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American Epic (I): The first 40 chapters of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (revised)

A new kind of science (of whales)

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In the construction of the verisimilar world of *Moby-Dick*¹, Herman Melville uses scientific language as a literary tool, sometimes to create distance from the reader –a distance that makes the world of whalemens more believable-, and sometimes as a contrasting device to emphasize the seaworthiness of the characters; their nature as practical, resigned men of action. Far from naïve, the use of scientific references and language plays a central role in the definition of Ishmael, the narrator, and of the world that surrounds him. A world of proud whalemens.

Before chapter 32, Ishmael is presented to us as a detached man who faces events of life with stoic resignation: “And doubtless, my going on this whaling voyage, formed part of the grand programme of Providence that was drawn up a long time ago.” (p.22). In *Loomings* (Chapter 1), after a description of the reasons that pull him to embark as a sailor –as opposed to do so as a passenger- in merchant ships, Ishmael seeks to explain his tendency to embark as a necessary therapy that prevents him from “deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off”. About the passage from a sedentary life to the isolated life on the sea Ishmael tells us;

¹ *Versisimilar*, similar to the truth, but not necessarily true.

“The transition is a keen one, I assure you, from a schoolmaster to a sailor, and requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it. But even this wears off in time.” (p.21)

His resignation to divine fate is displayed consistently throughout the first 40 chapters of the book, which are filled with biblical references, many of which would probably escape from modern readings if it not were for the careful work of the editors, adding complexity of meaning to the text. In several passages, Ishmael combines faith in Providence with the skeptical pragmatism that can be expected of a sailor. His pragmatism is sometimes manifest with a materialistic tone:

“Me thinks we have hugely mistaken this matter of Life and Death. Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance. Methinks that in looking at things spiritual, we are like oysters looking at the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air”. (p.45)

His pragmatic stance manifests itself as a skepticism towards philosophy in general that sometimes turns into mockery:

“So soon that I hear that a man gives himself out as a philosopher, I conclude that, like the dyspeptic old woman, he must have “broken his digester”. (p.55)

And a few pages below, his pragmatism evolves into a statement of relativism:

“The more so, I say, because truly to enjoy bodily warmth some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself” (p.58)

However, in Chapter 32 Ishmael appears with a new voice, and presents us with the ambitious enterprise of a new cetology². His aim is to organize the knowledge about whales in a scientific manner; in order to do so, Ishmael uses the scientific language of the time –we might see it today as a subjective exercise in *ad-hoc* taxonomy- to describe the many different kinds of whales that he has seen. Perhaps more important than describing them, Ishmael’s attempt is to devise a system of classification, a classification

² The branch of zoology that deals with whales.

that consciously differs from the accepted Linnaean taxonomy of the time (for Ishmael whales are fish, no matter what books say), based almost solely on personal observation and, to a lesser degree, in accounts of friends and former messmates. Ishmael claims for this system the role of providing a solid framework for present and future naturalists to correctly deploy their observations in a methodic, efficient, practical way. Ishmael's naturalist enterprise is ambitious, and by devising the system he distances himself from *ad-hoc* naturalists, the mere observer and recorder, calling himself "the architect, not the builder" (p.116) of this new science of whales.

"I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty. I shall not pretend to a minute anatomical description of the various species, or –in this place at least– to much of any description. My intention here is simply to project the *draught* of a systematization of cetology. I am the *architect*, not the *builder*." (emphasis added p.116)

Editors Parker and Harrison suggest that here Melville is using it as a parody and a rejection of science as a means to explain the world. "All these incomplete indications but serve to torture us naturalists." (p.115)

"There are only two books in being which at all pretend to put the living sperm whale before you, and at the same time, in the remotest degree succeed in the attempt. (...) The original matter touching the sperm whale to be found in their volumes is necessarily small; but so far as it goes, it is of excellent quality, though mostly confined to scientific description. As yet, however, the sperm whale, *scientific or poetic*, lives not complete in any literature. Far above all other hunted whales, his is an unwritten life." (emphasis added p.116)

Dismissing Linnaean taxonomy with a single stroke of biblical argumentation (and with a little help from his friends and former messmates Charley Coffin of Nantucket and Simeon Macey, Ishmael states that "waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me." (p.117) In his systematic series of nested descriptions, (Book I, Chapter VI, Folio), a confident reliance on personal accounts is once more revealed: "Prodigies are told of him. Adieu, Sulphur Bottom! I can say nothing more that is true of ye, nor can the oldest Nantucketer." (p.121)

As is clear in chapter 32, in the world of *Moby-Dick* scientific authority is contested, porous, less totalitarian, questionable, and -perhaps more important- associated in the minds of its characters with real people with real names, authors, rather than with a faceless “universal” enterprise. One has the impression that in Melville’s world questioning the scientific enterprise is more of a discussion between mates, than a rebellious, blasphemous act that it would be today in some contexts. *Moby-Dick* speaks to us of a world in which the lines of understanding and knowledge then shyly drawn by science are to be used, moved, changed according to the purpose and to the experience of the practical man (for Ishmael whales *are* fish); in *Moby-Dick*, this man is he whose every-day knowledge of whaling provides him with a solid and tangible basis for reasoning.

This reading of Melville leads me to consider how perhaps in its embryonic state modern scientific language was just a mere branch of poetry. I wonder if this is where the essence of his romanticism is.

d.c.