THE AMERICAN NOVEL

剑桥美国小说新论·7

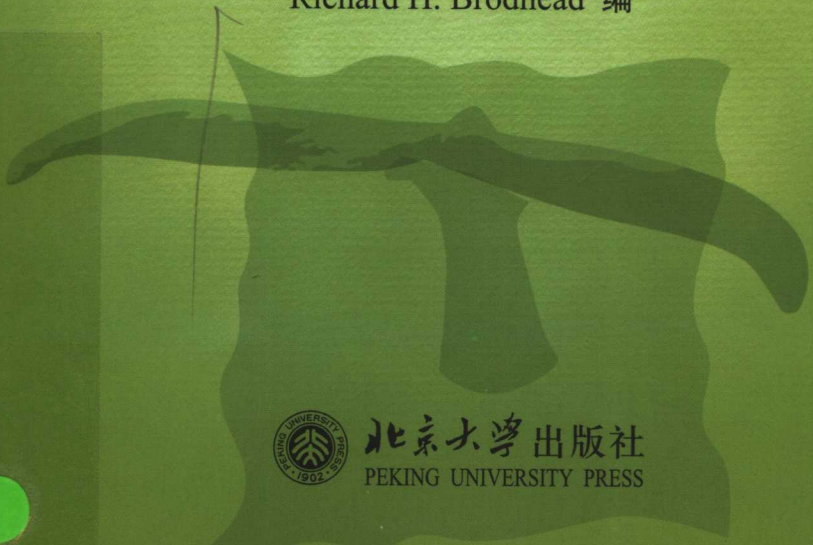
（英文影印版）

New Essays on

Moby-Dick

《白鲸》新论

Richard H. Brodhead 编



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导　读

北京大学英语系教授　陶洁

近年来，美国文学在我国很受欢迎。大专院校英语系纷纷开设美国文学选读和专题课，学生从中学到的大部分内容是美国小说。不仅如此，在本科毕业论文、硕士论文或博士论文方面，学生所选题材也大多为关于某部美国小说或某个美国小说家。然而，我们的学生往往热衷理论而对作品或作家缺乏深入细致的了解和分析。他们往往先大谈理论规则，然后罗列一些例证，不能很好地把理论和文本融会贯通，恰如其分地结合在一起。在这种情况下，我们需要一些好的参考资料来帮助学生更好地认识和理解他们在阅读或研究的作品和作家。《剑桥美国小说新论》正是这样一套优秀的参考书。

这套丛书的负责人是曾经主编过《哥伦比亚美国文学史》的艾默里·埃利奥特教授，并且由英国剑桥大学出版社在上世纪80年代中期开始陆续出书，至今仍在发行并出版新书，目前已有五十多种，不仅出平装本还有精装本。一套书发行二十多年还有生命力，估计还会继续发行，主要因为它确实从学生的需要出发，深受他们和教师的喜爱。

《剑桥美国小说新论》的编排方式比较统一。根据主编制定的原则，每本书针对一部美国文学历史上有名望的大作家的一本经典小说，论述者都是研究这位作家的知名学者。开篇是一位权威专家的论述，主要论及作品的创作过程、出版历史、当年的评价以及小说发表以来不同时期的主要评论和阅读倾向。随后是四到五篇论述，从不同角度用不同的批评方法对作品进行分析和阐

释。这些文章并非信手拈来，而是专门为这套丛书撰写的，运用的理论都比较新，其中不乏颇有新意的真知灼见。书的最后是为学生进一步学习和研究而提供的参考书目。由此可见，编书的学者们为了帮助学生确实煞费苦心，努力做到尽善尽美。

这五十多种书有早期美国文学家库珀的《最后的莫希干人》，也有当代试验小说大师品钦的《拍卖第49号》和厄普代克那曾被《时代》杂志评为1923年以来100部最佳小说之一的《兔子，跑吧！》；有我们比较熟悉的麦尔维尔的《白鲸》，也有我们还不太了解的他的《漂亮水手》；有中国学生很喜欢的海明威的长篇小说《永别了，武器》，令人想不到的是还有一本论述他所有的短篇小说的集子。有些大作家如亨利·詹姆斯、威廉·福克纳等都有两三本作品入选，但它们都分别有专门的集子。丛书当然涉及已有定论的大作家，包括黑人和白人作家（可惜还没有华裔作家的作品），但也包括20世纪70年代妇女运动中发掘出来的如凯特·肖邦的《觉醒》和佐拉·尼尔·赫斯顿的《他们眼望上苍》，甚至还有我国读者很熟悉的斯托夫人的《汤姆叔叔的小屋》。当年这部小说曾经风靡美国，在全世界都有一定的影响，后来被贬为“政治宣传”作品，从此在美国文学史上销声匿迹。70年代后随着要求扩大文学经典中女性和少数族裔作家的呼声日益高涨，人们才开始重新评价这部作品，分析它对日后妇女作家的影响、对黑人形象的塑造，甚至它在美国文学的哥特式传统中的地位等等。

这样的例子还有很多，例如威廉·迪恩·豪威尔斯和他的《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》。以前人们只肯定他在发展现实主义文学和理论方面的贡献，对他的作品除了《赛拉斯·拉帕姆的发迹》评价都不太高。但在这本新论文集子里编者对已有定论进行挑战，强调豪威尔斯的小说、他的现实主义跟当时的社会经济文化现状有很大的关系。他的小说既有其文学形式，又是一种社会力量。另外一位19世纪新英格兰作家萨拉·奥尼·裘威特过去一向被看成是乡土作家，现在学者们用女性主义观点强调她的《尖枞树之乡》对美国文学的贡献，分析当年的种族、民族主义和文学市场

对她写作的影响。用封底宣传语言来说，这本集子对美国文学研究、女性主义批评理论和美国研究等方面都会引起很大的兴趣。

还有一本书似乎在我们国家很少有人提起过——亨利·罗思的《就说是睡着了》。此书在20世纪30年代曾经风靡一时，此后长期销声匿迹，60年代又再度受到推崇。现在这部小说则是上面提到的《时代》杂志100部优秀小说中的一部，被认为是上个世纪头50年里最为出色的美国犹太小说、最优秀的现代主义小说之一。评论家认为集子里的文章采用心理分析、社会历史主义等批评方法探讨了有关移民、族裔和文化归属等多方面的问题。

这套集子里还出现了令人信服的新论点。很长时间内海明威一直被认为是讨厌女人的大男子主义者。但在关于他的短篇小说的论述里，作者通过分析《在密执安北部》，令人信服地证明海明威其实对妇女充满同情。不仅如此，这一论断还瓦解了海明威在《太阳照样升起》中充分暴露他的厌女症的定论。

然而，作者们并不侈谈理论或玩弄理论名词，所有的论断都是既以一定的理论为基础，又对文本进行深入的分析；既把理论阐述得深入浅出，又把作品分析得丝丝入扣，让人不由得不信服。他们能够做到这一点完全是因为他们了解学生的水平和需要。

我认为《剑桥美国小说新论》是一套很好的参考书。北京大学出版社购买版权，出版这套书是个有益于外国文学研究教学的决定。

Series Editor's Preface

In literary criticism the last twenty-five years have been particularly fruitful. Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself – apart from history, biography, and society – there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical. While attention to the text itself, as taught by the New Critics, remains at the core of contemporary interpretation, the widely shared assumption that works of art generate many different kinds of interpretation has opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings.

Before this critical revolution, many American novels had come to be taken for granted by earlier generations of readers as having an established set of recognized interpretations. There was a sense among many students that the canon was established and that the larger thematic and interpretative issues had been decided. The task of the new reader was to examine the ways in which elements such as structure, style, and imagery contributed to each novel's acknowledged purpose. But recent criticism has brought these old assumptions into question and has thereby generated a wide variety of original, and often quite surprising, interpretations of the classics, as well as of rediscovered novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, which has only recently entered the canon of works that scholars and critics study and that teachers assign their students.

The aim of The American Novel Series is to provide students of American literature and culture with introductory critical guides to

American novels now widely read and studied. Each volume is devoted to a single novel and begins with an introduction by the volume editor, a distinguished authority on the text. The introduction presents details of the novel's composition, publication history, and contemporary reception, as well as a survey of the major critical trends and readings from first publication to the present. This overview is followed by four or five original essays, specifically commissioned from senior scholars of established reputation and from outstanding younger critics. Each essay presents a distinct point of view, and together they constitute a forum of interpretative methods and of the best contemporary ideas on each text.

It is our hope that these volumes will convey the vitality of current critical work in American literature, generate new insights and excitement for students of the American novel, and inspire new respect for and new perspectives upon these major literary texts.

Emory Elliott
Princeton University

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Trying All Things: An Introduction to *Moby-Dick*

RICHARD H. BRODHEAD

I

HERMAN Melville has been acknowledged, in our time if not in his own, as one of American literature's greatest authors. Our time has also seen *Moby-Dick* – probably more than any other American novel – enshrined in the ranks of literature's ultimate achievements. But we are in danger of missing the special quality of Melville as a writer and of *Moby-Dick* as an act of writing if we think of them as sitting peacefully inside such sedate categories. If *Moby-Dick* is a classic, it is so very much on its own terms. What sets it apart is not really its whaling subject, and not even its famous depths of symbolic meaning, so much as the stand it takes toward literature itself – its quite peculiar attitude, registered on every page, toward what literature is and can be, and toward what it can attempt as a work of literary making.

Moby-Dick's great hero gives one measure of what I mean. Melville's ravaged and fanatic captain, so overscaled in his energies and so restricted in his range of interests, is in one sense a variant on a classic American type. Monomania, a rare personality disorder in everyday life, has something of the status of a normal state of selfhood in American fiction. From Charles Brockden Brown's compulsive ventriloquist to Hawthorne's questers after knowledge and Poe's fetishists of tooth and eye to the rigidified regional obsessives of Sarah Orne Jewett and Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner's tracers of unalterable designs, and Flannery O'Connor's involuntary baptisers and tattoo seekers, American fiction's most distinctive fantasies have commonly featured the figure of the monomaniac, the self mastered by a single motive and so restricted to a single move or goal. Captain Ahab is, of course,

the classic embodiment of this figure. But what is characteristic of Melville is that when he seizes on this common literary property, he instantly endows it with the power and presence of the full-fledged heroic self. He equips his obsessive with the hero's unforgettably distinguishing name – *"he's Ahab,* boy" (Chap. 16), Captain Peleg rightly underlines. He equips him with the hero's special linguistic register – the gorgeously musical metaphorical language Ahab seems less to speak than to declaim or sing. He equips him with the hero's magnanimity, his outsized capacities to will, do, feel, and suffer: Ahab wills not as we will but as a locomotive drives along a track; Ahab sobs not as we sob but with the superior woe of "a heart-stricken moose" (Chap. 36). And he equips him with the hero's memorable *story* or adventure – in this case, to hunt and to be destroyed by hunting the great white whale.

Captain Ahab is one of the few American contributions to that handful of resonant names – like Hamlet, or Lear, or Oedipus, or Faust – that seem to sum up some fact of human potential and to bare the contours of some exemplary human fate. If Ahab has joined this company, it is because Melville *imagines* him heroically: grasps and realizes him within a heroic conception of the self. This unattenuated heroicism is an impressive feature of *Moby-Dick* as a finished book. But it also bespeaks its distinctive spirit, the enabling literary attitude in which the book is attempted. When the author of *Moby-Dick* thinks of literature, his revival of the heroic mode reminds us, he associates it scarcely at all with the literary forms most active in his own time. Instead he drives literature back to its most primal and potent forms: identifies it with epic, quest narrative, and heroic tragedy, the forms of its most ancient and enduring achievements. And as he exhumes the idea of these forms, he also insists that they are still practicable now. He reads heroic literature in one way as a set of great achievements but in another as a set of imaginative *acts,* acts he asserts his right to do again in making a work of his own.

Part of what makes *Moby-Dick* stand out, in the company of literary classics, is its quality of raw literary presumptuousness – its cheeky confidence that nothing great has ever been done that it

can't at least try to do again. And it is a correlative of this presumptuousness that although *Moby-Dick* lays claim to everything great literature has achieved, it also refuses to acknowledge traditional literature's systems of restraint. The traditional high literary forms – tragedy and epic, most notably – observe fairly strict literary protocols. They do things in certain ways and not in others. Melville knows this; and in his zeal to reclaim what he thinks of as the genres of greatness, he can follow their programs quite carefully, for two or three chapters at a time. But Melville refuses to accept that part of the traditional compact that says that, while writing one kind of work, one must give up the will to be writing another. The obvious proof is that although the rudiments of a Shakespearean heroic tragedy can be spotted in *Moby-Dick*, they share textual space with masses of material that lie quite outside that tragedy. The book in which we learn something great about the internal contradictions of unqualified will is also the book in which we learn all sorts of little things about whales and their habits – how they breathe, for instance (a constant number of surface breaths in a fixed interval); or how they see (with two nonoverlapping visual fields and a blind spot to the front); or how they mate [*"more hominum"* (Chap. 87)]. Similarly, the book that, in one of its aspects, thrusts irreversibly forward toward its hero's appointed end is also the book that traces, much more meanderingly, the sequence of tasks needed to put up a killed whale's blubber in the form of processed oil.

The so-called cetological center of *Moby-Dick*, that mass of chapters story lovers love to skip, in fact could make a vigorous book in its own right. Properly separated and slightly amplified, these chapters could form a great work of American commodity history. They do for whale oil lighting what Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* does for the cattle hides that become our shoes, or what Frank Norris's *The Octopus* and *The Pit* do for the wheat that becomes our daily bread: They bring back to visibility, behind some product so familiar as to be a precondition for everyday life, the forgotton process by which it has been first wrenched out of natural life, then worked or manufactured into a marketable good. (We will continue to lack our world's full equivalent for

Moby-Dick until we have a great novel of the oil or nuclear power industry, a novel that will bring us knowledge of how the light we read it by is made.)[1]

But it is the nature of *Moby-Dick* that this commodity narrative is not given us as a book by itself, any more than Melville's quest tragedy is. Instead *Moby-Dick* delights in being heterogeneous – a work of mixed and discordant kinds, amalgamating into itself every form of writing (so it would seem) that strikes its fancy. Formally, *Moby-Dick* is always becoming something else, always deciding what kind of book it will be next; and its hectic shape shiftings bespeak, again, the peculiar *idea* of literature that governs this work. The book that will not pass up the chance also to do an Elizabethan soliloquy, and also a Calvinist sermon, and also a parody of a legal brief, and also an experimental operatic ensemble number (as in "Midnight, Forecastle") is a work strong in the sense of the whole, unfractioned power of literary utterance – a work that glories in the recognition, behind the separate generic forms that define and constrain it, of what *all* writing can express or do. Accordingly, its idea of the proper way of being literary is not to fill out the outline of some predetermined literary kind but rather to do everything at once: to embrace and display, in an exuberance of renewed invention, the full form of writing's expressive potential.

Moby-Dick's unwillingness to do one literary thing at the expense of another is part of what keeps it from pursuing its story straightforwardly. But another pressure keeps disrupting it too: the pressure of passionate philosophical surmise. As *Moby-Dick* describes it, the most elemental human passion is not love, or ambition, or acquisitiveness, but something more like anxiety – anxiety, specifically, about the ground of our being, an anxiety that drives us, whatever our immediate situation, to keep worrying the question how the world is framed and governed. Ahab is the most obvious victim of this passion. Ahab's disease is that he can't keep from extrapolating from local experiences to their cosmological implications – can't see elemental force, as in "The Candles," without thinking a world ruled by gods of force; can't see the insane Pip, as in "The Log and Line," without seeing too the "creative libertines" (Chap. 125) who allow such humanly intolerable sights.

But the passion Ahab feels so unqualifiedly is lived, at different levels of intensity, by all of Melville's characters. (Stubb's "I wonder, Flask, whether the world is anchored anywhere" [Chap. 121] is a typical passing remark in this cosmologically anxious book.) And this same passion informs the book itself as an act of thought. The energies of literary composition are so interfused with the energies of philosophical surmise in *Moby-Dick* that every stray particular that enters the book is in immediate danger of being seized on and pressed to yield a model of the world. Whale-lines are functional tools, made of certain materials in certain thicknesses, but only until they get caught in the updraft of cosmological generalization: "But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines" (Chap. 60). Sharks are fierce scavengers, fascinating wonders of natural ravenousness, but they too get pressed to yield a statement about the world's creator: "de god wat made shark must be one dam Injin" (Chap. 66).

Moby-Dick's always renewed thrust toward ultimate statement gives it its distinctive rhythm as a meditation in prose. It also produces what must be the most remarkable achievement in the book: the way *Moby-Dick* manages, not once but over and over, to project a vision of the world's essential constitution, and not vaguely but with sustained precision of articulated detail. "The Chapel" thus lets us see – where else did we ever grasp this possibility so concretely? – a world peopled with the dead, filled with the void of the nonexistent. "The Grand Armada" lets us see a world centered in generative and nurturing love, in its *Paradiso* vision of nursing mother whales; "The Castaway" lets us see a world formed through speechless, unmindful natural process; and so on. These acts of cosmic knowing are among the most distinctive literary accomplishments of *Moby-Dick*, and they remind us of something else Melville takes the literary to mean. For as *Moby-Dick* presumes to practice it, literature is simply not a secular art. First and last things, the state of the world and our place in it, are not the province of some other cultural system called religion, *Moby-Dick* asserts. They are instead literature's province, questions literature is empowered to address and explore. Moreover, Melville presumes that literature has the power not just to retell religious truth already arrived at but to deliver religion's realm *to*

knowledge, to grasp and speak it into comprehensible form – as "The Whiteness of the Whale," to give one last example, literally *develops* the idea of a cosmic blankness outside the sphere of mind, through the churnings of its prose.

Melville's activation of literature as an art claiming these great powers gives *Moby-Dick* its peculiar form of seriousness. Like scripture or vision narrative or wisdom writing – genres that it also draws into itself – *Moby-Dick* makes the heightened claim on our attention not that good writing does, but of speech that engages the ultimate dimensions of our existence. But if *Moby-Dick* reaches beyond the usual registers of literary expression, this leads to no devaluation of writing, but to intensified care for writing as such. More persistently than anything else – more persistently than it is heroic, or philosophic, or whatever – *Moby-Dick* is a book in love with language. It is so in love with the sound of words that it savors their spoken heft as it writes them. It is so in love with the infinitude of language that it always wants to use more of it, to heap high all the actual or conceivable words that any textual space will support. ("He tasks me; he heaps me" [Chap. 36] is a *Moby-Dick* locution; so is "devoured, chewed up, crunched" [Chap. 16], or "infixed, unrelenting fangs" [Chap. 41], or "heathenish, sharked waters and . . . unrecorded, javelin islands" [Chap. 24].) But it is peculiarly the case with *Moby-Dick* that its addiction to the act of putting things in words, or what we could call its sheer indulgence in language, serves as the means by which it drives its insights into knowledge. *Moby-Dick* loves to amplify. Having half-said something, its urge is always to stop and say it again. And this process of rhetorical elaboration is, on page after page, how it finally manages to say what at first eluded its grasp. If we end up with some idea of the spiritual torments that fuel Ahab's quest for revenge, it is because Melville keeps naming what exasperates Ahab (I break the passage to mark its iterations):

> All that most maddens and torments;
> all that stirs up the lees of things;
> all truth with malice in it;
> all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain;

> all the subtle demonisms of life and thought;
> all evil, to crazy Ahab, was visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. (Chap. 41)

If we finally begin to understand the dreadful blankness Ishmael associates with the white whale's whiteness, it is because he keeps renewing his surmise, more and more ingeniously naming the nothing he addresses:

> Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?
> Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors;
> is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (Chap. 42)

If we come more fully to realize the blind, unmindful destructiveness embodied in the beautifully deadly sea, it is because Melville's repetitions drive through our usual obliviousness:

> But though, to landsmen in general, the native inhabitants of the seas have ever been regarded with emotions unspeakably unsocial and repelling;
> though we know the sea to be everlasting terra incognita, so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his superficial western one;
> though, by vast odds, the most terrific of all mortal disasters have immemorially and indiscriminately befallen tens and hundreds of thousands of those who have gone upon the waters;
> though but a moment's consideration will teach, that however much baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make;
> nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impres-