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Whale Magic

(Response to the Prologue and Chapter 1 from Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*)

I was quite captivated by the prologue to *Arctic Dreams*, much more than I was affected by Walton's accounts of the Arctic (i.e., Shelley's imaginative view). In *Frankenstein*, we are presented the scenery more in terms of generalities and expectations: being "nearly surrounded by ice, which closed in the ship on all sides" (Shelley, Letter 4), "vast and irregular plains of ice, which seemed to have no end" (Shelley, Letter 4), or "the sun is for ever visible, its broad disk just skirting the horizon and diffusing a perpetual splendour" (Shelley, Letter 1). As a reader, this seems no more than an intense winter, or somewhat farther north, but is not too far removed from my sense of reality. The latter is the most absurd detail to someone living in the temperate zone, but still not relayed in great detail compared to Lopez's treatment.

Walton inures himself to the the harshness of the Arctic in whaling expeditions. In the prologue, Lopez also provides a narrative of the whalers in the Arctic, but the everyday life is much more explicit – and, due to the nature of whaling, much more unsettling and surreal than those of *Frankenstein*: these creatures, unlike Victor Frankenstein's creation, are not of near-human proportions, and the lurking dangers are capable of causing widespread calamities. Even the plain numbers are too large to size up in most people's minds: the harvested whales from the *Cumbrian* provided "236 tons of oil [and] ... more than four and a half tones of whalebone" (Lopez 2). In its mouth are "blades nearly 14 feet long" (Lopez 3) and the body "wrapped in blubber as much as 20 inches thick" (Lopez 3). Perhaps I am dwelling too long on this subject, but, as an engineer, it is hard not to size up an object when measurements appear. There's a quote from the movie *Boyhood* that captures this sentiment:

“I mean, what makes you think that elves are any more magical than something like... like a whale? You know what I mean? What if I told you a story about how underneath the ocean, there was this giant sea mammal that used sonar and sang songs and it was so big that its heart was the size of a car and you could crawl through the arteries? I mean, you'd think that was pretty magical, right?” (*Boyhood*)

The quote is a response to a boy asking about real magic in the world, and is a fairly convincing statement that “magic” is that which is so far from comprehension that it doesn’t feel real or scientific. We also have the “singing” of the whales (Lopez mentions that, by the time of the *Cumbrian*’s journey, Europeans “were unaware that the Greenland right actually ‘sang’” (Lopez 8)), which adds to the whales’ mystery, and compounds the eerie “high note that eventually faded away to a very low note” (Lopez 5) indicating Arctic gales.

The most haunting image is that of the Greenland right who had gently pushed the *Cumbrian*. “Awakened by [the *Cumbrian*’s] approach, she swam slowly once around the ship and then put her head calmly to the bow and began to push. She pushed the ship backward for two minutes before the transfixed crew reacted with harpoons. The incident left the men unsettled. They flinched against such occasional eeriness in their work ... They heard no whistling that year ... – but they had not liked the whale pushing against them, as though urging them to go back” (Lopez 4). This particular gentle whale, kin of the playful dolphins, capable of dragging down ships but instead harmlessly nudging it, becomes “the carnage of wealth” (Lopez 6). Is this an unending pain of hunters, and especially those who must hunt for a living? The innocence of a deer or a duck will not feed the hunter’s family, and so we might say that a hunter cannot be both empathetic and successful. But a whale is different story – it is so magical, and its power to drag or push a ship is as powerful as the immutable weather. One must wonder what exists in the mind of a godly object as it pushed the boat, and as it perished.

The lack of empathy is a recurring theme. There is the objective nature of whaling, but the interactions with the people are likewise. Lopez describes the fascination of the Inuit people to the

Europeans, and vice versa, but there is never the notion of care or respect. Survival of their own, lack of cross-pollination of ideas, cause both sides to condescend on the other. Just as whaling would eventually endanger the whale population, smallpox engendered by the Europeans spread unhindered through the Inuit villages, causing an estimated 90 percent decrease in their population (Lopez 10). Somehow, man has become one of the irregular forces of the Arctic that make it so inhospitable, causing genocides like the “ten-year series of late spring snowstorms [that] prevented lesser snow geese from ever laying their eggs” (Lopez 32), or the “spring storms that have swept hundreds of thousands of infant harp seals into the sea, where they have drowned” (Lopez 32), or “October rainstorm [that] created a layer of ground ice that, later, musk-oxen could not break open to feed” (Lopez 32). In this case, we have the “thousands of European men that arrived in boats and caused the unrestrained hunting of the Greenland right whale.”

Much of Chapter 1 of *Arctic Dreams* is fascinating to me, but primarily in the sense of wanting to obtain more information, rather than in the awe-inspiring sense of the Prologue. It is useful to learn about how the sun moves (in much greater detail than given in *Frankenstein*) and how life conforms to the harsh year-round day. The departure from the norms of temperate life justify the sailors’ wonderment.

(Do we need a bibliography for this kind of informal assignment?)