

## “Her bleeding philosophy”: Ahabian Monomania in China Miéville’s *Railsea*

David Farnell

Many scholars have examined Herman Melville’s portrayal of monomania through the character of Ahab in *Moby-Dick*. But some have taken alternative routes. Poet Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) straddles the divide between literary criticism, personal essay, and poetry, while even writers of popular science fiction such as Fred Saberhagen in *Berserker: Blue Death* (1987) have explored the same theme through less academic avenues. And there are countless others.

One of the most recent to do so is China Miéville in his novel *Railsea* (2012), a semi-young-adult weird-fiction darkly comic homage/parody/spiritual child of *Moby-Dick* set in a wrecked post-capitalist-apocalypse steampunk/dieselpunk/clockpunk world where Melville’s ocean is replaced by a vast dystopian “sea” of tangled railroad tracks, the white whale by a titanic ivory-colored mole, and the whaler *Pequod* by the moletrain *Medes*.

It is a world where the captains of moletrains quite regularly develop “philosophies,” obsessions with unique members of the species they hunt, and their crews more or less take these obsessions in stride, often even taking pride in them. Miéville’s novel dwells upon the nature of this monomania as a metaphor for academic scholarship in a way both playful and serious.

The novel starts with its Ishmael, Shamus Yes ap Soorap, better known as Sham, a “Big lumpy young man. Thickset, not always unclumsy...” (Miéville, *Railsea* 6), apprenticed to the surgeon of the moletrain *Medes*. Sham is not quite an Ishmael, however. He is less worldly, more shy and nervous. This is far from the only departure. *Railsea*, in Miéville’s words, “...sort of takes *Moby Dick*, obviously, as a kind of starting point, but it doesn’t follow the events of *Moby Dick*; it sort of uses it as a peg to try and do all sorts of various other things” (Cathcart).

In fact, despite its many absurd parallels—trains

instead of ships and giant moles instead of whales only scratch the surface—the novel is very much its own work, with its own characters and setting. One would not have to have read *Moby-Dick* to understand and enjoy it. Considering it is being marketed in the young-adult category—a “marketing term” that the author feels is “not terribly helpful” and prefers to think of the book as for “readers of all ages” (Jones)—it is not likely, indeed, that many of its market-intended teenaged readers will have read its inspiration.

This paper examines Miéville’s homage to Melville’s Ahab in the person of Captain Naphi and others in the novel, and the ways in which the novel treats monomaniacal obsession: the meanings of their philosophies, the lengths to which these captains will go, and where pursuit of them leads.

We are soon introduced to the literally iron-fisted commander of the *Medes*, Captain Abacat Naphi, a grey-haired woman, her left arm an apparent prosthesis made of “mole-bone, jet & metal” (94), that has “winking lights” (94) and throughout the book reveals numerous built-in tools and compartments. This arm of course reflects Ahab’s whalebone leg, which as scholars such as David Mitchell and Susan Snyder have pointed out, can be seen as a physical manifestation of his personality (123). Although Harriet Hustis cautions against making too much of this “dismasting” by pointing out that according to records of the time injuries like Ahab’s were “by no mean exceptional or remarkable” (34), it’s indisputable that in the popular imagination the one-legged, obsessed whaling captain is as firmly entrenched as the pirate with an eyepatch and a hook for a hand.

And so in *Railsea* we have our one-armed captain, and, it seems, quite a few other similarly injured captains. As he listens to Captain Vajpaz, another moletrain commander at a conclave of captains, telling of how he lost his leg to a giant stoat, young Sham

muses,

There were times ... when the captains regretted there being only two types of limb they could lose to their obsessions. On the whole, you were a leg person or an arm person: had one a tail to lose, a pair of prehensile tentacles, a wing or two, it would increase the possibilities for those vivid scars of philosophizing. (101)

The loss of a limb serves as a marker for membership in a select group, a more visible and extreme circumcision, irreversible and disabling, “a badge of intensity, of honour” (305). Like Odin plucking out his own eye at the well of Mimir, wisdom demands physical sacrifice. But is this becoming cyclopean, this dismasting, merely a way of exchanging breadth of wisdom for depth?

And the pursuit of these remarkable beasts is the pursuit of wisdom. They are called, by their hunters, “philosophies,” and each carries a meaning. Exactly what these meanings are is not always clear. Captain Vajpaz’s greatstoat means the quintessence of “speed” (102), while other esoteric truths are revealed by the hunting of others, for it is not the prey itself but the hunt that reveals knowledge:

In the taverns of Streggeye Land, in the books they wrote, which Sham & his classmates had sat through, in the lectures public & exclusive, captains had held ruminatively forth about the bloodworm, the mole rat, the termite queen or the angry rex rabbit or the badger or the mole, the great mole, the rampaging great moldywarpe of the railsea, become for them a principle of knowing or unknowing, humility, enlightenment, obsession, modernity, nostalgia or something. The story of the hunt as much their work as the catching of the meat. (102)

One of the listeners whispers,

“I come for all the good philosophies ... Captain Glenn’s Ferret of Unrequitedness; Zhorbal & the Too-Much-Knowledge Mole Rats; & Naphi. Of course. Naphi & Mocker-Jack, the Mole of Many Meanings.” (104)

“Mocker-Jack,” she says, in a statement that reflects the vast sea of criticism written about Moby-Dick, “means everything” (104). Naphi calls the mole “a burrowing signifier” (105) and describes it in color as “ivory ... bone-hue ... tooth-like” (27). Everyone but her calls it “yellow,” but when a Captain Skaramash, who is pursuing a ferret known as “Old Hookhead,” unwisely calls Mocker-Jack “the custard-coloured moldywarpe” in front of her, Naphi “harshly” corrects him, calling it “*Old-tooth* coloured ... the hue of ancient parchment. Ivory-reminiscent. Lymphlike. A white stained like the old eyes of frantically ruminating scholars. ... My philosophy ... is not yellow” (94-5).

Melville, in the words of Juana Celia Djelal, “compounds the complexity of narrative’s desire” via “the morphing shape of the whale” (53), and we see Naphi and other captains do this in *Railsea*, adding profundity to their philosophies that one suspects are not much apparent to the average person.

And how far will these scholar-captains go in hunting their philosophies? Naphi, like Ahab, is willing to risk her train, her own life, and the lives of her crew in pursuit of Mocker-Jack, but complications get in her way and cause her crew to step back and question this obsession. Like the owners of the *Pequod*, “The owners of the *Medes* wanted the credit that molemeat & fur & oils would bring” (188), but unlike the *Pequod*’s owners, they have an awareness of how Naphi’s vow to “submit him to a sharp & bladey interpretation” (104) will increase her value to them via a “kind of brand recognition” (188).

She wins the crew over as well, but even as she does so, Sham is abducted into another thread of the story, and his loss eats away at the crew as they hunt without him. They pursue Mocker-Jack with the help of a device Sham helped acquire, an electronic tracker, and one of the crew, Vurinam, wonders, “If Naphi gets Mocker-Jack like this ... mightn’t it be cheating to complete your philosophy that way? Can you shortcut an insight-hunt, do you think?” (265) This tracking device is in a way another prosthesis, but one that extends the senses without sacrificing anything.

But this is not the only cheating in which Naphi engages. After Mocker-Jack leads its pursuers into a trap and several of the crew are devoured by a tentacled Scylla-like monster, Vurinam notices that the captain’s artificial arm is bleeding. The surgeon examines it and discovers to his disgust that her arm “is in fact not missing at all, only hidden,” “encased in metal

& mole-bone, all this time" (304-5). Confronted with this deception, she doubles down, claiming that those captains "Who need that terrible bite & rupture to spur their fascination. Their revenge" are "weak" (305), to which Vurinam explodes, "That don't even bloody *mean* anything! ... It's complete bloody gibberish!" (306)

For the moment, though, they leave her in charge, despite all this, until they learn where their trainmate Sham is, and then they demand that Naphi give up her hunt to rescue him. It is a gentle mutiny. They allow her to howl in despair for a moment, and then, despotism turned to democracy, she obeys and orders the train to change course (321).

But deceitful Naphi has not given up her hunt. She has "*flipped the signal*" (363), turning the tracking device into a calling device, bringing Mocker-Jack to them. It is the last betrayal the crew will endure, and they depose her. But her actions have saved them, for while she was pursuing the mole, Sham and others—pirates, salvage seekers, an imperialistic military—have been pursuing a way out of the railsea, an astonishingly single line to a land beyond that is still like Earth before its apocalypse.

By the standards of the poisoned land they live in, its green arable land and ocean make it a utopia. But it is guarded by an ancient automated train, heavily armed and armored, and it is only through using the tracking device to provoke Mocker-Jack into attacking this "Angel" can they slip into "Heaven" (379-80).

In her obsession, Naphi attempts to leap from a bridge and follow Mocker-Jack to his death, but is stopped by the crew. They bind her but take no vengeance, continuing to treat her gently even if they will never follow her again. They recognize her obsession for what it is: madness. This may seem a criticism of academia, but Miéville himself is a professor of creative writing and wrote his PhD thesis on Marxism and international law, and has said of *Railsea*, "And I'm not mocking that. I love that kind of question; I love literary analysis and so on. But that doesn't mean you can't tease it" (Cathcart).

The Marxist direction of his scholarship is evident in this and virtually all of Miéville's works. The rivals in Sham's quest for this utopia are all in pursuit of one thing: money. Pirates, salvagers, and perhaps most of all the military forces of Manihiki

all reflect the capitalist forces that brought about the apocalypse. Manihiki in particular recalls *Mardi*'s Vivenza in its hypocrisy and greed, but instead of targeting the hypocrisy of America's slavery as Melville does in *Mardi*, Miéville focuses on America's capitalist/imperialist foreign policy—and as T. Walter Herbert describes, so does Melville in *Typee* and *Omoo* (Herbert).

The sea of rails and the poisoned sky are the result of out-of-control capitalism in the distant past, leaving the people of Earth to "live in the aftermath of business bickering" (183), and what the seekers find at the end of the line are the Controller, a "feral businessman" (410), who presents them with a massive interest-bearing bill of debt, which one reviewer calls "an explicit challenge to the politics of austerity" (Crane).

But Sham and his companions, now including Captain Naphi, have come in pursuit of knowledge, and primed by their experiences they reject this false authority, refusing an economic structure which they had no part in forming and that has brought about nothing but ruin. While the Manihiki ferronavy tries to force its way into a hidden land like Perry and his black ships arriving at "that double-bolted land, Japan" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 110; see also Ragno 465 and Makino 19), Sham and his companions slip in and, disputing the flim-flammy of Wall Street, seize utopia, actualizing what Kim Stanley Robinson, in a speech about the capitalist causes of climate change, says is "a case of utopia or catastrophe, and utopia has gone from being a somewhat minor literary problem to a necessary survival strategy" (15). Instead of plundering this new land, they choose utopia, and begin to plan ways for it to benefit all the denizens of the railsea.

And this, serendipitously, is what Naphi's obsession, along with the obsessions of many other characters in the novel, leads to in the end. The Controller defeated, a fertile land reclaimed: actual, though accidental, practical benefits of academic questioning and questing. Not that Naphi cares. At the end of the novel, she is sitting in a small boat, looking into the depths of salt water, on the cusp of forming a new obsession with a huge creature swimming in the depths (424).

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