

Vesper No. 5, Moby Dick: avventure e scoperte | Adventures and Discoveries

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The 1851 novel 'Moby-Dick; or, The Whale' flopped. It was a critical and popular failure, which marked the end of the writing career of the former sailor and deserter Herman Melville. The author of 'Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street' (published anonymously in 1853) constructed his 'definitive novel' – in which Captain Ahab and the white whale vie for the starring role – by collecting quotations, references to news reports, and fragments of his personal life. 'Moby Dick' – a cornerstone of the American Renaissance alongside Henry David Thoreau's 'Walden' – anticipates James Joyce's 'Ulysses' and is the manifesto of motions and actions such as challenge, obsession, adventure, and failure. The luminous whiteness of the whale is contrasted with the dominance of darkness, thus reaffirming the centrality of the quest over the achievement of the target: the cetacean is not captured (indeed, it takes revenge for too much doggedness), and the long writing coincides with the gruelling pursuit witnessed by Ishmael.

Melville's narrative is mentioned here to suggest, recall and emphasise 'frontier research', meant as a mode of investigation literally positioned at the extremes of knowledge, at the edge of what is known. The task of any research is to go beyond the already known, the already given. Beyond the mainstream, however, working at the edges means tackling controversial issues, which are difficult to settle with established methodologies: it calls for the 'move of the knight'. In other words, it requires experimentation even in practice. More than that, frontier research is aimed at refuting dominant paradigms, thereby working with a high degree of uncertainty and failure. Under this definition it is possible to label many adventures and discoveries of the past, whose re-foundational potential in all domains, from science to the arts, can be assessed by their initial lack of acceptance.

In his search for the shortest route to the Indies by means of maps, texts, and oral sources, Christopher Columbus became convinced that beyond the Azores, across the ocean, lay Asia. It took him more than ten years of his life to find the funding for his adventure (based on a mistake), which in 1492 turned out to be the discovery of a new world for the world of the time: the discovery of 'another land'. Galileo Galilei was accused of heresy and forced to abjure his astronomical conceptions. However, this did not prevent him from publishing, shortly after his trial, the scientific treatise 'Discorsi e dimostrazioni matematiche intorno a due nuove scienze attinenti la meccanica e i moti locali' (1638), for which he is now considered the father of modern science. In 1880, Auguste Rodin was commissioned by the French State to design an ornamental door for the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. After four years of work, the artist was informed that the museum project had been abandoned. However, this did not mean that 'his project' came to an end, as it continued for forty years until his death, turning the initial objective into a driving force for other works. In 1925, Konstantin Stepanovič Mel'nikov was commissioned to design two

garages following the success of his Russian pavilion presented at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris. The architect responded with two variations that remained on paper, one of which envisaged a volume placed over a Paris bridge, with its structure positioned at the intersection of two ramps proudly cantilevered over the old route and the waters of the Seine. At both ends of the structure, there were two tension cables hidden inside monumental statues: the Russian architect thus consecrated, with irony and nonchalance, his own ability to work at the limits of what is feasible. In 1962, Vittorio Giorgini built a house in Baratti – Casa Saldarini, known as 'The Whale' – based on an iso-elastic membrane made of concrete and wire netting. The project was carried out, up to its construction, through an agreement with the client. The pact enshrined the experimental nature of the work, that is, the possibility of failure, of not achieving the purpose intended by the two involved and complicit parties.

To look for the white whale is to swim against the tide, to see beyond the already established, to pursue other ways of seeing, to challenge oneself, to meet at least one ally. Sometimes the evidence of these adventures and discoveries is direct: the authors' voices narrate their own adventure, retracing the steps of a discovery (made or failed). At other times the authors are not given the opportunity to know the fate of their quest or how it will be experienced over time. The voice then being that of Ishmael: the witness.

This navigation assumes a single certainty sanctioned by Herman Melville: 'Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!'.

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TIMELINE

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