The World in a Footnote: Examining Ahab’s Chart in Chapter 44 of *Moby-Dick*

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Chapter 44 of *Moby-Dick* is the cartographic center of the novel: this is where Melville explains how Ahab plans to find “one solitary whale” in “the broad boundless ocean” (Melville 201)—Melville’s maritime version of the needle in a haystack. The captain of the *Pequod* is nearly certain that he will encounter Moby Dick during “the Season-on-the-Line” (200), a spatial and temporal phrase that refers to the Equatorial hunting ground, in the Pacific Ocean, during the month of January. Since the *Pequod* left Nantucket at the beginning of the Season, Ahab plans to spend the 365 days before the beginning of the next one sailing from one hunting ground to the next, in the hope of encountering Moby Dick “in any other waters haunted by his race” (201). This “devious zig-zag world circle” (201) is not entirely random, though. Ahab plots previous sightings of sperm whales onto his nautical charts, then uses charts of winds and currents to locate the “veins” along which whales are thought to migrate (199). As the width of a vein “never exceeds the visual sweep from the whale-ship’s mast-heads” (199), Ahab’s careful plotting aims at positioning the *Pequod* in the middle of these channels, in which “migrating whales may with great confidence be looked for” (200).

Melville’s main inspiration for this chapter comes from the *Narrative of the US Expedition* (1845), volume V, chapter 12, entitled “Currents and Whaling,” in which Lieutenant Charles Wilkes develops the idea that a careful compilation of data from whaling voyages and observations of winds, currents, and temperatures, would allow whalermen to obtain a better picture of the distribution of whales around the globe, and to identify their migratory patterns (Vincent 182-186). Wilkes showed that the hunt could be systematized and rationalized, and thus provided Melville with an answer to the
question “Is it possible to find a specific whale in the oceans of the planet?”—a crucial question that Melville needed to answer to convince his readers to follow Ahab around the globe. In late 1850 and early 1851, at the exact moment when Melville was writing the novel, this idea was gaining traction. Melville saw it mentioned in Cheever’s *The Whale and His Captors* (1850), to which he had access in the late stages of writing the book (Parker 723-724). Cheever’s book also contained a brief allusion to the work being conducted by Matthew Fontaine Maury (Cheever 107) who, in the late 1840s, started developing a system of data collection very similar to what Wilkes described in his *Narrative* (Hearn ch. 6, Sugden 26-29). This convergence of ideas showed that Ahab’s plan was in line with ideas that were picking up steam at the time. In the spring of 1851, Melville discovered a notice published by Maury himself, announcing the upcoming publication of his whale chart. Chapter 44 had already been written, but Melville added a footnote in which he celebrates Maury’s work and the fortuitous similarities with Ahab’s method:

> *Since the above was written, the statement is happily borne out by an official circular, issued by Lieutenant Maury, of the National Observatory, Washington, April 16th, 1851. By that circular, it appears that precisely such a chart is in course of completion; and portions of it are presented in the circular. “This chart divides the ocean into districts of five degrees of latitude by five degrees of longitude; perpendicularly through each of which districts are twelve columns for the twelve months; and horizontally through each of which districts are three lines; one to show the number of days that have been spent in each month in every district, and the two others to show the number of days on which whales, sperm or right, have been seen.”* (Melville 199)

While most of the other twenty-two footnotes in *Moby-Dick* read as brief and often playful commentaries on certain details of the whaling universe, this one unexpectedly, and somewhat brutally, bridges the gap between the fictional realm of Ahab’s story and the world that Melville’s readers inhabit. The references to a specific date and to the writing process itself suggest that the voice we are hearing here is not the voice of the narrator but rather that of the author himself. The effect is jarring. On the one hand, the footnote brings to the fore the crafted nature of the text and, obliquely, its fictionality; but on the other, it does so to establish what Melville calls in the next chapter “the reasonableness of the whole story” (Melville 205). The footnote performs a deictic gesture in the literal sense of the word: the text points toward an object outside itself, the better to authenticate the verisimilitude of the story it contains. The object that plays a key role in this authenticating process is Maury’s whale chart: as a cartographic document produced by a recognized institution (“the National Observatory, Washington”), it is presented as an authoritative and reliable reference point that shows that the task of data compilation that Ahab is performing to find the White Whale is not “an absurdly hopeless task” (199): men of science like Maury are doing exactly the same thing at the exact same moment.

In this reading of chapter 44, I explore the textual reverberations produced by this deictic gesture and examine the nature of the interactions between map and text. Critics who have discussed the place of maps and mapping in *Moby-Dick* have tended to focus on Melville’s treatment of Wilkes’ suggestions, and to read the late addition of the footnote as the sign that the reference to Maury’s chart was a negligible detail—a fragment that was not part of the intended structure of the chapter and thus a text that was, somehow, not meant to be read. Both Baker and Bulson for example, only evoke the allusion to Maury in, interestingly, an endnote (Baker 41n26, Bulson 54n23). Others,
like Edward Sugden, have explored the similarities between Maury and Ahab in depth, noting that they share not only the same method, but also the same (illusory) dream of homogenizing and controlling the oceanic world—a strategy dislocated by Moby Dick, a creature that “exits linear time” and “undermines the progressive logic of imperial territorialization” (Sugden 25). All these approaches focus on the way the text and the whale complicate and disrupt the imperialistic logic that is inherent in (Western) cartographic practices, the literary text being read as a medium that registers “anxieties” related to imperialistic expansion (Sugden 24, Baker 28, Hsu 17). My purpose in the present article is to consider other dimensions of cartographic documents, treating them not only as agents, or signs, of imperialism and standardization, but as reference points whose existence outside the novel produces multiple effects on the way we read the text itself. I draw attention to the footnote as a meaningful part of the novel to illuminate how reading Moby-Dick takes place at widely different scales and in the interplay between the subparts and the whole, the footnote and the text, the textured details of the map and the global scope of the hunt.

Instead of looking at Ahab’s charts as purely fictional documents whose aspect and nature remain poorly defined, and thus rather abstract, I endeavor to offer a comprehensive visual overview of the specific documents that Melville had in mind when writing the chapter. Drawing on relevant maps and charts available online, I unpack the different effects produced by the addition of the footnote. Its function is evidently to show the validity of Ahab’s cartographic method, and, in this respect, Maury’s chart is first and foremost presented as a model. In a second section, though, I show that the footnote also plays an important role in making apparent the delirious scope of Ahab’s plan. Paying attention to the successive whale charts produced by Maury, I eventually focus on the fact that the chart evoked in the footnote is “in course of completion”—a significant detail that encourages us to reevaluate the deictic gesture performed by the footnote as the repetition at the textual level of Ahab’s yearning for an object that eludes him.

Using Maury to authenticate Ahab

Wilkes’ chapter on “Currents and Whaling” includes a famous map entitled “Map Illustrative of the Currents and Whaling Grounds” which is probably the main visual inspiration behind Ahab’s charts. These are described in chapter 51 as “charts of winds and currents” (Melville 235). Such charts, representing winds and currents in distant regions of the globe, were extremely uncommon before the late 1840s, which suggests that Wilkes’ chart (possibly the first attempt to map currents on a global scale) is precisely what Melville had in mind in chapter 44. Wilkes’ chart uses shaded areas to represent whaling grounds, and curved lines and arrows to represent currents (fig. 1). The “veins” that Ahab is drawing seem to merge the two cartographic symbols, in an attempt to identify the channels along which whales can be encountered. The phrase “a maze of currents and eddies” found in chapter 44 (Melville 199) appears as a fitting description of the complex interweaving of lines and arrows in certain areas of Wilkes’ chart.
7 Melville’s reading of Wilkes and Cheever allowed him to state that “many hunters” (199) among whalemen were convinced that mapping the “localities of whales’ resorts” (Cheever 107) was indeed feasible. The insistence on a sense of consensus aims at showing that Ahab’s cartographic practices, far from being unique and outlandish, reflect what most captains endeavored to achieve. Placed as it is at the junction between the description of Ahab’s vengeful project and the beginning of the sea voyage proper in chapter 47 (“It was a cloudy, sultry afternoon…” [Melville 214]), chapter 44 plays a key role in convincing the reader that Ahab’s plan is realistic, and that the “fiery hunt” (195) can take place—and, indeed, Bulson notes that some contemporary reviewers reacted enthusiastically to Melville’s demonstration that “chasing a particular fish from ocean to ocean” was possible (Bulson 57). The adverb “happily” placed in the footnote reinforces the sense of a convergence of ideas. It suggests that the publication of Maury’s “Notice” is a fortuitous coincidence that bolsters the verisimilitude of Ahab’s method, and even obliquely suggests that fiction anticipates scientific discoveries.

8 Adding the reference to Maury in a footnote, and not in the text itself, is a strategic choice and a careful staging that allows Melville to show that he had devised Ahab’s plan even before hearing of Maury’s work. This is probably the first function of the strangely specific date, April 16th, 1851: it shows that the book, printed during the summer of 1851, was written before Maury’s announcement. But the date provided in the footnote also works as a bibliographical reference that implicitly encourages the
reader to track down Maury’s “circular.” The announcement quoted by Melville can be found in *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle for 1851*, p. 443-444. Some minor adjustments in syntax excepted, the footnote gives a verbatim quote of Maury’s announcement (fig. 2).

Figure 2

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I am, &c.,
M. F. MAURY, Lieutenant, U.S.N.

National Observatory, Washington, April 16th, 1851.

Notice to Whalermen.

Captain Daniel McKenzie of New Bedford and George Manning of New York, have been engaged for a year in procuring for this office information from whalers and others concerning navigation and its industrial pursuits of the sea. The log-books containing this information have been used here by Lieutenants Herndon, Leigh, and Fleming, of the navy, in making a chart to show when and where our whalmen have searched for whales; when and where they have found them; with what abundance; and whether in shoals or alone. This chart divides the ocean into districts of 5° latitude by 5° longitude, perpendicularly through each of which districts are twelve columns for the twelve months; and horizontally through each of which districts are three lines; one to show the number of days that have been spent in each month in every district, and
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As Melville notes, “portions” of the chart are presented in Maury’s notice (fig. 3). The table included in his text (see image) does not merely represent the data on which the chart is founded. It is the chart itself, the rows and columns of the table representing the “districts” of the ocean. The chart is thus a spatialized spreadsheet indicating not only how many whales were sighted, but also the number of days spent by whaleships in each district, during each month. In other words, Maury’s chart also indicates the degree of trustworthiness of these sightings: if a district has rarely been visited in any given month, then the number of sightings for that month is not going to be statistically significant.
The straight lines of the table, the neat districts they delineate and the precise numbers they contain echo the vocabulary of precision used at the beginning of the chapter. Ahab’s cartographic work is presented as careful, meticulous and characterized by certainty. “Seated” before “a screwed-down table,” the captain appears as a figure of stability and fixity. His pencil is “slow but steady.” The data he uses is presented as unquestionable: he knows “the regular, ascertained seasons,” “the substantiated times, upon well-known separate grounds.” This allows him to chart the whale’s “periodicalness” and “invariability” (198-199). The geometrical and numerical nature of Maury’s table plays an important role by coloring our perception of Ahab’s work: the parallel with Maury’s chart suggests that Ahab’s task is also methodical, organized, and trustworthy.

Read in this light, the footnote stands in sharp contrast with the final paragraph of the chapter, in which Melville describes in highly metaphorical language Ahab’s torments when he wakes up at night and emerges on deck, screaming and seemingly empty of substance. While the rest of the chapter is nearly devoid of metaphors, striking images appear here to describe Ahab’s inner self as “a chasm […] in him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up,” a “hell in himself yawning beneath him” (202). The neat dichotomy in style and subject matter between these two different parts suggests that the purpose of the chapter is also to illustrate Ahab’s statement in chapter 41: “all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad” (Melville 186). Hunting one specific whale is an insane endeavor, but Ahab pursues it with very rational instruments.

The first function of the deictic gesture performed by the footnote is clear. It points at Maury’s chart as a stable, definite object that is not part of the fictional realm but of our own world and that, as such, can attest that Ahab’s method is plausible. The vocabulary used by Maury to describe his projected chart happens to be in keeping
with Melville’s description of Ahab’s cartographic practices. The true topic of chapter 44, though, is not maps and mapping, but Ahab’s inner torments.

Charting Ahab’s madness

Chapter 44 might be entitled “The Chart,” but what this chart looks like remains very vague. The nature of Ahab’s charts and their visual aspect are rarely alluded to in the novel as a whole. The only significant detail appears at the beginning of chapter 109, when Starbuck enters the cabin and finds Ahab “with a general chart of the oriental archipelagoes spread before him; and another separate one representing the long eastern coasts of the Japanese islands–Niphon, Matsmai, and Sikoke.” (Melville 473). These three very specific names offer us a glimpse of the kind of documents that Melville had in mind when writing the book. The three toponyms refer to three of the main islands of Japan—Honshu, Hokkaido and Shikoku, respectively. Interestingly, the three names almost never appear in combination on nautical charts of the period. The name “Matsmai,” in particular, is very rarely used, the island Hokkaido being usually referred to as “Ieso” or a variation on that name. Despite some extensive research, I was able to find only two nautical charts from that period that bear all three names. The first one is a two-sheet “Map of the Islands of Japan, Kurile, Etc.” published by Aaron Arrowsmith in 1818; the other is the Northern Sheet of “A New Chart of the Pacific Ocean,” published by J. W. Norie in 1836 (fig. 4). My point here is not to argue that one of these maps is the exact document that Melville used when writing the novel. I am more interested in the fact that the highly specific toponyms mentioned in chapter 109 show that Melville had a precise chart in mind when he wrote the novel. Far from referring to maps in a vague, abstract way, Melville had a direct and intimate knowledge of the nautical charts used in the whaling industry.
Several different copies of Norie’s Pacific chart are available online, but one specific copy, owned by the David Rumsey Map Collection, is particularly useful to understand the uniqueness of Ahab’s endeavor. The chart is part of a group of four sheets that were “owned and used for many whaling trips by an American captain out of New York in the 1840’s and 50’s and are marked with his ships’ tracks and numerous whale sightings.” A comparison of the names of the different ships whose tracks are drawn in pencil on these charts with available data related to whaling voyages indicate that they belonged to Captain Jeremiah W. Hedges, who sailed from Sag Harbor on several whaling voyages from the 1830s to the early 1860s. Hedges was in the Pacific in the early 1840s aboard the ship Thames II at the exact moment when Melville was aboard the Acushnet, which suggests that the picture of his whaling voyages that emerges from his charts must be comparable to Melville’s own experience. Just as in Moby-Dick, the tracks inscribed on the charts show an alternation of long periods of sailing straight across the ocean, followed by very intense periods of hunting and killing, during which the ship criss-crossed specific hunting grounds—just east of the Kamchatka Peninsula (fig. 5) or east of New Zealand, for example.
The chart that Ahab is attempting to produce is of a different kind. Even though his aim of identifying “veins” is clearly defined, the nature of the annotations he draws on his charts remains rather vague. In the first paragraph, Ahab is said to be “tracing additional courses over spaces that before were blank” (198). Since the next sentence refers to the old log-books that he is using, we can assume that Ahab is drawing the routes followed by previous ships, marking on his chart “the seasons and places in which […] whales had been seen or captured.” This corresponds to the work that had been done by Maury himself since the late 1840s. On the “Wind and Current” charts which he started publishing in 1847, Maury represented the tracks of dozens of naval and commercial vessels, the charts becoming a sort of archive of American navigation (fig. 6). Ahab seems to be performing a similar task.
In the next paragraph, though, Ahab is said to be marking “lines and courses”—and no longer simply “courses.” The exact nature of these “lines” is not explained. And in the third paragraph, Ishmael reveals that “every night some pencil marks were effaced, and others were substituted. For with the charts of all four oceans before him, Ahab was threading a maze of currents and eddies” (Melville 198-199). The reference becomes clearer in the next two paragraphs, when Ishmael notes that Ahab “knew the sets of all tides and currents […] thereby calculating the driftings of the sperm whale’s food.” Ahab is covering his charts with marks related to several different categories of information. Some of them are a record of the history of the whaling industry, some of them aim at inscribing natural phenomena (like the currents), and some of them are simply “lines” that possibly represent the “veins” followed by sperm whales, or the future course of the Pequod.

The fact that these marks are erased and drawn again every night, though, suggests that Ahab’s quest is not simply about transferring data onto the surface of the map. Plotting becomes an obsessive gesture that he is bound to repeat over and over again. The circulation of the adjective “wrinkled” suggests that mapping, in Ahab’s case, leads to scarring. The term is initially applied to Moby Dick himself: as early as chapter 36 (Melville 162) and in chapter 41 (183), it has been clearly associated with the White Whale, and it is repeated later in chapter 44 (“turn up his wrinkled brow” [201]). At the beginning of chapter 44, it characterizes the charts (“a large wrinkled roll of yellowish sea charts” [Melville 198]) but it is eventually transferred onto Ahab himself:

While thus employed, the heavy pewter lamp suspended in chains over his head […] for ever threw shifting gleams and shadows of lines upon his wrinkled brow, till it almost seemed that while he himself was marking out lines and courses on the wrinkled charts, some invisible pencil was also tracing lines and courses upon the deeply marked chart of his forehead. (Melville 198).
The creases on his forehead suggest that Ahab does not escape unscathed from his interaction with the map. He ends up bearing the marks that characterize the very object of his yearning. In this triangular interaction, the map, the whale, and the captain are placed on the same level. As opposed to an open, dramatic wound, the image of the wrinkles suggests a long, repetitive erosion. Ahab’s mapping practices wear him down, physically and mentally.

Compared with Hedges’ clean annotations on the Pacific charts, Ahab’s obsessive accumulation, and subsequent erasure, of data on his charts appears as an impossible project. Hedges’ charts are first and foremost a record of his past voyages. Ahab is doing the opposite: he is trying to plot the future course of his ship. Contrary to Ahab, the whaleman does not ask his chart “thou tellest me truly where I am—but canst thou cast the least hint where I shall be?” (Melville 501). The chart shows the alternation of different temporalities during the voyage (sailing v. hunting), but it remains a factual document that does not register the doubts, hesitations, and secret fears of the captain. Ahab’s map, on the contrary, becomes a palimpsest of his torments, and a “maze” where he loses his mind.

Seen in this light, the deictic gesture pointing at Maury’s map has a different function. It reveals a disjunction between Ahab’s project and Maury’s charts, rather than a fortuitous adequation. Instead of simply establishing the verisimilitude of Ahab’s method, it also gradually and obliquely reveals the “delirious” (200) scale of his endeavor.

A map unseen

The way the addition of the footnote is carefully staged as a later, fortuitous decision, seemingly reinforces the perception of cartographic documents as stable, well-defined objects. The verbatim quote describing Maury’s chart gestures at a specific, identifiable document that exists “out there” and that is implicitly envisioned as a reliable reference point. Under scrutiny, though, the footnote itself contains puzzling details that suggest that the chart it alludes to is not as solidly defined as it seems. The language of the footnote, for example, echoes the words used to characterize Ahab’s delirious plan. The term “circular” never appears in Maury’s original publication, but it is repeated three times in the footnote. Deliberately added, and repeated, by Melville, the term introduces the image of the circle, which, in the novel, is used several times as an image of Ahab’s madness. At the end of the chapter, for example, his thoughts are said to be “whirled […] round and round in his blazing brain” (Melville 201). By characterizing Maury’s document as something that moves in circles, Melville connects it with the circular maze of Ahab’s monomania. The circle is a trap; contrary to the penetrating straight lines drawn on Hedges’ charts, it fails to conquer anything. Even though the footnote is presented as disconnected from Ishmael’s narrative, echoes appear, which suggests that it is more carefully woven into the texture of the chapter than it seems.

The celebratory tone of the footnote (“happily”) and its insistence on perfect correspondence (“precisely such a chart”) cleverly distract the reader from the most important characteristic of Maury’s chart, which is that it simply does not exist. The map evoked here is “in course of completion.” It is a map in the making that Melville
himself had not seen at the time, and that he never saw, even after the publication of the book. Indeed, Maury never completed the chart described in his initial “Notice,” opting instead for a simpler design for his whale chart. The reason might be that the chart would have been too crowded, to the point of being illegible. The most famous version of Maury’s whale chart is the “Preliminary Sketch” of his “Series F” whale chart,\textsuperscript{11} published in 1851 and sometimes reproduced in modern editions of \textit{Moby-Dick}.\textsuperscript{12} This version, published the same year as \textit{Moby-Dick} but probably after the book was printed, does not match the description that can be found in Melville’s footnote. Instead of being divided into twelve columns and three lines, each district simply includes a drawing of a (white, as it happens) sperm whale and/or a right whale, and a letter indicating the best hunting season.

Other versions of the whale chart were published in the following years. They suggest that Maury kept hesitating between different ways of constructing his chart. In a four-sheet version entitled “Whale Chart of the World,” published in 1852 as part of the same “Series F,” for example, Maury again tried to represent the trustworthiness of his data (that is to say, not only the sightings themselves, but also the number of days spent by ships in each area), this time using graphs (fig. 7 and 8).\textsuperscript{13} Each district contained a miniature graph showing three lines: the number of days spent by ships in the area, and the number of sperm whales and right whales, respectively, sighted in that area. This version of the whale chart was not easy to interpret, and it was never republished.

\textbf{Figure 7}

When Maury published his masterwork *The Physical Geography of the Sea* in 1855, he once again included a whale chart, this time entitled “Sea Drift and Whales.” The visual aspect of this chart is dramatically different from the earlier versions. The “mean polar limits” of the areas frequented by each species of whales are clearly delineated, but the currents of the ocean are shown using a surprisingly intricate woven texture of lines and curlicues. The resulting chart appears at the same time extremely detailed and, for Maury, surprisingly non-geometrical (fig. 9). Each carefully delineated spiral represents a specific “eddy,” and yet the chart as a whole seems to be a rather impressionistic depiction of the waves and the smooth space of the ocean (fig. 10). It appears as the culmination of Maury’s Herculean task of data collection, but, in its attempt to fix in place a body of water that is in constant flux, it also implicitly recognizes its own limitations. This chart, published four years after *Moby-Dick*, seems to be visually similar to Ahab’s “maze of currents and eddies.” It moves away from a strict and geometrical way of organizing the surface of the ocean. The overabundance of data in each district is replaced with a more global approximation of the complex and large-scale phenomena represented here.
Paying attention to the diachronic accumulation of the successive versions of Maury’s whale chart allows us to put the chart described in Melville’s footnote into perspective. Far from being a key cartographic achievement and the end-result of a linear progression towards accuracy and clarity, Maury’s charts illustrate the complexity of data collection and the challenges of cartographic representation—in John Bryant’s words, the chart is “fluid,” the product of a series of choices and technical challenges. Mapping whales is a messy affair, each chart being, to quote Ishmael, “a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught.” (Melville 145).

**Toward blankness**

At first sight, the reference to Maury has a clear function: it is evoked as a model of clarity and precision that obliquely bolsters the plausibility of Ahab’s method. The neat and geometric construction of Maury’s projected chart echoes the steadfastness of Ahab’s meticulous plotting. The fact that he keeps erasing and redrawing his chart, though, gradually reveals a dichotomy between him and Maury. Contrary to the usual mapping practices of whalemen at the time, Ahab’s interaction with maps is obsessive and repetitive, and leads to disorientation instead of clarity. From this perspective, the image of Maury’s chart, as it is conjured up in the footnote, is rather a counterpoint than a model: it shows that what Ahab is doing is nothing like Maury’s work.

These two different readings, nevertheless, share a common characteristic: they implicitly consider Maury’s chart as a stable, definite object that the text can use as a...
valid reference point. The footnote itself, though, indicates from the start that this is not the case. The fact that Maury’s chart is still “in course of completion” signals that the footnote is gesturing at an object that is absent. The chart that plays such an important role in promoting the validity of Ahab’s method simply doesn’t exist. The footnote does not refer to a stabilized, complete, and definite object that would embody technicity, objectivity, and certainty, but rather to an object in flux, something in the making—and that, unbeknownst to Melville, never took shape.

The textual reverberations produced by the presence of the footnote illuminate the complex interactions between Melville’s text and the cartographic object. In her 2018 essay on Melville’s geographical imagination, Wyn Kelley argues that Melville’s treatment of Ahab’s sea-chart amounts to an “un-mapping”: “Melville un-maps the chart […] by undoing the human biases of mapping, thus in effect using it to create a city of whales” (Kelley 170). In a sense, this is also what Maury’s successive charts perform: they gradually move away from the Cartesian (and very human) graphs of the early versions to the more intuitive (nonhuman?) representation of the “city of whales” in the 1856 edition—the changing, fluid, and more organic space that the whales inhabit on the planet. Rather than an un-mapping (a term which suggests a radical undoing of the chart itself), though, I would characterize Melville’s treatment as a reorientation of the chart’s function: within the textual regime of the chapter, the reference to the chart no longer points at a specific location, but at an absence. Kelley adds:

I would go a step further to suggest that Melville implicitly maps the whales’ global imaginings as well. That is, Maury’s chart, while showing the whales as having bodies and agencies, cannot fully map their stories. Only Melville’s novel can begin to do that, indicating that human maps and other kinds of texts leave gap for the literary imagination to fill. By un-mapping the maps at his disposal Melville can imagine and narrate worlds beyond human ones. (171)

I would rather argue that, at the end of the day, the whale’s story remains unheard, just as the chart evoked here is bound to remain invisible and out of reach. Even though the first function of chapter 44 is to describe Ahab’s method, its real theme is the issue of impossible certainty, and thus the radical disjunction between the human and non-human worlds. The narrator emphasizes several times that Ahab’s efforts are asymptotic: they allow him to “arrive at reasonable surmises, almost approaching to certainties” (199), and to near a moment “when all possibilities would become probabilities, and […] every probability the next thing to a certainty,” but final, absolute certainty remains out of reach. Ahab is forced to confront the possibility that Moby Dick could elude him: “And have I not tallied the whale, Ahab would mutter to himself […], tallied him, and shall he escape?” (201). The unusual transitive use of the verb “tally” harks back to its etymological meaning—to cut wood, to notch a stick. It evokes a gesture of inscription, referring in this case to the salient physical features that make Moby Dick recognizable—“his broad fins are bored, and scalloped out like a lost sheep’s ear” (201). Ahab has “tallied” (measured, marked, noted) Moby Dick mentally but this gesture of inscription cannot be translated onto the map, since Ahab is bound to erase and redraw it again and again. Ahab points at the whale, but it is constantly absent.

This explains why Moby Dick’s insurmountable and anti-cartographic blankness breaches the surface of the text all over again at the end of the chapter. While, at the beginning of the chapter, Ahab is said to be filling “spaces that before were blank”
(198) (an image that suggests that blank spaces are disappearing), the image of blankness returns in the very last lines of the chapter, when Ahab’s spirit is said to be “a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself” (202). Even though the opening of the chapter is concerned with the numerous lines, shadings and markings that Ahab inscribes on his chart, the chapter eventually circles back to the image of blankness. The image of a ray of light that fails to become visible because it does not encounter an obstacle is reminiscent of the deictic gesture performed by the footnote. The figure of Ahab is overwhelmed by the motif of blankness because he keeps yearning for an object that is unreachable, just as the footnote points at a map that does not exist.

Both passages dramatize an experience of failed deixis: pointing at something that is not there. This obliquely reinscribes the figure of Moby Dick himself, not visually (a white whale) but as an absence, something just out of reach. Even though it is a late addition, the footnote is a key element of the chapter, not so much because it shows that Ahab’s cartographic dealings are plausible, but because it designates an absent map.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. At the beginning of the next chapter, Melville insists on the importance of chapter 44 in the novel as a whole: “the foregoing chapter, in its earlier part, is as important a one as will be found in this volume” (Melville 203).


3. The chronology is also confirmed implicitly by the other date mentioned in the book, Dec. 16th, 1850, which appears in chapter 85 (Melville 370) and thus shows that the footnote in chapter 44 was added later.

4. Charts are briefly mentioned at the end of chapter 51 (Melville 235)—another indication that Ahab keeps poring over his charts throughout the voyage. Although it does not refer to charts explicitly, the bird’s-eye view description of “the long and narrow peninsula of Malacca, extending south-eastward from the territories of Birmah” (Melville 380) at the beginning of chapter 87 (“The Grand Armada”) seems to be based on a cartographic representation.


6. John William Norie (1772-1843) was a mathematician and a specialist of nautical charts. He acquired a reputation as an excellent chart maker and founded the company that bore his name in 1813. The company later merged with some of its rivals and is now known as Imray, Laurie,
Chapter 44 of *Moby-Dick* (“The Chart”) includes a footnote comparing Ahab’s plan to track Moby Dick across the globe with Matthew F. Maury’s efforts to chart the winds and currents of the oceans and produce an accurate “whale chart.” This article unpacks the effects produced by the addition of the footnote in the chapter and uses it as a starting point for examining Ahab’s charts and discussing the interactions between map and text. At first sight, Maury’s chart is used as a stable reference point that reinforces the verisimilitude of Ahab’s plan. A comparison of Ahab’s use of nautical charts with actual documents used by whaling captains, though, reveals a disjunction between his cartographic ratiocinations and Maury’s work. Yet the most significant detail in the footnote might be the fact that Maury’s chart is “in course of completion”: far from being a definite document that the text can rely on to bolster the plausibility of Ahab’s method, the chart remains unseen—and even unseeable, since the version described in the footnote was
never produced in reality. The “deictic” gesture performed by the footnote duplicates Ahab’s yearning for an object that constantly eludes him.

Le chapitre 44 de Moby-Dick décrit comment Achab utilise des cartes des vents et courants pour déterminer les « veines » le long desquelles les cétacés se déplacent dans l’océan. Une note de bas de page ajoutée dans ce chapitre compare le plan d’Achab au projet de M. F. Maury de cartographier les courants océaniques et de dresser des cartes baleinières fiables. Cet article explore les différents effets produits par l’ajout de cette note, et la prend comme point de départ pour examiner les cartes utilisées par Achab et l’interaction entre carte et texte. À première vue, la carte de Maury décrite dans la note est utilisée comme un point de référence stable qui permet de prouver la vraisemblance de la méthode d’Achab. Si l’on compare la façon dont Achab utilise les cartes marines aux documents effectivement utilisés par les capitaines de baleiniers à la même époque, on mesure cependant qu’il existe un écart majeur entre la pratique cartographique du capitaine et le projet de Maury. Le détail le plus révélateur de cette note de bas de page, cependant, est que la carte de Maury qui y est décrite est « en voie d’achèvement » : loin d’être un document identifiable sur lequel le texte peut s’appuyer pour montrer la plausibilité du plan d’Achab, la carte demeure invisible et même inexistante, puisque la version décrite dans la note n’a finalement jamais été réalisée. Le geste « déictique » que produit la note devient alors un double textuel de la quête d’Achab vers un objet qui ne cesse de se dérober.

INDEX

**Keywords:** maps, mapping, cartography, nautical charts, science, oceanography, sperm whales

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