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The Appetite for the Sea

It seems rather expectable that the very fact of raising matters of “culinary nature” in a volume of predominantly cultural and literary-theoretical orientation should cast shadow upon the innocence of what could appear to be the discussion on pleasures of palate. Here, nutrients, otherwise unmarked, are *read* historically, symbolically, or metaphorically; digestion and reading becoming synonymous. In this context, the title of a popular monthly sounds quite adequate: if eaters — read, then *Reader('s) Digest*.

Thus, if reading is digesting, then writing could be claimed analogous to food production. And yet, if we decide to follow this line of reasoning *too* far, it will soon become scary to think what the writing of literary interpretations could possibly be likened to. An unbecoming analogy, perhaps; but for the purpose of this paper it appears an apt controlling idea, especially in the context of the existentialist thought of Herman Melville, whose *Moby-Dick* provides a plethora of graceful material for the Reader to intellectually digest.

The present paper is concerned with a peculiar kind of appetite, one whetted by the spicy oceanic context in which the subject of “craving” places himself, but nonetheless an appetite positively omnipresent. My protagonist here is the *appetite for the sea*, or, as the Latin etymology of the word would suggest, *the natural desire of the sea*. At the same time, however, the appetite I wish to discuss is *the desire for food* peculiar to the maritime, *liquid* context. My remarks here are thus intended to “open up” a few questions concerning *incorporation* of food in excess, and its relation to the desire of *appropriation* of what has always been beyond human control, or — in other words — of *digesting the indigestible*.

My reasoning develops along the lines of three interrelated arguments, which could be labeled as: *the sea-drive*, *the feast of victory*, and the insatiable *appetite for power*. Allow me to be your chef, and invite you to partake of some *frutti di mare* I prepared.

The Sea-Drive

What is it about the ocean that attracts human minds? What is it that irresistibly drives people to the sea? This peculiar psychosomatic state of sea-hunger, omnipresent in traditional and modern sea-shanties and forecastles, is what baffles Melville's Ishmael most. The protagonist muses:

Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall northward. What do you see? – Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the spiles; some seated upon the pier-heads; some looking over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep. But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster – tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here?

But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand – miles of them – leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues, – north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither?¹

Soon Ishmael provides a feasible answer: it is the ungraspability of the phantom of life, the impossibility to force semiosis into stasis, the nightmare

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker & G. Thomas Tanselle, in *The Writings of Herman Melville*, Vol. 6, series eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker & G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston & Chicago: Northwestern University Press & Newberry Library, 1988), p. 4.

of human helplessness in the context of universal mercuriality that makes one wish that there be absolute solidity – even if the only *solid* in the universe were to be its *liquidity*. This is what Ishmael supposes that drives Bulkington, a restless sea-wanderer whose feet land “scorched,”² and whose death is elevated to the rank of heroic martyrdom by the will of the Melvillean narrator. “Terrors of the terrible!” cries Ishmael; “is all this agony so vain? Take heart, take heart, O Bulkington! Bear thee grimly, demigod! Up from the spray of thy ocean-perishing — straight up, leaps thy apotheosis!”³

Unable to accept what lies beyond human ken, Ishmael must build a theory which would effectively equate the appetite for the sea with the appetite for truth. The wish to know is the wish to understand, a wish to appropriate the code which makes one able to read what now is still illegible, to digest what the mind and the body refuse to digest. This, precisely, is the etiology of nausea. Ishmael desperately wishes to be able to turn this sad psycho-gastrological condition into a scrumptious feast of victory, which idea brings us to the second argument.

The Feast of Victory

The power of the mercurial sea, like the stubborn mercuriality of sense, is both a challenge and a punishment to a mind that refuses to content itself with inherited stereotypes, or is unable to do so. Reading *Moby-Dick* one wishes to grasp the sense of *Moby-Dick* and fully digest it, just like Ahab, hurt, and frustrated, but still monumental, hunts Moby-Dick to finally pin Moby-Dick’s true sense down with a harpoon. Like the Ishmael of the beginning of the *Pequod*’s journey, Ahab *wishes* that sense be solidified, he wishes to *try-out* Moby-Dick – if I may quote the phrase coined by Howard P. Vincent,⁴ who used it as a title for his excellent book, in which he attempted to try-out *Moby-Dick* – the novel. Ahab’s will determines his vision: if the White Whale could be *caught* – he could be *had*, dissected, examined, tried-out or eaten. A somewhat fallible logic, perhaps based on the

² Ibid., p. 106.

³ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴ Howard P. Vincent, *The Trying Out of Moby-Dick* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1980 (1949)).

assumption that pasteboard masks, like fruit skins, are not edible, and that *therefore* there *must* be some juicy part beyond them. Especially that when incorporated, objects, even ceasing to be what they used to be, make the *objective* nature of the human *subject* terrifyingly evident.

Ahab hunts Moby-Dick. His second mate, Stubb, hunts whales. Still, in practice, both fight the same opponent: a being informed with enmity, a being with which a struggle may end in victory or in death, a being thus equal to a human. If, on top of this, we decide to notice that giving individual animals individual names is an act of personification, and that as a result of such an act the human hunter equals himself with the very object of his hunt, we will inevitably realize that the hunt bears the features of a purely human war, the killing is a victory in a peer-to-peer competition, and thus the feast itself is much akin to an act of cannibalism.

Although seemingly a digression, this last remark sheds some light upon Stubb's supper, especially that — unlike Ahab, whose appetites are never satisfied — the *Pequod's* second mate, the Captain's spiritual miniature, can indeed minicelbrate his minifeast of apparent minivictory.

After the whale Stubb killed has been towed back to the ship, the mate,

[...] flushed with conquest, betrayed an unusual but still good-natured excitement. Such an unwonted bustle was he in that the staid Starbuck, his official superior, quietly resigned to him for the time the sole management of affairs. One small, helping cause of all this liveliness in Stubb, was soon made strangely manifest. Stubb was a high liver; he was somewhat intemperately fond of the whale as a flavorish thing to his palate.

"A steak, a steak, ere I sleep! You, Daggoo! overboard you go, and cut me one from his small!"

Here be it known, that though these wild fishermen do not, as a general thing, and according to the great military maxim, make the enemy defray the current expenses of the war (at least before realizing the proceeds of the voyage), yet now and then you find some of these Nantucketers who have a genuine relish for that particular part of the Sperm Whale designated by Stubb; comprising the tapering extremity of the body.⁵

What is the mysterious "extremity of the body" Melville mentions? Certainly none of the whale culinary delicacies the narrator presents in the chapter "The Whale as a Dish." A prominent Melville scholar, John Gretchko, who devotes one of the chapters of his collection of essays *Melvillean Loomings* to Melville's ribaldry, interprets the "mystery" as follows:

⁵ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, p. 292.

In chapter 64, "Stubb's Supper," Melville introduces Fleece, the old black cook of the *Pequod*. Fleece is the subject of a weird pun. In *White Jacket* Melville uses the word *fleece* to mean "hair" (357). In a later novel, *The Confidence Man*, fleece has the same meaning and attaches to a crippled black man, "his knotted black fleece and good-natured, honest black face" (10). In *Moby-Dick*, *fleece* also means "hair," but more specifically it is the nineteenth-century colloquialism for "female pubic hair". The chapter preceding this Fleece appropriately is labeled "The Crotch," which in context refers to that part of the whaleboat which has a rest for a harpoon. The word should properly be *crutch*, not *crotch*. *Crutch* appears in at least of one of Melville's whaling sources [...]; *crotch* seems not to appear at all. Less one miss his intentions, Melville's first sentences in "The Crotch" read: "Out of the trunk, the branches grow; out of them, the twigs. So, in productive subjects, grow the chapters" (289). Thus out of this subliminal suggestiveness, the crotch grows fleece.⁶

Fleece provides the context that allows Gretchko to make further observations:

"Stubb's Supper" is a very toothy chapter. The crew slowly tow a whale to the *Pequod* and there secure it for the night. But Stubb "flushed with conquest" orders a steak cleaved and cooked from this newly dead whale. Melville writes: "yet now and then you find some of these Nantucketers who have a genuine relish for that particular part of the Sperm Whale designated by Stubb; comprising the tapering extremity of the body" (292). This wording seems harmless enough and may very well be that. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out given the character that Stubb is that he could very easily have ordered a steak from the whale's penis which is "longer than a Kentuckian is tall, nigh a foot in diameter at the base" (419). Maybe he did, maybe not.⁷

But given the mysterious "his small," from which the steak is to be cut, the peculiar verbal exchange between the cook and the officer that follows, and the repetitive "All 'dention'" of Fleece, distorting the word "attention," Gretchko's argument seems quite convincing, especially that

There is nothing unusual about a black cook with a dialect except here in a toothsome chapter where attention becomes dention and smacks of dentition. Such toothiness is in keeping with fleece just as vagina dentata dreams supposedly are to male homosexuals. Thus Stubb's cut of meat could prove very important here in a chapter with great subliminal antagonisms.⁸

⁶ John M. J. Gretchko, *Melvillean Loomings: Essays on Moby Dick* (Cleveland: Falk & Bright Publishers, Inc, 1990), p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

This argument is still reinforced by the last angry words of old Fleece, which the narrator comments upon as “sage ejaculation.” “To underline the obvious,” Gretchko writes, “this is ejaculation from fleece.”⁹

If we decide to follow John Gretchko’s reasoning, a whole new field for “culinary” interpretation opens up. Stubb wins the competition and kills the whale. As the victor, he manifests his power by emasculating the beaten opponent. But emasculation is not the end of the ritual yet; subconsciously, Stubb feels the need to partake in the power of the whale: the penis must be processed by Fleece/fleece, and consumed. Stubb, in a symbolic act *incorporates* the power of the whale. The mate commits an act paralleling that of *cannibalistic incorporation*, described by Louis-Vincent Thomas as consisting in the strife for a synthesis in the dialectics of “the I” and “the Other.”¹⁰ Such an act, Thomas argues, is an act of cultural assimilation, the result of which is negating the opponent as a person and assimilating otherness into the I. According to this dialectics, the author claims, one has to find a point of balance between the fact of eating what is “mine,” which is equal to autocannibalism, and the fact of eating what is “the other’s,” who, if radically different, may imperil the eater’s identity. Especially in the context of Ahab’s emasculation, Stubb’s act of phallotomy, performed on the sexual organ of no other but a *sperm* whale, seems to reflect the belief that incorporating a given part of the enemy’s body in the eater’s organism strengthens the faculties for which this part is responsible.

In this context, phallus is masculinity, patriarchal power, the power to control and conquer, and thus – to resort back to the conclusion drawn from the first argument – to know and understand. Stubb, however, is the conqueror only for a while, or, more precisely, his victory lures him into belief that he is in control of the reality around him. As victor, Stubb may congratulate himself on being an experienced sailor to whom sea is no danger, and an experienced whaleman, a cruel destroyer of whales. In the end, however, Stubb, whom Old Fleece equals to the sharks preying on the dead whale, is beaten by the whale and falls prey to the very same sharks. Thus a shark digests a shark, being feeds on being in an autocannibalistic act, thus questioning the essentiality of legibility and difference. This concept leads us to the third argument:

⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰ Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Trup. Od biologii do antropologii*. Tr. Krzysztof Kocjan (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Łódzkie, 1991).

The Appetite for Power

Stubb, feasting, celebrates (wished-for) control. Interestingly enough, the (wished-for) control over reality is also one of the defining attributes of royalty: a class ruling the world and battling over oceans. It is also this class that is entitled to the delights of the whale-meat cuisine. Melville writes that

It is upon record, that three centuries ago the tongue of the Right Whale was esteemed a great delicacy in France, and commanded large prices there. Also, that in Henry VIIIth's time, a certain cook of the court obtained a handsome reward for inventing an admirable sauce to be eaten with barbecued porpoises, which, you remember, are a species of whale. Porpoises, indeed, are to this day considered fine eating. The meat is made into balls about the size of billiard balls, and being well seasoned and spiced might be taken for turtle-balls or veal balls. The old monks of Dunfermline were very fond of them. They had a great porpoise grant from the crown.¹¹

Melville's maverick reasoning, however, leads to the inevitable conclusion about the essential fallacy of human delusions of power: when closely examined, patriarchal (phallogocentric) authority proves rickety; sooner or later empires, though supposedly eternal, uniformly fall. The wished-for order of the world is liquid: the appetite for total control is a function of the appetite for total understanding, a fancy of *pandigestibility*. It is a nauseating wish: there are foods human stomachs are unable to digest, and the indigestible foods are in excess. The disturbing existential problem seems to lie in *the indigestibility of excess, and the excess of indigestibility*.

* * *

Let us conclude. "The fact is," Melville writes,

[...] that among [Henry the VIII's] hunters at least, the whale would by all hands be considered a noble dish, were there not so much of him; but when you come to sit down before a meat-pie nearly one hundred feet long, it takes away your appetite. Only the most unprejudiced of men like Stubb, nowadays partake of cooked whales.¹²

¹¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, p. 298.

¹² *Ibid.*

Digest a hundred feet of food, and you are in for a nausea. Becoming fully “immersed in feasting” is possible only if you are “unprejudiced” — as Melville euphemistically remarks — or, in less select words, naive enough to believe that in the end you will be able to digest *all*. The vision of total digestion, Melville seems to argue, to someone “prejudiced,” someone burdened with the non-verbal experience of the limits of his or her own stomach, will probably put them off before the feast even begins. As for those “unprejudiced,” a success in drinking a glass of water may lead to an easily falsifiable conclusion that all water is drinkable, or, in the extreme, that one simply drinks water when in fact they are about to drown.

Appetite for the sea is the appetite to possess the impossible, to lend shape to liquidity; it is an appetite to read to the end what we wish to be writing, to digest what we wish to be food, to “eat the whale by its own light,” and thus to “add insult to injury.”¹³

The appetite for the digestive incorporation of the object that looms as one’s challenge — effectively proves to be a manifestation one’s hunger for appropriation, a “*sensation*” propelled by existential anxiety. The craved-for appropriation is an act that grants fleeting satisfaction to those prone to self-deception. In the light of the novel, the appetite for things “oceanic” deserves a piquant coda, which Melville, gleefully, provides:

In the case of a small Sperm Whale the brains are accounted a fine dish. The casket of the skull is broken into with an axe, and the two plump, whitish lobes being withdrawn (precisely resembling two large puddings), they are then mixed with flour, and cooked into a most delectable mess, in flavor somewhat resembling calves’ head, which is quite a dish among some epicures; and every one knows that some young bucks among the epicures, by continually dining upon calves’ brains, by and by get to have a little brains of their own, so as to be able to tell a calf’s head from their own heads; which, indeed, requires uncommon discrimination. And that is the reason why a young buck with an intelligent looking calf’s head before him, is somehow one of the saddest sights you can see. The head looks a sort of reproachfully at him, with an “Et tu Brute!” expression.¹⁴

It is a commonsensical fact that the whale may only be tried-out or made into a dish if dead; no living organism gets digested. After all, the food-chain processing of nutrients eventually leads to mineralization; thus the cycle closes. But if — in this context — we keep insisting on the validity of the favourite “reading/digesting” equation, then where in the food-chain does the present text locate itself? A terrifying idea to think of! Shall I give up eating then? Or perhaps a slight moderation of my eating habits could be enough?

¹³ Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 299.