

Abstract [Ocean](#)

In a few decades the ocean-going ship took over from the desert caravan and became the principal vector for global commerce, exploration, and venturing into the unknown. Designing new nautical models and sailing technologies was essential to the imperial ambitions of Western nations. This design-centred mentality carried over to the planning of whole new towns in the Americas, leading to the idea that also state governments could be engineered to improve civil society. Correspondingly, in the early 16th century two new literary genres arose to capture the extremes of this ship/town semantic continuum: utopia and the popular *naufragium* or shipwreck story. Both genres sprang simultaneously from early ocean-spanning travel reports and dramatised the triumphs and failures of imperial planning – utopia on land and shipwreck at sea. From time immemorial, land and ocean were considered antithetical spaces. As an Italian proverb puts it, ‘Chi è in mare naviga, chi è in terra radica’ (Those at sea go sailing, while those on land put down roots). Indeed, the land has conventionally stood for constructive values such as homelands, sites of memory, the rewards of agriculture, the benefits of civilization, and the triumphs of urban dwelling. At sea, none of these factors hold. Planning the outcome of a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was a matter for astronomers and soothsayers. But whether we consider this storied rivalry literally or metaphorically, land and ocean continue to express a perduring tension between two cardinal elements.

[Ocean](#)

In pochi decenni la nave oceanica ha preso il posto della carovana del deserto ed è diventata il vettore principale per il commercio globale, l'esplorazione e l'avventura nell'ignoto. Progettare nuovi modelli nautici e tecnologie di navigazione era essenziale per le ambizioni imperiali delle nazioni occidentali. Questa mentalità incentrata sul progetto si è estesa alla pianificazione di intere nuove città nelle Americhe, portando all'idea che anche i governi statali potessero essere progettati per migliorare la società civile. Di conseguenza, all'inizio del XVI secolo due nuovi generi letterari sono sorti per catturare gli estremi di questo continuum semantico nave/città: l'utopia e il *naufragio* popolare. Entrambi i generi sono scaturiti contemporaneamente dai primi resoconti di viaggio che attraversano l'oceano e hanno drammatizzato i trionfi e i fallimenti della pianificazione imperiale, l'utopia a terra e il naufragio in mare. Terra e oceano sono considerati spazi antitetici da tempo immemore: come riporta un proverbio italiano, “Chi è in mare naviga, chi è in terra radica”. In effetti, la terra ha convenzionalmente rappresentato valori costruttivi come la patria, i luoghi della memoria, le ricompense dell'agricoltura, i benefici della civiltà e i trionfi dell'abitare urbano. In mare, nessuno di questi fattori è valido. Pianificare l'esito di un viaggio attraverso l'Oceano Atlantico era una questione per astronomi e indovini. Ma che si consideri questa storica rivalità in senso letterale o metaforico, la terra e l'oceano continuano a esprimere una tensione duratura tra due elementi fondamentali.

VESPER No. 5

MOBY DICK: AVVENTURE E SCOPERTE | ADVENTURES AND DISCOVERIES

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VESPER No. 5

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MOBY DICK:
ADVENTURES AND
DISCOVERIES

MOBY DICK:
AVVENTURE E
SCOPERTE



Vesper è una rivista scientifica semestrale, multidisciplinare e bilingue, si occupa delle relazioni tra forme e processi del progetto e del pensiero. Ponendo lo sguardo al crepuscolo, quando la luce si confonde con il buio e l'oggetto illuminante non è più visibile, *Vesper* intende leggere l'atto progettuale seguendo e rendendo evidente il moto della trasformazione. Pitagora identificò nel pianeta Venere sia la stella della sera (*Hesperos*) che quella del mattino (*Phosphoros*), i due nomi si riferiscono allo stesso astro ma posto in condizioni temporali differenti. *Vesper* dichiara quindi una posizione più che un oggetto e privilegia il situarsi che ne profila lo statuto. Non è qui accesa la luce tagliente dell'alba, che promette giorni completamente nuovi e alti sol dell'avvenire, ma quella che fa intravedere nella penombra una possibilità nell'esistente.

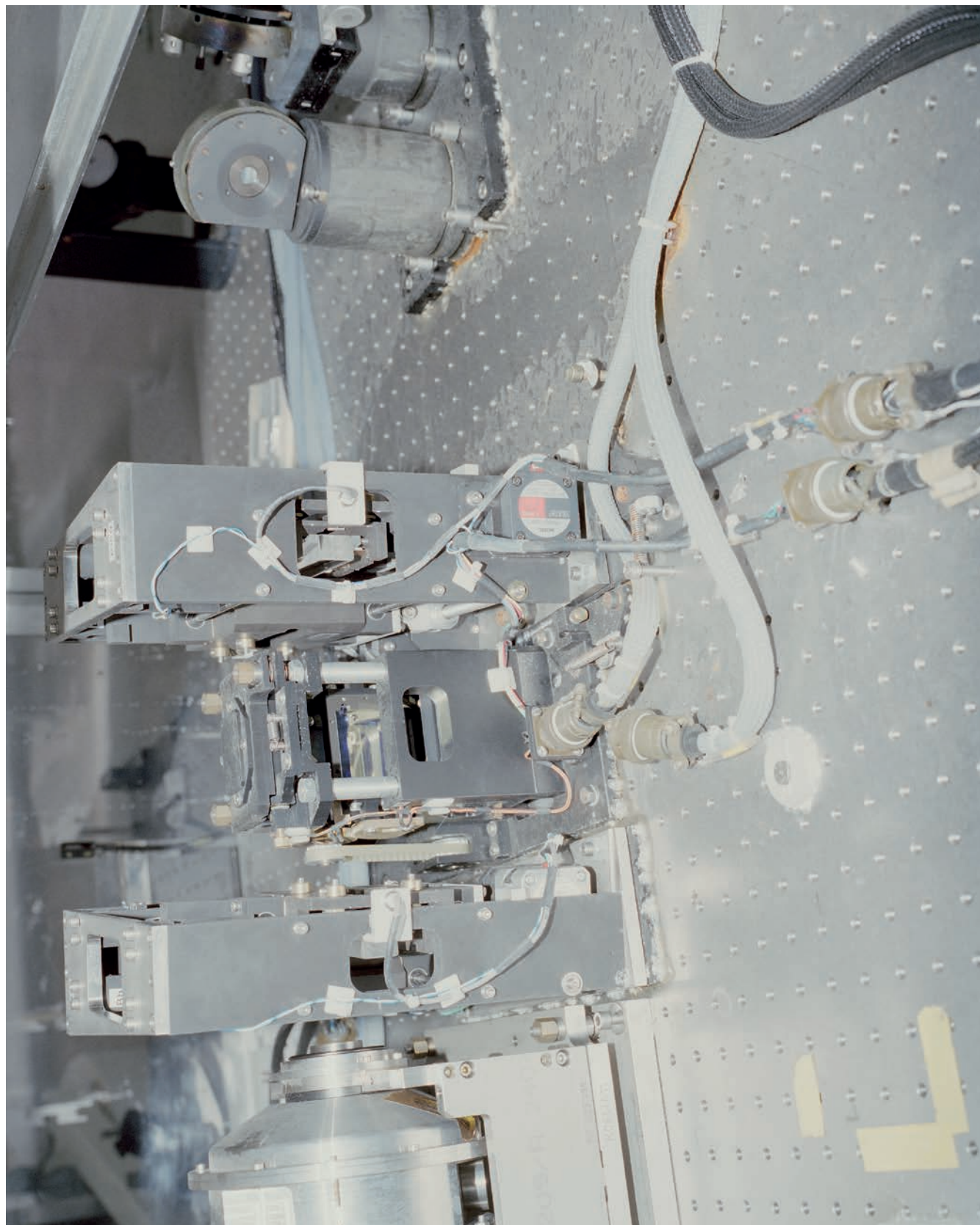
Richiamando e rinnovando la tradizione delle riviste cartacee italiane, *Vesper* ospita un paesaggio articolato di modalità narrative, accoglie forme di scrittura e stili differenti, privilegia l'intelligenza visiva del progetto, dell'espressione grafica, dell'immagine e delle contaminazioni tra linguaggi. La rivista è pensata nella sua successione di numeri tematici come discorso sulla contemporaneità, nello spazio di ogni singolo numero è articolata in un insieme di rubriche che gettano luci differenti sul tema. Nel procedere delle diverse sezioni – editoriale, citazione, progetto, racconto, lezione, saggio, inserto, traduzione, archivio, viaggio, ring, tutorial, dizionario – mutano i riverberi tra idee e realtà, si accende l'intreccio tra evidenze concrete e loro potenzialità, potenziali trasformativi, immaginari. Le rubriche sono pensate non per aggiornare istantaneamente ma per indagare condizioni progettuali e per fornire strumenti e materiali dall'*ombra lunga*.

Vesper is a six-monthly, multidisciplinary and bilingual scientific journal which deals with the relationships between forms and processes of thought and of design. Gazing into the dusk, when light slowly merges with darkness and the illuminating object is no longer visible, *Vesper* aims to interpret the act of designing through tracing and revealing the movement of transformation. Pythagoras identified in the planet Venus both the evening star (*Hesperos*) and the morning star (*Phosphoros*), assigning the two names to the same star observed in different temporal conditions. *Vesper* thus states a perspective rather than an object, privileging the condition that defines its status. Rather than the sharp light of dawn, heralding a brand-new day and promising a brighter future, it is the twilight that allows you to have a glimpse at the potential of what is already there.

Following the tradition of Italian paper journals, *Vesper* revives it by hosting a wide spectrum of narratives, welcoming different writings and styles, privileging the visual intelligence of design, of graphic expression, of images and contaminations between different languages. The journal is conceived as a series of thematic issues that build a discourse on the contemporary. Each issue is divided into sections that offer a range of diverse perspectives on the theme analysed: editorial, quote, project, tale, lecture, essay, extra, translation, archive, journey, ring, tutorial, dictionary. Throughout the different sections, reverberations between ideas and reality change, connections emerge between tangible facts and their potentials, transformative prospects, collective perception. The principal aim of these sections is not to provide instant news, but to offer an in-depth investigation of different instances of design and to provide tools and materials that have a long-lasting effect.

VESPER No. 5

MOBY DICK: AVVENTURE E SCOPERTE



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Moby Dick: Adventures and Discoveries

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Forma e modo d’espressione di questa rubrica sono a discrezione dell’autore. | The section consists in the original contribution of an author.

Manuale d’uso per l’esecuzione di pratiche e/o operazioni. | Instructions to carry out practices and/or operations.

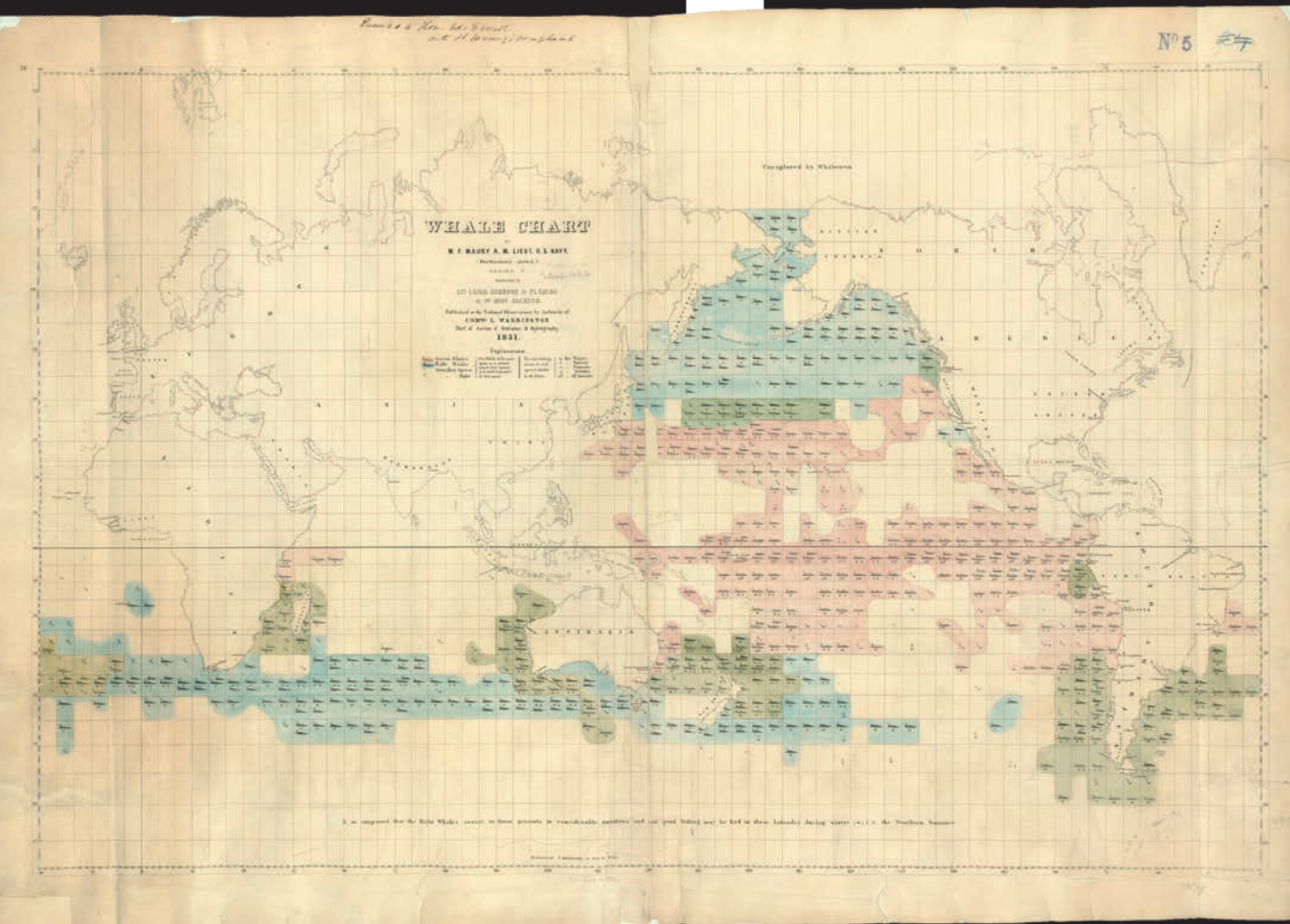
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Definizioni critiche di tre lemmi in italiano e tre lemmi in inglese contribuiscono alla precisazione del tema. Il dizionario prosegue con l’evolvere di “Vesper”, si compone in itinere. | Critical definitions of three headwords in Italian and three headwords in English that contribute to point out the issue’s topic. The definitions through the issues of “Vesper” will compose an ongoing dictionary.

ocean (ō'shən) noun | 1. from the Greek *ōkeanos*, a great river believed to encompass the earth. | 2. the whole body of salt water that covers nearly three fourths of the surface of the globe. | 3. one of the large bodies of water into which the great ocean is regarded as divided (the Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, Arctic, and Antarctic). | 4. an immense expanse, an apparently unlimited space or quantity. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, G.&C. Merriam, Springfield Il. 1966.



Matthew Fontaine Maury, *Whale Chart*, Washington D.C., U.S. Navy, National Observatory, 1851. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Easily the most important 15th century world map combining the land-centered vision of the world (the medieval T-O map), Ptolemaic geography, and the emerging early modern sense of a blue-water connection between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans is Fra Mauro's World Map (circa 1447-1450), now in Venice's Marciana Library. While this map visually depicts the known ecumene surrounded by the formidable river *Okeanos*, that confining ring of water has now become a sea lane dotted everywhere with merchant ships apparently capable of sailing around the world (Boelhower 2018, pp. 286-94). For Fra Mauro, the Atlantic Ocean was no longer an unbreachable barrier but a bridge that led around the southern tip of Africa to India and China. The map signaled an emerging paradigm shift from a telluric to an oceanic vision of the world.

In a few crucial decades the ocean-going ship took over from the desert caravan and became the principal vector for global commerce, exploration, and venturing into the unknown. Designing new nautical models and sailing technologies was essential to Western nations' imperial ambitions. This design-centered mentality carried over to planning whole new towns in the Americas, leading to the idea that also state governments could be engineered to improve civil society. Correspondingly, in the early 16th century two new literary genres arose to capture the extremes of this ship/town semantic continuum: the utopia (Thomas More's, Francis Bacon's, Henry Neville's) and the popular *naufragium* or shipwreck story (Boelhower 2019, pp. 27-33).

Both genres sprang simultaneously from early ocean-spanning travel reports and dramatized the triumphs and failures of imperial planning, the utopia on land and the shipwreck at sea. From time immemorial, land and ocean were considered antithetical spaces. As an Italian proverb puts it, 'Chi è in mare navica, chi è in terra radica' (Those at sea go sailing, while those on land put down roots). Indeed, the land conventionally has stood for constructive values such as homelands, sites of memory, the rewards of agriculture, the benefits of civilization, and the triumphs of urban dwelling. At sea, none of these factors hold. Planning the outcome of a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was a matter for astronomers and soothsayers. But whether we consider this storied rivalry literally or metaphorically, land and ocean continue to express a perduring tension between two cardinal elements. Hit by hurricane weather while sailing in the Caribbean, Columbus declared in his letter of July 7, 1503, that the waves were so high 'it seemed like the end of the world' (Columbus 1989, p. 117). Commenting on the sheer power of waves, Leonardo da Vinci noted, 'No human shelter can withstand [water's] fury' (da Vinci 1991, p. 80). As the ocean quickly became the normative condition of early modern life, the signifying figure of the wave came to stand for both a maximal and a minimal sign, culminating in Hokusai's iconic *The Wave off Kanagawa* (1830).

Stunned by the drowning cries of sailors in the opening scene of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, Prospero's daughter, Miranda, pleads, 'Had I been any god of power, I would have sunk the sea within the earth' (Shakespeare 1971, I.ii.10-11, p. 6). Already with Columbus – and later with Melville's Ahab – the ocean represented an ontological condition as much as an intercivilisational bridge. In the first decades of the modern epoch Europe's appropriation of the ocean had turned it into a flow chart of sea routes. Seeking to grab political power in Italy, Antonio says to his co-conspirator Sebastian in *The Tempest*, 'I'll teach you how to flow' (*ibid.*, II.i.218, p. 33). Once the new capitalist world-system was in place, the ocean became an energy field that redefined space as movement.

Melville's Ahab had turned his cabin on the *Pequod* into an archive of whalers' log books. At night he would study them, hoping to cull a master chart of the white whale's feeding grounds. Citing the efforts of a certain Lieutenant Maury, of the National Observatory in Washington, D.C., Ishmael comments, 'On this hint, attempts have been made to construct elaborate migratory charts of the sperm whale' (Melville 1967, p. 172). Maury's *Whale Chart* was published in 1851, the same year Melville published his novel. The entire plot of *Moby Dick* is based on Ahab's monomaniacal quest to find the white whale. Ishmael says of Ahab's mapping efforts, 'after poring over his charts till long after midnight [...] Ahab would mutter to himself, [...] have I not tallied the whale?' (*ibid.*, p. 174).

In the end it is Leviathan that tallies Ahab. Melville's tale (from the Old Saxon *tala*, meaning number) – both the French *conte* and the Italian *racconto* derive from the Latin *computare*, to count – recounts Ahab's failure to map or capture the white whale. On the final day of the chase Ahab broods, 'Will I have eyes at the bottom of the sea, supposing I descend those endless stairs?' (*ibid.*, p. 462). In counterpoint, Ishmael, the *Pequod*'s lone survivor, admonishes, 'Oh, man! Admire and model thyself after the whale' (*ibid.*, p. 261) which, he notes later, has an unsourced existence. In effect, *Moby Dick* cannot be held accountable. Ahab's (and Ishmael's) frequent voicing of the plosive particle 'O' unwittingly evokes the T-O map's ocean ring separating the known from the unknown, sense

from non-sense, number from infinity, and order from chaos. But as Fra Mauro's world map precociously reveals, that threshold is now moot. After Magellan's circumnavigation of the world, the globe *de facto* became not planet Earth but planet Ocean.

Ahab's off-spoken grievous 'O', not only a linguistic particle but also an elementary cartographic and arithmetic figure, expresses language's and life's failure to either mean or tally. This expletive or discursive filler moves easily across cultures, defying semantic capture. It is intimately connected to the body and is often used to express the poet Wallace Stevens's 'beyond the last thought' (Stevens 1997, p. 476). Above all, it voices Ahab's failed Promethean quest and Ishmael's liquifaction of novelistic form in a display of cinematic semiosis. Also, it sums up Columbus's failed attempt to master the world as *globus* (the cartographic O). According to Melville's allegorizing hero, the only way to tame the Ocean was to track down and kill Leviathan. But Ishmael knew better. On duty in the mast-head, he reworks Byron to declare, 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll! / Ten thousand blubber-hunters sweep over thee in vain' (Melville 1967, p. 139). Contrary to the captain of the *Pequod*, Ishmael understood that 'we live in a flooded world' (*ibid.*, p. 410).

Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The City in the Sea*, about the fate of Western modernity, pivots on the perennial tension between utopia and shipwreck. Due to unknown weather conditions, the city is suddenly submerged. There is a moment of suspension, then a stir, and then the city sinks into the sea, 'Far down within the dim West' (Poe 1993, p. 525). The poem does not care to translate crisis into concept. Instead, it focuses on accident and the end of the West as a staging ground for utopia. As Walter Benjamin famously noted, 'Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad' (Benjamin 1973, pp. 264-265). Utopia and shipwreck, land and ocean, circulation and arrest, and the West's many cities in the sea: all are invested with tensions. Taking note, Ishmael would add, 'there is an aesthetics in all things' (Melville 1967, p. 238).

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Moby Dick: Adventures and Discoveries
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