

MOBY-DICK, MODERNISM AND THE “POST-DEATH” NARRATION

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Abstract: There is a peculiar tendency among many first-person Modernist narrators to simulate the narrative perspective of “posthumousness” (as if these accounts were somehow narrated by the dead). The procedure (that could be termed the “post-death narration”) seems to be present in various proto-modernist and Modernist works such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, etc. This narrative perspective is entwined with the trauma discourse, and the article argues that some of the best-known Modernist techniques (like the stream of consciousness) are based on the Gothic model of spectral narration. In the works of the genre, ghosts are often portrayed as traumatized, incommunicative, and disoriented “shattered selves” eternally entrapped in the closed space of a single, repetitive traumatic memory. This also seems to be the case with many Modernist narrators. The article shows various ways this genre convention of the Gothic has been (re)used in Modernist storytelling. Furthermore, the “post-death narration” could also be interpreted as a “symptom” of extreme subjectivity and epistemic frustration (which are typical features of Modernist narration in general). It is also claimed that the narrative perspective of “posthumousness” was first employed in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and that Ishmael, the narrator of the novel, could be seen as the “prototype” of this kind of Modernist “post-death” narration.

Keywords: post-death narration; Modernism; subjectivity; *Moby-Dick*

“Memories of the dead”

The “underworld” is not just a frequent motif but the symbolic model of the storyworld in many Modernist fictions. What is Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*¹, “a Modernist manifesto, announcing in 1899 the note of its new era” (Graham 2004, 211), but a reworking of an ancient theme: a hero, a doomed Orpheus is descending into the underworld, “the city of the dead” (Conrad 2002, 15), gliding through the Styx-like Congo river, “like a phantom, wondering and secretly appalled” (Conrad 2002, 58). For Marlow, Congo becomes “the tenebrous land invaded by [...] mean and greedy phantoms” (Conrad 2002, 114), the underworld

¹ For a more elaborated exploration of the “underworld” theme in Conrad's novella, see (e.g.) Anspaugh 1995 and Vujošević 2021.

from which one can never find a way out. The entire geography becomes strangely chthonic: not only Africa but Europe itself turns out to be the world of the dead. Brussels is “the sepulchral city” (Conrad 2002, 119), and London is “one of the dark places of the earth” (Conrad 2002, 5). As if everything is swallowed up by the experience of death and destruction, even Marlow himself. His narration is strangely “posthumous”: his sentences are incoherent, elliptical, like “memories of the dead that accumulate in every man’s life—a vague impress on the brain of shadows that had fallen on it in their swift and final passage” (Conrad 2002, 123). He seems to be “numbered with the dead” (Conrad 2002, 114), and his narration is disturbingly inconclusive, shattered, and elliptical, like whispers and wailings of ghosts that are forever haunting the places of their traumas. There is a spectral effect to this kind of Modernist narration.

This same narrative model is also present in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). The depiction of the London workday morning routine suddenly turns into a purgatorial vision, like an image from a nightmare of some visionary saint:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many. (Eliot 2001, 7)

The multiple narrators of Eliot’s poem are also strangely spectral. These are fragmented, overheard chatters of the dead, specimens of shadows talking:

And when we were children, staying at the arch-duke’s,
My cousin’s, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went (Eliot 2001, 5).

These are phantom memories, melancholy repetitions of shattered, evaporated, ghostly subjects, long dead. If there is a lesson we can learn from the Gothic, it is that ghosts are strangely incommunicative, eternally obsessed with some private image or memory, some arcane word they cannot stop uttering. They are forever caught up in endless eerie repetitions, entrapped in a haunted nostalgia for their own terminated lives, for some unacted possibility. They can offer nothing but “a heap of broken images” (Eliot 2001, 5). There is a uniquely Gothic ghostly script sustaining many Modernist narratives.

This is perhaps nowhere as obvious as in Faulkner’s high modernist *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Seven years after his suicide in Faulkner’s previous novel *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin Compson (re)appears again as a narrator, speaking from “the cold air, the iron New England dark” (Faulkner 1951, 378) of his Harvard campus. As if he were invoked, “exhumed” from a previous text in which he was already dead and buried, to become “a faceless mind agonizing in the void” (DiRenzo 1993, 147), speaking quietly to Shreve (as if from shadows)

about multiple traumas, intimate and collective. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the world of the *postbellum* South is already the world of the dead: “The deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one” (Faulkner 1951, 9). Another narrator of the novel, Rosa Coldfield is also “a ghost” musing “with shadowy docility” (Faulkner 1951, 8), a spectral spinster still haunting the old mansion, keeping hold of its secrets like “the cold Cerberus of [family] hell” (Faulkner 1951, 136) narrating from “the dim coffin-smelling gloom” (Faulkner 1951, 8) of the old, decrepit house. She is caught up in the loop of reveries, missed opportunities and regrets (like all ghosts are), eerily repeating the childish ditty: “Yes, Rosie Coldfield, lose him, weep him; caught a beau but couldn't keep him” (Faulkner 1951, 171).

Perhaps, this spectral atmosphere (the hidden symbolic presence of the underworld waiting to swallow up the world of the living) is also present in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), as if the entire narrative is driving on “toward death through the cooling twilight” (Fitzgerald 2001, 87). When Nick Carraway sees Gatsby for the first time, he seems to be only a passing apparition: “When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness” (Fitzgerald 2001, 16). Could the “unquiet darkness” be a strange reference to “The Unquiet Grave,” a ballad describing a young man grieving the death of his beloved and talking to her specter? Isn't Nick Carraway a strange, symbolic “widow” of Gatsby, the only one who had stayed by his bier until the end? For Nick, Gatsby seems to be invested with spectral quality, entrapped within the ghost-like world of a single desire, single futile obsession: “He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about... like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees” (Fitzgerald 2001, 103). The lesson of the Gothic is emerging again and again in Modernist narration: gothic specters are always desperately plagued with impossible dreams that distance them from the solid world.²

² For example, in Matthew Lewis's Gothic novel *The Monk*, the afterlife of the Bleeding Nun, a ghost haunting the castle of Lindenberg, is nothing but a mute repetition of a single erotic fascination, a disembodied fantasy surviving her physical substance. She is doomed to eternally reenact her transgression, forever entrapped in this single emotion. A similar thing happens in *The Turn of the Screw*, where the ghosts of bedeviled lovers, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, forever haunt the mansion at Bly, their afterlife being

But, how to account for this Modernist “hauntology,” this strange propensity of Modernist texts to be “possessed” with images of the underworld, with uncanny narrative *posthumousness*?

“An author from the dead”: narrating trauma in (proto-)modernism

The origin of Modernist post-death narration could be traced back to Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). This novel is also structured as a symbolic “descent into the underworld” (Kenngott 2014, 2). It represents an unstable rewriting of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* with Queequeg as “Ishamel’s Virgil, [...] a type of virtuous pagan” (Kenngott 2014, 13). Moreover, Ishmael’s narration is uncannily spectral: toward the end of the novel it appears that the I-perspective (established already in the first chapter with “Call me Ishmael”) is abandoned, and some more “pervasive” narrative instance seems to be taking hold of the narration, surveying and rendering various events of the sinking of the Pequod. For example, in the last chapter, we are informed of the two relatively distant events: Stubb’s moribund lamentation on the Pequod’s deck is almost immediately followed by Ahab’s concluding, tragic soliloquy (uttered on his whaling boat). A single, “normal” human consciousness could hardly be the narrator of these nearly simultaneous but spatially removed events. The description of the Pequod sinking is then elaborately offered, resembling some “last revelation, which only an author from the dead could adequately tell” (Melville 2014, 466).

As if something paradoxical has happened here. It seems that everyone has perished in the final confrontation with the white whale, yet a strange, disembodied, phantom narrative voice somehow survives to tell the entire story: “[T]hen all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (Melville 2014, 560). However, the ensuing short “Epilogue” informs us that “one did survive the wreck” (Melville 2014, 561). Ishmael somehow survives the vortex opened by the sinking of the ship and the shark-infested waters for “almost one whole day and night” (Melville 2014, 561). The “Epilogue” seems to be a forced move: an unconvincing attempt to provide a realistic basis for previous narration. But the sense of some narrative “posthumousness” remains as if this was an effect necessary for the narration. In the end, *Moby-Dick* is not so much a survivor’s tale as the narration of the dead, unconvincingly excused in the “Epilogue” from its own impossibility. Tara Robbins Fee rightly notices that “such closure eludes the reader of Melville’s novel [...] for although the ending resolves the conflict of the story [...], it does not render the Ishmael plucked out of the ocean recognizable as the Ishmael

nothing but an eerie and anemic repetition of their transgression. It seems that ghosts are, ultimately, shadows of desire.

who tells the tale“ (Fee 2012, 139). As if the retelling of the events of the novel somehow demands a simulated perspective of the post-death experience.

This simulated perspective of “posthumousness” is related to narrative accounts of trauma. According to Ishamel, the “knowledge of the dead” is essentially connected with incommunicability. As if there is a dark *surplus* of traumatic experience that cannot be adequately and discursively expressed:

In what census of living creatures, the dead of mankind are included; why it is that a universal proverb says of them, that they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Goodwin Sands; [...] in what eternal, unstirring paralysis, and deadly, hopeless trance, yet lies antique Adam who died sixty round centuries ago; [...] why all the living so strive to hush all the dead; wherefore but the rumor of a knocking in a tomb will terrify a whole city. All these things are not without their meanings. (Melville 2014, 35)

This could be a compelling way to approach the Modernist post-death narration. Modernist narrators (and Ishmael is, perhaps, the protomodernist narrator, a prototype of shattered, solipsistic narrators such as Conrad's Marlow, Medox Ford's John Dowell, or Faulkner's Quentin Compson) “tell no tales.” What is, for example, the “tale” of *Heart of Darkness*? Marlow is caught up in the narrative crisis, constantly asking for reassurance concerning the identity of his own story:

Do you see [Kurtz]? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment [...] that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams... “He was silent for a while....” No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation. (Conrad 2002, 43)

Traumatized by his experiences, Marlow is “the narrator who constantly evokes forms of unreality – dreams, nightmares, phantoms, visions” (Knight 1987, 26). The real world is lost to him. “The whole text [seems to be merely] an adventure of Marlow’s imagination” (Knight 1987, 26). It appears that any objective, impartial rendition of empirical reality is impossible here. Instead, we are caught up in “the literal/figurative play-off by which it becomes impossible to process descriptions of light, darkness, hearts, etc., without slipping into metaphorical reading” (Knight 1987: 25). Everything becomes invested with arbitrary symbolism, like a laborious and inconclusive interpretation of an utterly chaotic dream. Narrative failure seems to be an integral part of the

Modernist aesthetic.³ No wonder Faulkner famously described the *Sound and the Fury* as “a splendid failure,”⁴ for none of the shattered, traumatized Compson narrators are able to “tell the story” adequately.

The stance of narratorial posthumousness seems to be provoked by some traumatic crisis of subjectivity. (E.g., Septimus Smith, a shell-shocked character in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, is described as an animated dead person⁵). Perhaps, even the stream of consciousness, the Modernist narrative technique par excellence, could be viewed as a uniquely spectral discourse of trauma, a peculiar narrative imitation of catatonic rigor of the shell-shock with “its stutter-like repetitions and syntactic tremor, [...] resembling a speech in a restless dream” (Vujošević 2021, 121).⁶ This is especially true of Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and John Dowell in *The Good Soldier*. These narrators are caught up (to use Ishmael’s description of the condition of the dead) in some “eternal, unstimulating paralysis and deadly, hopeless trance.” Their stream of consciousness reflects the disturbing fact that somehow every kind of future development is excluded for them. These are the agitated, hopeless narrators plagued by past traumas, by some death-like uneventfulness in which they can do nothing but brood over the traumatic experiences that have already happened in a futile attempt to make of them a coherent story. “I was the walking dead” (Ford 2003, 120), says a disoriented narrator of Medox Ford’s

³ Jonathan Ulliot, e.g., claims that “literary modernity” in general is “committed to failure” (2015, 1). Various works of literary Modernism are often “repetitive, fragmented, and nonlinear texts that privilege moments of paradox, confusion, anxiety, and breakdown over moments of revelation, discovery, coherence, and resolution” (Ulliot 2015, 1).

⁴ Faulkner used this phrase in response to a student’s question at the Virginia College Conference on April 15, 1957. The transcript and the audio recording of the event are available at “Faulkner at Virginia” website, n.d. Retrieved July 27, 2022, from https://faulkner.lib.virginia.edu/display/wfaudio07_2.html.

⁵ “But he himself remained high on his rock, like a drowned sailor on a rock. I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still, he begged (he was talking to himself again - it was awful, awful!)” (Woolf 1992, 83).

⁶ An interesting specimen of this kind of repetitious, traumatic narration could be found (e.g.) in Quentin’s section of *The Sound and the Fury*: “Because if it were just to hell; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us. I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames And when he put Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. When he put the pistol in my hand I didn’t. That’s why I didn’t. He would be there and she would and I would. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. Dalton Ames. If we could have just done something so dreadful and Father said That’s sad too people cannot do anything that dreadful they cannot do anything very dreadful at all” (Faulkner 1946,98-9).

novel. This type of narration presupposes some symbolic death of the narrator. For such narrators, everything has already happened: they wait for nothing and expect nothing. They are reduced to spectral minds agonizing over their traumatic histories.

“The demon phantom”: the loss of reality and solipsistic disintegration of the (proto-)modernist self

It seems that this new narrative crisis begins with Melville's Ishmael. He is the narrator with “no world of his own” (Dreyfus 2018), strangely obsessed with his own death: “A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me” (Melville 2014, 413). He is a shattered, manic-depressive subject. The fact is obvious even in the very first chapter.⁷ What he narrates is always compromised by his own “fantasmatic” investments. Reality is lost, rejected, censored (“Ishamel” even withholds his real name), and what remains is a fantasmatic overwriting of reality, a flight to fantasy. But there is something decentralized, shiftless in Ishmael's fantasies, in this “pocket novel” (Barthes 1994, 87) of reveries he always carries with himself.

For example, his initial encounter with Queequeg (they were bedfellows at the Spouter Inn) is invested with excessive homoerotic intimacy and desire for proximity (“Queequeg now and then affectionately throwing his brown tattooed legs over mine”⁸). The bed-sharing affair becomes, in Ishmael's unrestricted fantasies, almost a symbolic marriage. “But human relationships mean little to [Ishmael], and after a [...] violent entry, Queequeg is almost forgotten” (Forster 1985, 140). A strange kind of emotional “promiscuity” is at work in Ishmael's fantasy of intimacy. A similar thing happens with his idealization of one Bulkington whose physique is described with obvious homoerotic fascination (“This man interested me at once”⁹), and with a sort of melancholy desire (he's compared even to a “demi-god”¹⁰), and then is mentioned no more. Ishmael's fantasy is not built around anyone: Queequeg and Bulkington are merely dispensable guest-actors of his intimacy plays. His fantasies are startlingly solipsistic. No wonder that in what is perhaps the strangest chapter of the novel “A Squeeze of the Hand,” Ishmael's intimacy play achieves an almost explicit

⁷ The narrative opens with Ishmael's suicidal ideation: “[W]henever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get [...] an upper hand of me [...] then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship” (Melville 2014, 1).

⁸ Melville 2014, 53.

⁹ Melville 2014, 13.

¹⁰ Melville 2014, 104.

“onanistic” quality. “When the sperm of the whale is extracted, it is found to have 'strangely concreted into lumps.' [...] The task of the crew is to squeeze these lumps back into fluid” (Cosgrove 2014, 24). However, the event provides an unexpected, symbolic *surplus* pleasure for Ishmael:

[I]n that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it; I almost began to credit the old Paracelsan superstition that sperm is of rare virtue in allaying the heat of anger. [...] Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; 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 feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally. (Melville 2014, 405-6)

The scene is not (so much) a “celebration of human fellowship and community” (Cosgrove 2014, 4) as some critics would have it, but a delirious, compulsive, manic episode. This alleged celebration of fellowship is paradoxically associated with the “solitary vice.” Fraternalization and communal proximity are only masking out Ishmael's private reveries and “his own (onanistic) solipsism” (Schutjer 2000, 171).

There is something “haunting” about fantasies as if they can establish a spectral world concomitant to our own but strangely spectral and elusive, to which one could easily become a prisoner: an enslaved ghost of one's own desire. This destructive power of fantasy is something that Ishmael expresses through a uniquely spectral idiom of the ghost stories, almost resembling a summary of Poe's Gothic *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*: “But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed” (Melville 2014, 229).

Dealing with the psychology of Modernism, Patricia Waugh notices that “as the mind turns inward – and this is an ‘inward turn’ [typical of Modernism] – the world is drained of affective meaning and becomes a place of the imaginary, [...] shimmery and strange and like a world but never achieving that depth and solidity that gives the feeling of reality” (Waugh 2012, 90). Ishmael's fantasies create a “double space, disconnected, layered” (Barthes 1994, 88), thus slowly replacing reality with fantastic interpretations. E.g. numerous chapters in the novel are complete fabrications. Ahab's soliloquy (uttered in the privacy of his cabin) in Chapter 37 is nothing but a fabricated Shakesperian pastiche. Chapter 40 is a dramatic play script (not a mimetic report of actual events) portraying sailors singing and dancing to the tambourine, speaking like characters in a

vaudeville. Chapter 95 is a strange hallucinatory rendition of a sailor “called the mincer” (Melville 2014, 408) pulling over himself the skin of a whale’s penis. And so on. There is this constant retreat to some private vision, to the “defensive and deceptive, the unreliable and the darkly inconceivable” (Waugh 2012, 85). This kind of narration ultimately offers merely “desires and obscure drives and the self-dramatizations that hide characters from themselves” (Waugh 2012, 85). This is something that “Modernist fiction is almost exclusively identified with” (Waugh 2012, 85). Ishmael’s unreliability is so specifically manic and solipsistic that it becomes an early symptom of Modernist writing.

Speaking of Musil’s novel *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1943), Paul Ricoeur claims that it “amply verifies that the crisis of identity of the character is correlative to the crisis of identity of the plot” (Ricoeur 1991, 78). This is also true of Ishmael and his narration. His narrative only masquerades itself as an adventure story (the novel is only a broken promise of the seafaring adventure). Ishmael’s narration seems to be a strange fulfillment of the famous Flaubertian „proto-modernist“ desire: “to compose a book about nothing” (Flaubert 1980, 154). His renditions of the seafaring events slowly recede, giving way to numerous chapters of endless theoretical speculations, daydreams, fantasies, unresolved cetology, and metaphysics. It is the doomed *Summa Cetologiae* that ends with the horrid and destructive nothingness of the sea, deep and dark enough “to make an infidel of Abraham” (Melville 2014, 394). All of Ishmael’s exegetical attempts are ultimately arbitrary and futile: the ocean is a symbolic anti-text, groundless substance, the great erasure of non-narrativity¹¹ that ultimately swallows up all narrative structures, all interpretative attempts: this is “the sea which refuses to give up its dead” (Melville 2014, 251).

The white whale is a monstrous text, and Ishmael’s narrative a hopeless attempt at its reading. This seems to be the onset of Modernism: the world itself becomes a textual enigma. For example, “Quentin’s desire to know Bon’s lineage and Sutpen’s murderous past in *Absalom, Absalom!* mirrors the perpetual frustration to fully understand both the [the semantic significance of the] white whale and Ahab’s monomania through the lens of Ishmael’s relentlessly discursive investigations” (Ball 2018, 313). There is something ungraspable, some perpetual obsession with “textual” meaning (and this is also the very stuff of the ghost stories – with their secret manuscripts written in “the faint spidery script”¹² that always hide more than they reveal). Everything breaks down, for Ishmael, into arbitrariness of interpretation. There is a certain Gothic inspiration to this (proto-)modernist epistemic anxiety. Even the hue of the sperm whale,

¹¹ Hubert Dreyfus also speaks of this “unrepresentativeness of the sea” (Dreyfus 2018) in Melville’s novel.

¹² Faulkner 1951: 129.

its spectral whiteness, becomes the cause of obsessive, inconclusive, and “bipolar” speculations. It must mean something! But, for Ishmael, it simultaneously denotes contradictory things: “divine spotlessness and power” (Melville 2014, 182) and “nameless horror” (Melville 2014, 181) and “demonism” (Melville 2014, 187). Ishmael is not a mere conveyor of events, but a spectral and doomed interpreter, a purveyor of interpretations.

Everything has become a “textual” sign for Ishmael. Even the folds, delineations, and scars of the white whale’s skin “are hieroglyphical” for him; “that is, if you call those mysterious ciphers on the walls of pyramids hieroglyphics, then that is the proper word to use in the present connexion. [...] [T]he mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable” (Melville 2014, 299). This image of unreadable, encrypted text reappears anew in *Moby-Dick*.¹³ There is a doomed quest for the “complete theory of heavens and earth” in Ishmael’s narration, megalomaniacal interpretative lunacy that necessarily ends up in epistemic frustration. According to Louis Sass, “modernist art has been said to manifest certain [...] characteristics that are reminiscent of [mental illness]” (Sass 1992, 8). Schizophrenic attitude, in Sass’s terms, has something of Apollonian, even Socratic propensity for “exaggerated cerebralism” (Sass 1992, 9). In a word, the schizophrenic mind is never simply “unhinged”: it is “possessed” by a peculiar far-reaching interpretative logic. It is preoccupied with the quest for totalities. The ultimate “delusional” attitude is to read the world as “text,” and that is what Ishmael does (and many subsequent Modernist narrators). What does this mean? For example, when the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* informs us that the hue of Gatsby’s car is “yellow” we can read this as symbolic information (perhaps it denotes gold, the quality of money and wealth, etc.). But we can engage in such interpretations only because we are dealing with a fictional narrative. But what will happen if, in real life, I start to attribute symbolic values to the colors of the cars I encounter in my everyday routine? To see the world as a (fictional) text in which everything could be endowed with a special symbolic significance is already a sign of delusion.¹⁴

¹³ For example, Queequeg’s tattooing, Ishmael informs us in what is probably one of his fabrications, “had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read [...] and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last” (Melville 2014, 469-70).

¹⁴ Sass offers an example of a schizophrenic patient “who noticed that people in a train car were crossing their legs from time to time, and then suddenly concluded that they were all performing some kind of play for his benefit” (1992, 43).

Similarly, Ishmael constantly tries to see the outer world as potentially “engaged” in a peculiar Morse code communication with him through various symbolic hints (the color of the whale, the scars on its skin, the Queequeg’s tattoos, etc.). As has already been said, the same thing repeatedly happens in (e.g.) Marlow’s narration in *Heart of Darkness*. Realistic accounts are exchanged for unstable symbolic/metaphorical interpretations of events.¹⁵

This loss of stable reality through excessive fantasies and rabid, inconclusive interpretations seems to explain the simulation of the “post-death” narration on behalf of many (proto-)modernist narrators. Ultimately, they resemble some ghost-like subjects devoid of the stable world, inhabiting the liminal space of their own making. As if detailing Ishmael’s narratorial propensities, Sass observes that “schizophrenic individuals often describe themselves as feeling dead yet hyperalert—a sort of corpse with insomnia; thus one such patient spoke of having been ‘translated’ into what he called a ‘death-mood,’ yet he also experienced his thoughts as somehow electric— heated up and intensified” (Sass 1992, 6). To borrow Sass’s term, “a death-mood” narration will become the ultimate narrative position of a shattered, solipsistic subject in much of the later Modernist tradition.

The enclosed space of narration

The simulation of narrative posthumousness, or the position of the post-death narration, seems to be an expression of extreme, solipsistic subjectivity that runs through much of Modernist tradition. This particular narrative procedure already occurs in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, a novel that has been “deemed protomodernist” (Ball 2018, 308). I have offered two possible explanations for the appearance of this narrative model.

The “death-mode” narration in (proto-)modernist fiction could be seen as an expression of a traumatic experience. What often characterizes a traumatized subject is the sense of loss of stable subjectivity. When narrating traumatic episodes, many Modernist I-narrators simulate the post-death narrative perspective (which is informed by the Gothic model of spectral

¹⁵ Thus, Marlow’s account of persons and events is “only marginally anchored in direct observation” (Knight 1987, 24). For example, his description of the Intended’s apartment is more allegorical than realistic: “The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus. A high door opened—closed. I rose” (Conrad 2002, 104; also cited in Knight 1987, 24). His report invests the Intended’s apartment with the symbolic value of a mausoleum. Sensory knowledge is illusory here: these descriptions pertain to be a part of an almost mystical, visionary knowledge of events.

narration). In the works of the genre, the ghosts are often portrayed as subjects entrapped in repetitious and incommunicative memories of traumatic experiences.

The second explanation (that cannot be separated from the first one) is that the simulated perspective of “narrative posthumousness” arises from a sense of the narrator's isolation from the objective reality. There is a particularly solipsistic quality to many Modernist or proto-modernist I-narratives (such as *Heart of Darkness*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Waste Land*, and *The Good Soldier*). Often, the narrator is lost in his conjectures and “inconclusive experiences” (Conrad 2002, 9), caught up in the dream-like “effect that erodes the normal solidity of the world” (Graham 2004, 204) while “the sense of [...] reality” is slowly “falling away” (Graham 2004, 208). Thus, the narration takes place in an enclosed, ethereal space devoid of any kind of inherent solidity. Such narratives are marked by constant retreats to some incommunicative privacy of experience. The narrator becomes an almost apparition-like Cartesian mind, narrating from the “impenetrable darkness” (Conrad 2002, 115).

I have claimed that Ishmael's narration in *Moby-Dick* could be seen as the prototype of the “post-death” I-narration in Anglophone Modernism. Melville's novel is a point of a unique crisis: it is the narrative space of transition from one great tradition to another. In Ishmael's renditions of events, something far-reaching has happened: a specific “mutation” of the Romantic ideal of heroic individuality into a new Modernist crisis of subjectivity has been achieved. Romanticism (which marked the era in which *Moby-Dick* was written) perpetuated the notion of the private experience as the higher-level authenticity. Thus, in many Romantic works, we find individuals retreating to some self-sufficient, heroic privacy (heroic, since it is the ultimate place of individual authenticity in which the individual, with their limited capacities, could, nevertheless, stand against the power of society). To create a world of one's own seems to be the ultimate stipulation of Romanticism.¹⁶

Natty Bamboo exchanging the degrading civilization for the heroic wilderness, Hester Prynne holding her ground against the power of society, Catherine and Heathcliff leaving the material world of customs and mores for some amoral, private consummation of their desire in their haunting afterlife on the moors – these are all Romantic “retreats” to the heroic space of individuality. What ultimately characterizes Romanticism is a peculiar apotheosis of private experience. No wonder that “Blakean tiger of the night, feeling no scruples and

¹⁶ Isn't this the very fantasy of Frankenstein's monster pleading with Victor to create him a mate, a “creature of another sex, but as hideous as [himself]” (Shelley 2001: 142) with whom he could happily flee the civilization, and create a world of his own, *a ménage à deux* in the “vast wilds of South America” (Shelley 2001: 142)?

nursing no unacted desires“ (Sass 1992, 3), a solitary wild animal without a community of its own, has become an icon of Romantic individuality. Romanticism challenges us to accept the “groundlessness“ of subjectivity as the heroic choice: “[B]ut as in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land!“ (Melville 2014, 104). *Moby-Dick* begins with this Romantic expectation. Ishmael answers the heroic invitation to set sails to the unknown lands, to leave behind the communal life of safety and shared experiences, to become an “*isolato*, not acknowledging the common continent of men, but [...] living on a separate continent of his own“ (Melville 2014, 117). But this is already a doomed enterprise, for Ishmael. This new, private Romantic continent would prove to be a desolated, ghostly space, the proto-modernist netherworld, the abode of the dead.

What the Romantics “admired was wholeheartedness, sincerity, [...] the ability and readiness to dedicate yourself to your ideal, no matter what it was. No matter what it was: that is the important thing“ (Berlin 1999, 9). This is ultimately the message of Fr. Mapple’s sermon in *Moby-Dick*. He is a preacher of explicitly Romantic ideals: “Delight is to him [...] who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self“ (Melville 2014, 47). Thus, the ultimate message of Fr. Mapple’s sermon is one of Romantic subjectivity: our goal is only “true insofar as we are totally committed to it“ (Dreyfus 2018). What ultimately counts is the larger-than-life subjectivity behind our plans and intents. But Hubert Dreyfus is right: after the sermon, Ishmael leaves the church completely “unaffected“ (Dreyfus 2018). Ishmael is not a real Romantic. He can no longer believe in such ideals.

Ishmael’s narration is a violent push of Romantic subjectivity to its limits. It seems that extreme subjectivity necessarily ends up in the solipsistic fragmentation of the self. Ishmael’s narration and experiences ultimately represent the overworking of the Romantic heroic and stable subjectivity into incommunicative solipsistic disorientation. Through the complete subjectivization of experience, the communal structures and shared meaning are “swallowed up“ by utter privacy. The solid world is lost and what remains is a kind of shattered psyche unsuccessfully trying to gather its “inconclusive experiences“ into a coherent and meaningful story. The consequence of this disintegration of the narratorial self is a specific narrative atrophy, narration that seems to come from a ghostly trance of an “impalpable shadow“ (Hart 2013) rather than from a healed and unified subject. This is the birthplace of the Modernist “narration of the dead.“ It first emerged as a “symptom,“ a “mutation“ within the Romantic tradition of subjectivity.

The Modernists have perhaps found a model for this utter subjectivization of narratorial experience in the Homeric depiction of the underworld. It is no

surprise that Pound's *The Cantos*, a great Modernist epic, begins with a passage from *The Odyssey*, describing Odysseus's encounter with the world of the dead. In both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the afterlife is introduced as a sort of "shadowy, spectral, half existence in a dark, barren, joyless underworld" (Hart 2013). There is a memorable place toward the end of *The Odyssey* where "Hermes leads the shades of the slain suitors away to the underworld. Where they are going is a place of despair, fragmentary memory, and emptiness" (Hart 2013). The dead own no stable persona; they are "the senseless burnt-out wraiths of mortals" (Homer 1996, 265). All the shadows of the dead that the suitors encounter are strangely preoccupied with their own fragmented stories and former glories and heroisms, eternally entrapped in tragic repetitions and unallayable nostalgia; "wailing, heartsick" (Homer 1996, 470), devoid of any new experiences. This haunting imagery (that will survive in the Gothic spectral discourse) will also become a model for many "phantom" narrators in the Modernist tradition. As Ishmael himself concedes: "Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance" (Melville 2014, 36).

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MOBI-DIK, MODERNIZAM I POSTHUMNA NARACIJA

Pri modernističkom pripovijedanju u prvom licu često se simulira pripovjedačka perspektiva posthumnosti (kao da nam u takvim djelima pripovijeda mrtvi narator). Ova procedura koju možemo opisati kao „posthumnu naraciju“ čini se prisutnom u različitim protomodernističkim i modernističkim djelima poput Konradovog *Srca tame*, Foknerovih *Krika i bijesa* i *Avesalome, Avesalome!*, T. S. Eliotove *Puste zemlje*, itd. Ova je pripovjedačka perspektiva bitno vezana za diskurs traume, te u članku pokazujemo kako su neke od najprepoznatljivijih modernističkih tehnika (poput toka svijesti) utemeljene na gotičkom modelu spektralne naracije. U djelima ovog žanra, utvare su često prikazane kao nekomunikativna, dezorijentisana „raspolučena sopstva“ trajno zarobljena u repetitivnom, traumatičnom sjećanju. U članku ukazujemo i na različite načine na koje je ova gotička žanrovska konvencija bila upotrebljavana u modernističkom pripovijedanju. „Posthumnu naraciju“ možemo takođe sagledati i kao „simptom“ ekstremne subjektivnosti i epistemičke frustracije (što su tipični elementi modernističkog pripovijedanja uopšte). Tvrdimo, takođe, kako se ova narativna perspektiva posthumnosti prvi put javlja u Melvilovom *Mobi Diku* i kako se Išmael,

pripovjedač ovog romana, može sagledati kao „prototip“ modernističke „posthumne naracije“.

Ključne riječi: posthumna naracija, modernizam, subjektivnost, *Mobi Dik*;