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STS.464 Technology and the Literary Imagination
Spring 2008

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Science as fiction

STS 464 – Technology and the Literary Imagination SPR 08

Daniel Cardoso LI.

Ishmael's ambition to construct a new science of whales had been laid out explicitly in chapter 32. In the second section of *Moby-Dick* this endeavor is tackled and enriched, both glorified and rendered useless, by Melville. It was noted how in the construction of a new cetology Ishmael made no concessions to the established naturalism of his time, or to its Linnaean taxonomical implications, and rather makes use of scientific language to devise his own classification, which, even though might sound arbitrary and inaccurate in the light of an *established* biology, is beautifully tailored and makes perfect sense for the purposes of a whale man. This ad-hoc -perhaps playful- stance towards scientific discourse is a literary resource throughout the book, and is one of the many ways Melville enriches the prose of *Moby-Dick* to create a contained yet complex universe around the subject of whaling. In chapter 55, for instance, one of Ishmael's many voices is heard in his account of works of art depicting whales, claiming for the observer the benefit of truth.

"I shall ere long paint to you as well as one can without canvas. Something like the true form of the whale as he actually appears to the eye of the whale-man when in his own absolute body the whale is moored alongside the whaleship so that he can be fairly stepped upon here." (p.215)

The whale as he "actually appears to the eye of the whale-man" is a subtle statement of empiricism, and another instance of Ishmael's (and Melville's?) deep respect

for the nature of whaling as a craft, as an experience that cannot be successfully grasped by mere theory or science. In *Moby-Dick* men are helpless in the face of the immensity of the sea regardless of their knowledge.

“(…) however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the staliest, stiffest frigate he can make; nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impressions, man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it.” (p.224)

Science is, nevertheless, persistently sought by Ishmael to color his endeavor, which in this light adopts a scholar tone. In chapter 74 he even attempts what we could call an early preliminary neurological and cognitive study of whales:

“A curious and most puzzling question might be started concerning this visual matter as touching the Leviathan. (...) True, both his eyes, in themselves, must simultaneously act; but his brain so much more comprehensive, combining, and subtle than man’s, that he can, at the same moment of time attentively examine two distinct prospects, one on one side of him, and the other in an exactly opposite direction? If he can, then is it as marvelous a thing in him, as if a man were able simultaneously to go through the demonstrations of two distinct problems in Euclid.” (p.263)

Almost every access of scientific prose in *Moby-Dick* is, however, promptly demoted to fiction in a powerful literary game by Melville. In *Moby-Dick* science is but a “passing fable”¹: Science if *the* fiction. Ishmael’s careful discussion about the skin of the whale starts with a sentence that signals certain ambiguity in his stance in the theory vs. practice debate: “I have had controversies about it with experienced whale-men afloat, and learned naturalists ashore.” (p.245) Where does Ishmael stand? Sometimes he is the whale-hunt practitioner who speaks of whales, sometimes the scientist, the philosopher,

¹ “Physiognomy, like every other science, is but a passing fable.” (p.275)

the chef, the engineer². Ishmael's many voices and his freedom as a narrator (sometimes it is hard not to read him as Melville's alter ego), add depth and complexity to the narration. Yet at the end of chapter 68 Melville might give us a clue; for Ishmael makes a reading of the whale's anatomy, of its "interior spaciousness" and "individual vitality" as virtues of the whale's body applicable to the moral dimension of mankind.

"Oh man! Admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being part of it. Be cool at the equator keep thy body fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter's, and like the great whale, retain, O man! In all seasons a temperature of thine own." (p.247)

The whales are not only a natural resource to be obtained, a prey to be hunted, but are for Ishmael a fundamental question to be asked, a mirror in which to look himself at, and a moral model to be followed. Earlier in the book Melville had sketched a blueprint of whaling as the archetypal, fundamental human quest:

"There are certain times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own."

and a few lines below:

"That odd sort of wayward mood I'm speaking of comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation (...) there's nothing like the perils of whaling to breed this free and easy, sort of genial, desperado philosophy; and with it I now regarded this whole voyage of the Pequod, and the great White Whale its object." (p.188)

² In chapter 63 Ishmael draws a sharp theoretical critique of the harpooneer's practice aiming at improving the efficiency of the whale-hunt.

"Now, I care not who maintains the contrary, but all this is both foolish and unnecessary. The headsman should stay in the bows from first to last; he should both dart the harpoon and the lance, and no rowing whatever should be expected of him, except under the circumstances obvious to any fisherman." (p. 234)

The chapter goes on to delve into the frailty of whale-man's lives -which often depend on the mates' skills-, into the sailor's fondness of wills and testaments, and into Ishmael's realization (after turning Queequeg into his lawyer and legatee) of his commitment to Ahab's demented, monomaniac, enterprise. In this evolving scenario the whale remains, both for Ishmael and Ahab³, a subject of analysis and a source of mystery and contemplation beyond its commercial value.

³ "Speak thou vast and venerable head" (p.249)