⁷ Playing on homophones and paronomasias, Melville suggests that Hunilla’s ‘reed’ cannot fulfil its promise: instead of a measure of real time that she could easily read, the reed proves the indecipherable sign of her ‘nameless misery’, ‘unrepiningly to be borne’ (‘E’ 162), as the relief created by the reed’s indentations indexes Hunilla’s impossible relief from pain.²⁸ As a grimly ironic marker of pastoral poetry, the reed reminds us that hers is a tale of never-ending woe and that the ‘Enchanted Isles’ which she was left to roam are under a dark spell indeed. The record of her silent martyrdom does not point to the redemptive prospect of painless eternity, and the proliferation of Christological allusions at the end of the sketch—from the ‘small gray ass’, on which she is last seen riding, to ‘the beast’s armorial cross’ (‘E’ 162)—only underscores the illusory nature of Messianic time as a measure for, and an escape from, the pain of grief.

Recalling the raised script of the braille system and its method of reading by touch, Hunilla’s ‘blind’ statistics also reveal the embodied nature of her pain, as the inscriptions on the reed analogize the bodily marks of her suffering and the violence of sexual violation. In their senselessness, they further anticipate the impossibility to record and verbalize the event and the pain of rape—a crisis of representation which the end of the narrator’s account dramatizes:

‘There were more days’, said our Captain; ‘many, many more; why did you not go on and notch them, too, Hunilla?’

‘Señor, ask me not.’

‘And meantime, did no other vessel pass the isle?’

‘Nay, Señor;—but——’

‘You do not speak; but *what*, Hunilla?’

‘Ask me not, Señor.’

‘You saw ships pass, far away; you waved to them; they passed on;—was that it, Hunilla?’

‘Señor, be it as you say.’

Braced against her woe, Hunilla would not, durst not trust the weakness of her tongue. Then when our Captain asked whether any whale-boats had——

But no, I will not file this thing complete for scoffing souls to quote, and call it firm proof upon their side. The half shall here remain untold. Those two unnamed events which befell Hunilla on this isle, let them abide between her and her God. In nature, as in law, it may be libelous to speak some truths. (‘E’ 157-158)

The narrator frames his silence as editorial necessity and justifies his self-censored account by the economic imperative to avoid legal charges of libel. As Hester Blum has argued, the dashes that punctuate, but also puncture, both Hunilla’s woeful tale and the narrator’s account obscure sexual and racial violence, while registering Melville’s impatience with the contradictory demands of the literary marketplace whose own, obscene calculus of suffering requires simultaneously sentimental restraint before feminine pain and a whiff of lurid sensationalism.²⁹ From this perspective, the narrator’s insistence on itemizing the ‘two’ events of rape is at odds with his equally insistent refusal to verbalize them and this tension emphasizes the contradictory conditions under which Melville’s fiction operates, while putting under erasure the very pain that drives the narrative in the first place.

Yet the narrator’s oddly specific count also harks back to Hunilla’s own, vain attempts to itemize her pain and to the failure of statistics to provide an adequate measure of her suffering. In both cases, numerical figures fall short of the task of tallying pain. More generally however, it is not just the language of measurement, but language itself which seems inaccurate in the face of pain. Melville’s sketch would thus seem to bear out Elaine Scarry’s crucial insight that pain resists to, and even destroys, language.³⁰ From this perspective, the narrator’s emphasis on historical, editorial pressures to elide sexual violence would obscure an even more fundamental, and philosophical, difficulty: that of accounting for the pain of others, but also, in the case of Hunilla, of fully articulating one’s own. On this account, the dashes register the gap between the narrator and Hunilla, between the observer and the sufferer—which no common measure or language can bridge—as well between Hunilla and her pain, which she cannot even communicate to herself. As Scarry also observes, however, the very recognition of the inadequacy of language to express pain is what makes the effort towards verbalization an ethical

and political imperative.³¹ Acknowledging the defectiveness of language does not profess failure, then, so much as it invites further elaboration and fuels the material work of literary figuration, which in the case of ‘The Encantadas’ may be seen to occur in the very space of the dash. Blum astutely notes that, when the text first came out in *Putnam’s* in 1854, Melville’s dashes varied in the course of Hunilla’s sketch, from em to two-em to three-em dash. This typographic peculiarity, she contends, one which the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition of Melville’s works retained, foregrounds the dashes’ Dickinson-like materiality.³² As non-verbal yet materially nuanced and visually meaningful signs, as graphic rather than metric marks, Melville’s dashes thus help figure, as much as they contribute to obscuring, Hunilla’s otherwise ‘nameless’ pain, prompting the reader to face the ethical challenge not only of ‘regarding the pain of others’ but also of caring for it.³³ The dashes function therefore as a paradoxical mode of (dis)articulation whereby pain is simultaneously ‘given and withheld’, abstracted from the material body that experiences it yet relocated in and as typographic matter, which configures reading as itself a material experience involving the reader’s own bodily labours as much as the exertions of their mind.³⁴

Small Figures

In chapter 108 of *Moby-Dick*, ‘Ahab and the Carpenter’, the carpenter’s efforts to take the right measure for Ahab’s new ivory leg similarly open onto the difficulty, if not the impossibility, to determine, by way of calculus, the intensity of someone else’s pain—in Ahab’s case, the instantaneous pain of dismemberment, as well as the chronic pain of his amputated limb’s phantom presence. Ahab’s missing limb has generated important work in the field of disability studies and its absence is usually read as a paradox.³⁵ On the one hand, the missing leg is seen as the all-too-readable cipher for Ahab’s character, his monomania being supposedly entirely accountable for by his dismasting. This is the line of interpretation offered by Captain Peleg early on in the novel. ‘I know Captain Ahab well’, Peleg tells Ishmael in chapter 16:

I’ve sailed with him as mate years ago; I know what he is—a good man—not a pious, good man, like Bildad, but a swearing good man—something like me—only there’s a good deal more of him. Aye, aye, I know that he was never very jolly; and I know that on the passage home, he was a little out of his mind for a spell; but it was the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump that brought that about, as any one might see. I

know, too, that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he's been a kind of moody—desperate moody, and savage sometimes, but that will all pass of. (*MD* 79)

Peleg's account is underwritten by an epistemological assumption.³⁶ Claiming to 'know' Ahab, Peleg attributes his Captain's monomaniacal desire for revenge to 'the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump', as if this agonizing wound were the exact measure of Ahab's character, but also—and somewhat contradictorily—as if his pain and suffering were only temporary ('it will all pass off'). Yet on the other hand, Peleg's discourse largely works against its own logic, since despite his presumed knowledge of Ahab, he confesses that, 'there's a good deal more of him'. That remainder is Ahab's pain, his chronic pain, which exceeds the bounds of Peleg's episteme, if not of logos altogether, much like Hunilla's 'nameless misery'.

A similar paradox of knowledge and mystery informs the beginning of chapter 106, 'Ahab's Leg'. At first, Ahab's pain is entirely reduced to, and measured by, his originary wound: 'all the anguish of that then present suffering was but the direct issue of a former woe', Ishmael notes (*MD* 463–4). Yet the clarity of that reading is soon obscured, to the extent that, 'as touching all Ahab's deeper part, every revelation partook more of significant darkness than of explanatory light' (*MD* 464). Ishmael is quick however to restore 'explanatory light' to conclude that, 'That direful mishap was at the bottom of [Ahab's] temporary recluseness' and of his hidden pains (*MD* 464). What this constant back-and-forth suggests, however, is that Ahab's bodily wound both is and is not the measure of the pain he experiences, thus troubling the possibility of measurement from the outset.

It is this very paradox that the carpenter confronts in chapter 108. 'If the captain pleases, I will now mark the length. Let me measure, sir', he entreats Ahab (*MD* 470). Yet the measuring of Ahab's leg rapidly turns into a dialogue at cross-purposes between them, as the carpenter proves unable to compute Ahab's pain, which appears as 'ungraspable' a 'phantom' as 'life' itself, to appropriate Ishmael's phrase in 'Loomings' (*MD* 5). Indeed, Ahab's ivory prosthesis does not come as a replacement for his missing limb, so much as it is a visible supplement to his invisible yet perceptible and ever-present member. As Ahab comments: 'here is only one distinct leg to the eye, yet two to the soul' (*MD* 471). This doubling is more than a 'riddle': it is a 'poser' (*MD* 471), which utterly mystifies the carpenter because it severs feeling from vision and touch, just as it dissociates pain from the body. 'How dost thou know', Ahab further asks, 'that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly standing precisely where thou now standest; aye, and standing there in thy spite? [...] 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?' (MD 471) 'Long dissolved' yet still the site of 'tingling life' in the form of smarting, 'fiery pains', Ahab's missing leg figures, in the dialectic of its absent presence, the conundrum of invisible pain and its vexed relation to feeling and embodiment, life and death. This conundrum eventually muddles the carpenter's measuring: 'I must calculate over again', he concludes, 'I think I didn't carry a small figure, sir' (MD 471). In the complex arithmetic of Ahab's pain, one actually means two, if not three, as the carpenter further ponders the seemingly chiasmic poser of 'one leg standing in three places, and all three places standing in one hell' (MD 472), in a distorted and blasphemous echo of the doctrine of the Trinity. However circular, the inequivalence between 'one' and 'three' explains why the carpenter's numbers do not add up, leaving him with the wrong measure in the end and leaving Ahab with the inescapability of his pain rather than with faith in a redemptive God. The extra 'small figure' which the carpenter thought he forgot to 'carry' turns out to be the sign of what mathematicians would likely call an irreducible case, or *casus irreducibilis*, that is, an equation that remains unsolvable using only real numbers and whose solution requires the introduction of complex or imaginary numbers. In this respect, it is an ironic coincidence that, historically, the word 'algebra' should also have designated 'the surgical treatment of a fractured or dislocated bone' and, more generally, the 'restoration (of anything which is missing, lost, out of place, or lacking)', the 'reunion of broken parts'.³⁷ There is no reducing, in the sense of restoring or setting straight, Ahab's fractured bones, just as there is no reducing, in the sense of solving, the equation of his pain. This suggests that any calculus of suffering—prosthetic or otherwise—is predicated on a compensatory logic of restoration, which the very experience of pain refutes. And it does so because it is not an experience of loss, so much as a paradoxical experience of excess, as Ahab's sense of two or three legs in one intimates.

But Melville also invests here the double sense of the word 'figure', to suggest that the 'small figure', the excessive remainder which renders the equation of Ahab's pain irreducible and insoluble, may well be the stuff of literary figuration, just as the impossible equivalence between 'leg' and 'hell'—discordant phonic shadows of each other—leaves the carpenter's equation forever off balance yet propels Melville's figural thinking about pain. Snediker helpfully elaborates the work of Melville's literary figuration as a process of 'inching towards meaning', one which allows to approach the infinitesimal movement of chronic pain, its 'allure'.³⁸ Interestingly, the word 'allure', at least in French, also names the traces left by an animal being pursued during the chase.³⁹ In this section of *Moby-Dick*, the labour of figuration,

appropriately analogized by the carpenter toiling before ‘*the red flame of the forge*’ (MD 469) while he converses with Ahab, may be seen as a way of inching towards the infinitesimal traces of chronic pain as it eludes capture by the language of measurement—as in the gap between Ahab’s ‘leg’ and the ‘hell’ of his pain, which recalls Dickinson’s ‘Heavenly Hurt’ where

We can find no scar,
But internal difference –
Where the Meanings, are —⁴⁰

‘Measureless Sobbing’

By dramatizing the aporia of measurement, both ‘The Encantadas’ and *Moby-Dick* centre on the difficulty to relate to someone else’s experience of pain, as well as to relate one’s own pain to others. Ishmael’s response to Peleg’s evocation of Ahab’s pain in chapter 16 is illustrative of that difficulty and its attendant ethical challenges:

As I walked away [Ishmael writes], I was full of thoughtfulness; what had been incidentally revealed to me of Captain Ahab, filled me with a certain wild vagueness of painfulness concerning him. And somehow, at the time, I felt a sympathy and a sorrow for him, but for I don’t know what, unless it was the cruel loss of his leg. And yet I also felt a strange awe of him; but that sort of awe, which I cannot at all describe, was not exactly awe; I do not know what it was. But I felt it; and it did not disincline me towards him; though I felt impatience at what seemed like mystery in him, so imperfectly as he was known to me then. However, my thoughts were at length carried in other directions, so that for the present dark Ahab slipped my mind. (MD 79–80)

Unlike Peleg, Ishmael values feeling over knowing, as the passage hinges on the opposition between his uncertain knowledge of Ahab and the assurance of his affective motions towards him. Despite Ishmael’s insistence however, the possibility of sympathy that this scene seems to promise is complicated, if not altogether hindered, by affective asymmetry. Compared to, or rather measured up against, Ahab’s ‘sharp shooting pains’, Ishmael’s ‘wild vagueness of painfulness’ sounds oxymoronic at best and resonates ironically with his claim to be ‘full of thoughtfulness’. The formlessness of his mood is further underscored by the indefinite articles

‘a sympathy and a sorrow’, which, though they recategorize Ishmael’s feelings as countable and specifiable events, simultaneously index the indistinctness of his response, leading Ahab quickly to ‘[slip] his mind’ altogether.

Another scene of vexed sympathetic exchange bookends the novel, this time between Starbuck and Ahab. In ‘The Symphony’, seeing Ahab ‘[drop] a tear into the sea’, Starbuck ‘seemed to hear in his own true heart the measureless sobbing’, just as Ahab sees his wife and child in Starbuck’s eyes (*MD* 543). Yet the circulation of affects between them is short-lived and ultimately fails to detract Ahab from the chase. Starbuck’s picture of domestic bliss falls short of matching Ahab’s pain, which remains ultimately ‘measureless’ and inexorable. The examples of Ishmael and Starbuck confirm that the logic of sympathy is underwritten by a fantasy of equivalence of affects whereby the sympathetic observer could match the sufferer’s pain and thus work toward relieving it. They also reveal the illusory nature of that equivalence, for want of a third term that could serve as a common, reliable measure to compare the sufferer’s pain and the observer’s sympathy and make them correspond.

Like many other nineteenth-century writers, Melville repeatedly confronts the limitations of sympathy and its arithmetic of suffering. This arithmetic hinges in particular on the possibility, or rather the difficulty, of analogy. In *Melville’s Anatomies*, Samuel Otter has magisterially explored how *White-Jacket* (1850) for instance picks apart the analogy between the pain of sailors and that of enslaved people that the shared experience of flogging invites in the first place. In Otter’s reading, Melville positions himself exactly ‘at the pivot’ of the figure of analogy, ‘at the preposition “like” around which the meanings turn’, the better to expose ‘the ways in which anxieties about likeness generate efforts at discrimination’.⁴¹ Rather than identity and identification, analogy—‘like’—produces difference. Other critics have since noted Melville’s engagement with the figure of analogy and the labour of an easily overlooked word such as ‘like’, from Michael Warner’s close reading of the parenthetical line in ‘Shiloh’, ‘(what like a bullet can undeceive!)’—which Warner reads as questioning the redemptive function of war suffering while activating the undeceiving power of the lyric form—to Elizabeth Barnes’s exploration of ‘fraternal melancholies’ in Melville and Douglass, to Russ Castronovo’s critique of the politics of analogy in ‘Bartleby’, to Snediker’s concern for ‘Melville’s sustained fascination with ontologies of *being like*’ and his ‘meditation on analogic affection’.⁴²

Critical accounts of the ways in which the representation of pain in Melville is bound up with the figure of analogy—at once critical of and inextricable from it—often turn to ‘Bartleby’, more particularly, in light of the scrivener’s renowned impenetrability, to the way

the lawyer-narrator relates to the pain that he supposes Bartleby has been experiencing. ‘Bartleby’ may thus be seen to dramatize a radical version of the problem of pain that Scarry identifies: insofar as Bartleby remains inaccessible to others, ‘his’ pain exists essentially in relation to, or as an effect of, the discourse and projections of others about him, and specifically the narrator’s.⁴³ One of the narrator’s stylistic idiosyncrasies in this respect is his predilection for comparisons, which literally bookend the tale—from his confessed ‘love’, in the opening scene, for the name of ‘the late John Jacob Astor’, which ‘rings like unto bullion’, to his mention of ‘dead letters’ sounding ‘like dead men’ in the closing sentences.⁴⁴ Other examples would include his description of Bartleby being ‘like a very ghost’ (‘B’ 29) or ‘like the last column of some ruined temple’ (‘B’ 33). Yet in the course of the story, ‘like’ takes on another valence, as the lawyer asks several times Bartleby ‘what sort of business’ he would ‘*like* to engage in’ if indeed he ‘would prefer not to’ copy anymore (‘B’ 41; my emphasis). Oscillating between ‘like-as-resemblance’ and ‘like-as-affection’, the lawyer’s grammar reveals the labour of *like* as ‘simultaneously affective and analogous’.⁴⁵ His identificatory motion towards Bartleby, his ‘fraternal melancholy’ for him and his supposed suffering, is grounded in their ‘common humanity’—in their both being ‘sons of Adam’—and posits, as its condition, the possibility of an affective equivalence between them (‘B’ 28).

This initial motion or disposition meets however with another, opposed movement, which consists for the lawyer in denying all common measure between them in order to preserve the integrity, the safety of his own self. His self-description as ‘an eminently *safe* man’ (‘B’ 14) configures the self as a safe that needs to be protected at all costs, which implies severing all ties with Bartleby. As he declares after changing offices in the hope of definitively getting rid of his now unproductive clerk: ‘The man you allude to is nothing to me—he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him’ (‘B’ 39). His response evinces the fear that, through a relation of sympathy, he might be led to experience the same kind of spiritual bankruptcy as the one he believes his employee to be suffering from, for ‘to a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain’, he observes (‘B’ 29). The lawyer refuses to relate to Bartleby through the figure of analogy, not so much because of an unsurpassable difference between them that would invalidate the very premise of analogy, but lest the analogy reveal itself perfectly accurate, lest they prove, in fact, utterly similar to each other. Yet, although the lawyer denies forcefully any analogical relation with Bartleby, he surprisingly ends his narrative with one such analogy, exclaiming famously: ‘Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!’ (‘B’ 45) By universalizing Bartleby into a representative figure for the misery of the human condition, the lawyer may still nonetheless be seen to attempt to sever all ties between himself and the

scrivener, whose presumed pain is now so generalized that it ‘might apply to anyone’, that is, to no one in particular, least of all himself.⁴⁶ Conjured and disowned at once, analogy functions as a paradoxical means of differentiation and self-protection for the lawyer, even as it discloses the anxiety of likeness that haunts and unhomes him.

There may be, however, another way to read the lawyer’s analogies, away from the measuring of pain, away from the dubious and self-interested calculus of suffering that, under cover of compassion, drives his actions, and as a means for Melville to approach, to approximate the allure of Bartleby’s suffering through the work of literary figuration. From this perspective, a simile such as ‘like a very ghost’ (‘B’ 29) echoes uncannily Shakespeare’s phrase in *Hamlet*: ‘very like a whale’, which Melville takes up in the extracts that open *Moby-Dick* (MD xix). In *Hamlet*, where Polonius seeks to please the Prince who is asking about the shape of a cloud, the intensifier ‘very’ indexes ironically the failure rather than the closure of representation. In *Moby-Dick*, where the tenor has been elided, only the vehicle remains to signal the movement of figuration itself as the work of a paradoxical mimesis that does not aim at capturing its object in order to convert it into a set of measurable quantities, but follows instead the rhythm and the form of its singular allure.⁴⁷ As a figuring that never reaches the fullness of a figure, ‘very like a whale’ thus provides an apposite—because appositely incomplete—figuration of pain: a figuration without measure.

When Melville asks in *Pierre* (1852): ‘can Truth betray to pain?’, the eponymous character firmly answers in the affirmative.⁴⁸ The narrative logic of the novel however, as Édouard Marsoin has recently shown, largely undoes Pierre’s epistemology of pain.⁴⁹ Similarly, ‘The Encantadas’, *Moby-Dick*, and ‘Bartleby’ reveal how Melville challenges the effort to know pain through the operations of measuring and calculation. This challenge complicates in turn the possibility of the equivalence of affects upon which sympathetic identification hinges. This certainly enables Melville’s critique of the hierarchies of suffering and of the ideological complicities that underwrite the politics of pain in the nineteenth-century United States. In this sense, the paralectic elision of the pain of Hunilla’s rape and the grim irony of her silent martyrdom in ‘The Encantadas’ would echo, for instance, the sexualized exploitation of the white factory girls and the ambiguous transfiguration of their suppressed suffering as mock-Christological sacrifice in ‘The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids’ (1855). Beyond critique however, Melville’s writings also offer avenues to figure and thus to recover,

obliquely and always at a distance, what *Clarel* names as those ‘gusts of lonely pain / Beating on the naked brain’ (*C* 186)—a trope which oddly recalls the catachrestic adequacy of the Beaufort scale to figure the varying amplitudes of chronic pain, thus registering the affordance of literature in the relentless effort to articulate one’s pain and that of others.

¹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 13.

² I develop the problem of pain’s articulation in *Writing Pain in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

³ Eula Biss, ‘The Pain Scale’, *Seneca Review* 35.1 (2005), pp. 5–25, 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ Susannah B. Mintz, ‘On a Scale of 1 to 10: Life Writing and Lyrical Pain’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5.3 (2011), pp. 243–59, 248.

⁸ Lisa Olstein, ‘Pain Studies’, in ‘The Pain Cluster’, ed. Emily Wells, *Post45: Contemporaries* (24 February 2020), <http://post45.org/2020/02/pain-studies/> (accessed 27 May 2021).

⁹ Biss, ‘The Pain Scale’, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 13, 25.

¹¹ Mintz, ‘On a Scale of 1 to 10’, p. 256.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 276.

¹³ Michael D. Snediker, *Contingent Figure: Queer Embodiment and Chronic Pain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), pp. 35–60, 43.

¹⁴ Branka Arsić and K. L. Evans, ‘Introduction: Reconstructing Melville’, in *Melville’s Philosophies*, ed. Branka Arsić and K. L. Evans (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Snediker, *Contingent Figure*, p. 38.

¹⁶ Biss, ‘The Pain Scale’, p. 7.

¹⁷ On the history of pain in the nineteenth-century US, see for instance Frances M. Clarke, *War Stories: Suffering and Sacrifice in the Civil War North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 8–27.

¹⁸ See for instance Martin Pernick, *A Calculus of Suffering: Pain, Professionalism, and Anesthesia in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) and Simon Strick, *American Dolorologies: Pain, Sentimentalism, Biopolitics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014).

¹⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1997), pp. 551–2. Hereafter cited as *MD* with page number.

- ²⁰ Sari Altschuler, *The Medical Imagination: Literature and Health in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2018), p. 161.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 161 and 174–83.
- ²² Brandon Johnson, ‘Pain, Paradise, and Person: An Analysis of Sensibility in Melville’, unpublished graduate paper, University of Oxford (March 2020). See also John J. Ross, ‘The Many Ailments of Herman Melville (1819–91)’, *Journal of Medical Biography* 16.1 (2008), pp. 21–9, 26 and Richard Dean Smith, ‘I and My Sciatica’, *Western Journal of Medicine* 143.5 (1985), pp. 688–90.
- ²³ Altschuler, *The Medical Imagination*, p. 167.
- ²⁴ Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1984), p. 87.
- ²⁵ Herman Melville, ‘The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles’, in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, G. Thomas Tanselle *et al.* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), pp. 157, 155. Hereafter cited as ‘E’ with page number.
- ²⁶ Biss, ‘The Pain Scale’, p. 11.
- ²⁷ Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1991), p. 491. Hereafter cited as *C* with page number.
- ²⁸ Michel Imbert, “‘The Encantadas’ ou le décompte du temps en archipel”, *Transatlantica* 1 | 2015, <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/7550> (accessed 27 May 2021).
- ²⁹ Hester Blum, ‘Douglass’s and Melville’s “Alphabets of the Blind”’, in *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*, ed. Samuel Otter and Robert S. Levine (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), pp. 257–78.
- ³⁰ See Scarry, *The Body in Pain*.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 12.
- ³² Blum, ‘Douglass’s and Melville’s “Alphabets of the Blind”’, pp. 269–73.
- ³³ See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, 2003).
- ³⁴ Snediker, *Contingent Figure*, p. 38. On reading as an embodied practice in Melville, see Matthew Rebhorn, ‘Minding the Body: Benito Cereno and Melville’s Embodied Reading Practice’, *Studies in the Novel* 41.2 (2009), pp. 157–77.
- ³⁵ See for instance David Mitchell, “‘Too Much of a Cripple’: Ahab, Dire Bodies, and the Language of Prosthesis in *Moby-Dick*’, *Leviathan* 1.1 (1999): pp. 5–22.
- ³⁶ Snediker, *Contingent Figure*, p. 36.
- ³⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v., ‘algebra’.
- ³⁸ Snediker, *Contingent Figure*, p. 42.
- ³⁹ See Agnès Derail-Imbert, *Moby Dick: allures du corps* (Paris: Éditions Rue d’Ulm, 2000).

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- ⁴⁰ Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), F320.
- ⁴¹ Samuel Otter, *Melville's Anatomies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 94.
- ⁴² Michael Warner, 'What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?', *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003), pp. 41–54; Elizabeth Barnes, *Love's Whipping Boy: Violence and Sentimentality in the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp. 51–81; Russ Castronovo, 'Occupy Bartleby', *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 2.2 (Fall 2014), pp. 253–72; Snediker, *Contingent Figure*, pp. 61–84, 74 and 75.
- ⁴³ As Elizabeth Barnes remarks, 'the narrator projects onto Bartleby an empathy with the pain of others that belongs chiefly to the narrator himself' (*Love's Whipping Boy*, p. 66). For a compelling reading of the distinction between pain and suffering in 'Bartleby', see Branka Arsić, *Passive Constitutions, or 7 ½ Times Bartleby* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 85–97.
- ⁴⁴ Herman Melville, 'Bartleby', in *The Piazza Tales*, pp. 14, 45. Hereafter cited as 'B' with page number.
- ⁴⁵ Snediker, *Contingent Figure*, pp. 79, 76.
- ⁴⁶ Castronovo, 'Occupy Bartleby', p. 269.
- ⁴⁷ Derail-Imbert, *Moby Dick: allures du corps*, p. 280.
- ⁴⁸ Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1971), p. 159.
- ⁴⁹ Édouard Marsoin, *Melville et l'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, 2019), p. 161.