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Sketches of Salt Water Poetry: Herman Melville’s “The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles”

ABSTRACT This article uses Herman Melville’s remark on the demise of the “poetry of salt water” as the starting point of an inquiry into the relationship between form and content in one of his seafaring pieces, “The Encantadas, or The Enchanted Isles.” It revisits claims that Melville’s use of a fragmentary style in “The Encantadas” undermines and thereby challenges hegemonic knowledges about the Pacific and its archipelagos, such as are at work in early nineteenth-century natural histories and travel writings. For this purpose, the article discusses “The Encantadas” as an example of the antebellum genre of the literary sketch and points out Melville’s use of the desert island trope. In conclusion this article argues that Melville may be challenging naturalist knowledge in “The Encantadas” but he is also prioritizing literary knowledge—what he calls the “poetry of salt water”—by rendering the Galapagos archipelago simultaneously remote and accessible to readers.

KEYWORDS Herman Melville, archipelagos, islands in literature, aesthetic form, empire

Introduction

Herman Melville began his career as a literary author in the 1840s, with two books about his adventures as a young man in the South Pacific. These two books, *Typee* and *Omoo*, were so successful that Melville—then in his late twenties—was able to get married, settle down, and begin to think more earnestly about his career as a writer. However, a common scholarly narrative of his career highlights the degree to which it all went downhill for Melville after he took up writing in earnest: how his novels after *Typee* and *Omoo* were mostly commercial failures, for example, and how he

produced magazine fiction such as “Bartleby, the Scrivener” only because he needed the money. In the last few years, however, this narrative of demise has been partly debunked: yes, most of his novels were commercial failures; and yes, magazine fiction was better paid and more conventional by comparison. But magazine fiction also allowed Melville to write for a bigger audience, to reach a more diverse readership, and to develop and experiment with narrative forms that we also find in his novels.

To get an idea of Herman Melville’s sense of authorial identity at this early commercial height of his career, we can turn to a review he wrote anonymously, and which was published in *New York Literary World* in March 1847. It is a review of two books on whaling: factual accounts of the practices and the state of the whaling industry: J. Ross Browne’s *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (1846) and Captain Ringbolt’s *Sailors’ Life and Sailors’ Yarns* (1847).¹ In his review, Melville presents the two books as “faithful” accounts of seafaring, but it is also precisely this faithfulness that distinguishes them from what Melville calls the “poetry of salt water.” He begins his review by stating:

From time immemorial many fine things have been said and sung of the sea. And the days have been, when sailors were considered veritable mermen; and the ocean itself, as the peculiar theatre of the romantic and wonderful. But of late years there have been revealed so many plain, matter-of-fact details connected with nautical life that at the present day the poetry of salt water is very much on the wane. (Melville [1847] 1984, 1117)

These two new books, he adds, have “further [...] impair[ed] the charm with which poesy and fiction have invested the sea,” and he deplores the extent to which “the disenchanting nature of the revelations of sea life” turn the matter of writing about the ocean into a merely “practical one” ([1847] 1984, 1118). Melville’s own writing evidently aimed to *add* to rather than to diminish the charm of the sea, and, in fact, so much so that publishers had doubts about the veracity of Melville’s accounts of his South Pacific adventures (cf. Phillips 2007, 128).

This article uses Melville’s remark on the demise of salt water poetry as the starting point of an inquiry into the relationship between form and

1 Sheila Post-Lauria discusses J. Ross Browne’s works as part of her study of Melville as magazine writer. She writes that Browne, like Melville, understood “the particular practices that marked the literary environment[s] of the magazine[s],” and that he accordingly employed sentimental registers in his work for *Harpers*, for example, while *Etchings of a Whale Cruise* testifies to his ability to “writ[e] more ‘realistic’ narratives” (1996, 192).

content in one of his seafaring pieces. “The Encantadas, or the Enchanted Isles” was first published in three instalments in *Putnam’s Magazine* in 1854 and later republished as part of his collection *The Piazza Tales* (1856). The subject of “The Encantadas” is the archipelago better known as Galapagos, the islands made famous by Charles Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle*, first published in 1839. The piece is divided into ten so-called sketches that can be loosely grouped thematically: the first four sketches introduce the islands geographically by way of the narrator’s recollections of his ascent of a high, tower-like rock formation and its panoramic view. The remaining sketches present anecdotal histories of individual islands, of their history of exploration, and of an attempt to create a free republic on one of them. “The Encantadas” is still one of Melville’s lesser-known works, though it was by far one of his most successful pieces of magazine fiction. Contemporary reviewers of the *Piazza Tales*, for example, often singled out “The Encantadas” from the other stories in the collection. One reviewer recommended “The Encantadas” by declaring that “[a] more vivid picture of the fire-and-barren cursed Gallipagos [*sic*] we have never read”; while another wrote that the piece “exert[s] an indefinable but irresistible sway over the imagination” (quoted in Beecher 2000, 88).

More specifically this article focuses on “The Encantadas” because recent scholarship has read its representation of the Galapagos archipelago as an intervention into the contemporary discourse on mapping and natural history. This scholarship compares the fragmentary style of “The Encantadas” and its preoccupation with questions of nature, hierarchy, and knowledge favourably against, for example, Charles Darwin’s account of the Galapagos in *Voyage* and his *Diary* (1933).² For example, “The Encantadas” contains a population table that is quite similar to the statistical table that Darwin presents in his chapter on the Galapagos archipelago. In the same vein, the fragmentary style’s challenge to ideas of wholeness and the possibility of complete knowledge have been taken as a critique of the imperial practice of mapping, for example.³ However, almost none of the scholarship pays attention to the formal conditions of this fragmentariness in Melville’s piece and what this can tell us about the nature of his discursive intervention. This article fills this gap by locating “The Encantadas” in the tradition of the literary sketch and by detailing the ways in which the genre itself allows Melville to assert narrative authority and his authorial identity through fragmentation rather than through the

2 For example, see Tanyol (2007) and Blum (2008). As Denise Tanyol notes, Melville had purchased the first US edition of the *Voyage* in 1847 (2007, 244).

3 For example, see Smith (2019) and Blum (2008).

kind of totalizing reach we find in the naturalist discourse of writers like Darwin, for example.

Melville's South Pacific Fiction

In the last two to three decades, such questions of power and discursive critique in Melville's South Pacific fiction have, for a large part, been addressed in the context of the scholarship on nationalism and imperialism in nineteenth-century US culture. Based on the work of Benedict Anderson, for example, scholars have analysed and pointed to the significance of maps in Melville's fictions: pictorial maps included in the publication as well as the literary maps drawn narratively, as part of the prose. Overall, such investigations have yielded ambivalent readings of Melville's work.

For example, both *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) included maps of the Marquesas Islands to authenticate Melville's narratives. As Christopher Phillips explains, "maps served as powerful rhetorical devices with which to at least partially circumvent the need for suspension of disbelief in [...] audiences; because the maps were there, the narratives could by implication be trusted as true" (2007, 128). Such maps as part of literary fictions also contributed to the readers' imperial imaginary. As Benedict Anderson has famously argued, as the world entered the age of mechanical reproduction, the map—just as the museum and the census—was also an instrument that the colonial state used to determine "the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry" (2006, 164). Literature, and travel writing in particular, fulfilled a similar function, as Mary Louise Pratt's study *Imperial Eyes* (1992) has shown. Pratt analyses the way in which rhetoric enabled colonization: how the discourse of travel and exploration, through the figure of the imperial "seeing man" (1992, 7)—explorer or travel writer—desires, objectifies, and possesses. In Melville's literary cartographies, as Juniper Ellis has called them, similar desires can be detected. Both *Typee* and *Omoo* begin with the ocean as a blank space waiting to be filled, for example. And these blank spaces ultimately point to preceding "act[s] of erasure": erasure of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous cartographies, for instance (Ellis 1997, 12). In the last degree, they become the setting for Melville's acts of self-authorization: the creation of his "identity as an eyewitness" (Ellis 1997, 15).

But such readings can be complicated. For example, Christopher Phillips points out that, while *Typee* and *Omoo* open with pictorial and literary maps, they also close with views of sailors lost and disoriented in what *Moby-Dick*

calls “the limitless, uncharted seas” (Melville [1851] 1983, 987). For Phillips, therefore, the function of the maps in Melville’s works is not so much to inscribe and to possess, but rather to expose maps as subjective, as limited, and therefore dangerous. Read in this light, Melville’s South Sea adventures stage the Pacific Ocean as a space of “epistemological opportunities and challenges” (Phillips 2007, 124). L. Katherine Smith comes to a similar conclusion in her recent discussion of cartography in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851) and the US Exploring Expedition in the South Pacific and Antarctica (1838–1842). Through its representation of whales and the whale hunt as metaphors of cartography, she argues, *Moby-Dick* “engages issues of cartographic representation [...] in order to erode trust in the implicit claims to accuracy ingrained in the charts and maps produced” (Smith 2019, 51). For Hester Blum, Melville’s problematization of practices of knowledge production at sea, whether mapping, charting, or accounting, are also central to “The Encantadas.” Building on the similarity between Darwin’s statistical table of the Galapagos Islands and Melville’s population table in “The Encantadas,” she argues that the two authors’ epistemological approach is nonetheless quite different: “Melville requires the reader first to recognize the artifice of such structures of understanding and then to participate actively in their formation” (2008, 147). Rather than mocking Darwin’s and other naturalists’ attempts at writing and mapping the world, Blum maintains, Melville democratizes the practice by engaging his readers and simultaneously teaches them to be wary of the accuracy of such practices (Blum 2008, 147).

“The Encantadas” and the Study of “Natural History”

From the start, the narrator of “The Encantadas” impresses upon his readers the difficulty of *knowing* the islands. They are famously hard to arrive at, he explains, on account of both winds and currents:

Nowhere is the wind so light, baffling, and every way unreliable, and so given to perplexing calms, as at the Encantadas. Nigh a month has been spent by a ship going from one isle to another, though but ninety miles between [...]. And yet, at other times, there is a mysterious indraft, which irresistibly draws a passing vessel among the isles, though not bound to them. (Melville [1854] 1998, 128)

Because each voyage to the islands therefore appears different, the narrator adds, Spanish sailors have called them enchanted: “[T]his apparent

fleetingness and unreality of the locality of the isles was most probably one reason for the Spaniards calling them the Encantadas, or Enchanted Group” (Melville [1854] 1998, 128). In this respect, moreover, the precarious epistemological status of the islands can be seen as part of the text’s larger representation of the sea as a space that destabilizes hegemonic categories of knowledge. As Hester Blum has observed, “modes of oceanic thought are themselves predicated on relations whose unfixed, ungraspable contours are ever in multi-dimensional flux” (2013, 151). In “The Encantadas” this is particularly apparent in how the text signifies upon and challenges dominant practices of knowing and writing nature.

In the third sketch, for example, the narrator introduces the reader to a solitary rock formation called Rock Rodondo that rises like “a high stone tower” from the seas (Melville [1854] 1998, 133). Like the rest of the archipelago, the epistemological status of the rock is uncertain because it partakes of both terrestrial and aquatic space. For instance, because it is covered in guano, sailors often mistake it for a ship’s sail from afar; and as for the birds that can be found on the rock, we are told that, “though Rodondo be terra-firma, no land-bird ever lighted on it” (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). Indeed, the narrator claims, Rock Rodondo is “the aviary of Ocean” (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). What is more, the rock’s ascending tiers or “shel[ves]” give it the appearance of a naturalist’s cabinet (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). The narrator exclaims that “I know not where one can better study the Natural History of strange sea-fowl than at Rodondo. It is the aviary of Ocean. Birds light here which never touched mast or tree; hermit-birds, which ever fly alone, cloud birds, familiar with unpierced zones of air” (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). In the passages that follow, the narrator describes the birds sitting on the ascending shelves of the rock formation in terms evocative of a naturalist’s taxonomy of animals, with each group of birds occupying a separate shelf.

Yet, even as it pretends to employ them, Melville’s sketch can be said to question the truth of naturalist categories. As Denise Tanyol has argued, once established, the taxonomy and in particular the hierarchy implied by the ascending tiers are undermined by the narrator’s descriptions and classifications, such as when the narrator describes the birds on each shelf, but spends comparatively more time on the *lower* tiers, with their “outlandish beings” and the “woebegone regiments” of grey pelicans; or when the narrator suddenly includes submarine life in his description of what he calls the Pacific’s aviary, thus mixing birds with fish, which is paradoxical from the point of view of a Western/Darwinian categorization of animals (Melville [1854] 1998, 135). In this way, Tanyol argues, Melville directly challenges the idea that naturalist taxonomies and their basis in Western ideas

about nature and non-human life can represent the world truthfully. She explains that “at a time when readers were captivated by the new hierarchies that Darwin and other naturalists so convincingly disclosed, Melville’s work wrests the Galapagos from the grasp of the naturalist, revealing that the marvels of the world are not to be easily mapped, counted, and classified” (2007, 245). As a result of this strategy, she concludes, Melville’s account “keeps the islands mystical, [... and] indeed unfit for human habitation” (2007, 279). In this way, she argues, he recovers them from naturalist and imperialist epistemologies, and insists that the islands (but also nature more generally) “are not to be easily mapped, counted, and classified” (2007, 245).

A closer look at Melville’s use of literary conventions suggests otherwise, however. Most obviously, there is his use of the desert island trope in “The Encantadas,” whose more prominent iteration is the tropical island paradise, but which also comes in a more mysterious version. Scholars have often noted how undesirable the archipelago is depicted in Melville’s text and thus how apparently different from the trope of the tropical island paradise. The islands are described as “looking much as the world at large might, after a penal conflagration”: solitary, desolate, barren, and unchanging are dominant features of the Encantadas in Melville’s text (Melville [1854] 1998, 126). However, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey explains, this dystopian island is simply the flipside of the tropical island:

[S]ince paradisiacal islands do not always provide the kind of excitement needed for plot-driven adventure narratives, other island texts migrate towards the aspects of epistemological inscrutability suggested in titles that employ terms like “mystery,” “wild,” “secret,” “vanishing,” “uncharted,” “lost,” and “floating.” (DeLoughrey 2004, 23)

Nor does the narrator’s initial insistence that the archipelago is remote and inaccessible bear out. Throughout, the text presents the archipelago as a hub in a trans-Pacific network. For example, it served as refuge for buccaneers in the seventeenth century, its waters were a highly frequented hunting ground for whaling ships and more generally, the islands served as place where ships could stock up on provisions. In fact, the islands possess a (however rudimentary) infrastructure: a cemetery and “post-offices [which ...] consist of a stake and a bottle” (Melville [1854] 1998, 172). Finally, almost half of the sketches tell the stories of those who travelled to and, for some time, lived on the island, from a failed settlement on Charles’ Isle to a female castaway on Norfolk Isle. Hence, it is more accurate to say that the text establishes the islands as simultaneously remote and accessible. This tension is, once again, a staple of the desert island genre, as DeLoughrey

notes. In such narratives, “[t]he islands and inhabitants are paradoxically positioned as ‘contained’ and ‘isolated,’ yet this belies the consistent visitation by colonials, shipwreck, anthropology, and tourism—in fact, the narrative of island isolation depends upon these visitors” (2004, 26).

While Melville’s text presents attempts to know the islands through mapping, charting, or accounting as problematic and therefore an object of necessary readerly caution, knowing the islands through literary conventions and tropes is presented as much more unproblematic. In fact, Melville’s use of the literary conventions of the desert island trope warrants a closer look at his purported revisionism of taxonomies, his challenge to a totalizing naturalist and by implication imperialist knowledge of the world. Focusing on what he himself has called “the poetry of salt water,” the next two sections argue that the fragmentary style of “The Encantadas” serves to return to the literature of the Pacific Ocean some of the charm and enchantment that Melville had found wanting in the “matter-of-fact accounts” of travellers and explorers, as well as to affirm the authority of literary discourse. To this end, Melville turns to the affordances of the literary sketch, which was a popular literary form in Melville’s time, but which has received surprisingly little attention by modern-day scholars.

“The Encantadas” and the Tradition of the Literary Sketch

The popularity of the literary sketch in the United States is often said to begin with Washington Irving’s *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, a collection of essays, tales, and sketches published from 1819 to 1820. According to Graham Thompson, Irving’s *Sketch Book* provided a “blueprint” that many writers would follow, including “the figure of the educated, gentlemanly narrator, or the bachelor given to quiet disquisitions” (2018, 59). But blueprints invite creative redesigns, and the scene of authors writing literary sketches as well as their stylistic choices diversifies in the decades after Irving. In 1824, the British writer Mary Russel Mitford published *Our Village*, a collection of sketches based on her life in a village in Berkshire that was a popular success in the United States as well. Other authors followed suit: in 1829, for example, Sarah Josepha Hale published *Sketches of American Character*, and in the 1830s and 1840s, literary sketches became a staple of the market with publications such as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes, Characters, Incidents, Etc.* (1835), Eliza Leslie’s *Pencil Sketches; or Outlines of Characters* (1833), and Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s *Tales and Sketches* (1833), to name just a few (cf. Hamilton 1998, 2).

Twentieth-century critics have tended to subordinate the emergence and development of the literary sketch to a variety of cultural developments. For instance, some scholars associate the sketch primarily with the period's picturesque aesthetic, in particular with regard to the genre of travel writing, while others have identified it as "the medium for early realism" (Hamilton 1998, 5). Yet other scholars have focused on the form's use by specific groups, including, but not limited to, the white male middle-class New Yorkers following in Irving's footsteps, New England Renaissance writers, and rural women writers. By contrast, Kristie Hamilton, author of the only book-length study of the genre to date, has argued that the diversity and ubiquity of the sketch in the first half of the century suggests that the genre offered specific affordances⁴ that attracted these groups and the audiences for which they wrote (1998, 5).

Those formal affordances include, for instance, the sketch's "closer relationship to *space* than time" (Fash 2016, 170). Sketches often focus on a particular place which they portray in great detail—whether urban or rural, national or regional. This emphasis on space rather than time also means that they are often only loosely plotted or even plotless, since the unfolding of narrative would require a temporal dimension. Moreover, the narrative voice of literary sketches often assumes a personal, subjective, even intimate stance, that suggests that the sketch is rooted in experience and legitimizes the narrator's claim to what Kristie Hamilton has described as a form of "documentary authority" (1998, 149).

Of course, both qualities—its emphasis on space as well as its claim to documentary authority—made the literary sketch a popular genre for travel writing. But for Kristie Hamilton, it is not just the needs of travel writing per se that made the sketch so successful, but the impact of modernization, in particular technological and social change, which it served to capture and make more manageable for its audience. According to Hamilton, the literary sketch presented the period's "preeminent genre of the ephemeral," the genre that best afforded literary representation of a world under the conditions of modernization, because of its "aesthetic of fragmentation": "By making discontinuity a literary convention, sketch writers diminished the shock of the perception of constant change" (Hamilton 1998, 135). Rather than seeking to unify experience into a whole, the literary sketch's generic

4 I follow Caroline Levine's work on aesthetic form in this regard. Borrowing the concept of *affordance* from design theory, where it is "used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs," she introduces it to the study of literary aesthetics: "rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements" (2017, 6–7).

insistence and thus legitimation of discontinuity helped render the phenomena of modernization more familiar for its readers.

A closer look at “The Encantadas” suggests that Melville drew on this tradition of the literary sketch and tested its limits. To give an example of how he conformed to the generic conventions, “The Encantadas” is the only one of his magazine pieces that was published under a pseudonym: Salvator R. Tarnmoor. Such colourful aliases were characteristic for sketches and can be found, for example, in Washington Irving’s work, whose alter ego has the telling name of Geoffrey Crayon; but also in the work of British writers such as Charles Dickens and William Thackeray. Melville also tested the limits of the genre, going beyond what was established convention. As Graham Thompson points out, Melville wrote “The Encantadas” at the same time as his other sketches, all of which were diptychs: “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” as well as “The Two Temples” (cf. Thompson 2018, 72). The diptych structure allowed Melville to employ strong contrasts, such as the comfortable lives of lawyers in London as opposed to the hardships suffered by women working in a rural New England paper mill. In “The Encantadas,” Melville went beyond such simple dichotomies by designing “a multi-part sketch,” a sequence of no less than ten sketches. This multiplication of the form’s generic investment in discontinuity already tells us something about the special significance of the aesthetic of fragmentation in “The Encantadas.”

Yet, in their generous reading of the text, scholars who focus only on how Melville’s use of the aesthetics of fragmentation undermines colonialist and naturalist practices of knowledge production tend to overlook the extent to which it also renders the authority of the narrator vis-à-vis his readers more powerful. The aesthetic of fragmentation and the affordances that come with it allow Melville to craft an author-narrator persona that is in control over the islands as well as over the readers. It is, in fact, the form of the sketch that provides Melville with the ideal framework to craft the “poetry of salt water” in which he had found other accounts of sea travel wanting, and, in the process, successfully claim them for the American imaginary of the South Pacific.

The “Poetry of Salt Water”

To this end, almost everything in “The Encantadas” offsets the importance of the narrator’s experience, his personal knowledge of the islands, and his intimate account of his visits. This imbalance of knowledge between

readers and narrators is a key characteristic of the sketch, which values what Hamilton describes as “documentary authority,” and in “The Encantadas” this generic feature is already inscribed in the pseudonym that Melville chose for the text.⁵ For example, Hershel Parker claims that the name Salvator R. Tarnmoor is “simultaneously reminding readers of Salvator Rosa’s wild Calabrian scenes and Poe’s gothic tarns and woodlands” (quoted in Tanyol 2007, 256). But as Graham Thompson has pointed out, the pseudonym is also a pun on words that once more highlights the experience of the narrator. Because we can read the pseudonym as “a tar nor more,” which is to say that the narrator is an experienced sailor, albeit one who no longer goes to sea (Thompson 2018, 76). “Tar” is a reference to Jack Tar, a name that was popularly used to refer to a sailor of the British Merchant or Royal Navy. In other words, this Tarnmoor is an experienced sailor.

Tarnmoor’s expertise is soon displayed when, in the Rock Rodondo sketch, he explains to the reader what it takes to ascend to the summit of the rock.

If you seek to ascend Rock Rodondo, take the following prescription. Go three voyages round the world as a main-royal-man of the tallest frigate that floats; then serve a year or two apprenticeship to the guides who conduct strangers up the Peak of Teneriffe; and as many more, respectively, to a rope-dancer, an Indian Juggler, and a chamois. This done, come and be rewarded by the view from our tower. (Melville [1854] 1998, 137)

This is an exceptional list of qualifications that most readers of *Putnam’s Magazine* would be hard pressed to gain, and it serves to underscore the narrator’s expertise and the reader’s luck in being able to follow him up this rock, even if only imaginatively. Read in a more democratic spirit, of course, the imagination makes all the difference. For Hester Blum, the reader’s work begins once he or she has followed the narrator to the top, “incarnating a new proprioceptive vision” that ultimately reimagines and revises “received knowledge” about the islands (Blum 2008, 156, 154). Yet the imbalance between the narrator’s/author’s knowledge and the reader’s remains and is in fact central to the creation of the narrative persona.

5 In *Putnam’s*, texts were generally published without the author’s name. Hence, the fact that Melville actually insisted on providing a pseudonym is evidence of his knowledge of the literary sketch conventions. In *The Piazza Tales*, he published the piece without the pseudonym.

In this respect, it is important to remember that this scene once more follows closely established literary conventions. To climb the rock all the way to the top, the narrator assures the reader, is “the very best mode of gaining a comprehensive view of the region round about” (Melville [1854] 1998, 133). But similar to the views of blank seascapes that open Melville’s South Pacific novels, upon reaching the summit, the narrator informs the reader that there is nothing to see—or rather, that the reader will see nothing at first. “Look edgeways, as it were [...] to the south. You see nothing; but permit me to point out the direction, if not the place, of certain interesting objects in the vast sea, which kissing this tower’s base, we behold unscrolling itself towards the Antarctic Pole” (Melville [1854] 1998, 137). What’s there to be seen—“certain interesting objects in the vast sea,” such as islands and shores in the distance—cannot be seen but through the mediation of the narrator. Only the narrator can see and make visible to the reader what remains otherwise obscure and invisible. The “unscrolling” ocean thereby serves as the blank piece of paper on which the author/narrator can set down his vision of the world.

In its sketch-form, the text itself makes manifest this authorial position. As noted earlier, “The Encantadas” is a multi-part sketch and consists almost equally of sketches that concern general aspects of the islands and those that concern only specific islands. As the narrator explains at the end of the fourth sketch, “[s]till south of James’s Isle lie Jervis Isle, Duncan Isle, and various lesser isles, for the most part an archipelago of aridities, without inhabitant, history, or hope of either in all time to come. But not far from these are rather notable isles—Barrington, Charles’s, Norfolk, and Hood’s” (Melville [1854] 1998, 142). Their notability derives from the fact that they were inhabited at some point: Barrington Isle was a refuge for buccaneers, Charles Isle home to brief republican experiment, while castaways lived on Norfolk and Hood’s Isle. Focusing on those islands, Melville stretches the generic limits of the sketch as he prioritizes plot over place. He tells stories of individual islands and their inhabitants rather than exploring what he calls the “archipelago of aridities,” which drops out of sight.

Most importantly, the narrator ultimately also masters the islands’ mutability and their location-shifting enchantedness. While he describes previous captains’ and buccaneers’ difficulties at mapping and naming the islands permanently, the narrator of “The Encantadas” casually succeeds in providing a map for his readers. And even though it is a little unorthodox, even this minimalist map serves to assert the author-narrator’s superior epistemological position. The islands Narborough and Albemarle, he tells the reader, “are neighbors after a quite curious fashion. A familiar

diagram will illustrate this strange neighborhood: “Cut a channel at the above letter joint, and the middle transverse limb is Narborough, and all the rest is Albemarle. Volcanic Narborough lies in the black jaws of Albemarle like a wolf’s red tongue in his open mouth” (Melville [1854] 1998, 140). The letter E (but turned by 180 degrees) and the simile of the wolf’s tongue serve to establish the islands’ position vis-à-vis each other for the reader—they represent and locate the islands more adequately than conventional maps. Literary discourse, the narrator suggests, can achieve what factual writing—whether travel accounts or natural histories—cannot.

The authority of experience thus repeatedly affirmed, the narrator is in control of both making the islands strange and making the islands familiar to the reader. While critics like Tanyol are right when they observe that Melville succeeds in *removing* the islands from the grasp of naturalist as well as imperialist epistemologies by making them strange, they do not account for the elements in the story in which the narrator exerts his literary skill to make them *less* strange. An important example for this familiarizing strategy that also undercuts the islands’ physical remoteness is the very first paragraph of “The Encantadas,” which begins like this: “Take five-and twenty heaps of cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot; imagine some of them magnified into mountains, and the vacant lot the sea; and you will have a fit idea of the general aspect of the Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles” (Melville [1854] 1998, 126). Here as on other occasions, the narrative bridges the gap between the familiar world of the reader and the unfamiliar world of the Pacific Ocean; and here as on other occasions it is precisely the narrator’s experience in both worlds and his command of a highly figurative language that achieve this goal.⁶

Conclusion

Rather than praising Melville for his revisionist approach to the naturalist discourse, we should investigate the aesthetic forms more closely that support his alternative taxonomies. While Melville’s text is not inspired by the desire for totalizing knowledge that characterizes naturalists’ texts and while it can be seen as challenging precisely this totalizing reach, I would argue that there is nonetheless a desire at work in the text. While the

6 As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes, the island’s remoteness is actually predicated on the city: “the construction of the remote island is contingent upon the metropolitan centre that employs it” (2004, 301).

accounts of Darwin and other naturalists were shaped by a *libido sciendi*, the investment into the rules of the academic field and a drive for knowledge, the kind of investment that shapes Melville's text is that of the fiction writer, a *libido scribendi* we could say. This *libido* is what ties Melville to the literary field of his day and age, in which he saw himself and his literary fictions competing with the factual narratives of writers like J. Ross Browne.⁷ The text and how it presents its oceanic and archipelagic objects bears the marks of this libido, most distinctly in its creation of a narrative authority that challenges naturalists' narratives. It is to this end that Melville turns to the genre of the literary sketch and its affordances: its prioritization of place over time, its prioritization of experience over scholarship, and, most important of all, its aesthetic of fragmentation.

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7 See Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and libido as, for example, in *Pascalian Meditations* (1997, 11).

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