Moby-Dick by Herman Melville

Edited and with an Introduction by
Charles Child Walcutt

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Herman Melville

was born in New York City in 1819. When his father died, he was forced to leave school and find work. After passing through some minor clerical jobs, the eighteen-year-old young man shipped out to sea, first on a short cargo trip, then, at twenty-one, on a three-year South Sea whaling venture. From the experiences accumulated on this voyage would come the material for his early books, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), as well as for such masterpieces as *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *The Piazza Tales* (1856) and *Billy Budd, Sailor* (posthumous, 1924).

Though the first two novels—popular romantic adventures—sold well, Melville's more serious writing failed to attract a large audience, perhaps because it attacked the current philosophy of transcendentalism and its espoused "self-reliance." (As he made clear in the savagely comic *The Confidence Man* (1857), Melville thought very little of Emersonian philosophy.) He spent his later years working as a customs inspector on the New York docks, writing only the poems comprising *Battle-Pieces* (1866). He died in 1891, leaving *Billy Budd, Sailor* unpublished.

This edition of *Moby-Dick*, edited with an introduction by Charles Child Walcutt, contains the complete text of the novel; a brief life of the author; selections from his letters (including the brilliant exchanges with Nathaniel Hawthorne); a sampling of reviews by Melville's contemporaries; six modern essays (including D. H. Lawrence's famous critique); and a bibliography.

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INTRODUCTION

What Coleridge's ancient mariner said about his ill-fated voyage—

> We were the first that ever burst
> Into that silent sea.

might well have been said of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Its first readers were shocked and startled by the strange world it revealed to them. It was greeted by most English and American reviewers with respect but also with impatience and bewilderment. More than half the leading periodicals ignored it. The reactions of the rest ranged from glowing praise for its lively and vigorous style to severe censures for its bombast and its unnovelistic form. The consensus of reviewers described it as a wild mixture of philosophy, blasphemy, fancy, wit, exuberance, and adventure.

Initially, Melville seems to have started writing it as a sea adventure in the tradition of *Mardi* and *White Jacket*. On June 27, 1850, he offered the partly completed manuscript to an English publisher describing it as "a romance of adventure, founded upon certain wild legends in the Southern Sperm Whale Fisheries, and illustrated by the author's own personal experience, of two years and more, as a harpooner." The change in his conception of the novel seems to have dated from July of the same year when he read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*. In August, Melville met Hawthorne and the two joined in deep kinship over problems which they profoundly and almost uniquely shared. Later Melville spent several days with Hawthorne at Lenox and they engaged in long sympathetic exchanges. In Hawthorne, Melville found a man who understood his most deeply-suppressed intimations—a man who had written about them already, although in a manner that was so restrained and evasive that no one except perhaps Melville himself had understood their implications. He told Hawthorne what he may not have dared tell any other man: "The reason the mass of men fear God, and *at bottom dislike* Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch."

Influenced by Hawthorne, Melville produced a new and different book from the one he had begun. Published in October, 1851, a year late, *Moby-Dick* was dedicated to Hawthorne "In Token of my Appreciation for his Genius." Haw-

thorne's letter to Melville about *Moby-Dick* is lost. Melville received it about November 15, 1851, and replied, "A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as a lamb." He went on to express his astonishment at Hawthorne's so exactly sharing his deepest thoughts and fully sensing what Melville had despaired of ever being able to communicate.

Not only was *Moby-Dick* changed, it was also vastly enlarged. What Melville in June, 1850, described as half of it was probably only a small quarter of the finished work. As Melville's symbols generated meanings and further meanings, the book grew in size and complexity. What began with Calvinism reached out into Zoroastrianism; what began as a symbol of nature became a symbol of God and then of Man.

Stylistically, Melville was influenced by Sir Thomas Browne, the seventeenth-century writer whose prose impressed many American authors of the nineteenth century. Melville also drew heavily on Shakespeare both for style and character. Pip, for example, seems to be modeled after the Fool in *King Lear*. Ahab defying the fire in Chapter CXIX recalls Lear out in the storm on the heath, challenging the gods in their ultimate injustice. In the great Chapter XXXVI where Ahab declares his purpose to the crew, he does so in creditable Shakespearean blank verse, which Melville printed as prose.

> *Take off thine eye! More intolerable*
> *Than fiends' glarings is a doltish stare!*
> *So, so; thou reddenest and palest;*
> *My heat has melted thee to anger-glow.*
> *But look ye, Starbuck, what is said in heat,*
> *That thing unsays itself. These are men*
> *From whom warm words are small indignity.*
> *I meant not to incense thee. Let it go.*
> *Look! see yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted tawn—*
> *Living, breathing pictures painted by the sun.*
> *The Pagan leopards—the unrecking and*
> *Unworshipping things, that live; and seek, and give*
> *No reasons for the torrid life they feel!*
> *The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all*
> *With Ahab, in this matter of the whale?*

The more one rereads this passage, the more strikingly it reproduces the movement of the verse in Shakespeare's great tragedies, especially in *King Lear*. Even the slight irregularities

that appear in the first three lines above are characteristic of Shakespeare.

In the fervor and jubilation of the act of creation, Melville wrote to Duyckinck, "Can you send me about fifty fast-writing youths, with an easy style & not averse to polishing their labors?" With such a staff he might have been able to stay abreast of his inspiration. Without it, he was bound to feel that his creature grew faster than he could control it. "God keep me from ever completing anything," he wrote when he came to understand that this condition was inevitable to a conception like his. "This whole book is but a draught—nay, but a draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!"

A second reason for the greater size of the rewritten book is that its thesis cannot be simply, or even clearly stated. It has to be "rendered," to use Henry James's famous word, and the rendering involves indirections and ambiguities that carry the reader more and more deeply into the maze of Truth. At the same time, what Melville had to say was in some aspects so blasphemous, so utterly shocking to the religious sensibilities of his contemporaries that he dared not come out with it directly. On top of his proliferating symbols, he imposed a style of jocular evasion, of double and triple talk, of sly hints and impudent ironies, which made it difficult to hold him directly responsible for his most audacious statements and the impieties they express. Not only was he uneasy about speaking out directly; he was also oppressed by the realization that no artistic communication is more than a fraction of what the artist intends.

His book is difficult and complex because Melville does not reduce the dilemmas of the world and of life to childish simplicities. In *Moby-Dick* he is dealing with matters of profound mystery. Melville himself was concerned because he was unable to express all he meant, or even to bare all of his deepest thoughts.

Moby-Dick is a story contrived to explore and exemplify an idea. The journey in quest of Moby-Dick is an intellectual journey in quest of a truth. The novel therefore does not take the traditional dramatic form of problem-conflict-choice (climax)-and dénouement. Ahab is pitted against an antagonist he does not understand. The action of the book is, physically, the pursuit of the white whale; but spiritually it is the story of Ahab's developing idea of what his antagonist represents and what he plans to *do* as his understanding of his antagonist

develops. By the end of the story Ahab has knowledge, warnings, and portents. He has the loving appeals of Pip, the noble eloquence of Starbuck, and the warmth of home to draw him away from a final confrontation he knows to be hopeless. Yet he must go on. His decision to go on is not the result of a clear-cut choice, but of his fatal compulsion. "What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, so keep I pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time?" Ahab asks, and he has no answer. The Idea is in command and the characterization of Ahab is somewhat baffling because his intellectual development is at cross-purposes with his drive for revenge.

Melville allows us to consider various possibilities in his conceptions of the nature of evil and of the universe:

1. That the universe and God are all-good, essentially spiritual. This is the transcendental view that unites God, man, and nature in mutual perfection.

2. That the universe is controlled by an omnipotent and benevolent God who permits evil in man and nature. This is Christian dualism, which carries an enormous range of dogma, interpretation, and philosophy.

3. That good and evil are independent, equally powerful principles perpetually at war for control of the universe. This is Zoroastrian or Manichaean.

4. That the universe or God is essentially evil.

5. That the universe is chaotic.

6. That the universe is orderly but godless, therefore indifferent.

All, or almost all, critics have agreed on the special importance of the whale as a symbol. The extraordinary range of concepts and possibilities which the whale is made to suggest gives *Moby-Dick* its great richness. At first, the whale is Nature, a source of oil, meat, whalebone, and the valuable spermaceti oil. It is also the largest and the most powerful of all creatures, capable of sudden and incredible feats of destruction. It is impossible, as Ishmael discovers, to picture or describe the whale because it does not keep its shape unless it is in the water, and it is impossible to get close enough to it without being in the direst danger. Legends have grown up around the White Whale among mariners, until he has come to be thought both immortal and ubiquitous.

The whalers, then, become seekers of an ultimate truth,

which retreats farther and farther into the forbidden depths of the remotest seas. They discover "that mortally intolerable truth, that all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore." (XXIII) From such tropes, generated by an exploration of his great symbol, Melville constructs some of the most extraordinary sentences in American literature, sentences that derive their concreteness and vitality, their wonderful poetic qualities, directly from the powers that he releases in his symbol. Trying to get close enough to know Moby-Dick, his pursuers come to the ultimate inseparable and incomprehensible juxtaposition of Good and Evil. "Judge, then, to what pitches of inflamed, distracted fury the minds of his more desperate hunters were impelled, when amid the chips of chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades, they swam out of the white curds of the whale's direful wrath into the serene, exasperating sunlight, that smiled on, as if at a birth or a bridal." (XLI) From this graphic image of horror and frustration, Melville goes on to even more terrifyingly mysterious suggestions: "But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul; and more strange and far more portentous—why, as we have seen, it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind." (XLII) In abstracting and exploring one quality of the whale—its whiteness—Melville generates whole worlds of suggestions and new meanings beyond Christianity, beyond the various religions of the East, which are invoked in his search into the unknown, beyond good and evil, almost beyond the possibility of meaning, till "the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear colored and coloring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. And of all these things the Albino whale was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?"

In *Moby-Dick,* his great "draught of a draught," Melville went farther into the mystery of man's deathbound plight than any other American writer has done before or since.

In Token
of my admiration for his genius,
This book is inscribed
to
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

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.

לויתן,	*Hebrew.*
κητος,	*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.*

CONTENTS

EXTRACTS

(SUPPLIED BY A SUB-SUB-LIBRARIAN.)

IT will be seen that this mere painstaking burrower and grub-worm of a poor devil of a Sub-Sub appears to have gone through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth, picking up whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane. Therefore you must not, in every case at least, take the higgledy-piggledy whale statements, however authentic, in these extracts, for veritable gospel cetology. Far from it. As touching the ancient authors generally, as well as the poets here appearing, these extracts are solely valuable or entertaining, as affording a glancing bird's eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including our own.

So fare thee well, poor devil of a Sub-Sub, whose commentator I am. Thou belongest to that hopeless, sallow tribe which no wine of this world will ever warm; and for whom even Pale Sherry would be too rosy-strong; but with whom one sometimes loves to sit, and feel poor-devilish, too; and grow convivial upon tears; and say to them bluntly, with full eyes and empty glasses, and in not altogether unpleasant sadness—Give it up, Sub-Subs! For by how much the more pains ye take to please the world, by so much the more shall ye for ever go thankless! Would that I could clear out Hampton Court and the Tuileries for ye! But gulp down your tears and hie aloft to the royal-mast with your hearts; for your friends who have gone before are clearing out the seven-storied heavens, and making refugees of long-pampered Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael, against your coming. Here ye strike but splintered hearts together—there, ye shall strike unsplinterable glasses!

"And God created great whales."
Genesis.

"Leviathan maketh a path to shine after him;
One would think the deep to be hoary."
Job.

"Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah."
Jonah.

"There go the ships; there is that Leviathan whom thou hast made to play therein." *Psalms.*

"In that day, the Lord with his sore, and great, and strong sword, shall punish Leviathan the piercing serpent, even Leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea." *Isaiah.*

"And what thing soever besides cometh within the chaos of this monster's mouth, be it beast, boat, or stone, down it goes all incontinently that foul great swallow of his, and perisheth in the bottomless gulf of his paunch." *Holland's Plutarch's Morals.*

"The Indian Sea breedeth the most and the biggest fishes that are: among which the Whales and Whirlpooles called Balæne, take up as much in length as four acres or arpens of land."
Holland's Pliny.

"Scarcely had we proceeded two days on the sea, when about sunrise a great many Whales and other monsters of the sea, appeared. Among the former, one was of a most monstrous size. * * This came towards us, open-mouthed, raising the waves on all sides, and beating the sea before him into a foam."
Tooke's Lucian. "The True History."

"He visited this country also with a view of catching horse-whales, which had bones of very great value for their teeth, of which he brought some to the king. * * * The best whales were catched in his own country, of which some were forty-eight, some fifty yards long. He said that he was one of six who had killed sixty in two days."
Other or Octher's verbal narrative taken down from his mouth by King Alfred. A.D. 890.

"And whereas all the other things, whether beast or vessel, that enter into the dreadful gulf of this monster's (whale's) mouth, are immediately lost and swallowed up, the sea-gudgeon retires into it in great security, and there sleeps."
Montaigne.—Apology for Raimond Sebond.

"Let us fly, let us fly! Old Nick take me if it is not Leviathan described by the noble prophet Moses in the life of patient Job."
Rabelais.

"This whale's liver was two cart-loads." *Stowe's Annals.*