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*Ishmael's empty ship*

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“Who ain't a slave?” (Chapter 1. p.21<sup>1</sup>)

Ishmael's freedom operates at different levels, as a character, as a narrator, and as a thinker; and manifests itself throughout the novel in his many voices. Ishmael is the observer who roams *Moby Dick's* world in an ambitious pursuit of both knowledge and experience, ubiquitous and omniscient at times, pledged to Melville's designs. Of course, it would be hard to imagine a fictional character to operate otherwise (pledged to designs other than his author's), but in the case of the crafting of Ishmael by Melville, his ubiquitous voices and scholarship are important because they set the general tone of the book, subtly giving us hints of Melville's ambitious presence in the world of the novel<sup>2</sup>; a strong authorial stance that constantly reminds us that the core of *Moby Dick* is not a one-sided unambiguous account of Ishmael's roaming around the world (or at least that it is

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<sup>1</sup> All the page numbers and references are from the Norton Critical Edition 2002 (1967).

<sup>2</sup> This despite Melville's skilled avoidance of a direct authorial voice in his writing.

not its only core). Ishmael's ambiguity and multiplicity as a narrator is one of the keys to the fascinating depth of *Moby Dick* as a work of fiction, and as a novel of the sea<sup>3</sup>.

In this unconstrained crafting of Ishmael by Melville as a curious being with many voices, what we could call today scientific discourse plays a central role. It has been pointed out in the previous commentaries how his ambition to construct a new science of whales, his careful observations of nature<sup>4</sup>, his accesses of historical rigor, his well nurtured –and yet cynical- scholarship, and his stances in contemporary debates, are not only surprising in a whale man, described as “these floating outlaws” in (Chapter 50, p.191), but used as scaffolds by Melville to build up a *verisimilar*<sup>5</sup> world fertile for poetic exuberance. A world marked by an ever-present attitude of questioning and signaling at the limitations of the so-called scientific discourse; Melville's deep respect for the nature of whaling as a physical craft unattainable by means of theory, or by any means different from the pure and crude engagement with the *whale*, is often contrasted with the then nascent intellectual world of scientific truth that –I am arguing- is symptomatic of an incipiently technological world order. This nascent intellectual world is also a domain on which Ishmael –and Melville with him- relies to convey poetic associations and evocations of reality.

Ishmael is an explorer of the world, and a collector, Melville lets the rigorous nature of his (of Ishmael) studies through explicitly in several passages of the novel:

“How long, prior to the year of our Lord 1775, this great whaling house was in existence, my *numerous fish-documents* do not make plain.” (emphasis added, Ch 101, p.341),

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<sup>3</sup> Verne's –also mad- Captain Hatteras, or Emilio Salgari's Black Corsar never achieved Ahab's complexity and power.

<sup>4</sup> In the Linnaean sense

<sup>5</sup> This uncommon word has latin roots (*veritas* means truth or honesty), and makes reference to things *appearing* to be true or real while not necessarily being so.

And a few lines later, when discussing the hardships of whaling, he funnily acknowledges the need for historical research into the good moods of English whalers.

“I will tell you. The abounding good cheer of these English whalers is matter of historical research. Nor I have been at all sparing of historical whale research when it has seemed needed.” (Ch. 101, p.342)

In a previous commentary I discussed how in the world of *Moby Dick* the scientific truth of the time is porous, less totalitarian and undisputable, and not as regulated and standardized as it is today. In Melville’s time, as was pointed out by Rebecca a few sessions ago, “science” was mainly done by wealthy gentlemen -who didn’t necessarily see themselves as scientists- in their spare time, rather than as part of large organizations and normative apparatuses. The way Ishmael confidently tailors taxonomy to the reality of the whale-hunt, dismissing unnecessary distinctions (whales are fish) is fascinating and unimaginable in the world of, say, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, where the scientific truth is not only undisputable, but also menacing and inscrutable. In *Moby Dick* science is but a “passing fable” (Ch. 179, p.275), and its role in the collective imagination has not transitioned into the undisputable state that it seemingly has today; instead it seems plastic, playful, and strongly bonded to the physicality of life.

If Ishmael is a roamer, an explorer, Ahab is a seeker, a dart (a harpoon). If Ishmael’s pursuit is the pursuit of experience, Ahab’s is the annihilation of it. When Ahab stops smoking he is sharpening, he is becoming the monomaniac, one-dimensional Ahab that leads his ship and crew to destruction while in “fatal pride” (Ch. 125, p.390). Ishmael, on the other hand, is open and explores. Two instances of the novel where Ishmael gives us hints of his motivations are, first, the whale portrayed as a moral ideal, and second, in *The Decanter* (Ch. 101) when he discusses the resemblances between Dutch and English whale men. Worthy of mention is his tone when doing so; again we are faced with the scholarly Ishmael the whale researcher; a sort of floating doctoral fellow in fishery.

“At the time I devoted three days to the studious digesting of all this beer, beef and bread, during which many profound thoughts were incidentally suggested to me capable of a transcendental an Platonic application and furthermore I compiled supplementary tables of my own touching the probable

quantity of stock-fish &c., consumed by every Low Dutch Harponeer in that ancient Greenland and Spitzbergen whale fishery.” (Ch. 101, p.343)

This chapter’s core and a key to understand Ishmael’s nature as opposed to Ahab’s, may be an apology of food and drink that he draws, and that may be interpreted as an instance of Melville’s projection of the ship as a metaphor of a human life. This apology can be added as an argument in favor of Ishmael’s reputation as an empiricist, a pragmatist and now under this light, an atheist and an epicurean.

“For, say then, when cruising in an *empty ship*, if you can get nothing better out of the world, get a good dinner out of it, at least.” (emphasis added Ch. 101, p.344)

Ishmael is an explorer of experience and knowledge riding on an empty ship.