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HERMAN MELVILLE

Moby Dick

with an introduction by DR. LAURIAT LANE, B.A., M.A., PH.D.

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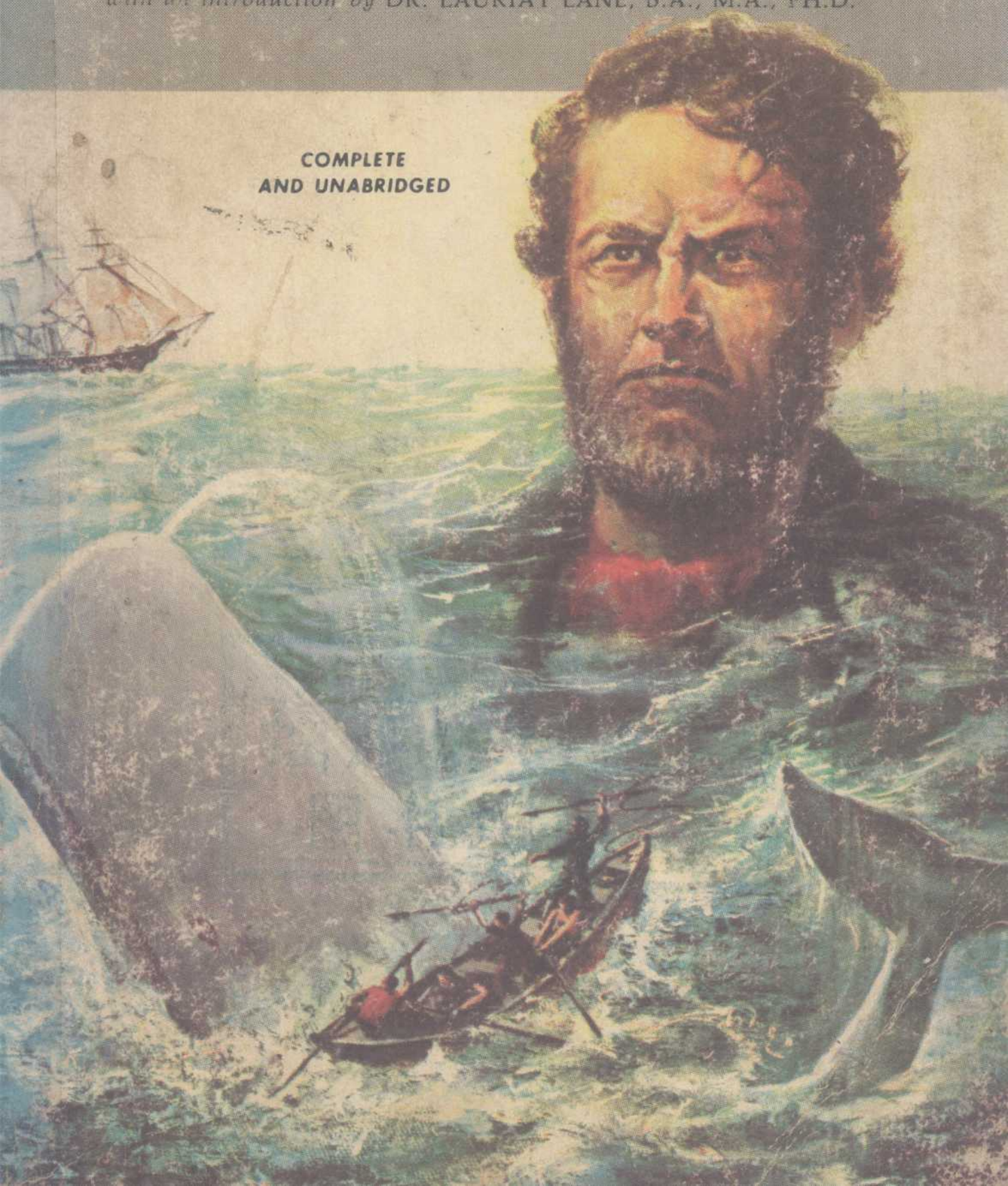

Moby Dick

or The White Whale

HERMAN MELVILLE

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from the immortal literature of the world

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Etymology

(SUPPLIED BY A LATE CONSUMPTIVE USHER TO A GRAMMAR SCHOOL)

THE pale Usher—threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now. He was ever dusting his old lexicons and grammars, with a queer handkerchief, mockingly embellished with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world. He loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his mortality.

"While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true."

HACKLUYT.

"WHALE. * * * Sw. and Dan. *hval.* This animal is named from roundness or rolling; for in Dan. *hvalt* is arched or vaulted."

WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY.

"WHALE. * * * It is more immediately from the Dut. and Ger. *Wallen;* a.s. *Walw-ian,* to roll, to wallow."

RICHARDSON'S DICTIONARY.

תן,	*Hebrew.*
χητος,	*Greek.*
CETUS,	*Latin.*
WHŒL,	*Anglo-Saxon.*
HVALT,	*Danish.*
WAL,	*Dutch.*
HWAL,	*Swedish.*
WHALE,	*Icelandic.*
WHALE,	*English.*
BALEINE,	*French.*
BALLENA,	*Spanish.*
PEKEE-NUEE-NUEE,	*Fegee.*
PEHEE-NUEE-NUEE,	*Erromangoan.*

In Token
of My Admiration for His Genius
This Book is Inscribed
to
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

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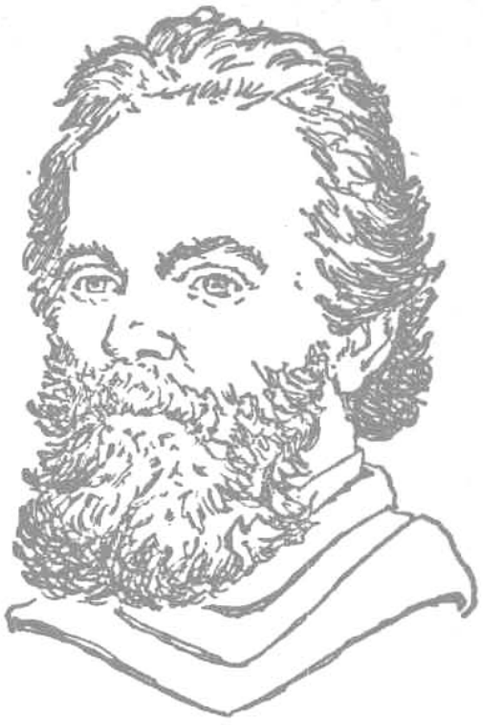

HERMAN MELVILLE

Introduction

HERMAN MELVILLE 1819-1891

In January 1841, Herman Melville sailed from New Bedford, Massachusetts, on board the whaling-ship *Acushnet*. In October 1844, he was discharged at Boston from the U.S. man-of-war *United States*. During these three years Melville served on three different whalers, jumped ship, took part in a mutiny, lived among the natives, worked as a store clerk in Honolulu, and finally served for a year in the regular navy. Along with a single voyage to England as a common seaman in 1839, these adventures supplied the raw material for most of Melville's major fiction and his imaginative vision of life.

When Melville sailed on the *Acushnet* he was, like the narrator of *Moby Dick*, "of an old established family in the land" but with "little or no money in my purse." One of his grandfathers was Major Thomas Melvill of Boston, the subject of Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem, "The Last Leaf." His other grandfather was Peter Gansevoort of Albany, a Revolutionary War general and a wealthy member of an important Dutch patroon family. Melville's father, Allan Melvill, however, failed in business and died when Melville was only twelve years old. Before going to sea on the *Acushnet* Melville had worked at various jobs, including one short period as a schoolmaster.

Moby Dick was published in 1851. Of the period from 1844 to 1851 Melville wrote to his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, "From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself. But I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould." During these seven years Melville had published six novels, including *Moby Dick*. After *Moby Dick* he continued writing fiction for a few years, but with less and less financial success. Gradually he turned to writing poetry, made some unsuccessful attempts at public lecturing, and in 1866 took a full-time position as Inspector of Customs at the Port of New York, a position he held for the next nineteen years. In his final years he turned again to prose fiction and wrote what is probably his second most famous work, *Billy Budd,* not published, however, until 1924.

MOBY DICK

Moby Dick has certain qualities in common with Melville's other novels, especially those that lead up to *Moby Dick*. Like these other novels, it has a factual base in Melville's own experience. This basis, in fact, is one of Melville's strengths as a writer, for it gives him an unshakable authenticity and also provides him with abundant material for poetic enlargement. In spite of this actuality, even Melville's most autobiographical works are not non-fiction. Melville always orders his narrative for artistic purposes and develops such themes as the relation between native and "civilized" life, the contrast between paganism and Christianity, or the idea of the ship as a miniature society reflecting society as a whole. Again, all these books have signs of Melville's growing concern for the problem of the presence of evil in the world, as seen in particular social abuses and in the universe as a whole. Always behind these particular questions of form and content lay Melville's split between the need to make money by writing and the desire to make a serious artistic statement.

Melville began writing *Moby Dick* soon after he returned from England in February 1850. In April he was taking books on whaling out of the library to help him reconstruct the world he had known almost ten years before. By summer both Melville and his publisher referred to the book as nearly done. Then, apparently, something happened to change Melville's ideas about the book,

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for the *Moby Dick* that we have was not finished until a year later, in the summer of 1851. One reason for the change may have been his renewed reading of Shakespeare. Another reason may have been his getting to know Nathaniel Hawthorne and Hawthorne's writings. In August 1850, Melville published a long critical article on Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* that contains some of Melville's most important remarks about what literature should be and do. After *Moby Dick* was published, Melville wrote to Hawthorne, "I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."

"Call me Ishmael"—one of the most dramatic and by now one of the most famous opening phrases in literature. Yet the novel does not really begin here, for the title, the subtitle, the dedication, the "Etymology," and the "Extracts" all prepare us in their own way for the work to follow. They help to define the subject and stature of the novel, they place Melville's whaling story in a full context of whaling literature, and they are the first of the many means Melville uses to universalize his particular story.

Who is Ishmael? First, he is the teller of the story. He is obviously not the immature, half-educated Herman Melville who went whaling in 1841. Nor is he identical with the mature, inspired Melville who, in 1850 and 1851, wrote *Moby Dick,* although he may often speak for this Melville. Ishmael is not only the teller of the story but an actor in it. And he is, in a real sense, the meaning of the story. For it is Ishmael's vision of the story that we get in *Moby Dick,* and Melville seems to have no other to offer.

The first twenty-three chapters of the novel are mainly Ishmael's. They establish him as the narrator of the entire novel, and they prepare him in a number of ways for the voyage. He goes to listen beneath the pulpit of Father Mapple and thereby gains an orthodox text out of which to evolve his own understanding of the story to follow. He becomes blood brother and soul mate of the savage harpooner Queequeg and thereby qualifies as a true whaler and as a Christian more tolerant than some. He gives us our first introduction to the *Pequod,* the legendary ship on which Ishmael sails under Captain Ahab to hunt the whale. At times Ishmael may seem to vanish after the ship sets sail for the Pacific, but we are often reminded in specific scenes of his presence, and his is still the voice we hear speaking of Captain Ahab, the *Pequod*'s crew, and the white whale Moby Dick. At the

end, of course, Ishmael alone survives to tell the tale. By his humor, his sanity, his understanding of the monomaniac Ahab, his sympathy with the crew, Ishmael has earned the right of survival and the obligation to retell his story.

"Reality outran apprehension"—in this way Ishmael introduces his first sight of Captain Ahab. One of Melville's greatest literary achievements is the way he has prepared Ishmael and the reader for the appearance of Captain Ahab and yet created a character so vivid and heroic that reality does, as Ishmael says, go beyond apprehension. Ishmael's talks with Captain Peleg and with the mad prophet Elijah have in many ways prepared him for Ahab. But Ahab, standing on the deck of the *Pequod,* with "an infinity of firmest fortitude" and "a crucifixion in his face," transcends all preparation. And Ahab's actions only confirm his tragic complexity and his domination over the crew as, in the great chapter "The Quarter-Deck," he binds them all to his vengeance.

During the voyage Ahab further reveals his nature. On the one hand, he allies himself with the diabolic Fedallah; on the other, he attaches to himself the little Negro cabin boy Pip, whose insanity, like that of the Fool in *King Lear,* often speaks truth. He opposes the first mate Starbuck and bends even Starbuck to the pursuit of the whale. In each of the nine "gams," or meetings with other whaling ships, Ahab again reveals himself. Above all in his many acts of presumption and his defiance of the omens that confront him everywhere he shows his greatness and his folly.

Ahab is the hero of *Moby Dick,* but what sort of a hero? Is he an epic hero, a representative man, in some sense a positive embodiment of the strength, virtues, and ideals of his people? Is his destiny in this sense national or even universal? Or is he a romantic hero, a figure of individual protest, a rebel against restraint and convention and order, against authority even if that authority come not from man but from God? Or is he a tragic hero, a potentially great man brought low by some flaw, perishing in pity and terror? Is he, in short, another Macbeth, or even another Lear?

The answer to all these questions depends in part on our judgment of Ahab's quest and on the identity of the white whale, Moby Dick, that is the object of that quest. And so we must also ask ourselves, who, or what, is Moby Dick? He is, first of all, a real whale, and one side of *Moby Dick* is its greatness as a history

of the whale fishery, the story of a colorful, courageous, little-known, vanished, and heroic way of life. The book is about whales and about whaling, and much of its action, although preparation for the final meeting with Moby Dick, does not concern the white whale directly. In this almost encyclopedic novel we learn all about the whale, inside and out, in fable and in fact, and live through the routine and the violent excitement of the whaling industry. In this context Moby Dick is the arch-whale, the king of the whales, perhaps avenging the slaughter of his people.

Many readers and some critics have been troubled by the digressions in the middle third of the book and have doubted what place they really have in the novel. By telling us about whales and whaling they provide the factual base that is characteristic of Melville's fiction. They give us relief and variety from the violence of the many lowerings after whales. By extending the middle of the book they give a sense of the length of the voyage from New Bedford through the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and into the Pacific, and by their alternation with other kinds of material they may even give a sense of the long ocean rhythms against which the other rhythms of the style and action of the novel are set. To sum up, these digressions allow for every possible enlargement of the central subject of the novel. And they are also eloquent and imaginative pieces of writing in their own right.

To Ahab, Moby Dick is not just any whale, or the king of whales, but the cursed whale that took off Ahab's leg. To Ahab, therefore, Moby Dick becomes the embodiment of "that intangible malignity which has been from the beginning; . . . all the subtle demonisms of life and thought"; and for this reason Ahab dedicates himself to hunting and killing Moby Dick, and wills the crew to share his quest.

But to Ishmael, and in some degree to Ahab and the crew as well, the whale is also the *white* whale, a symbol. What the whale is a symbol of defies paraphrase but is presented most fully in the famous chapter forty-two, "The Whiteness of the Whale," and is suggested in many places elsewhere in the novel. In his size, his elemental whiteness, his power, his beauty, his terribleness, and his other qualities, Moby Dick has been to some readers a symbol of nature, to some a symbol of God, to some a symbol of evil, to some even a symbol of the id or the superego. A symbol of such complexity cannot and should not be reduced to a single meaning, and every reader of *Moby Dick* comes to his own

terms with Melville's great symbol and then passes his own judgment on Captain Ahab's life and death.

In 1851, Melville wrote to Hawthorne about *The House of the Seven Gables*. What he said in that letter applies so well to Melville himself that it belongs at the end of this introduction to *Moby Dick:* "There is a certain tragic phase of humanity which, in our opinion, was never more powerfully embodied than by Hawthorne. We mean the tragedies of human thought in its own unbiassed, native, and profounder workings. We think that into no recorded mind has the intense feeling of the visible truth ever entered more deeply than into this man's. By visible truth, we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things, as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not, though they do their worst to him."

LAURIAT LANE, JR.

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