

Back to the World of Light: On Tactile Subject in Melville and Merleau-Ponty

Chiu-hua Su

Ph. D. Student, Graduate Institute of Foreign Languages and Literatures
National Taiwan University

ABSTRACT

Western philosophical tradition ever since Plato has, as many culture critics show, been dominated by vision. It is widely accepted that this hegemony of vision has conspired with Cartesianism to forge the foundation of dualism for traditional epistemology which celebrates the human mind, reason, and consciousness at the cost of bodily senses and the materiality in which every living being is embedded. Scholars of contemporary cultural studies try to bridge this gap by resorting to twentieth century continental philosophers, such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Irigaray, to name but a few. Among them, Merleau-Ponty has offered a promising model for reviving the body and rethinking a non-dualistic relation between subject and object. In this study, I would like to show that, although situated in historical contexts quite different from each other, Merleau-Ponty and Melville challenge the hegemony of vision in a very similar way—emphasizing the encroachment of touch and vision. Their recasting of seeing corresponds with the paradigm shift in optics at the turn of the nineteenth century, when the traditional Newtonian corpuscular theory was replaced by the new wave theory of light. With the new paradigm in mind, Melville in *Moby-Dick* has subverted the inside/outside dichotomy posed by traditional epistemology and made a significant contribution to contemporary discussion of the body, a revolutionary insight which marks his affinity with Merleau-Pontian phenomenology.

Keywords : tactile subject, wave theory of light, Merleau-Pontian Phenomenology, *Moby-Dick*, Cartesian Perspectivalism, camera obscura

回返光的世界：論梅爾維爾與梅洛龐蒂之觸覺主體

蘇秋華

國立臺灣大學外國語文學研究所博士生

摘要

自柏拉圖以來，西方哲學傳統長久為視覺所宰制；咸以為視學霸權與笛卡爾主義沉瀆一氣，堅實了傳統認識論的基礎，在此二元思維模式中，人類心靈、理性以及意識皆大受讚揚，反之，舉凡活的存有所依附的身體感官以及物質性則遭到貶抑。當代文化研究者試圖以二十世紀歐陸哲思彌補此鴻溝，如：海德格、梅洛龐蒂、列維納斯、依希佳黑等人之思想，其中梅氏理論在回復身體重要性及重思主／客之非二元關係上極具潛力。本文將試圖說明，梅洛龐蒂及梅爾維爾雖處於完全不同的歷史脈絡中，但兩者均強調視覺與觸覺之跨侵，進而對視覺霸權提出挑戰的策略卻不謀而合。兩者對觀視的重塑相應了十九世紀初在光學上的典範轉移——牛頓的粒子說被波動說所取代。在《莫比·迪克》中，梅爾維爾以新的光學理論顛覆了傳統認識論的內／外二元模式，因而豐富了當代與身體相關的討論。此一真知灼見亦說明了他和梅洛龐蒂現象學可對話之處。

關鍵詞：觸覺主體、光的波動說、梅洛龐蒂現象學、《莫比·迪克》、笛卡爾式透視論、暗箱

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Western philosophical tradition ever since Plato has, as many culture critics show, been dominated by vision. It is widely accepted that this hegemony of vision has conspired with Cartesianism to forge the foundation of dualism for traditional epistemology which celebrates the human mind, reason, and consciousness at the cost of bodily senses and the materiality in which every living being is embedded. Scholars of contemporary cultural studies try to bridge this gap by resorting to twentieth century continental philosophers, such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Irigaray, to name but a few. Among them, Merleau-Ponty has offered a promising model for reviving the body and rethinking a non-dualistic relation between subject and object. In this study, I would like to show that, although situated in historical contexts quite different from each other, Merleau-Ponty and Melville challenge the hegemony of vision in a very similar way—emphasizing the encroachment of touch and vision. Their recasting of seeing corresponds with the paradigm shift in optics at the turn of the nineteenth century when the traditional Newtonian corpuscular theory was replaced by the new wave theory of light. With the new paradigm in mind, Melville in *Moby-Dick* has subverted the inside/outside dichotomy posed by traditional epistemology and made a significant contribution to contemporary discussion of the body, a revolutionary insight which marks his affinity with Merleau-Pontian phenomenology.

Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century declared that phenomenology would be a “science of experience” established on a cornerstone of “our lived experience” (Abram 35-36). This emphasis on “lived experience” led Husserl to recognize the intersubjective world of life, the *Lebenswelt*, or the life-world, the world in which we live prior to any thought about it (Abram 40). While scientists tend to forget or ignore our participation in the world, phenomenologists remind us that science is deeply

* I want to express my gratitude toward the two anonymous reviewers. The positive comment from the first reviewer gives me courage and motivation to continue my study. The challenging, yet extremely inspiring, questions of the second reviewer help me see the weak points of my argument and make revision to the acceptable degree.

rooted in the same world “that we all engage in our everyday lives and with our unaided senses” (Abram 43). It is a pity that, despite the fact that Husserl has succeeded in calling forth our attention to the life-world, he was criticized for his assumption of a “transcendental ego” as the experiencing subject. Isolating the non-material dimension of the subject from the material facts constructed by science, Husserl risked stumbling into solipsism. Merleau-Ponty fortunately has avoided this pitfall by acknowledging the embodied nature of the subject. Body is the very condition through which we contact the world. Reflection, thought and knowledge would be totally impossible without it. *Phenomenology of Perception* lays bare his ambition to revive “the sensuous and sentient life of the body itself” (Abram 45). In this project, intellectualism and empiricism—the two methodological foundations on which modern science is based—were investigated in the light of bodily senses. Moreover, if Husserl’s assertion of a return to thing itself was to remind people of the material foundation of abstract scientific knowledge, Merleau-Ponty went further in his later years to claim that the corporeal and the incorporeal, the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible are all intertwined in the tapestry of the world.

In the following paragraphs the philosophical tradition which serves as the foundation of modern science will be discussed. I will try to give explanation as to how the body is downplayed in a tradition which privileges vision. In this line of thought, the knowing self has lost its body and become a disembodied subject separated from the outside world. Enclosed in an imagined interior space, the subject ponders over the sense data collected and mediated by bodily senses. The ocularcentric tradition has persisted through the modern era, so as to lead modern science to a track of quantification and abstraction. I will delineate how Merleau-Ponty poses his challenge to epistemology through the body and discuss how Melville in the nineteenth century responds to the science of his time in a very phenomenological way.

The body in western philosophical tradition has been depreciated since ancient Greece. Regarding “matter” as an “imperfect version of the Idea,” Plato claimed that the body was a “source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason” (Grosz 5). This form/matter distinction was continued in the Christian tradition, in which the immortal soul was believed to be resurrected after the decay of the mortal body (Grosz 5-6). Corresponding to the mind/body dichotomy is the dominance of vision over all other senses. Despite their distrust of the body, early Greeks respected vision as the “noblest of the senses” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 21). Sharing the

visible form of the sun, the human eye was linked to the mind as Plato posed the metaphor of “the eye of the mind” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 26) to depict human intellect. Paradoxically, while other senses of the body were downplayed as lower versions of the Idea, only vision was elevated as the means to obtain ultimate Good. Even so, western modern ocularcentric culture had not become full-fledged until the development of perspective in visual art during the Renaissance. Replacing the meaningfulness of the medieval paintings that were drawn through multiple viewpoints, the “sovereign eye” of the perspectival beholder using geometrical rule to render three-dimensional space onto the two-dimensions of the flat canvas functioned in accordance with the new scientific order. In both science and perspective paintings, living space was deprived of its tactility to the viewer and became a homogeneous grid system, and consequently was turned into a timeless “container of objective processes” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 51-53). The implication of perspective was twofold. First of all, vision was revered as the dominant sense through which we know the world. On the other hand, turned into a “monocular, unblinking, fixed eye (or more precisely, abstract point)” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 54), the beholder lost its body.

The impact of perspective was complicated with the invention of camera obscura, or, the dark chamber, an optical device which makes use of the linear movement of light to project an upside down image. It confirmed with what people thought of the light in the sixteenth century—the light emitting from the source in a linear movement—and gave perspective its legitimacy. Moreover, speculated to be analogous to the operation of human vision, it provided a model of an interior closed space in which the mind—the inner eye—was located. As Jonathan Crary maintained, camera obscura “performs an operation of individuation; that is, it necessarily defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines. It impels a kind of *askesis*, or withdrawal from the world” (*Techniques of the Observer* 38-39). Adapting this model, Descartes then severed the mind from the body and further from the world. Devoting himself to clarifying the relationships between the physical art of seeing and our conscious vision, he suggested forsaking the resemblance theory of knowledge in favor of representations (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 79). The intervention of language was deemed necessary for the viewer to interpret the visual images correctly into data for our consciousness to comprehend and absorb. In other words, the eye which sees and knows everything is not an incarnate eye, but the eye distinguished from the body, as he has celebrated in *Discourse on Method*:

“this *me*—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is completely distinct from the body” (qtd. in Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 81, original italics). In Cartesian dualistic thinking, the eye, as the viewpoint of perspective, has no body and becomes “the unblinking eye of the fixed gaze” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 81). This inner eye, identified with the knowing subject, is located in a “quasi-domestic space separated from a public exterior world” (Crary, “Modernizing Vision” 33). Following this line of thought, the body, relegated to the “extended substance” as opposed to mind as “thinking substance,” belongs to nature and is subject to physical laws. The vulgar substance is untrustworthy. Therefore, what really make the mind comprehend are not the images collected by the bodily eye, but “signs and words” read by the inner eye. As Crary’s study shows, the camera obscura model is often illustrated by the paintings of the seventeenth century portraying a diligent scholar reading a book in a semi-domestic chamber lighted up only by a small window. For example, the two paintings of the Renaissance Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer, *The Astronomer* (1668) and *The Geographer* (1668), portrayed solitary scholars with their eyes downcast focusing on the celestial globe or the map on the desk, rather than the things outside the window (*Techniques of the Observer* 43-47). In sum, the medium through which we know things is not even the image which resembles the thing but the representation constructed by signs. The knower is thus doubly removed from the world.

Jay, in his study of the hegemonic, visual model of the modern era, identifies the Renaissance notions of perspective and camera obscura with the Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality, calling it “Cartesian perspectivalism” (“Scopic Regimes of Modernity” 4). According to him, the main reason why Cartesian Perspectivalism became the basis for modern epistemology is that it could best explicate the “‘natural’ experience of sight valorized by the scientific world view” (“Scopic Regimes of Modernity” 5). The knower, as I have mentioned above, is identified as an incorporeal mind separated from the bodily senses. Elevated from the incarnated eye, it occupies “the vantage point onto the world analogous to the eye of God” (Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* 48). Avoiding errors that might be brought up by untrustworthy senses, the self-contained disembodied subject obtains the so-called objective knowledge of the world. The concept of space which was consequently developed is “geometrically isotropic, rectilinear, abstract, and uniform” (Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” 6). No longer living in the world, the apathetic subject sees the homogeneous gridded space devoid of emotions, stories, and memories. Complicit with the scientific worldview, Cartesian

perspectivalism sees the world as “situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order filled with natural objects that could only be observed from without by the dispassionate eye of the neutral researcher” (Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” 9). In addition, the model of camera obscura based on perspectivalism helps to establish “a metaphysic of interiority” (Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* 39). The subject as a “free sovereign individual” cut off from a “public exterior world” (Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* 39) is capable of handling the correspondence between the inside representations from the outside stimulations and of ruling out anything which is out of order. The inside/outside division thus separates the knower from the known.

Severing the knower from the known, Descartes went so far as to expel body and the visible from his world of deduction and inference. To understand this, we must investigate his theory of light. Light, in this epistemological tradition dominated by vision, enjoys a privileged position through its close connection with truth.¹ However, the dualistic model of Cartesian perspectivalism has also applied to light and divided it into *lumen* and *lux*. While the former refers to the linear movement of the invisible rays of light unperceivable by any organ of sight, the latter means the light experienced by the bodily eye. The dichotomy gives *lumen* the connotations of speculation, ideas, revelation and divine illumination (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 29). *Lux*, on the other hand, implies the light of “facticity, observation, and empirical evidence” (Vasseleu 129). Descartes in his *La Dioptrique* further distinguished the two types of light. *Lumen*, for him, was the tool of reason, directing us to see the phenomenon of the world. When we see, we see on the one hand the “distance, location, size, and shape” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 77)—characteristics which correspond with our “innate geometrical sense” (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 78). On the other hand, the brightness and colors of the object were treated as secondary and deceptive. What is intriguing here is that it is not necessary for the light of reason to depend on the bodily sight. Even a blind man, according to Descartes, can “see” distance, size, and shape through the application of geometrical method through the touch of sticks (Jay, *Downcast Eyes* 77-78; Vasseleu 43). That is to say, the light of reason, independent of our sight, leads us to see the geometrical attributes of a thing that reveal its true essence. To the contrary, the visible world that we experience by means of the phenomenal light, *lux*, has many features that may distract us from truth. The two paintings of Vermeer can best expound

¹ See Hans Blumenberg’s “Light as a Metaphor for Truth.”

the implications of Cartesian camera obscura. Focusing on their own studies instead of the world outside the window, the two figures of scholars can be regarded as the disembodied subject obtaining knowledge through representations. To know the truth, it is not necessary to count on the *lux*, illustrated here as the dim light illuminated from outside the window, for the light of reason is located in the knowing subject who is isolated from the world, and, if we see the dark chamber as the metaphor for the human mind, even from its own body. The Cartesian dualistic model creates an unbridgeable gap between the mind/body. While the mind is correlated with light, reason, consciousness, subject, truth, and form, the body is relegated to shapeless dark matter, too passionate and unruly, in need of control and domestication. As Grosz puts it clearly, the body, connected with concepts which are “nonhistorical, naturalistic, organicist, passive, inert,” is regarded as “an intrusion on or interference with the operation of mind, a brute givenness which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence” (3-4).

People of the early nineteenth century, however, witnessed a paradigm shift in optics. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the dominant theory of light was the corpuscular theory proposed by Isaac Newton, who asserted that light was composed of minute corpuscles radiated from the luminous source in perfect linear movement.² Supported by the operation of camera obscura, the Newtonian corpuscular theory seemed to accord perfectly with the geometrical and mathematical principles Descartes had maintained. However, the wave theory of light suggested by Augustin Fresnel and Dr. Thomas Young aroused a heated debate as to the nature of light,³ and eventually overshadowed the former paradigm.⁴ It argued that light particles did not move in straight line but were propagated in vibration and undulation in a medium called ether (Neal 45). Here it might be helpful to point out that the paradigm shift was not only a crucial turning point in the history of physics (Frankel 141), but also the outset of modern science which began to view the world as a unitary field of force. The nineteenth century zeal for the study of energy, heat, chemistry, and matter reshaped tremendously what had

² Therefore, the corpuscular theory is also referred to as the “emission theory” (Frankel 141).

³ Although Young and Fresnel have made a considerable contribution to the wide acceptance of the wave theory of light, it was Christiaan Huygens, Newton’s contemporary, who first suggested that the movement of light was like a wave (Neal 45; Dijksterhuis 1).

⁴ For the detailed historical account, see Eugene Frankel’s “Corpuscular Optics and the Wave Theory of Light.”

been believed in earlier natural philosophy. The scientists of the previous centuries were mostly followers of Newton who believed that, while ordinary matter can be analyzed into small particles named atoms, electricity, heat, and chemistry were expounded as “imponderable fluids” surrounding the solid matters (Harman 13-14, 19). It was not until the late eighteenth century did they start to convert these separate processes into the “luminiferous ether” through the studies of thermodynamics, electromagnetism, and optics (Harman 21-27).⁵ Energy, force, and matter have since then been unified to the ubiquitous fluid medium, ether, subject to perpetual flow and exchange. Michael Faraday, for instance, developed his theory of electromagnetism to see ether as galvanized fluid filling the universe in which bundles of energies collided with each other to render various life forms.

This radical step taken by scientists implied a strong *potential* to subvert Cartesian Perspectivalism.⁶ To regard light as part of the manifestation of ether, instead of a unique being bound with our conception of truth, was the first step to deprive it of ontological privilege. Its vantage in traditional epistemology, based on linear perspectivalism, was thus seriously undermined. If light did not move in perfect linear movement, how could the model of Cartesian camera obscura be maintained? Moreover, the idea of a field of

⁵ It is important to note here that the paradigm shift in optics did not occur in a vacuum. Ever since the eighteenth century, a powerful image of the world as a fluid universe circulating with polarized forces has dominated the popular imagination, and has inspired not only scientific development, but also philosophical discussion and literary creation. As a universal image, the ubiquitous ether has provided a ground for unifying the incorporeal and the corporeal, the inorganic and the organic, form and matter, into one process. In this line of thought, human bodies were nothing but contingent assembly coming into being through the agitation of the oceanic system of energy.

⁶ Here I want to emphasize the notion of “potentiality” in that in reality the new wave theory of light has not succeeded in reshaping our perceptual experience thereafter. Acknowledging the strong potential of the wave theory to challenge the Cartesian model of epistemology, critics often observe that modernization and capitalization of the late nineteenth century have pushed the trend in the reverse direction, that is, the separation of vision from other senses, and the more abstraction and mathematicalization of science. Cray, for instance, argues that, although certain nineteenth-century artistic innovations might be treated now as the efforts to undermine traditional perception — such as Turner’s practice of *sfumato*, a technique of blurring the outline — they are only countercultures struggling in the mainstream of visual culture (“Modernizing Vision” 47). In other words, although the initial momentum of the wave theory is promising in the restoration of the body, whose exclusion is the basis for the Cartesian perspectivalism, the physiological knowledge therein prospered has taken the opposite route and coincided with the development of abstraction, modernization, urbanization, and capitalization. Bodily sensations are regarded as quantifiable, and vision is further severed from the body and from our perceptual experience of the world. For more detailed studies, see Chapter Three in Cray’s *The Techniques of the Observer* (67-96) and Chapter Two in Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* (83-148).

force has introduced a new picture of the world. The previous picture of separate bodies surrounded by various imponderable fluids was replaced by an overall ever-changing field weaving all elements together in the process of repulsion and attraction. The solidity of matter was subordinated to the process of exchange and thus questioned. The firm ground, therefore, for the dichotomy between the inside/outside, truth/appearance, invisible/visible could no longer be held. Following the metaphor of wave, light was now recast as “unbounded, irrecoverable. . . performance of energies” (Beer 85). The hierarchy between *lumen* as invisible light rays for the mind’s eye and *lux* as light visible to the eye for the body was dissolved in the imagined activity of oceanic ether. The invisible was not the opposite of the visible, but a ubiquitous medium through which the visible fleetingly emerged. As Gillian Beer maintains, “The invisible, instead of being placidly held just beyond the scope of sight, was newly understood as an energetic system out of which fitfully emerges that which is visible” (85). The visible world, so to speak, was conceived of as crests of waves constantly surfacing from the depth of the invisible. I would like to argue that the new theory of optics has inspired Merleau-Ponty not only to advance a new ontology but also to rethink the concept of the body.

In current study of visual culture, it is widely accepted that the loss of the body has not been taken seriously until very recently. Contemporary cultural studies seek to revive the body by resorting to philosophers of the mid- to late-twentieth century, such as Sartre, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray, Derrida or Deleuze. Here I would like to argue that, Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, regarded as a powerful tool to undermine the hegemony of vision, derives its revolutionary vigor from the wave theory of light. As the wave theory and its following development of electromagnetism have shifted the interest of scientific research from physical optics to the physiological mechanism of visual sensation, the body has been relocated into the process of knowing. It is significant in that this change might have collapsed the dualism between inside/outside, truth/appearance, invisible/visible rooted in Cartesian Perspectivalism. In the following paragraphs, I would like to trace the trajectory of Merleau-Ponty’s career to see how his attempt to criticize modern science has evolved from his emphasis on the tactile body to his posing flesh ontology. Rethinking the relation between mind/body, invisible/visible, inside/outside, he eventually directed his attention to the primary metaphor of western epistemology—light.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty's endeavor to rectify the two scientific methodologies—empiricism and rationalism⁷—relied on the reintroduction of the body into our knowledge acquisition. Following Cartesian thought, rationalists, or, intellectualists in Merleau-Ponty's term, suppose a solipsistic consciousness preceding any bodily experience. Deemed untrustworthy and capricious, bodily senses, including sight, would be better eliminated in order to gain the abstract truth. On the other hand, empiricists' emphasis on experience does not make them less metaphysical. Insisting on the idea of disembodied subject, they treat the body as a passive receptor collecting sense data from the outside world. For Merleau-Ponty, the matter-of-factness of both rationalism and empiricism causes them to fail to account for experiences related to beauty and emotions, which are consisted in a large part of our everyday life. The main reason for this failure is that, maintaining the inside/outside dichotomy, rationalism and empiricism depend on language to mediate between the knowing subject and the objective world, and therefore cannot reach the "reality" as we perceive it. Therefore, what Merleau-Ponty was seeking is a more immediate way of perceiving the world. The solution he proposed was the body.

To know the world, one does not confine him/herself in a dark chamber to survey the ideas mediated through language. All the abstract knowledge, Merleau-Ponty contended, comes from our phenomenal body moving about the world. Our reflection and judgment do not come prior to experience. Nor is the mind a *tabula rasa* waiting for impressions from the outside world. He turned his attention then to the pre-reflective and pre-linguistic experience through which we live our life and upon which we build our knowledge of the world. The subject, hence, should not be a bodiless one, but one with a living and moving body. Thus, the subject is the "body-subject," our point of *contact* with the world. As Monika Langer succinctly put it: "it is not a disembodied observer but rather, a body-subject who sees and hears and touches the sensible, sensing is neither a passive registering nor an active imposing of a meaning; to sense something is to co-exist or 'commune' with it, to open oneself to it and make it one's own prior to any reflection or specifically personal act" (74). The contact blurs the distinction between inside/outside, subject/object. The body and the world interpenetrate each

⁷ The known empiricists are Francis Bacon, John Locke, George Berkeley, John Stuart Mill, and David Hume, while rationalists include René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Leibniz (Keller & Golley 133)

other. While the subject “penetrates into the object” and “assimilate[s] its structure into his own substance,” the object “regulates his movements” in return (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 152). Merleau-Ponty refutes Cartesian notion of “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am) by asserting that bodily movement is not determined by a transcendental consciousness (“I think”). Movement is an answer toward the call of the object. To move, one has to be incorporated in the structure of the object and moved accordingly. “Motility . . . is not . . . a handmaid of consciousness, transporting the body to that point in space of which we have formed a representation beforehand” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 161). The movement of the body is not subject to mathematical calculation and abstraction. We do not need to calculate the height of each step to avoid stumbling over it. We raise our head and exert the muscles around our eyes to see something more clearly without even thinking about it. We tilt our head and wave our body spontaneously when we appreciate music. These are things normal people can accomplish with ease because the ability to “move-in-this-environment” (Taylor 34) is pre-reflective and pre-understanding. It is not that mobility belongs exclusively to my body, but that my body lives in its surroundings.

Instead of the eternal unblinking gaze independent of time and space suggested by Cartesian perspectival subject, Merleau-Pontian body-subject inhabits the world:

In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness, and into which it draws my body. I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them. (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 162)

Living the world involves a certain kind of “preunderstanding” in which things are related to us with meanings that are not abstract and objective. The meanings might come not only from our desire, love, or hatred but also from something endowed in the object which beckons us to follow. It is upon this preunderstanding embedded in our everyday coping that our conceptual thinking is erected. The inside/outside dichotomy of the camera obscura cannot be sustained because “our living things in a certain relevance can’t be situated ‘within’ the agent; it is in the interaction itself” (Taylor 38). The preunderstanding by which I move about the world is not “within” me as a

picture, but in the “interaction” between the world and me (Taylor 38). In sum, our knowledge of the world derives not from our grasp of things from the outside of the world but from our *contact* with the world. Therefore, the relationship between me and the world is tactile.

Criticizing the Cartesian notion of seeing subject outside time and space, Merleau-Ponty argues that the sense of touch allows one to have intimate contact with the world because it incorporates the dimension of movement and time into the process of knowing. To know the world, one has to rely on the sensation of the body moving around the world. Movement and time are the phenomenal components of tactile data collected from the knowing touch in that the texture of a thing is felt through “the time occupied by our tactile exploration” and “the movement of our hand” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 368). Tactile experience is stuck to the surface of our body; therefore, knowledge acquired through it reminds us of our being in the world. “. . . [A]s the *subject of touch*, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is through my body that I go to the world. . . .” (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 369, my italics).

The emphasis on tactility in Merleau-Pontian theory has led to the reconsideration of subject formation. Discussing Malebranche’s influence on Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler in “Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche” contemplates how a subject is formed through tactility. Even though it has been widely accepted that the sense of touch constructs the self in Merleau-Ponty’s theory, Butler goes further to demonstrate that the touch does not merely mean ordinary touch, but a primary one—“the condition by virtue of which a corporeal existence is assumed” (182). From one sentence of Malebranche’s autobiographical account—“I can only feel that which touches me”—Merleau-Ponty started to reconsider body in its “impressionability” (185), the capacity of receiving impressions. Only when the body is exposed to the external world, can a sentient self emerge. Here I could venture to argue that one special point in the concept of subject formed through the touch is that it treats alterity as the necessary condition of the “I” formation. “I” can never be formed without undertaking a touch from the outside world. Even so, this undertaking is not equal to inertness. The body is passive, yet this passivity should not be regarded as the opposite of “activity,” but passivity with “a certain openness to the outside” (188-89), which helps to make sure that the subject does not exist in a status of self-sufficiency. The touch inaugurates the spatial and temporal experience, making it feel an “elsewhere” in which

something touches it (191). This touch also constitutes the structure of experience with which we sense and know the world. It challenges Cartesian cogito by recognizing the importance of “bodily extension” of a speaking and knowing subject (187). However, due to the fact that the primary touch (for Malebranche, the touch of God) is initiated by an anonymous source, which could never be fully accounted by the subject, there is always something unknown, something obscure, in the knowing subject. In other words, there is always an obscure spot in one’s self-understanding.

Several advantages could be derived from subject formed through touch. First of all, no longer a disembodied seer exploring (or, exploiting) the world, the body-subject receives impressions from the outside. This impressionability, however, should be equalized not with pure passivity but openness to the alterity. The existence of the outside, or, the alterity, is regarded as the condition of possibility in subject formation. Hence, the knowing subject established through touch could never be a solipsistic one. Our knowing has always already been constituted by the other. Moreover, the idea that an unknown agent initiates the subject’s ability to perceive the world marks an obscure area in subject formation. The ability of the subject to thoroughly understand itself is thus questioned. The knowing subject is no longer as transparent and omniscient as what has long been supposed in the Cartesian tradition.

So far, the sense of touch seems to offer an alternative for the hegemony of vision which worries contemporary critics much. If ocularcentrism has induced all the consequent predicaments of modern society, such as the exploitation of the underprivileged or the alienation of human beings from nature, could the sense of touch save us from the hopeless situation? For Merleau-Ponty, the answer might be yes and no at the same time. He did not in his project intend to replace the hegemony of vision by that of touch. The sense of touch should be accentuated to the extent that it is included in vision but not to supplant it, for the total subversion might only mean the replacement of the current hegemony with another. Therefore, the path he chooses to take is to stress on the encroachment of senses, especially that between vision and touch. Although physiology might suggest that each sense functions independently, Merleau-Ponty through the discussion of medical cases about patients suffering from various brain injuries argues that senses are never isolated faculty independent of one another. Insofar as senses intercommunicate with one another, one can listen through seeing, or see through touching. In “Eye and Mind,” he wrote, “[Painting] gives visible

existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; thanks to it we do not need a ‘muscular sense’ in order to possess the voluminosity of the world. This voracious vision, reaching beyond the ‘visual givens,’ opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuation or the caesurae. The eye lives in this texture as a man lives in his house” (166). What is implied in the statement that “[t]he eye lives in this texture as a man lives in his house” is the intercommunication between vision and touch. When the eye sees, it does not see only spectacle but also feels its texture. This paragraph can be regarded as Merleau-Ponty’s refutation against the model of camera obscura. Contrary to the disembodied subject isolated from the world, the metaphor of the eye living in the texture of the world brings the body back to the world. In addition, it shows Merleau-Ponty’s unwillingness to sacrifice vision in the celebration of touch. In his unfinished project, *The Visible and the Invisible*, it is obvious that vision is still the focus of his study. Continuing to assert the infringement and encroachment of vision and touch, he declares that the look is “the palpation of the eye” (133). It touches and embraces the visible things as if it “knew them before knowing them” (133). This familiarity comes from the “kinship” between the seer and the seen (133); the look and the visible thing are entangled and intertwined to the extent that one cannot be easily distinguished from the other. The idea of weaving and knitting indicates Merleau-Ponty’s new ontology, which is indebted significantly to the wave theory of light.

Throughout his works, Merleau-Ponty ponders over the nature of light. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, when he made a discussion on color, he concerned the textures of light and argued that lighting and bodily position should be treated as two parameters determining which color we see (353-65). By doing so, he was refuting the traditional concept of light. According to Cathryn Vasseleu, light enjoys an ontological privilege by being an “invisible medium that opens up a knowable world.” Holding all that exists together, it is itself “devoid of sensible qualities” (3). This light, obviously, is the light of reason, the light that is too noble to be seen by human sight. This notion of light as invisible to profane vision, adopted by Cartesian perspectivalism, continues to date to serve as the foundation of western epistemology, from which modern science flourishes. Scientific knowledge is usually associated with the light of reason, invisible to the incarnate eye. Scientific vision, thus, should penetrate through the deceptive appearance of things to obtain the ultimate truth. Taking upon himself the phenomenologist’s mission of criticizing modern science, Merleau-Ponty determined to undermine the

hegemony of vision through maintaining that “the light of conscious illumination and reflection cannot be separated from its experience as a lived phenomenon” (Vasseleu 41). Seeing color, for him, is exemplary. Refuting the Cartesian notion that the light of reason is colorless and that there is a “true colour of a thing that remains identical in any context,” he insisted on paying attention to the “interrelatedness of lighting and colour” (Vasseleu 44). By doing so, he advanced his argument that “a thing’s colour cannot be abstracted from the experience of a thing, but rather ‘colour in living perception is the way into the thing’” (Vasseleu 44). It is believed that his formulation of vision re-introduces body back to “the world of light which is not objectifiable or inhabitable from a distance” (Vasseleu 45). In *Textures of Light*, Vasseleu suggests that Merleau-Ponty’s rethinking of vision in *The Visible and the Invisible* coheres with the paradigm shift in optics taking place at the turn of the nineteenth century (42). In the following passages, I will try to elaborate more on this view.

The nineteenth century idea of “luminiferous ether” (Harman 21) replacing the notion of “imponderable fluids” circulating the atoms helps Merleau-Ponty to see the traditionally defined invisible/visible in a new light. In the former paradigm, the visible is the opposite of the invisible. Our body and things of the material world are visible; whereas the spiritual realm is invisible. The visible is untrustworthy since our bodily eye can see only “colour, brightness and transparency,” secondary qualities which distract us from obtaining invisible ideas, revealed only to the mind’s eye (Vasseleu 43). Light, as mentioned above, is bifurcated into *lumen* and *lux*, the light of reason and carnal light. Our bodily sight is nothing but a corporeal means to invisible ideas, which are illuminated by the light of reason, devoid of sensible qualities. Regarded as an agent external to the world of atomized masses and imponderable fluids, light thus enjoys a privileged status of being invisible itself and yet rendering truths visible for the mind’s eye. On the other hand, what is revolutionary in the wave theory of light is that it deprives light of its ontological privilege by incorporating it into the oceanic ether of the world. No longer having an originality of its own, light is now envisioned as the “undulations in the luminiferous ether” (Harman 21). It is regarded as the phenomena of electricity and magnetism and studied for the “sensations” it could arouse in the body (Vasseleu 43). Adopting this view, Merleau-Ponty sees the invisible as the depths and lining of the visible, and the visible, the surface of the invisible. Numerous allusions to the wave theory of light in his latter writing suggest that he has the model of luminiferous ether in mind in

the development of his new ontology. The most obvious one is in his dealing with “the experience[s] of the visible world.” He indicates that the sensible/visible/audible experiences, along with literature, music, and passions, are “the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas [which are] no less than. . . the science of Lavoisier and Ampère” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 149).⁸ The invisible “universe of ideas” is not contrary to the visible/sensible/audible world, for the latter is the “disclosure” of the former. While we have learned that the invisible is the depths and lining of the visible, now we are able to visualize the invisible as an inside ever turning outward, or, a depth surging up to the surface. The relation between the inside/outside, invisible/visible, insensible/sensible is therefore not in stasis, but in constant surfacing. The various natural phenomena, visible to the eye or audible to the ear, are the disclosures of the turbulent interweaving of forces underneath.

The unified oceanic ether was for the nineteenth century imagination the ultimate medium in which chemistry, heat, light, sound, electricity, and magnetism were interchangeable. It was envisioned as a medium, which was “viscous, vibratory, gravitational, elastic, kinetic, [and] electromagnetic” (Beer 85), a voluminous medium disturbed constantly by polarized forces interweaving with each other. The turbulence within constantly turned the inside outward, forming the physical world that was sensible, visible, audible to our body. I would venture to argue that this image has made a significant contribution in Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of “depth”—“the ‘dark space’ of occlusive permeation” (Cataldi 60). Many critics have noticed that the concept of “depth” is inseparable from Merleau-Ponty’s flesh ontology. For instance, in his discussion on Merleau-Ponty’s reconsideration of “depth” in painting, Glen A. Mazis maintains that what he has set out to do is to find new depth, depth which is different from the third dimension in perspectival paintings. This depth is an identity which cannot be captured by logical categories. It is an “enjambment,” or “envelopment” of parts, whose “oppositions and differences in playing off one another define its unity” (127). Also, in *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, Sue L. Cataldi suggests that the primordial depth, or, Depth, in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is “the ‘level of all levels,’ the ‘dimension of dimensions,’ the voluminous and

⁸ Both Antoine Lavoisier and André-Marie Ampère were famous scientists who argued for the wave theory of light at the turn of the nineteenth century. Ampère adopted the concept of luminiferous ether to explain the propagation of electromagnetic action. Lavoisier’s study on heat began to direct a way to the unification of various fluids into ether (Harman 31, 15-17).

simultaneous ‘locality’ from which all dimensions are abstracted. . .” (78). As a primordial locality, Depth, like ether, is the dark voluminosity in which all possibilities are enfolded.

Although the terminology in “The Intertwining—The Chiasm” is sometimes confusing, misleading one to regard flesh and depth as the same, I would here try to delineate the two concepts. Taking Cataldi as an example, I believe that her treatment of flesh as a given, a “medium” (61), a concept which is almost synonymous to the so-called “Depth,” fails to explain Merleau-Ponty’s reiteration that flesh is “not matter,” but “a sort of incarnate principle” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 139). As the most radical concept he proposes, flesh has yet “no name in traditional philosophy to designate it” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 139). Although the term “flesh” might lead one to think of the soft tissue of the body, Merleau-Ponty reiterates that flesh is not “matter” but a kind of *principle* which inaugurates the general Sensibility. This principle of incarnation can be expounded by phrases Merleau-Ponty employed, such as, “difference without contradiction,” “divergence between the within and the without,” “overlapping and fission,” “identity and difference,” or “dehiscence or fission” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 135, 142, 146). It is a relation of breaking up and uniting, differentiating and coinciding, diverging and converging. The uniting or coinciding is never complete; therefore there are still differences and fissions in the mass of the flesh. He also uses the term “chiasm” or “intertwining” to designate this incomplete but necessary convergence, which connects flesh with the image of the texture. The diction employed here also reminds one of spinning and weaving. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty has suggested defining flesh as “weaving relations,” or a “texture” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 144, 146). In other words, although the notion of flesh cannot be separated from that of Depth, they should not be treated as equal. Whereas there is no clear-cut differentiation between the invisible/visible, incorporeal/corporeal, subject/object in the dark fluid Depth, flesh unfolds the Depth, making it distance itself from itself (dehiscence) and coil over to itself (unification). In other words, by perpetually differentiating and uniting, flesh *makes* the enfolded possibilities become facts. Now, if we return to Merleau-Ponty’s allusion to Lavoisier and Ampère, we will see more clearly what he means by “experience of the visible world [is like] . . . the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas.” For these nineteenth century scientists, natural phenomena—such as sound, electricity, light, chemistry, and heat—reveal what is wrought in ether. The circulation, exchange, or interweaving of the energies arouses turbulence,

turning outward the invisible/inaudible/insensible interior, making them flickeringly visible/sensible/audible. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty continues, “The musical idea, the literary idea, the dialectic of love, and also the articulations of the light, the modes of exhibition of sound and of touch speak to us. . . and here also the appearances are the disguise of unknown ‘forces’ and ‘laws’” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 149). What Merleau-Ponty means by “flesh” is actually a verb—to flesh out. Dividing the Depth into the invisible/visible, mind/body, subject/object, it intertwines them and unites them into the tapestry of the world. Varieties of phenomena display to us the transient visible/audible/sensible which is very much alike the vortices, ripples, waves appeared on the surface of the turbulent ether.⁹

As the flesh is the originating principle of weaving, the human body is also woven in the flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty asserts that our body is in the world not as a gardener in his a private garden. The relationship between our body and the world is not like that among a series of Russain dolls, in that he refuses to define the bodily boundary according to the outline delineated by our skin. “Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 138)? The body-subject is entangled and intertwined in the flesh of the world as a thread is woven into a tapestry. In sum, “[t]here is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 138). Woven into the world, the human body is in constant fluctuation subject to dispersion and assembly. However, to describe the human body as a “sensible mass,” derived from “the mass of the sensible” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 136)

⁹ Yet, a question as to the incompatibility between the ideas of “tapestry” and “fluid” seems to remain. It has been observed that by employing the metaphor of weaving, Merleau-Ponty risks continuing the “solid” economy of traditional epistemology and thus fails to challenge Cartesian perspectivalism (See Cataldi’s summarization of Luce Irigaray’s criticism on Merleau-Ponty 146-48). However, I would like to argue that his choice of naming “flesh” as “flesh” is not without meaning. Rather than arid and dehydrated mass, flesh is saturated with fluid. Reminding one of a living organism, flesh is connected with blood, or blood vessel. Drew Leder, for instance, suggests that, to explicate the “visceral” dimension in Merleau-Ponty’s new ontology, one needs to supplement the notion of flesh as “the surface of the body” with blood as “a hidden vitality that courses within me” (212-13). As the principle of differentiation and uniting, fission and twining, flesh implies the complicated interweaving of vessels or arteries. Even in the seemingly amorphous ocean, there are currents and tides circulating underneath. Similarly, the solid-looking matters, such as earth and rock, are subject to flow and glide in the process of diastrophism. What I am trying to point out here is that the so-called “solidity” and “fluidity” is nothing but comparative descriptions, defined through the perception of the human body which emerges only momentarily in the universe. While the shifting of stratum would leave traces on the surface of the earth, the surging of currents also appears on the surface of water as waves and ripples, however elusive and transient.

only gives a partial account of the notion of the body. Since Merleau-Ponty has made it clear that our body is registered by its “two sides,” that is, the sensible/sentient, the human body should not be treated as the sensible only. Belonging to the same flesh of the world, the same Depth, the human body is a thing among things and yet is different from them. While indebted to the wave theory of light, Merleau-Ponty makes criticism of it. Although the image of ether as a turbulent system of energy giving rise to the diverse forms of life helps to explain how sensible body emerges from the depth of oceanic ether, it fails to answer the question as to how we sense the world. It becomes also the failure of modern science that phenomenologists are never tired of challenging. To see the world in a purely mechanistic view is not satisfactory enough to account for our everyday experience. It might be true that our body, emerging from the agitation of polarized energy underneath, is as transient and uncertain as other objects in the world. However, how do we explain our sensing other bodies and the world, with which we share close kinship?

Merleau-Ponty notices that the human body unites “two properties within itself,” that of the sensible and that of the sentient: “. . .[F]rom one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 137). The human body is “a thing among things,” belonging to them, yet “detach[ing] itself upon them. . .[and] from them” (137). Sharing close kinship with the sensible things of the world, the human body “sees and touches” not because it is alienated from them but because “it is of them” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 137, original italics). In his own words, “If [the human body] touches [things of the world] and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs. . . because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 137). The two properties of the body, the sensible and sentient, therefore, are not the opposite of each other, but, are like “two segments of one sole circular course which goes above from left to right and below from right to left, but which is but one sole movement in its two phases” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 138). Following the principle of flesh as “difference without contradiction,” “divergence between the within and the without,” the human body as the sensible sentient is born out of the self-divergence of the primordial Depth. As a divergence without separation, differentiation without contradiction, the sensible sentient is regarded as “two segments of one circular course.” Diverging from the sensible mass, or the Sensible, the human body, sentient, possesses the capability of sensing the world. What is

worth mentioning in this revision of body is that, by asserting the almost equal, or, slightly privileged, status of the sensible, it undermines the assumption of traditional epistemology which gives priority to disembodied consciousness. The subject, supposed to dominate the mass of the body, no longer orders the body to see, touch, or hear the targeted objects. To the contrary, when the body sees, hears, or touches, it answers the beckons of the world of the sensible. In other words, it is not that my consciousness determines what I am going to touch or see, but that my eyes and hands, diverged from the Sensible, answer the call of the Sensible to return to itself. In Merleau-Ponty's own words,

This concentration of the visibles about one of them, or this bursting forth of the mass of the body toward the things, which makes a vibration of my skin become the sleek and the rough, makes me *follow with my eyes* the movements and the contours of the things themselves, this magical relation, this pact between them and me according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance, [and] this fold. . . form a close-bound system . . . [and] define a vision in general and a constant style of visibility from which I cannot detach myself. . . . The flesh (of the world or my own) is not contingency, chaos, but a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself. (*The Visible and the Invisible* 146, original italics).

The moment that the sentient coils over to itself, answering the call of the sensible to return, as if the crest of the wave *touches* the ocean, I shall here suggest, is the moment at which the so-called “the tactile subject” comes into being. If one needs a metaphor, it might be envisioned as a “fold” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 146). There is no clear boundary between our body and the world, since, as a thing among things, our sentient body emerges from the Sensible off and on. When it does, it rises “by dehiscence or fission of its own mass” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 146) as transiently as a wave rises from the ocean. Coiling over, as if the crest of the wave falls down to meet the surface of the ocean, it creates a “cavity” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 146), a “hollow” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 147), in other words, a recess.

The *contact* between my body and the world at the moment of the sentient returning to the sensible that creates a recess marks Merleau-Ponty's ambition to challenge humanistic arrogance which makes solipsistic claim that vision, sound, and touch belong to the human being. He maintains that

what is mistaken to be “my” vision or touch actually does not belong to me but to a Visibility, Tactility, or Sensibility that is anonymous. The alleged vision of mine is but a fragmented experience drawn from this general Sensibility, as the individual visual or tactile experiences of my two eyes and hands are incorporated into one single experience of the body. At stake here is the process of incorporation. These experiences are not assembled “like flowers into a bouquet” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 141). Our living body feels a gestalt experience because the visions and touches felt by our bodily organs are intertwined in the recess—the chiasm. In the recess of the fold of our body subject, there is always a blind spot, the “lacuna” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 143), where synergy functions. The individual visual, tactile, sensual experiences that our eyes, hands, or ears have do not belong respectively to them. Through the chiasm, they are intertwined into a complete experience of my body and belong to my body. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty goes on, the vision, touch, and sound of mine do not belong to me, for “[w]hy would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible among each?” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 142). When our body contacts the world, “a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belong[s] properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 139) is formed. Like “two mirrors facing one another” giving rise to “two indefinite series of images,” these images belong to no body. As long as we are willing to acknowledge that our body is only partially sentient because of its corporeal base, and that function of synergy works in the depth of the world, unknown to us as much as the chiasm works in the depth of our being, it is possible that we shake our anthropocentrism off to imagine the possibility of the intercommunication between different bodies, human or non-human.

I have so far delineated Merleau-Ponty’s dialogue with Cartesian Perspectivalism and his groundbreaking contribution to the new ontology of flesh. In the following section of the essay, I would like to investigate Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* in the light of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. To read *Moby-Dick*, one has to put it into its historical context, the early nineteenth century, the time when people witnessed the paradigm shift in optics which undermined the ontological privilege of light into the undulations of the ubiquitous ether. Fully acquainted with the latest development of science, Melville showed his preference for the wave theory of light,¹⁰ a tendency making him echo Merleau-Ponty in the concept of

¹⁰ Melville’s affinity with the wave theory of light can best be illustrated by his idea of color indebted

bodily senses and the subject. For Melville, I will argue, the body was interwoven into the current—a concept very similar to the notion of flesh in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Melville was dissatisfied with the basic assumptions of modern science so as to emphasize the body. Similarly, he regarded the body as neither a passive receptor collecting sense data from the outside world, nor a mechanical device following the mind's command. It sees the world through touching and delving into the depths of the texture. Although it is true to a certain degree that the American Romantics are fascinated by vision, Melville's seeing is seeing with touching. His emphasis on tactility coincides with the notion of "tactile subject" implied in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Not only that, the "contact" between the body and the world is so tight that the body and the world interpenetrate each other. It is the weaving principle which defines the relation between the seer and the seen, the subject and object, the body and the world. Together, they are woven into the tapestry of the world, which has been visualized in *Moby-Dick* as the ubiquitous ocean. The following discussion will be divided into two sections. I will first investigate how the sensible body is tightly interwoven in the world in *Moby-Dick*. The second section deals mainly with the way in which our body, as the sensible sentient, "feels" the texture of the world through touching. As the crest of the wave coiling over to the sea, it is an act of folding which gives birth to the so-called "tactile subject" defined in Butler's article.

Melville's concept of the body can best be illustrated through his contemplation on how we see spiritual things: "Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air" (41). The so-called spiritual truth, metaphorized here as the sun, is not invisible to the bodily eye, nor is it behind the veil of corporeal things, but visible for us as oysters in the water. Opening to the flush and flap from the "thickness of water," the jelly-like semi-fluid oyster—meaning, our body—is much similar to the

to Goethe's *Theory of Color*. Criticizing Newtonian methodology in his experiments on optics, Goethe sought to investigate how body was participated in our color perception through a series of experiments on afterimage. This study is significant not only because it has made contribution to the development of the wave theory of light but also because it reshaped the artists' use of color in their paintings, especially Turner. In "The Whiteness of the Whale," the most mysterious chapter in *Moby-Dick*, Melville shows great acquaintance with Turner's paintings as well as the Goethean concept of color. For this topic, I have already made a lengthy discussion in the article I am now working on.

water it lives in. Even the “thickness” of water and the “thinness” of air are not absolute contradictions of each other. The thickness of water is not the hindrance to the invisible truth, but the very medium through which the visible comes into being. Hence, between the invisible/visible, spirit/body, corporeal/incorporeal exists not a gap but a continuum. Not only continuum, but also kinship: “Methinks my body is but the lees of my better being” (41). If the “better being” means spirit, the remains of it, the body, is not its opposition. As the squashy, slimy, fleshy leftovers in the process of making wine, the lees share close kinship to what has been extracted. If the body is interpreted as what remains after something better is extracted, this “something” shares a strong kinship with what it leaves behind. In other words, if the body is substantial and tangible, so is the soul.

Melville’s conception of the materiality of the body shows his acquaintance with the development of the wave theory of the nineteenth century. In *Moby-Dick*, the body is turned into an extremely uncertain being, striding between the corporeal/incorporeal, visible/invisible, a revision which corresponds to the theory of electromagnetism developed along with the concept of ether. Combining Humphry Davy’s chemist theory that elements of matter were bound together through electric forces, Michael Faraday conceived his notion of electromagnetism (Wilson 34-35). Portraying ether as universal galvanic force, Faraday suggested that matter was the contingent product engendered through the attraction and repulsion among polarized bundles of energy. The body in *Moby-Dick* becomes, as Faraday’s electromagnetism suggests, the contingent construction produced through the struggle between polarized bundles of energy, subject to assembly and dispersion. The boundary of the body, therefore, is not as rigid and adamant as that of a house or a shell, but is exposed to the outside, like an oyster, sheltered only by a piece of filmic membrane. Flexible and extensible, the membrane is portrayed in the chapter describing the “skin” of the whale. In Melville’s words, “True, from the unmarred dead body of the whale, you may scrape off with your hand an infinitely thin, transparent substance, somewhat resembling the thinnest shreds of isinglass, only it is almost as flexible and soft as satin” (259). Thus, the so-called “dualism” between the inside/outside is separated merely by the “infinitely thin substance,” “flexible and soft as satin.” More an interface than a barrier, the Melvillian “body boundary” is not established to isolate the subject from the outside world, but to make exchange and communication.

Overall, the texture of the interface is accentuated. Coating the blubber, the isinglass substance is engraved with “numberless straight marks in thick array” (260), making the whale look as if it is wrapped up in “a real blanket or counterpane” (261). The metaphor of weaving prevailing throughout the text, I would argue, indicates Melville’s familiarity with the contemporary wave theory and his affinity with Merleau-Ponty. Replacing the Newtonian notion of polarity as an action at distance, the notion of ether as ubiquitous undulating energy suggested an interlaced field of force. The idea that things were located in geometric empty space was thus subverted. All matters, organic or inorganic, were woven and generated in this undulating field. If Faraday’s electromagnetism has inspired Emerson to think of the Over-Soul as an oceanic light, Melville went further to think of the fluid medium as a complicated interweaving of steams and brooks. At the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, “Loomings,” the image of a tapestry woven by all the living beings is evoked. Meaning the appearance of a visible object, “looming” is also connected to its verbal form “loom”—to weave on a textile machine. In this chapter, Ishmael contends that people are actually “drawn” to the sea as streams are to the ocean. “But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive”; they come from “lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west” (13). Even in the “country . . . [or] in some high land of lakes,” every path would lead you to a dale, “leav[ing] you there by a pool in the stream” (13). The paths to sea are visualized here as densely woven textile, making us think of the water, under- or over-ground, which is interwoven into the landscape. Reinterpreting Emerson’s Over-Soul, Melville not only suggested the turbulence and billows of the galvanized omnipresent energy, but also indicated the complicated networks woven through streams, brooks, freshets, and creeks.

It is highly probable that Melville, familiar with contemporary scientific discourse, obtains this idea of weaving from electromagnetism.¹¹ This idea of weaving of all things together, I believe, corresponds with Merleau-Ponty’s idea of flesh, the principle of “overlapping and fission.” As an incarnate principle, the flesh weaves every being together. It is important to note that, in weaving, every individual threads remain distinct yet undistinguishable from the texture, distinct because the intertwining does not deny the intactness of

¹¹ In *Melville’s Science*, a book-length study on Melville’s acquaintance with contemporary scientific development, Richard Dean Smith suggests that references to electricity and magnet occur quite frequently in *Moby-Dick* (116-118).

each thread, undistinguishable because each thread is interwoven with other threads to the extent that to extract one from the others is impossible. Seeing the boundary between mind/body, spirit/truth, visible/invisible, corporeal/incorporeal as a thin membrane, Melville proposes a new ontology very similar to what is suggested by Merleau-Ponty. The difference or duality is to some degree to be maintained, yet the boundary is not as clear-cut as the wall to a house, severing the inside from the outside. It is, so to speak, an interface of exchange and communion. The opposites no longer maintain the dualistic hierarchy in traditional epistemology. They contest and interweave with each other into something similar to a force field, a cloth, a texture. This is what Merleau-Ponty means by “overlapping and fission,” or “identity and difference.” The unification is never assimilation. It is unification with differences, with fissures. This incompleteness in confluence is necessary for the visible to be a texture—something with depths and fissures created by the differences among its constitutive parts.

Now we are ready to flip to the “other side” of the body—the sentient. As I have mentioned above, according to Merleau-Ponty, our sensible body is also sentient in that it would rise as the crest of the wave to reach the mass of the sensible from which it is born. Not only is our sentient body capable of seeing, but it also possesses the capability of touching. Criticizing Cartesian ocularcentrism for its assumption of a disembodied viewer, Merleau-Ponty seeks to provide a new model of knowing which is based on our living body feeling the texture of the world. His challenge is echoed in Melville’s contemplation on scientific knowledge about the whale. Equipped with extensive scientific knowledge, Melville in *Moby-Dick* keeps on calling into question the validity of scientific discourse. Besides the main story line, he takes pains to explore the taxonomy, anatomy, and archeology related to the knowledge of the whales. But oftentimes these investigations fail to provide a satisfactory account of the cetacean animal. Instead, they seem to be regrettably crippled without a large body of experiential knowledge, that is, the lore obtained through whalers’ living on the surface of the ocean. Questioning the scientific discourse prevailing in his time, Melville even proposes a whale naming system of his own, as in “Cetology” Ishmael declares, “I shall enumerate them by their forecastle appellations” (127). Due to its habit of living in deep water, knowledge about the whale was deemed to be ungraspable for scientists in Melville’s time. Melville thus quotes the comments of naturalists: “‘Unfitness to pursue our research in the unfathomable waters.’ ‘Impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the

cetacean.’ ‘A field strewn with thorns.’ ‘All these incomplete indications but serve to torture us naturalists.’” (117). Despite the difficulties lying in the way to the knowledge of whales, books written about them are legion, as the “Extracts” at the opening of *Moby-Dick* shows. Among the plenty of authors writing on the whales, Ishmael observes, “only those following Owen ever saw living whales,” and only “one of them was a real professional harpooner and whaleman” (117). The books of Thomas Beale and Frederick Debell Bennett, both surgeons on whale-ships, are thought to have succeeded in providing the most accurate descriptions of the sperm whale. However, the success is “in the remotest degree” (118). Ishmael finds the knowledge they provide unsatisfactory in that, confined to the scientific description, it fails to let us know what a living whale is like. To know the whale, one must go whaling. Accordingly, Ishmael proposes to render “the draught of a systematization of cetology” (118), a system of knowledge built on living experience of the whaleman.

Ishmael wittily suggests classifying the whale according to the system of bibliography. Whales are classified according to their body size and categorized into “the Folio Whale,” “the Octavo Whale” and “the Duodecimo Whale” (120). Each category is further subdivided into “Books” and “Chapters.” The humorous tone Ishmael adopts here is prone to lead one to regard this system and the cetological chapter as an unbearably long digression to the main plot of *Moby-Dick*. As a matter of fact, the cetological chapter, along with other chapters devoted to the scientific accounts of the whale, is not as unrelated or insignificant to the main theme as earlier critics maintain. It is through these chapters that Melville is able to show his doubt of the knowledge built upon modern science and to assert that the living body is the foundation of all knowledge. Trying to justify Melville’s stance, J. A. Ward in “The Function of the Cetological Chapters in *Moby-Dick*” points out that these so-called “digressions” lay bare Melville’s conviction that it is impossible for science to reveal the mysteries of life. According to Ward, taking pains to describe the whale from different scientific angles, Melville aims to show his reader that knowledge is always partial and that the truth of life is unattainable. Therefore, instead of rendering a “complete” classification of the whale, Ishmael maintains that his is only a “draught,” or, “the draught of a draught” (128). “I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty” (118). No “human thing” is supposed to be complete, because we do not occupy the sovereign vantage point presumed by Cartesian

perspectivalism. As a living body moving in the environment, our knowledge of the world is based on and limited to what we have contact with. The employment of bibliographical system to classify the whale according to “their forecastle appellations” indicates the close relationship between knowledge and living experiences. As much as the act of naming comes with the interface between the living body and the environment, scientific knowledge is built upon human interaction with the world, rather than upon the contemplation of a transcendental consciousness.

The system is incomplete, because it is impossible to be elevated above the flow of materiality to capture the total universal current into one’s own body. The task, according to Ishmael, is like “*grop*[ing] down into the bottom of the sea after [the whales]; to have one’s *hands* among the unspeakable foundation, ribs, and very pelvis of the world” (118, my italics). While truth in traditional metaphysics is usually allied with vision, Melville extends it to the sense of touch by asserting that, to know the truth about the whale, one has to “grobe” the bottom of the sea with his “hands.” The distance assumed by the sense of seeing is thus eliminated. For Melville, we see not, as the perspectivalist would believe, through a single angle of vision, but we see with our hands feeling the texture of the world. A journal entry of Melville may also help illustrate this point: “Started alone for Constantinople and after a terrible long walk, found myself back where I started. Just like getting lost in a wood. No plan to streets. Pocket-compass. Perfect labryth [labyrinth]. Narrow. Close, shut in. If one could but get up aloft, it would be easy to see one’s way out. If you could get up into tree. Soar out of the maze. But no. no names to the streets no more than to natural allies among the groves” (qtd. in Bredahl 1). The experience of living in the world is much like groping one’s way through the labyrinth of the woods. Our knowledge is confined to what surrounds us, since it is impossible to soar out of the maze.

However, I would indicate here that even though Melville casts doubt on transcendental vision, he does not mean to forsake the sense of vision outright. Melville’s vision is to see with the “palpation of the eye” (Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* 133), reminding us the encroachment of touch and vision in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. In the text of *Moby-Dick*, with Ishmael’s eye prone to be attracted by the texture of things, digressions are often made to describe diminutive details full of tactual experiences seemingly irrelevant to the whole narration. The bench of the Spouter Inn is covered with cuts and etches—the voyagers’ works. These are the traces of time left on the surface of material things. So are the

wrinkles. Depicting Captain Bildad, Melville writes, “only there was a fine and almost microscopic net-work of the minutest wrinkles interlacing round his eyes, which must have arisen from his continual sailings in many hard gales, and always looking to windward; — for this causes the muscles about the eyes to become pursed together” (68). Time has left its traces on the human body, etching the skin into an interlacing network. The eye is solicited to touch the grooves, the furrows, the depths of what it sees.

The emphasis on tactility in *Moby-Dick* illustrates the idea of the tactile subject of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. In Chapter 4 “The Counterpane,” Melville describes how the subject of Ishmael emerges through the sense of touch. At the very beginning of the chapter, Ishmael wakes up to find himself amidst a tangle of the patchwork counterpane, his own limbs, and Queequeg’s. Unable to distinguish Queequeg’s tattooed arms from the patchwork sheet, he thinks, “The counterpane was of patchwork, full of odd little parti-colored squares and triangles; and this arm of his tattooed all over with an interminable Cretan labyrinth of a figure, no two parts of which were of one precise shade . . . this same arm of his, I say, looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt” (32). Nor can he make a distinction between himself and Queequeg: “partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together” (32). This entanglement is only unraveled in virtue of the sense of weight felt through touch: “it was only by the sense of weight and pressure that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging *me*” (32, my italics). But for the sense of weight and pressure, the “me” is immersed in the parti-colored scene. As the being hugged and touched by the other, the “me” feels itself distinguished from the environment. Ishmael then recounts a childhood incident. Punished by his stepmother, young Ishmael wakes up lonely from his nightmarish doze into a mysterious experience:

I opened my eyes, and the before sun-lit room was now wrapped in outer darkness. Instantly I felt a shock running through all my frame; nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard; but a supernatural hand seemed placed in mine. My arm hung over the counterpane, and the nameless, unimaginable, silent form or phantom, to which the hand belonged, seemed closely seated by my bedside. (33)

Here, Melville tries to simulate the experience of the primary touch from which a subject is formed. “Nothing was to be seen, and nothing was to be heard”; the sense of touch is what only remains. Now, isn’t it the realization

of Malebranche's phrase: "I can only feel that which touches me"? The anonymous, supernatural hand is placing itself in the hand of the "I," animating it into a sentient subject. A shock runs through "all my frame"—my body is animated. The touch of the supernatural hand, apprehended retrospectively, inaugurates the spatial-temporal experience of the subject, making it feel that something is touching me from somewhere outside my body—the bedside. The touch from the "nameless, unimaginable" source is the necessary detour or passage through which Ishmael as the narrator emerges. "[M]y sensations at feeling the supernatural hand in mine were very similar, in their strangeness, to those which I experienced on waking up and seeing Queequeg's pagan arm thrown round me" (33). Marking itself by its "strangeness," it wakes the sentiment of the self. The subject can only know obscurely the alterity which helps constitute the I, but can never give a full account of it. It is the sense of touch which forms the subject; in Chapter 94 "A Squeeze of the Hand," Melville reiterates this point. Describing how he enjoys the job of squeezing the cooled and crystallized spermaceti lumps back into fluid, Ishmael thinks that he himself has melted into the spermaceti as well. ". . . [A]s I bathed my hands among those soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues, woven almost within the hour. . . I forgot all about our horrible oath [that Ahab had made us taken]; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it" (348). Losing himself in the fluid spermaceti, the subject emerges when touching and being touched by the other. ". . . *I found myself* unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules" (348, my italics). The reflexive pronoun marks the emergence of the subject, which distinguishes the I from the other. In other words, when one is dissolved into the "infiltrated tissue" and "woven" into its opulence, only the squeeze of the hand of the other makes the "I" stand out against the "they."

As I have mentioned above, several advantages can be derived from the reconsideration of the subject as a tactile subject. No longer an omniscient disembodied subject supposed in Cartesian tradition, the Merleau-Pontian tactile subject is formed through the touch from the outside. Challenging the idea of cogito—I think, therefore I am—Merleau-Ponty proposed "I am touched, therefore I am." The subject is no longer a solipsistic one, but one which is open to and based on outside impressions. Its "impressionability" should not be regarded as total passivity, but the intertwining of activity and passivity. It is because a subject is equipped with ability to be touched and impressed that it can ever be formed. Now, whence does the ability come, if

not from the body? What else can make one receive the touch from the outside and return the touch, if it is not the materiality of the body? The notion of tactile subject, so to speak, is the body-subject—the subject with its flesh and blood living the world.

In addition, what is more radical in the idea of tactile body subject is its challenge to the arrogance of humanism. The notion of Cartesian cogito, which sees human subject as a self-enclosed whole overlooking the universe, is questioned. Woven into the flesh of the world, the subject senses the world only when the general Sensibility coils over itself. It is, therefore, a tactile subject, emerging when touched and acted upon. Its movement in space is not totally out of its own will, but “out of” its will. It can be observed in *Moby-Dick*, in which the actions of the characters are oftentimes out of their own control: Ishmael going to the sea as an answer to its enchantment, Ishmael and Queequeg continuing their journey despite the foreboding messages given to them, and Ahab’s mysterious charisma leading the crew of Pequod to the final destruction, to name but a few. This in Melville’s time was probably called fatalism, but we as modern readers might as well regard it as a question to the humanistic assumption that our action is determined by our own free will.

In sum, it is not a transcendental consciousness that governs the mass called body to enact its will. Men are drawn by the spectacle of the world in which we are involved, not in the sense that a gardener is surrounded by the garden, but that a thread is intertwined in a fabric. Sharing close kinship with what we see, we enter the full embrace of the world and are immersed in it. Expounding the enchantment of the sea, Melville writes: “And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (14). Echoing Melville, Merleau-Ponty re-considers the meaning of the myth of Narcissus and suggests that “there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 139). Woven into the flesh of the world, the seer is capable of seeing and touching the object because there is kinship between them. Emphasizing the encroachment of vision and touch, both Melville and Merleau-Ponty point out that the seer is not to see from a distance, but to palpate with the eye, delving into the structure of the seen object. The activity of seeing is “equally passivity” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 139) in that, when Narcissus sees his reflections, they also beckon him and return to him

his affectionate look. His plunging into water, for Merleau-Ponty, is to “exist within it, to emigrate into it, to be seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom” (*The Visible and the Invisible* 139). Both active and passive voices are employed here. Our body, like the wave rising out of the ocean, is “alienated” from where it is emerged. That means, the sentient part of our body differentiates itself from the mass of the sensible. “Seduced, and captivated,” the body chooses to answer the call of the “ungraspable phantom of life,” entering its bosom and being trapped and entangled in it again.



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