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The Archives of Ahab: the exhaustive and the elusive in the digital rewritings of *Moby Dick*

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- ¹ *Moby Dick*, as a novel which claims to exhaust the topic of cetology necessarily entertains a very particular relation with the exhaustive and the encyclopedic. Éric Plamondon states that the book:

is both a travel narrative, a cetological study, an essay on whaling techniques, an analysis of the whaling industry, a metaphysical meditation, and a gigantic allegory.¹ It is a complex novel [...] in which a multitude of knowledges cohabit.²

Fig. 1

Jeff Benenson, *Emoji Dick*, Morrisville, Lulu Press, 2010.

- 2 The text's encyclopedic character implies an issue of exhaustion, since the encyclopedia logically seeks to synthesise in a single work the totality of knowledge.³ However, as Jean-Marie Santraud notes in his introduction to the French translation of the book, "Although Melville may give the impression of wanting to be exhaustive, his intention is elsewhere: he wants to show that despite all the means of investigation at man's disposal, he will never be able to get to the bottom of the problem of the whale."⁴ Ishmael himself admits to this when talking of his great work as necessarily incomplete because, in human enterprises, "any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty."⁵ The true task is therefore not to create a total knowledge through exhausting the subject, but to show the impossibility of this goal by the impossibility of putting it into practice. However, even if the attempt is doomed from the start, the question of exhaustivity must be poeticised if this failure is to be represented.
- 3 Matt Kish's *Moby Dick in Pictures* and Fred Benenson's *Emoji Dick* are rewritings which redeploy and comment on the original text's preoccupations, while taking into account the specificity of the digital medium in which they are working. In order to show how these issues are recast, I shall first address the written, but paradoxically illegible, quality of the whale.
- 4 The subject of *Moby Dick* is clearly the whale, but the whale itself is often assimilated to a book. This likeness is made explicit in certain passages such as the chapter Cetology, in which Ishmael classifies different types of whale according to their size (folio, octavo, duodecimo).⁶ While the mystery of the whale's anatomy remains undeciphered, the surface of its skin speaks volumes: it is a polysemic covering "seamed" with "mystic hieroglyphics,"⁷ and "almost invariably it is all over obliquely crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array, something like those in the finest Italian line engravings."⁸

Fig. 2

Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011.

- 5 As though to counteract the semantic overdetermination of the leviathan's body, critics often refer to its whiteness. Indeed, the writing of this ultimately textual whale is difficult to decipher. Ishmael notes that the writing wraps itself around its object, moulding itself to it: "From his mighty bulk, the whale affords a most congenial theme whereon to enlarge, amplify and generally expatiate."⁹ If the writing of this whale-text must thus be as monumental as its subject, it must also be as meandering, labyrinthine and elusive as the leviathan. The novel regularly depicts the path of the whale as a set of "complex meanders" and an "imposing network".¹⁰ In the last scene, the White Whale "crossed and recrossed, and in a thousand ways entangled, the slack of the three lines now fast to him, [...] [which] , of themselves, warped the devoted boats toward the planted irons in him."¹¹ "Trailing after it the tangled lines," the whale leaves behind it "inextricable intricacies of rope."¹² In a moment of terror-struck lucidity, Starbuck himself, the mouthpiece of reason in the book, makes the following disturbing statement: "the ineffable thing has tied me to him ; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut."¹³ In this expression of Starbuck's anguish, it is clear that what draws him and his crew to shipwreck is of the order of the inexpressible and the unnarratable.
- 6 The sperm whale therefore defies representation, and can only be partially and incompletely grasped by any image made of it. Santraud finds this echoed in the Melville's own writing, since the dispersed information about whales obliges the reader to go back and forth and describe contorted routes through the novel. Insofar as the reader is also unable to embrace the whale directly and entirely, he or she has to navigate through the text, as across a network, in order to piece together an encompassing image.¹⁴ Given that the whale-text is clearly indecipherable, how do Kish and Benenson deal with this slipperiness in their reworking or reproduction of an image that necessarily escapes their grasp? How do they treat the theme of exhaustiveness regarding *Moby Dick*, the book, and Moby Dick, the sperm whale, while at the same time remaining true to the fundamental elusiveness of the whale? These reworkings seem to situate the Whale and the Book as equally monstrous: how to master both?

Melville's legacy: images of the inexpressible in Kish

- 7 Matt Kish's work addresses these questions. In the course of 552 consecutive days—552 being the number of pages in the original novel—Matt Kish created one illustration per page of text, which he reproduced line after line. The drawings were then published daily on the author's website, and later became a printed book. They were drawn on *found paper*, on which one can make out maps and diagrams resembling the illustrations of assembly manuals. Yet the friability of the medium, and the gradual erasure of the information printed on it, signal the gradual disappearance of this record, and therefore its constitutive incompleteness. Insofar as these found pages are selected from a predetermined whole, they introduce the idea both of contingency and of constraints. They also suggest that any surface to be covered is always already a palimpsest. They are difficult to decipher, and so defy the reader's attempt to determine their origin. This impossibility of identifying the source is not incidental, as implied also by Kish's comments on what he felt on reading the original novel: "there was more hidden under the words and [he knew¹⁵] that it was a tale to which he could come back again and

again.”¹⁵ Kish found a formal solution for this feeling of something essentially ungraspable about the novel.

- 8 The opacity of the drawings is a way of paying homage to the text they illustrate. Each drawing is accompanied in a thumbnail by the corresponding page number of the original novel and by a quotation. The reader follows up the trail of these fragments, in an attempt to reconstitute Melville’s narrative from them. Each illustration also shows the date it was made, so that while following Ishmael’s journey across the seas, the reader can also follow Kish’s own journey through this long 19th-century novel. Kish himself describes how in the course of his work, the figure of the artist became superimposed on that of the narrator, and also on the figure of Captain Achab.¹⁶ The reader, caught up in the text—or rather, in its partial absence—is transformed into a dogged hunter of signs, attempting to track down the remaining traces of Melville’s words and imagery through the illustrations. He or she can sense that Kish is attentive to the issue of exhaustiveness in the original work, as well as, in his turn, providing a supplementary and novel way of exhausting the possibilities of the book. However, the desire for exhaustiveness is never divorced from the concern to show its inevitable failure. Of the several images which suggest this, we shall look particularly at those which figure the whale.
- 9 In some drawings,¹⁷ the opaque body of the whale completely obscures the text underneath, while other images, such as the hand of Ishmael, are completely transparent except for their outline, such that the text remains legible. From the start, and as a constant across Kish’s work, each time the whale is represented, the words disappear under its immense bulk. In the middle of the work, for example,¹⁸ the shadow of the whale, in an opaque black, covers a page where the drawing looks like a real anatomical diagram of the animal. The reader attempts to restore imaginatively this scientific description, but ultimately in a register closer to fantasy than to fact. A labyrinth is sometimes formed from the whale’s silhouette,¹⁹ or else from the spurt of water it sends up.²⁰ The whale is sometimes figured as writing, for example, when its head looks like a speech bubble,²¹ and sometimes as a blank sheet of paper, a white surface sailing through a sea of letters.²² Its bulk becomes a white stain, a hole, or something superimposed on the text, a slit which swallows up the writing.²³
- 10 Kish follows the ambiguities of Melville’s text closely, and echoes them, as the lines of his drawings get covered over in crazy twists and tangles. Often, the sentences of the text on the found paper get covered over by a series of spirals and undisciplined scriptural forms, which render them incomprehensible, despite their straight lines.²⁴ Other drawings are made on lined blank paper, which is generally used for orderly, linear writing. Any absence of words on the page draws attention to itself because the lined paper is precisely designed for them. In the rare instances where words are nonetheless present, they utterly ignore the space pre-set for them.²⁵ Also, what the whale’s body obscures on the page is often colonial maps or glossaries,²⁶ that is, systems for organising a particularist, and now obsolete, knowledge. At the same time, this suggests that a geographical territory subtends the work, which the work itself conceals. Similarly, when the original images are still visible, they tend to be diagrams of strange machines, as though the nuts and bolts of the novel were suddenly made visible to the naked eye. Although it is hard to say what these sketches refer to, it is striking that precisely this type of material remains legible. It is not an instance of everyday language, but of a technical discourse, a non-narrative idiom, and perhaps

Kish preferred to use this language due to its graphic qualities, since diagrams and sketches are basically images. Even on the many pages covered with words, the writing figures most often as a pictorial rather than a scriptural sign, suspending its referential character in favour of its graphic qualities. Hence, although the drawings are powerful vehicles for the narrative, they are not writing, and so the reader must make do with images. As such, the drawings encompass the text, and at the same time render it inaccessible, making the reader aware of this, while also depriving him or her of being able to read. The reader is left suspended in this intermediary zone.

- 11 The hypertext then appears to overrun its own limits, and this idea is reinforced by the ever-present thematics and iconography of being submerged. The obsession with excess and the beyond explains in part the many paratextual elements in the found papers used by the author. Prefaces and flyleaves suddenly appear, suggesting that the text spills out over its own limits, and beyond its initial frame. Yet should we be surprised that the work gives shape to this commentary, since it obeys a logic of repetition which precisely requires the text to exceed its own limits, aided in this by the contribution of an other?
- 12 This impression is reinforced by the emergence of fragments from a text whose title, *Glossary of hand stitches*, both reiterates the theme of the encyclopaedia (a glossary), and evokes the theme of stitches, and by the same token, of patchwork.²⁷ The patchwork figures the leviathan's body, but it is also a metaphor of the hypertext. Kish's work is indeed a huge patchwork of voices—Ishmael's, Melville's, and the anonymous authors of the found papers who blend their voices with his. Many of the speech bubbles come from real comic strips, signalling the presence of another voice, extracted, recycled and pasted in for new uses. Some of the bubbles hide the text of the found paper but, although the whole bubble is opaque, the thick letters of the retranscribed text are themselves left empty, such that the original words show through. It would be difficult to find a more eloquent emblem of the way Melville's words are shot through by others, behind them, which do not disappear altogether, even if they are covered over. In this fragmentation, the novel becomes dependent on the image, as its necessary extension. Inversely, the image is only comprehensible referentially, in relation to what precedes it, from which it arises. What transpires overall is that the text, even if transcribed faithfully—although selectively extracted in Kish's work—inevitably changes due to the simple fact of its transposition, its migration to other places.

***Emoji Dick* : "To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty *meme*"**

- 13 We have already suggested that the image of patchwork, which also captures the artisanal aspect of Kish's work, somewhere between manual and digital techniques, is particularly apposite for describing *Moby Dick in Pictures*'s method. The analogy between text and material is even more relevant for the work coordinated by Fred Benenson, *Emoji Dick*. It too is the product of painstaking work, but this time essentially by robots. For among the different collaborators—coordinated by a single person—the most involved contributor is doubtless a machine. *Emoji Dick* does not transcribe *Moby Dick* into images, page by page, but into emojis, and sentence by sentence. First, a compilation of e-texts of *Moby Dick* was put through "Amazon Mechanical Turk" to produce a translation into emojis. Amazon Mechanical Turk is a platform where, in

return for a small sum of money, workers perform the micro-tasks required for artificial intelligence operations, namely a few simple procedures which require human judgement. In the case of *Emoji Dick*, an automatic translation tool provided three possible translations into emoji of every sentence in *Moby Dick*. The three versions were then submitted to a human intelligence who, through the platform, signalled the one which, in his or her view, best corresponded to the sense of the original sentence. These selected “sentences” were then assembled to give the emoji version of the whole book. The crew of the Pequod seemed to take shape before the reader’s eyes, in the guise of this pool of translators, who embark on a journey at least as fanciful as Achab’s saga of vengeance. But who—the machine, the programme, the original author or the compiler—takes the helm of this peculiar ship?

- 14 The project itself seems uncertain of its own paternity. The flyleaf gives the name of Herman Melville, with Benenson mentioned as the compiler. Yet *Emoji Dick* is under copyright. Does this mean that the text’s authorship remains unchanged, and we are dealing with a simple transcription? The authorship is less radically changed than, say, a French translation of the original: emoji are not a language but a proto-language, a restricted system of ideograms, with consequently an incomplete and narrower capacity to signify. A very simple sentence can produce a needlessly complex, and incomprehensibly long, emoji version. Inversely, a very long sentence can be rendered by a very short sentence. And for sentences of more than half a dozen words, the reader has difficulty understanding the logic of the translation. This logic is also unclear whenever a sentence deals with abstractions, because automatic translation tools are incapable of translating concepts, or equally more concrete terms when they are specific—for example, proper names. If, as we suggested, both Melville and Kish are preoccupied by the issue of what eludes our grasp, we can add that in *Emoji Dick* referential obscurity plays an even more essential role because it affects language itself.
- 15 Yet, as Paddy Johnson mentions in his preface to the work,²⁸ emojis generally supply a welcome visual variation to virtual conversations, particularly because the “iconographical gesture” they represent helps clarify the message. Normally, therefore, emojis do not add confusion, but orientate the interpretation, fulfilling the expressive functions of intonation or non-verbal gestures. That said, interpreting an emoji is always contextual, and in *Emoji Dick* the huge number of emojis and the obscure principle of translation forces the reader to do nothing more than visually scan and register them, whereas the presence of the original text invites a genuine reading. The presence of emojis and original text together therefore does not so much help decipher the former as show the immense gap between the two. The constitutive ambiguity of emojis is well suited to a text like *Moby Dick*, with its key motif of elusiveness.
- 16 In order to demonstrate this briefly, one need only examine the first 50 pages of this monumental work, focusing on the occurrences of the word “whale”. Since the text and its translation are visible together, the reader can first count the number of times the word “whale” figures, and then the number of times the corresponding pictogram appears. The statistics speak volumes: in only 3 of the 24 occurrences—or 6, if one includes cognates such as “whalin,” or “whalemen”—is the corresponding emoji pictogram present, that is, in at most 25% of cases. This alone proves how difficult it is to establish translation rules even for a simple common name like “whale,” and despite the fact that a particular emoji exists for it. Several other words and groups of words share the same fate. These statistics underscore the unrepresentability of the whale

and the entanglement of lines. The line underneath (the text) and the line overlaying (the emoji) fail to create a sense of correspondence, and this leads to an impression of one layer being caught up in the other, while at the same time, sense appears to be submerged under the surface. The emojis float on top, while the text is hidden beneath the waterline that separates them.

- 17 The same test can be done on certain expressions, such as the famous “*There she blows*,” shouted by the sailors on the look-out. This choice is particularly interesting because the expression is meant to signal the presence of the whale as it surfaces. From the top of the mast, the sailor attempts to decipher the sea he is scanning, acting as its interpreter. When the famous scriptural monster emerges (that is, when signs of his presence appear), the reader sees this expression, “*There she blows*,” surface in the text. Since it is a set expression, it should normally produce the same translation every time. However, the emoji version features such a huge number of variations that one can legitimately query the translation method. That said, although the translation of the text fails, it nevertheless succeeds in making tangible the text’s impenetrability, and in this sense, the emoji version remains faithful to the original. In this light, *Emoji Dick* provides insights into Melville’s text by bringing out some of its untapped possibilities, which, although not foreseen in the original, and not linked to an authorial intention, are nonetheless relevant.

The prosthetic and the metaphor of navigation

Fig. 3

Jeff Benenson, *Emoji Dick*, Morrisville, Lulu Press, 2010.

- 18 This suggestion is consonant with Sophie Rabau’s conception of literary history as a network where every new element alters the configuration of the whole. In *L’Intertextualité*, she contests the model of literature as a river, with the hypotext upstream flowing in an unbroken linear stream into the hypertexts downstream. Instead, literature is envisioned as a library, a reservoir which the reader encounters in his or her hermeneutical efforts. However, as *Moby Dick* itself suggests, a library and a river are not so very different from each other. Intertextuality already has a key place in the novel through the impressive number of scientific, Biblical and literary

references it contains. Its themes and storyline already represent the prosthetic—for example, Achab's artificial leg or Captain Boomer's wooden arm. Kish's and Benenson's texts are also forms of prosthesis, since they do not rewrite the text, and refuse to change a single word. Rather, they choose to add something, after amputating it. None of the words after the Foreword of *Moby Dick in Pictures* are Kish's; they are either from the found papers or from the text itself. And Paddy Johnson notes that emoji language is precisely "*designed to augment conversations*."²⁹ Insofar as prosthesis replaces the missing organ, and thus emphasises its disappearance, it sheds light on the narrative of *Moby Dick* as a tale which seeks to reconstruct textually the lost Pequod, through words which compensate for the absence of the phantom limb or ship. But does this process seek to exhaust the intertextual system itself, or the object which this system settles on? What exactly is the giant fish that this catch is obsessed with? What, in other words, has the figure of Achab as its intertext?

- 19 What is particularly interesting here is that the hypertextualisation (in Gérard Genette's sense) of *Moby Dick* can be understood in the second sense of the term, since the reworkings are at least partially digital. In his article "Naviguer entre le texte et l'écran" ["Navigating between text and screen"],³⁰ Bertrand Gervais construes the metaphor of surfing or navigating on the net precisely as a principle of reading, and a protocol for use of the Web. It is the term that would best describe the processes of reading in the age of hypermedia, and Gervais mentions several other related metaphors used to define online practices. Since these semiotic practices were not yet fully understood in 2002, they would not yet have been the object of semiological analysis. Such hypermedia creations suffered (and still suffer today) from what Gervais calls a mediological indecipherability. This is well expressed by the metaphor of navigation since it implies an incomplete reading, where the interpreter remains on the surface and does not really dive down into the text.³¹
- 20 Bertrand Gervais also stresses the idea that digitalisation goes hand in hand with an invisible writing, which is the programming code. This introduces a new dimension into the notion of hypertext as *the text underneath*, suggested already by the term's etymology. Moreover, the code in which a hypermedia production is written may be a completely foreign language for many readers. For the pleasure of the word-play, we can add that the expression "to be on line" becomes polysemic in the context of an analysis of *Moby Dick*, a novel which precisely develops their entanglement.
- 21 In summary, the hypermedia transformations of Melville's text clearly not only enable his successors to disseminate their rewriting of *Moby Dick*, but also to reread the original text differently. A completely new interpretation is introduced, in which, in addition to the many layers of critical commentary already formulated, a new sediment is laid down, which the reader constantly seeks to makes sense of, while always running the risk of becoming enmeshed. More can be said on these ideas, but what is certain already is that, in Melville's terms, the whale of the Web has still not been captured, and although the term Internet may suggest the opposite, the nets to catch it have not yet been woven.

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NOTES

1. Ishmael himself complains that his study « make[s] me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come », *The Works of Herman Melville*, Standard Edition, vol. VII, *Moby-Dick or The Whale*, 2 vol, Edinburgh, Constable And Company Ltd, 1922; Evanston and Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 456 [NW].
2. Éric Plamondon, *La Quête électromagnétique des savoirs dans Moby Dick*, M.A. Dissertation, Montreal, UQAM, 1997, p. 29.
3. We are of course not the first to suggest this interpretation : "the novelistic combination of knowledges is therefore presented from the outset in the textual apparatus of *Moby Dick*. The idea of totality, the desire to cover the whole world with language and the wish to constitute a whole can already be seen in the mass of fragments at the very beginning of the novel" (Éric Plamondon, *La Quête électromagnétique des savoirs dans Moby Dick*, M.A. Dissertation, Montreal, UQAM, 1997, p. 31).
4. Jean-Marie Santraud, "Introduction," in Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* [1851], Paris, Flammarion, 1989, p. 8.
5. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (p. 136, NW). He adds : "The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed" (p. 134, NW).
6. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* [1851], Paris, Flammarion, 1989, p. 69.
7. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* [1851], Paris, Flammarion, 1989, p. 257.
8. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 306, NW.
9. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, p. 455, NW.
10. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*.
11. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, vol. 2, 349.
12. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, vol. 2, 350.
13. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, vol. 1, 211.

14. Jean-Marie Santraud, "Introduction," in Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* [1851], Paris, Flammarion, 1989, p. 9.
 15. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. VI. Our translation.
 16. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. XII. Our translation.
 17. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 6.
 18. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 350.
 19. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 135.
 20. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 227.
 21. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 153.
 22. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 538.
 23. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 182.
 24. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 73, 102, 272, 536, 537.
 25. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 193.
 26. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 40, 128.
 27. Matt Kish, *Moby Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*, Portland, Tin House Books, 2011, p. 18.
 28. Jeff Benenson, *Emoji Dick*, Morrisville, Lulu Press, 2010, p. XIII.
 29. Jeff Benenson, *Emoji Dick*, Morrisville, Lulu Press, 2010, p. XIII.
 30. Bertrand Gervais, "Naviguer entre le texte et l'écran. Penser la lecture à l'ère de l'hypertextualité," *Les Défis de l'édition à l'ère de l'hypertexte*, Paris, Presses de l'ENSSIB, "Référence," 2002, p. 49-68.
 31. One could add that a similar reproach can, ironically, be levelled at this text, which is confined to analysing of digital reworkings of the book, focusing on the mechanisms rather than the results produced by these.
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ABSTRACTS

Matt Kish's *Moby Dick in Pictures* (2011) and Fred Benenson's *Emoji Dick* (2010) follow the path of an incalculable number of reworks based on Herman Melville's classic. The first one introduces a pictorial rewriting of Melville's novel, where each and every page of the book is being replaced by a corresponding illustration, whereas the second one offers a semi-automated participatory translation of the original text, relying exclusively on the use of *emojis*. Our goal in this article

will be to identify how those works both echo and comment on issues from the initial text, while remaining deeply anchored in a digital aesthetic and practice. Focusing on the matters of the exhaustiveness and the unseizability striking the bodies of both the whale and the text itself, we will see how both Kish and Benenson involve Melvillean themes, while formulating, through the specificities of their respective convocation, a reflection on the task of intertextual rework in a digital context.

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Keywords: emojis, exhaustiveness, hypertextuality, Melville, rewriting

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