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The Amorous Discourse of Dan Beachy-Quick's *Spell*

Spell, by Dan Beachy-Quick. Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, 2004.

To "spell" is to sound out, to give word to internal breath, to give structure to perception and to think. Dan Beachy-Quick's *Spell*, a book-length meditation on both the novel and the entity Moby Dick, reads as part poem and part essay. *Spell* itself is structured more like an essay with "chapters" or sections, and their constitutive parts: "A, B, C," etc., written in primarily free-verse poetic line. In addition, Beachy-Quick subtitles his query, "Leviathan: A Reading." Each subsequent chapter title is an anagram of leviathan. What the whale or leviathan is, he seems to suggest, is determined in part by its spelling or sounding of itself. His text activates a re-patterning or re-arranging of an external structure in order to reveal a glimpse at the internal structure of Moby Dick, both the whale and the book. For instance, there are several speakers in the poem, including: Ahab, Ishmael, Queequeg, Pip, and a poetic speaker who addresses an editor.

Spell is working under the literary tradition of the *razo*; one might argue that Melville was as well. The word *razo* translates as reason and acts as an explanation of why a poem was composed. The sections of *Spell* which are the *razo* address an unknown editor in a similar way to Ahab's address of the whale and to Melville's address of his book. By considering these three relationships as parallel, I've allowed myself to conduct a sub-sub-reading on the sub-reading of the leviathan in such a way as to cast a spell on both novels at once. I will do so using Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* as my model and as my net for the blank page.

Barthes's text examines the nature of love through its many expressions by first defining the terms or types of love and then pairing them with quotations from a variety of literary sources that exemplify those definitions. Barthes's discourse is proposed as a structural portrait or site, "the site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak" (3). This relationship is particularly pertinent as we see in Melville's text between

the characters Ahab and the whale, and between Ishmael and Queequeg. The relationship is mimicked or mirrored in Beachy-Quick's writing by the poetic speaker and his "editor." In all of these texts love is constantly shifting and redefining itself. Inherent to this depiction, or definition, of love by Barthes, is the fact that love both acts: it writes, speaks, embraces, and yet also is: jealous, silent, magic, or absent. Finally, amorous language is not limited to positive attributes or clichés; the depths it reaches, or attempts to reach, are as varied and wild as human experience and the human soul. Taking these various ideas into consideration, my analysis of Beachy-Quick's long poem and its re-imagining of *Moby-Dick* turn specifically to Barthes's nature of love and to this shifting relationship of the "I" and the "other."

Spell opens its "Prologue" with the following lines:

Editor,

Here are the lines my mind fathomed.
They are tar-dark. I wrote them on pages
Breathless and blank, as beneath water
Men's minds are blank but for needing
A next breath. Sir, turn
This page and the thick door opens
By growing thinner, ever thinner,
Until the last page turns and is turned
Into air . . .

Here the amorous is expressed as the poetic speaker or writer hands over inspiration, "the drawing in of the breath into the lungs during respiration" (OED). What is written is part of him, his being / breathing in the world, his sounding or spelling. Just as a whale "sounds" when it dives down, when it fathoms the watery depths, dragging a line (the harpoon stuck in its skin) behind it, so the mind or the breath, when it inspires, undergoes a similar activity. The presence of the other or editor represents a longing to share the expression, the self as it is contained by the self, in its external form, air made into letter. However, a transformation occurs between the air or breath or idea inside of the "I," and its external expression. Externally its form is expiration, "the fact or process of dying out, of being extinct" (OED). The distance between the "I" and the "other" is not breached in writing. And to complicate matters, this particular example of address must be sent in a letter along the distance of time and space. However, Beachy-Quick's speaker asserts " . . . I send me / To you on a paper-thin hull. Don't

knock. / I'm in there. I breathe on one lung / For both lungs' air" (Prologue). He defies this death or expiration by maintaining that he is "in there," the pipe of his lung sticking out of the depths of the print, as if underwater, so that he might still breathe and live inside the text, his means to reach the editor, or "other." Finally, he concludes this opening with the lines, ". . . Send word, send word. If you don't, I'll know" (Prologue). The poetic speaker perhaps only stays with his lines until they are opened and responded to, until a new "word" is sent to free him of his own spell or spelling. He waits to find out if the other has understood what is expressed in him, the self in the poem; he waits "to know that one does not write for the other," (Barthes 9) what is inexpressible, the real self, as we see in a later poem, "But, Sir— / *Souls never touch their objects. / An innavigable sea washes with silent waves, / Between us and the things . . . we converse with,* (Emerson)" (83). As Barthes explains, "Language is a skin . . ." (Barthes 73).

In "Razo—On the Nature of the Book as the Nature of the Whale," Beachy-Quick attempts to move beyond this skin through the body of the book and the body of the whale.

Editor,

Teeth and pages and the whale are white.
 I am white, and the white of the eye
 Is the eye's blindness, that black-hollow, the pupil,
 Is sight. Do you see how a book changes
 Its white nature? A first page turns away
 From an unread, ocean's depth. Chapters?
 How blackly we see our fingers fold down
 A page on the dark shore. A last page
 Crests, spills over, a white foam on land—
 We remember the ocean as drowned men
 Remember the shore. But, Sir—

I differ here:

This book I'm reading is a
 Book that to mark a page is as hard
 As folding in half an ocean-wave to know—
 In latitudes—where you are. Where am I? (77).

By cataloging the instances of "whiteness" in the whale, the book and the self, the author makes an inquiry into the nature and distance between all three. He finds that sight or perception is blind or blank

except for the black, depthless utterance of the pupil; its black, lead-tip is the part of the eye that appears absent and unfathomable. The “white nature” of the book vanishes with each turning of a page into its depths, and it follows that as we turn into it, more of its nature is understood with each turning or reading. This is not so with the book the poetic speaker is in. The other’s body, as in Barthes, is not understandable and what the speaker is able to define of it does not define it. The example in *A Lover’s Discourse* is from Proust,

(I was looking at everything in the other’s face, the other’s body, coldly: lashes, toenail, thin eyebrows, thin lips, the luster of the eyes, a mole, [the other becoming] a figurine in which I could read, without understanding anything about it, *the cause of my desire.*) (qtd. in Barthes 72)

This detached, physical inquiry also occurs in *Spell*, and in doing so, highlights its predecessor, *Moby-Dick*. In Chapter 3 of *Spell*, “Halt a Vein,” we, in Beachy-Quick’s words, “dive into the commodities and incommodities, biology, ligature, skeletal structure, skull and brain of the whale in the honorable art of whaling” (41). In part this chapter acts as a pun on what Melville did midway through *Moby-Dick*. He too charted and delved into this basic, physical structure of the whale in an attempt to force the internal to become external. It didn’t work here or there. The whale or other is “signed in language that is / no language we know” (48). The whale’s skin, like the tattoo on Queequeg, is unreadable; its prophecy cannot be reached by profiting on the whale as commodity. The subaltern remains immaterial.

Of this immateriality Barthes writes, “Thus: endlessly required to define the loved object, and suffering from the uncertainties of this definition, the amorous subject dreams of a knowledge which would let him take the other as he is, thus and no other, exonerated from any adjective,” (220) or as Beachy-Quick defines, from any word. Beachy-Quick writes in “Razo—On Jonah: Prophet-Profit (Currency Exchange ((of Speech))),

Editor,

A man who covets silence covets words
 A hand unknown in silence hid—
 Do you know such men, Sir? I do.
 I exhale

afternoons in the pen-nib

Above the blank page poised, blank-poisoned:
I cannot hear how the white-page wants to be
Darkened. I keep my tongue bit and dark (81).

The acknowledgement is that the blank silence, the other as other, is a swallowed knowledge. An encounter with the other is as the encounter with the blank page. Jonah, a man who would not speak is swallowed into the depths of an ocean, inside the blankness of the silent white whale, just as the poetic speaker in *Spell* "sit[s] silent in [his] study's white-walled mouth," (82) inside the mouth of the other, waiting for this other to speak a "shoreless, indefinite," truth (84) and to find out "what my words have done" (82). Speech is no longer a monologue, but a dialogue, a relationship of breath between the self and the other or between the blank silence and the written. As Martin Buber writes,

Language never existed before address . . . even when in a solitude beyond the range of call, the hearerless word pressed against his throat, this word was connected with the primal possibility, that of being heard (103).

The profit of the prophet of speech is being heard, or of hearing and responding to the subaltern, the whiteness of the whale, or the page, to, as Beachy-Quick states it, "read the page that was written so you could not / read it . . . You sleep, / Or step, or slip beneath the surface of the bed / And learn to breathe as paper breathes: with other's breath" (103). Beachy-Quick's raze or reason, as was Ishmael's, is to "tell the tale," that inks you and that used to ink your other (as with Queequeg and Ishmael), the one you cannot read except by deciphering the blank space between you. Ishmael, the poetic speaker in Beachy-Quick's text, writes, "Sir, when my book arrives, when each page / You've untied lets go the breath it held / That was my breath, then my breath will not be mine— / I think I'll know" (101). Thus, this movement of transformation between Ishmael and Queequeg which takes place in *Moby-Dick* takes place in *Spell*, also.

Editor, fathom me. I am a known depth. I'm a
Definition easy: a man, a mortal man,

A man with five needles on each hand
Pointing heavenward. Heed me. I'm lost (104).

In the same way that Queequeg's unable to read the text tattooed on his body—a map to the beyond—the writer cannot read his own blank direction, the fifth needle, his self or “I,” without the notice of an editor, or more specifically, an other. Without the encounter speech remains directionless; it is an address, but has no destination and remains lost in its utterance, engulfed, as Ahab was, by his desire to confront his white whale.

Beachy-Quick writes one last time in his “Afterward,” to the editor / other, in a state of amorous discourse:

. . . Here's one country: my hand.
It seals the envelope. Here's one country:
My lips, my tongue. They seal the envelope.
Suffer whiteness. My white hand in a white cloud.
My lips white with salt. The white rain—I see it—
Sings white a lullaby to the milky white ocean
And the milky white ocean calms

It calms as it dives down (108).

Here again is the site or portrait of the discourse, the self speaking amorously within itself, within its own landmass or country, to an other, who does not speak. Yet here, the self has also become the mouth of the other, the depths of the ocean, “lips white with salt,” the residual saying diving down, sealing the envelope or envelopment. In Barthes's terms this state is one of embrace, and it is said that, “The gesture of the amorous embrace seems to fulfill, for a time, the subject's dream of total union with the loved being” (104). The union is as much one of the writing and the envelope as it is of the writer and the editor to whom he is sending his words. In either instance, a merging of self and other has taken place, at least temporarily, and a sense of calm: a calm ocean, a calm self, a calm diving down absolves.

Beachy-Quick's writing is based primarily on relationship, the relationship between an existing text and a new text, between writers and readers, between the many-selved self and its many others and between the spoken voice (the quoted dialogue in *Spell of the Moby-Dick* characters), and the written voice, the poetic speaker (the response). His work on *Moby-Dick* is a both an amorous and linguistic inquiry into the nature of love and our reckoning with something larger than our selves, and the nature of text and how it too mimics this largeness.

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