



**As Light as a Whale: Roberto Abbiati's *Una tazza di mare in tempesta* and
the Presence of *Moby-Dick* in Contemporary Italian Arts**

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Abstract

Ever since Cesare Pavese's pioneering 1932 translation of *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*, Italy has proven particularly receptive to Herman Melville's masterpiece, which has not only been enthusiastically loved by generations of readers and stimulated the interest and acumen of local Americanists but has also inspired an extensive number of Italian writers and artists. The first part of this article sketches a provisional map of some of the most recent examples of *Moby-Dick*'s reception in the Italian arts. These range from Simona Mulazzani's dreamy etchings of tattooed whales and Giovanni Robustelli's delicate watercolours to Sara Filippi Plotegher's environmentally-inspired illustrations and designer Matteo Ugolini's *Moby-Dick* lamps. These works shed light on some of the meanings typically associated with Melville's work and how they have changed over the last two decades. In particular, I intend to show how the understanding of Melville's work has recently shifted from the somber and grave tone of early twentieth-century interpretations and rewritings – when it was all about tragedy, darkness, sacrifice, and folly – to the lighter tone of more recent admirers. Building on this shift, this essay investigates one of the most successful recent transmedial adaptations of *Moby-Dick*: Roberto Abbiati's play *Una tazza di mare in tempesta* (*A Sea Storm in a Teacup*). This adaptation distils *Moby-Dick* into a seventeen-minute show performed for a very small audience within a wooden box that simulates the hold of a tiny ship. In fact, Abbiati manages to evoke the whole drama by using figurines and found objects, as well as by selecting key passages from the novel with scalpel-like precision. Abbiati has also published a beautiful and singular graphic novel adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, summarizing each chapter of the book with only one drawing. Abbiati's works are evidence of the enduring vitality of Melville's presence in contemporary Italian art and offer the opportunity to appreciate the lighter dimensions of *Moby-Dick*.

Keywords: Herman Melville; *Moby-Dick*; Adaptation; Roberto Abbiati; Lightness

Introduction

Ever since Cesare Pavese's pioneering 1932 translation of *Moby-Dick*, Italy has proven particularly receptive to Herman Melville's masterpiece, which has not only been enthusiastically loved by generations of readers and stimulated the interest and acumen of local Americanists, but has also inspired an extensive number of Italian writers and artists. "White Whales," as Giorgio Mariani puts it, are "not an endangered species in the ocean of high and popular Italian culture" (Mariani 2013, p. 90), nor in the multifaceted world of Italian visual arts. Even though each artist's response to a gigantic, multilayered and complex work such as *Moby-Dick* is always inevitably personal and idiosyncratic, I suggest that it is possible to identify a common feature that connects many of the works inspired by Melville's masterpiece in recent decades. Such works tend to approach *Moby-Dick* with a certain peculiar lightness of touch, revealing a preference for an ironic take on the novel. This proves to be particularly interesting as it stands in stark contrast to older interpretations. This paper offers an overview of some of the most recent examples of the refashioning of *Moby-Dick* in twentieth-century Italian arts in order to then focus on a series of different adaptations created by the multitalented artist Roberto Abbiati. On top of the intrinsic quality of Abbiati's work, the possibility to analyze the artist's longstanding commitment to Melville's novel as it has developed through different media serves as a unique and particularly rewarding case study in which the general tendency of the recent Italian reception of Melville's novel comes out most clearly.

The Lighter Side of *Moby-Dick* in Mulazzani, Fortunato and Robustelli

Throughout the twentieth century, Italian readers and interpreters of *Moby-Dick* have proven particularly receptive to those aspects of Melville's work that are related to tragedy, darkness, sacrifice, and folly or, more generally, to metaphysically charged and extremely "heavy" notions. Cesare Pavese serves as a good example here, as he set the trend for *Moby-Dick*'s reception in Italy. In his approach to Melville's masterpiece, Pavese was particularly fascinated with the idea of Melville as a "primitive" and "barbaric" genius (Pavese, 1968, p. 74) who had managed to revive a premodern mythical worldview. In *Moby-Dick* he found the expression of that same intuition of the world and life that had motivated the creation of the great figures of ancient Greek mythology to the point of claiming "that Melville is truly a Greek" (Pavese, 1968, p. 74; all translations are mine). At the same time, though, Pavese appreciated the way in which the ability to go back to the sources of spiritual life and to drink at the fountain of myths, as a way of confronting the barbaric side of life, is in no way done with a decadent attitude, but rather the opposite. He admired what he saw as Melville's attitude of virile firmness matured through a genuine confrontation with life, as opposed to the decadent and emasculated nativism of "Rimbaud, Gauguin, Stevenson" (Pavese, 1968, p. 77).

Philosophical profundity, mythical intensity, and virile authenticity characterize Cesare Pavese's "heavy" – but nonetheless extraordinarily rich and fruitful – interpretation of *Moby-Dick*. By contrast, recent takes on the novel seem to be more in line with that view of lightness as a positive value for which Italo Calvino advocated in his posthumously published *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. In the first of his unfinished Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, written just before his death in 1985, the great Italian postmodern writer recommended the ability to "uphold the value of lightness" (Calvino, 1988, p. 3) against weight as one of the key principles – the others are Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, and Multiplicity – for the literature of the future. Incidentally, the sixth and last lecture, the one Calvino never got to write, would have been dedicated to Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Calvino's lightness is not to be understood as escapist, superficial, or frivolous. On the contrary, Calvino intends to promote a "thoughtful lightness [that] can make frivolity seem dull and heavy" (Calvino, 1988, p. 10).

And he finds this embodied in the gesture, as narrated in one of the stories of the *Decameron* dedicated to Cavalcanti, of “the poet-philosopher who raises himself over the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he possesses the secret of lightness”

(Calvino, 1988, p. 12). This same sublimation of weight into lightness seems to have been attempted by several recent Italian artists who see in *Moby-Dick* and its whale protagonist the opposite of the quintessence of weight.

Possibly the clearest example from this point of view is Simona Mulazzani. The artist, based in the Italian town Pesaro, has an extensive and successful career as illustrator of children's books, and is most popular among the Italian public thanks to her illustrations of the Italian edition of Luis Sepúlveda's *Historia de una gaviota y del gato que le enseñó a volar*. She has also illustrated the Italian edition of Sepúlveda's *Moby-Dick*-inspired children's book *Historia de una ballena blanca (Storia di una balena bianca raccontata da lei stessa)*, but her commitment to Melville's novel runs even deeper. She has produced a series of paintings of whales that, even though not explicitly connected to *Moby-Dick*, were inspired by Melville's work. Mulazzani's whales are always represented in a state of quiet suspension while immersed in the calm depths of the sea. Their vast bodies are completely covered by complex and dense networks of tattooed images dominated by flowers, plants, and animals – which at times remind one of Henri Rousseau's art – intermingled with details of human faces and landscapes both rural and urban.

In personal conversations I have had with the artist, Simona Mulazzani retraced her sources of inspiration. Even though she had already encountered *Moby-Dick* in her youth, she was first struck by the beautiful shape of the whales while drawing the illustrations for Nicoletta Vallorani's children's book *Come una balena (Like a Whale)*, a fascinating rewrite of *Moby-Dick* in which the story is seen from the point of view of a couple of friends, a dolphin and a stranded whale calf. The artist imaginatively conflated the image of the scratches and scars on the skin of the whale – produced by painful encounters with rocks, other whales, or humans – with the image of tattoos that cover sailors' bodies, reminders of the lush and verdant landscapes that they miss once they sail into distant waters. By doing so, Mulazzani creatively develops the analogy already suggested in *Moby-Dick* between the marks on the whale's skin and the quilt-like tattoos on Queequeg's skin.

In Chapter LXVIII, “The Blanket,” Ishmael describes the skin of the whale as “all over obliquely crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array, something like those in the finest Italian line engravings” (Melville, 2002, p. 246), which he then compares to “old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable” (Melville, 2002, p. 246). Similarly, the “hieroglyphic marks” on Queequeg's skin make up “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth [...] whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them” (Melville, 2002, p. 366).

Just like Queequeg serenely carrying on his skin the unresolved and unresolvable mysteries of the world, Mulazzani's whales, covered in thinly drawn, serene and luxuriant images, become emblems of the beautiful richness of nature, which does not need to be deciphered to be appreciated. Immersed in this calm awareness and protected by the lulling sea, these whales proceed untouched by the turmoil of the outer world, symbolically represented in some of Mulazzani's paintings by the profile of a busy village or by the rain falling from a dark cloud. Interestingly, the signature motif of the dark cloud also recurs in one

of the illustrations for the above-mentioned children’s book *Storia di una balena bianca raccontata da lei stessa* to signify the turmoil of a peculiarly dramatic moment of the story (Mulazzani, 2009, p. 82).

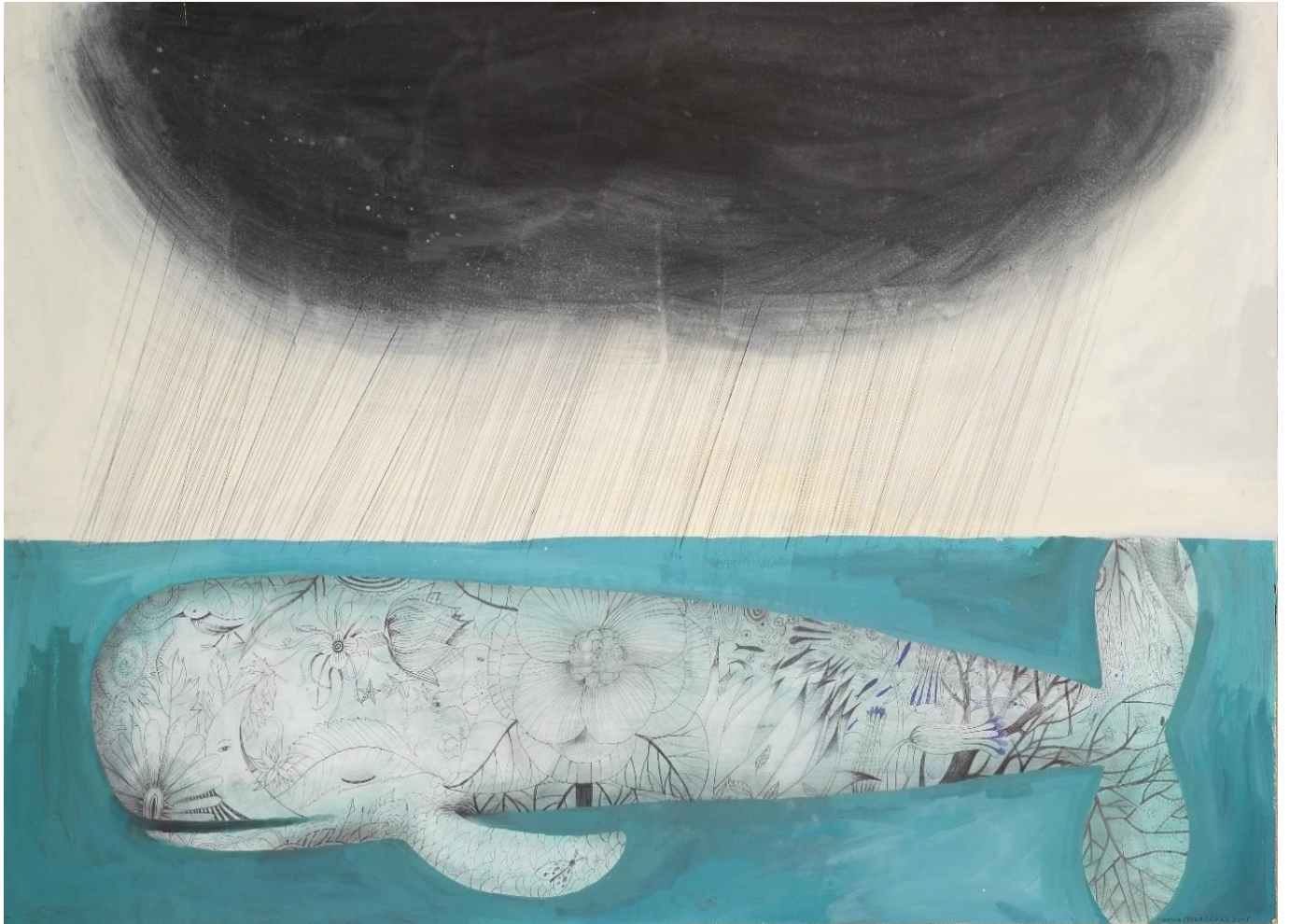


Image 1. Simona Mulazzani, *Piogge 3 (Rains 3)* from the series *Piogge*.

Mulazzani’s calm whales evoke a reading of *Moby-Dick* proposed in the nineteen-sixties by Elémire Zolla, one of the most perceptive and idiosyncratic Italian Melville scholars. In his essay on the origins of Transcendentalism, Zolla interprets the white whale as “a symbol of the true believer who, indifferent to the breakers of the world, is capable to steer below the waves of hardships” (Zolla, 1963, pp. 57-58), as opposed to the demoniacal Ahab, who is maniacally obsessed with the desire to grasp and control nature. Instead of being a symbol of evil, of the violence of Nature, or of an angry God, Zolla’s Moby Dick is the symbol of the quiet mystical appeasement of the Schopenhauerian wiseman who has detached himself from the cares of the world. Similarly, Mulazzani’s whales are placidly immersed in the protective calm of the deep sea, indifferent to the storm that is raging above the surface and radiating beauty through the tattoos on their skin.

Another interesting example of how contemporary Italian artists interact with *Moby-Dick* is Franco Fortunato’s 2005 series *Congetture su Moby Dick*.¹ As Elizabeth Schultz has

¹ More of Fortunato’s paintings can be found on the artist’s website:

argued, Fortunato's images are devoid of any reference to the traumatic, troubled, bloody aspects of the novel. In contrast, the artist creates terse images in which realist representations are combined with surrealist details and infused with symbolic or allegorical meaning, thus "taking the viewers into an ahistorical and apolitical, a mythic and mystical world" (Zolla, 1963, p. 27). The stillness that dominates Fortunato's paintings generate a dreamy atmosphere reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings but with a naive twist devoid of eerie overtones.

In *Il sogno di Ahab (Ahab's Dream)*, Ahab is represented as he gazes into a water fountain which, as Gaston Bachelard has famously argued, is a traditional symbol of a subject withdrawn into oneself and immersed in a reverie, reminiscent of the myth of Narcissus which, as Ishmael famously suggests, might prove to be "the key to it all" (Melville, 2002, p. 20). The "ungraspable phantom of life" (Melville, 2002, p. 20) reflected on the water appears here as the white whale, thus suggesting an interpretation of the novel as the allegory of a process of interrogation of one's self. In Fortunato's paintings, Ahab is not a monomaniacal and blood-thirsty tyrant but is reimagined as a self caught in the twilight of consciousness as he tries to solve the puzzle of life.

A similar interest in the psychological dimension of Melville's characters that avoids seeing them as mere allegorical substitutes for something else inspires the 2016 series of delicate watercolors *Chiamatemi Ismaele* ("Call me Ishmael") by the young Sicilian artist Giovanni Robustelli.² The series of thirteen images is not focused on any specific episodes from the novel but rather on the attempt to capture the psychology of its main characters as reflected on the fluidity of water. The portraits sprout from the bottom of each sheet of paper as if they are whales' spouts emerging from the surface of the sea. The only exception is the image of Ahab: to express his detachment from the world and his obsessive focus on himself, he is represented as if floating on the white paper. Images of whales, fish, whaleboats, and harpoons are intermingled with the marine substance that each portrait seems to be made of, as if to suggest how they are part and parcel of each character's inner world. Each image uses a combination of shades of blue and of warmer orange or red, creating tension between the drive to action and the desire for peace and rest that not only possesses each character but shapes the narrative as a whole.

Examples of the "lighter" take on *Moby-Dick* that characterizes recent Italian visual art inspired by the novel could be multiplied. Giorgio Mariani has already discussed, for example, how the 2001 graphic novel *Sulla rotta di Moby Dick (On the Route of Moby Dick)*, written by Tito Faraci and drawn by Bruno Brindisi as part of the *Dylan Dog* series, plays a complex game with Melville's text, complicating the relationship between high culture and popular literature and finally proving how "pulp fiction inexorably swallows any attempt to resist it" (Mariani 2013, p. 101). One might add Sara Filippi Plotegher's installation *Umanità contro (Humanity Against)* that the artist designed to accompany Elio de Capitani's 2022 production of Orson Welles's *Moby Dick-Rehearsed* from 1965. The emotional and inspiring educational installation uses the whale hunt as a symbol of human exploitation of other forms of life in the Anthropocene; at the same time, it explores the relationship between art and science and how they can support each other in addressing the public. To conclude this overview, one could also mention, as proof of how the white whale has even become a "brand" connected to lightness, designer Matteo Ugolini's airy and suggestive *Moby Dick* lamps, a series of elegant fiberglass lampshades inspired by the hump of the whale.

<http://www.francofortunato.com/opere/dipinti/2005-congettture-su-moby-dick-3/>

²<https://www.giovannirobustelli.com/chiamatemiismaele>



Image 2. Franco Fortunato, *Il sogno di Achab (Ahab's Dream)*, from the series *Congetture su Moby-Dick (Conjectures on Moby-Dick)*.



Image 3. Giovanni Robustelli, *Stubb*, from the series *Chiamatemi Ismaele*.

A Sea Storm in a Teacup: Roberto Abbiati's Moby-Dick

The most interesting protagonist among recent Italian adaptations of *Moby-Dick* is Roberto Abbiati, a multitalented artist and actor who has created a series of diverse works based on Melville's novel. The process is recounted by Matteo Codignola in a masterful little book dedicated to it, *Un tentativo di balena*, which also includes a detailed and lively description of the stage adaptation. The first product of Abbiati's fascination with *Moby-Dick* was a series of small-sized sculptures made of wooden boxes with figurines and found objects manipulated to recreate scenes from the novel. Abbiati presented some of the earlier experiments to his friends, but then collected thirty-three pieces to be exhibited in Milan, where they sold very quickly. The sculptures bear strong similarities to some of the iconic works of Joseph Cornell, known for his sculptures made of small boxes with assemblages of found objects. Even though Abbiati was not aware of them until later, he not only acknowledges the formal similarities between his series of sculptures and Cornell's but he is also impressed by the similar complicated procedures adopted by both artists to manipulate found objects in order to give them the desired visual texture. For example, both Cornell and Abbiati would soak found pieces of wood in water and then let them dry in the sun or even, when the weather would not allow (as is common in the region where Abbiati lives), in the kitchen oven to give them the intended patina. Such a time-consuming laborious process is a key element of the poetics of both artists, which, even when using found objects, always strive for an almost lyrical appropriation of materials.

Abbiati's successful experiments with box-shaped sculptures led to the second step of his artistic confrontation with *Moby-Dick*. In 2001, on occasion of the Castiglione Festival, he created an installation articulated in three rooms, similar to three expansions or blowups of the smaller sculptures (Codignola, 2008, pp. 56-58). Each room was dedicated to a different aspect of the novel: the first was dedicated to the whales, and was full of a variety of maquettes of whales made with painted brushes hanging from the ceiling; the second represented the sea as a large white bolt of fabric; and the third was dedicated to the end result of the hunt, with Ishmael at the center of the spiral of events leading to the destruction of the *Pequod* and the rest of her crew.

Fascinated by the installation, festival director Massimo Paganelli suggested that Abbiati could further develop his confrontation with the novel and design a stage adaptation, which was produced in 2002. *Una tazza di mare in tempesta (A Sea Storm in a Teacup)* distills *Moby-Dick* into a seventeen-minute show performed for a small audience of less than two dozen spectators within a wooden box simulating the hold of a tiny ship. In the show Abbiati stands outside the box and impersonates Ishmael, using small windows to address the audience as he recounts key passages from the novel, all selected with scalpel-like precision. Abbiati manages to evoke and condense the whole drama of the massive novel by using tiny figurines made up of found objects, twisted wire, and modeling clay. Wood planes, shoes, and cleavers can serve as different species of whales, and a pipe with minuscule sails stands in for the *Pequod*.

The show consists of a series of inevitably brief vignettes, but they are so craftily tied together that the progression appears to be seamless.³ Noises, recurring visual motifs, and the very fact of being inside such a tiny space all contribute to the feeling that the passages extrapolated from the text are not merely pieces of a fragmented whole, but tesserae of a complete jigsaw puzzle. There is even space for some interpolations: the first scene, in

³ An abridged version of the show is available on the artist's website:

<http://www.robertoabbiati.it/spettacoli/una-tazza-di-mare-in-tempesta/>.

particular, in which Ishmael narrates his decision to embark in order to overcome his melancholy, closes with a thought-provoking twist on the final paragraph of Chapter 1, "Loomings." Melville ends the chapter on a grand note, with Ishmael daydreaming of an infinite school of whales circling around "one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air" (Melville, 2002, p. 22). Abbiati, by contrast, closes the scene with a delicate metatheatrical note: the whales that inhabit Ishmael's imagination are said to "swim in the shape of wood-planes and cleavers, as if popping out of the workshop of one of the craftsmen of my country, my flat country in the heart of the plains" (Codignola, 2008, p. 76, my translation). Abbiati recites this passage from behind a sideboard while moving the tools he mentions between the shelves to make them swim like whales. The reference to workshops nods to the centrality that carpentry and craftsmanship play in the show, in which the aesthetic qualities of the odd stage, the props, and the figurines are as important as the story itself. Moreover, the mention of the plains is an autobiographical reference to the countryside of the Brianza province where Abbiati resides and to which he always refers affectionately. The same imagery appears again at the end of the show, where the "dim, bewildering mediums" (Melville, 2002, p. 426) through which the sailors on Ahab's boat see the ship sinking are assimilated to "the blurry atmosphere of foggy plains" (Melville, 2002, p. 132), thus inscribing Ishmael's global and marine adventure into the local and "earthy" autobiographical dimension of his new storyteller.

One of the strategies Abbiati uses to compress *Moby-Dick* to such a small size – in terms of time, space, and resources – is a virtuoso use of synecdoche, that is, mentioning a part to signify the whole. For example, Ahab is portrayed simply by means of his foot (a wooden last) and the whale-bone leg (a table leg) that rhythmically stomp on the wooden boards of the *Pequod*. (Image 5) Similarly, the ship is represented by means of her sails on the main mast: three coat hangers with bits of canvas attached to them. Accordingly, most of the characters are deleted, leaving almost only Ishmael, Ahab, and the whale. One more element that is preserved is the ship *Rachel*, but there is no mention of the tragic fate of the captain's son nor of Ahab's paramount egoism in refusing to help his peer. The dramatic overtone of the encounter is simply suggested by the red color of the sails of the tiny ship, actually a clothespin.



Image 4. *Una tazza di mare in tempesta*, picture by Lucia Baldini

Abbiati's *Una tazza di mare in tempesta* can be approached by means of two main formal axes that the artist uses to structure his work. The first is the shift from the outside to the inside. The set of the show subverts the traditional structure of the theatre, in which the public seats face the stage, so that the represented story takes place at a distance and detached from the viewer. By contrast, Abbiati puts his audience literally at the center, enfolding around them a complex set of small stages made of several windows in which the episodes of the story take place. The idea of putting the audience into a box developed from Abbiati's early sculptures and installation. It also resonates with the cetology passages in *Moby-Dick* as a description of the herculean attempt to put something immense, possibly the "ungraspable phantom of life" (Melville, 2002, p. 20), into something that can be handled, pondered, and shared. Literally placed at the center of the action, the spectators are forced to be constantly alert, ready to suddenly shift their attention from one of the windows to the next. At the end of the show, after Ishmael has been rescued by the *Rachel*, the opposition between inside and outside is questioned again: spectators are left for a few seconds in the dark in the claustrophobic space; then the ceiling of the box lights up with a myriad of stars and constellations, thus suggesting that all boxes, like all stories, are always within a larger box and part of a much longer cosmic story.

The second axis the artist uses to structure his work regards the shift from heaviness to lightness. Abbiati, too, seems to have been inspired by Italo Calvino's call for a poetics of lightness. In fact, it permeates all aspects of the performance, such as the choice of twisted wire to create the figurines of both the whale and Ahab, thus reducing the "heaviest" characters in the story to airy forms. The same holds true for the use of objects hanging from wires as if they are hovering over the heads of viewers, in particular the figurine of the ship *Rachel*. Abbiati's alchemical process of transformation of what is heavy into something light is by no means limited to the physical objects that he uses. The whole atmosphere is made light by a certain sense of informality, such as the fact that viewers are invited to sit on the wooden floor. This informality also accounts for Abbiati's use of a gentle and radically unemphatic tone of voice that strictly avoids all kinds of exclamatory stress even in the most dramatic moments. Accordingly, some quirky choices in the props and the materials adopted for the figurines – such as, on top of those already mentioned, the surprisingly effective choice to use a colander to represent the gold doubloon – have an immediate ironic effect. Abbiati thus compensates for the fact of having had to cut off the irony of Melville's text, which permeates *Moby-Dick* but is inevitably lost in his reduction. However, while Melville's irony is often generated by a baroque process of accumulation, repetition, or complication – such as, for example, Ishmael's plethora of witty reasons for why he goes to sea as a sailor rather than as a passenger in the first chapter of the novel – Abbiati's ironic effects are produced by means of reduction or playful substitution.

In 2017, Abbiati added one more element to his series of adaptations of *Moby-Dick*. He published an adaptation titled *Moby Dick o La Balena* (which, in line with most Italian translations, does not include the hyphen in the name of the whale), qualified by the paratext as a "Romanzo a disegni" (literally, a novel made up of drawings) and as "Liberamente ispirato dal capolavoro di Herman Melville," that is, "Freely adapted from Herman Melville's masterpiece." The book is made up of a series of 138 Indian ink drawings, one for each chapter of the novel, including "Etymology," "Extracts," and the Epilogue. Each drawing is simply accompanied by the title of the chapter in English on the facing page, presenting a variety of layouts and with a frequent overlapping between the two pages. This is not an uncommon decision since, as Schultz has already argued, "perhaps following the standard set by Frank Stella between 1986 and 1997, several artists have responded to the novel's complexity by

illuminating it chapter-by-chapter” (Schultz, 2019, p. 31). Abbiati attributes this decision to his conviction that each chapter is of equal importance and that each should be read as a small novel in itself. By dedicating a drawing to each chapter, he excavates each of these shorter novels and reduces them to their visual core.

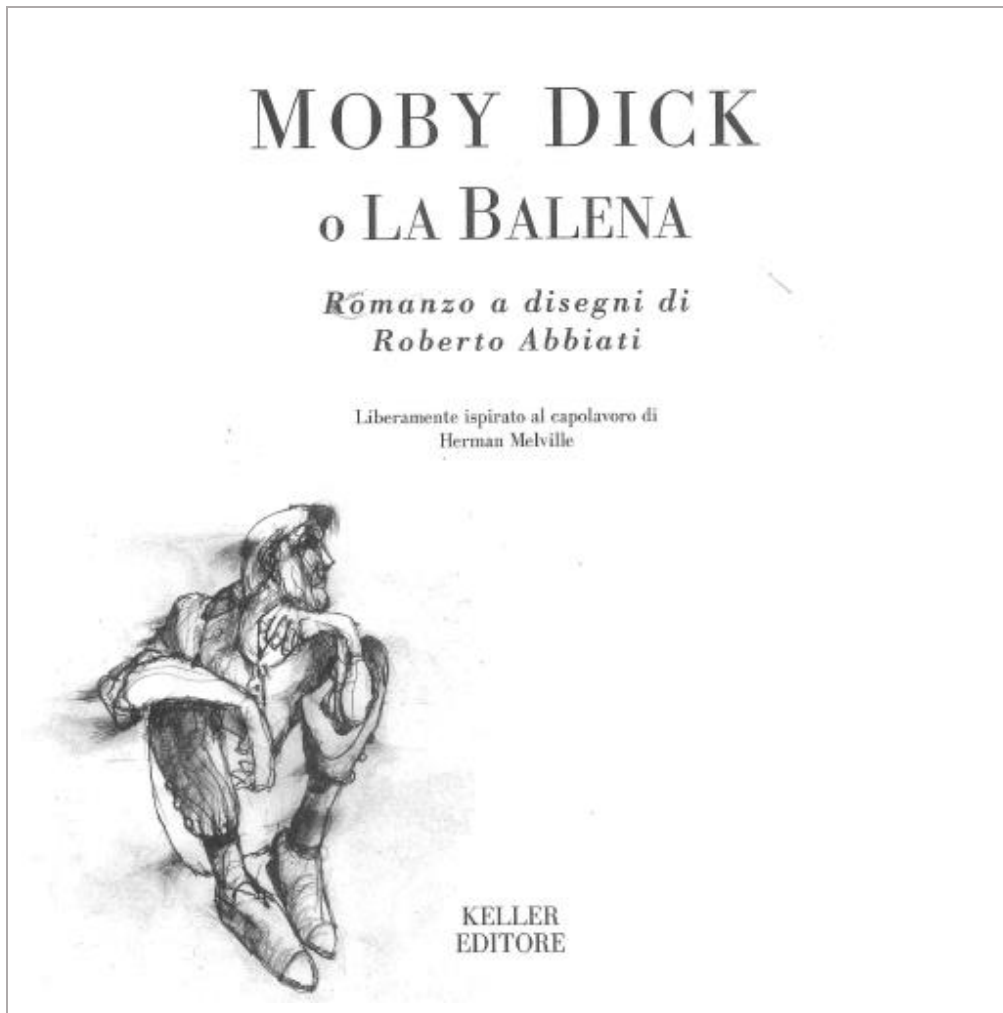


Image 5. Roberto Abbiati. *Moby Dick o La Balena*

As in all his works, one of the most relevant features of Abbiati's poetics is the decision to use only minimal means, an approach that is somewhat analogous to the OuLiPo poetics of constraints. This translates into the fact that – in stark contrast to other authors, such as the above-mentioned Frank Stella – Abbiati decides to address the complexity of *Moby-Dick* by using only black and white. Abbiati claims that his preference for the simplicity of pure black and white was inspired by one of his early teachers, AG Fronzoni, at the school where he studied typography. Fronzoni convinced him that the attentive combination of black and white was sufficient not only to suggest all possible shapes but also all tones, colors, and atmospheres. The test for the success of his work, the artist says, is that after having looked at the black-and-white drawings, viewers should remember having seen images in color, an effect generated by means of the astonishing variety of techniques that he uses and of the mutable visual textures thus generated (Codignola, 2008, p. 49).

In a number of interviews that he has given, including private conversations I have had with the artist, Abbiati has acknowledged, with gratitude, three sources of inspiration. The first is the Austrian expressionist painter Egon Schiele. Indeed, the nervous and angular lines of some of the drawings in *Moby Dick o La Balena* are reminiscent of the painter's portraits, as they strive for a similar emotional intensity of expression. The last drawing, illuminating the Epilogue (see Image 6), is a direct homage to one of Schiele's most popular works, *Standing Male Nude with Red Loincloth* (1914, Albertina Gallery, Wien). Abbiati borrows the awkward position of the model, expressive of Ishmael's emotions at the end of the traumatic experience, an effect enhanced by the slightly off-center position of the image on the page. By grasping his head, the character seems to be both questioning and, at the same time, reaffirming his control of himself and his own identity, as if preparing to address the reader with his story. While copying the gesture of the model, though, Abbiati renounces Schiele's thick contours (inspired by Japanese woodcuts) as well as their decorative winding curves, opting instead for a more dynamic and nervous approach. Similarly, in adapting Schiele's image, Abbiati magnifies Ishmael's eye, making it almost reminiscent of Alberto Giacometti's intense staring characters. The staring eye is after all one of the pervasive visual motifs of the Abbiati's book. Chapter LV, "Of Monstrous Pictures of Whales," for example, is translated into the relatively simple but effective image of a paint brush represented in the action of painting the open eye of the whale, suggestive of a metapictorial interpretation of the chapter in which the difficulty of representing the real image of the whale reflects the impossibility of getting to the ultimate meaning of life and the world.



Image 6. Roberto Abbiati, *Epilogue*, from *Moby-Dick o La Balena*

The second artist Abbiati mentions as a crucial inspiration for his work is Sergio Toppi, one of the greatest Italian illustrators and cartoonists of the last century. One of the main features of Toppi's extensive and varied work is the systematic attempt to overcome the traditional structure of the cartoon by experimenting with unusual points of view and deconstructing the standard series of chronologically organized vignettes. In a 2010 interview

with Mariangela Rado, Toppi highlighted the importance of “verticality” as a key component of his creative process, suggesting that it allowed him to “break free from the borders of the individual panels, thus altering the classical perspective” (Toppi 2016, p. 251, my translation).

An excellent example of Toppi’s influence on Abbiati’s *Moby-Dick* is Chapter XXXV, “The Mast-Head.” (Image 7) Ishmael is seen from above as he stands on a tiny platform attached to the mast. The emphatically skewed perspective enhances the effect of vertigo and of the radical detachment from reality it generates. At the same time, the platform where Ishmael stands, without railings, somewhat resembles a springboard, thus suggesting the character’s ambiguous fascination with the “mystic ocean at his feet”; while “lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie,” he risks giving in to the temptation of letting himself fall into it. A similar case is Chapter XXII, “Merry Christmas” (Image 8), in which sailors are shown pulling the spokes of a

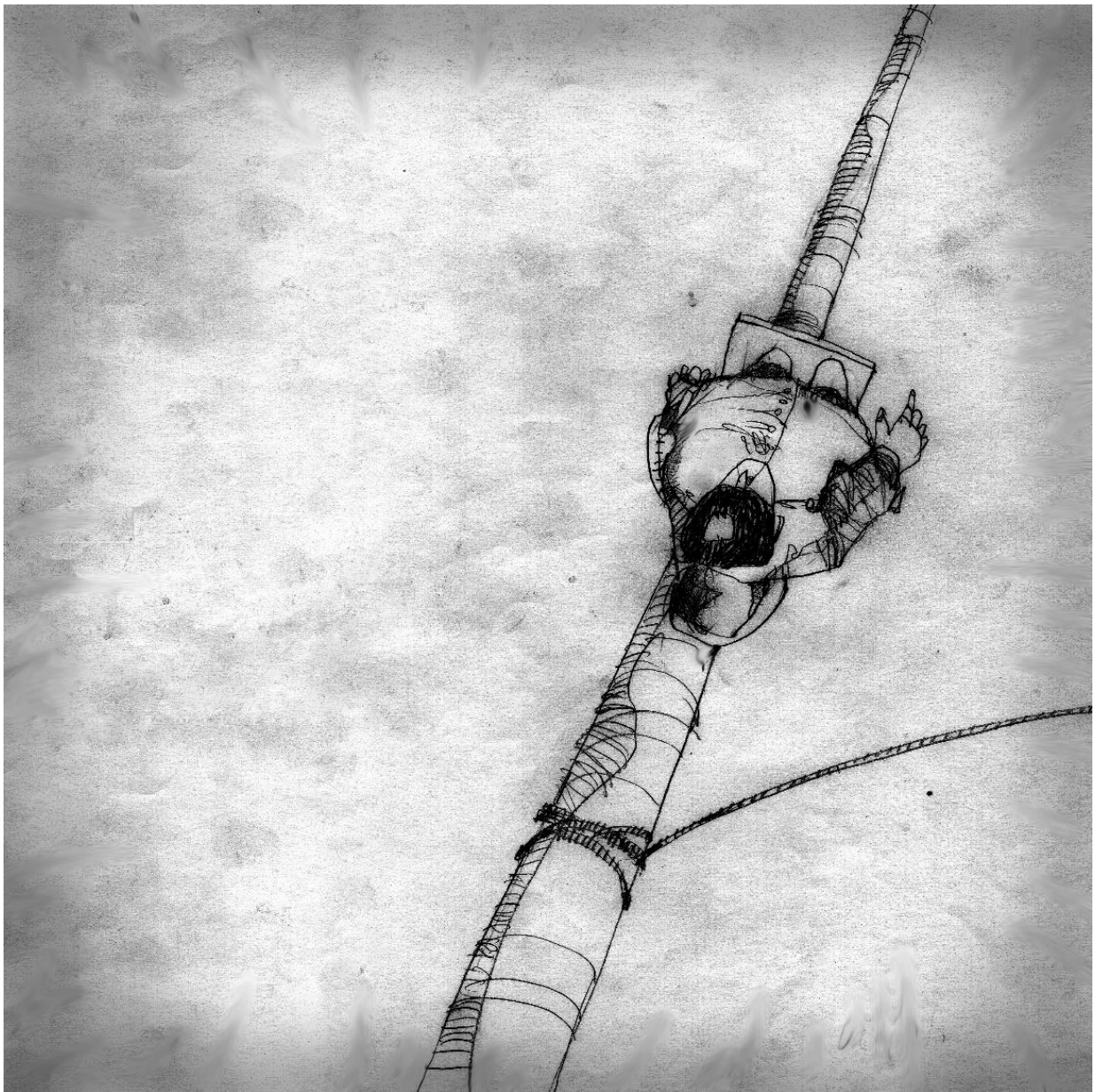


Image 7. Roberto Abbiati, *The Mast-Head*, from *Moby-Dick o La Balena*.

gigantic windlass. The cropping of the image on the top right corner of the page makes the image more dynamic, while the viewpoint from above blurs the features of individual sailors, suggesting the vanishing of their individuality in the common effort of turning the windlass. The circular motion in which they are thus caught, and in which they give up their individuality, anticipates their eventual submission to Ahab's insane vindictive plan, which will eventually lead them to destruction.

A third model that Abbiati refers to consistently, of many who have certainly influenced his multifaceted work, is Jackson Pollock. Pollock's imprinting is less evident, unless it is taken to refer merely to Abbiati's frequent use of dripping techniques in several images. This technique is observable in Chapter XCIV, "A Squeeze of the Hand" (Image 9), where it is used to suggest the atmosphere of Ishmael's dreamily squeezing the sperm "until a strange sort of insanity came over me" (Melville, 2002, p. 322), or in Chapter CXXIII, "The Musket," in which Starbuck's murderous dilemma and his torments are expressively suggested by a confusion of drops of watered ink. Pollock's influence, though, is better understood in reference to Abbiati's desire to capture in his images the action of their creation. Abbiati's drawings are intentionally done directly with the ink without preparatory pencil drawings, thus making it impossible to erase what has been drawn.

CHAPTER XXII
MERRY CHRISTMAS

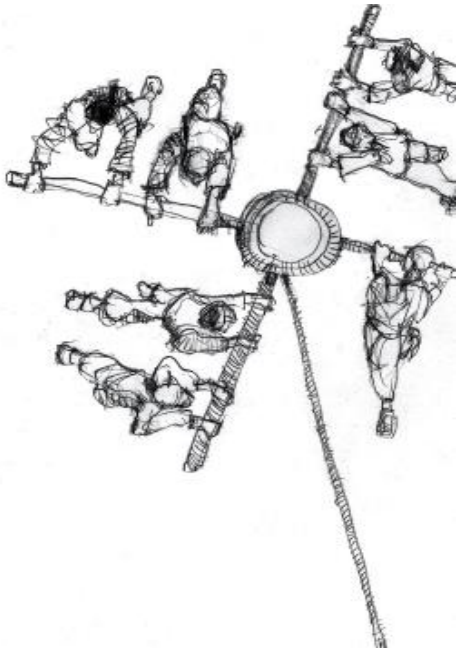


Image 8.

Roberto Abbiati, *Merry Christmas*, from *Moby-Dick o La Balena*.

Image 9.

Roberto Abbiati, *A Squeeze of the Hand*, from *Moby-Dick o La Balena*.

This process, by means of which inevitable imperfections are incorporated into the final product, stems from Abbiati's view of his own creative process as opposed to the Romantically derived veneration for the work of art as an object endowed by the genius of the artist with a special value that sets it apart from the rest of the world. By contrast, Abbiati, who with characteristic understatement claims to be nothing more than an enthusiastic amateur at drawing, likens his creative process to the production of a craftsman, always playfully experimenting in order to find new solutions to old problems while constantly striving for better control over his materials and his tools.

Conclusion

The analysis of recent Italian artworks inspired by *Moby-Dick* has shown that there is an established trend among Italian artists to offer “visual interpretations” of the novel characterized by irony, lyricism, and serenity. These rest on an approach to the novel that starkly contrasts with more traditional interpretations, which tend to highlight the more tragic, dramatic and gloomy dimensions of Melville's novel and of its implicit philosophy. The consideration of this trend, which is reminiscent of Italo Calvino's praise of lightness as a key value of the contemporary approach to literature, testifies once again to the constantly shifting meaning of the classics both in popular and highbrow culture. Roberto Abbiati's extended and multifaceted dialogue with *Moby-Dick* is the best and most fully articulated example of this lighter take on *Moby-Dick* which, in line with Calvino's appeal, does not imply being superficial or frivolous. On the contrary, Abbiati's *Moby-Dick*-inspired works are the product of a meticulous process of reduction of the novel to its core, which gives us extremely concentrated, if small in size, adaptations of the novel. Lightness is, after all, a relational property, and it is inversely proportional to the weight of the medium in which an object is immersed. Accordingly, one might wonder if these artists' reactions to *Moby-Dick* do not only respond to the lighter tastes of the public, but also to their perception of the heavier atmosphere of times in which, like Melville's hero stuffing “a shirt or two into [his] old carpet-bag,” (Melville, p. 2002, 7) one has better to travel light.

Of course, it is not a matter of saying whether the “visual interpretations” of *Moby-Dick* here analyzed are more or less appropriate, true, or faithful to Melville's text, as this would be to judge them by standards that are not their own. However, they can certainly serve as a call for Melville readers and scholars to bring to the surface that spirit of lightness that remains all too often hidden within the bulk of the book, and to which contemporary readers are often more responsive.

Notes on Contributor

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