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Moby-Dick

HERMAN MELVILLE



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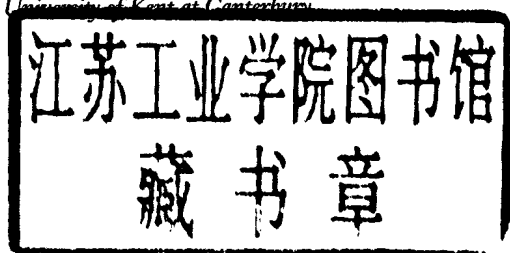
MOBY-DICK

or The Whale

Herman Melville

Introduction by
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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First published in 1993 by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ
New introduction and notes added in 2002

ISBN 1 85326 008 8

Text © Wordsworth Editions Limited 1993
Introduction and Notes © David Herd 2002

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Typeset by Antony Gray
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

MOBY-DICK

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

How the whale got its lungs

Shortly before the *Pequod* leaves the Indian Ocean for the Pacific, through the Straits of Sunda that separate Java from Sumatra, as Captain Ahab nears the end of his terrible quest, and when the crew is about as far from America as it is possible to get, Herman Melville, author, breaks brilliantly into his narrative, carrying his reader back to a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where, since earlier that day, in the shadow of Greylock mountain, he has been writing a chapter about the whale's spout.

My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist. And besides other reasons, to this conclusion I am impelled, by considerations touching the great inherent dignity of the sperm whale; I account him no common, shallow being, inasmuch as it is an indisputed fact

that he is never found on soundings, or near shores; all other whales sometimes are. He is both ponderous and profound. And I am convinced that from the heads of all ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, the Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts. While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long saw reflected there a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable moisture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon; this seems an additional argument for the above supposition. [pp. 309-10]

It is usually the case that when, like some literary Alfred Hitchcock, an author shuffles fleetingly into his own book, something notable is going on. So it is worth considering for a moment why Herman Melville, full up with tea in his 'thin shingled attic', all vestige of his narrator Ishmael temporarily shed, should choose this point in his story to show himself.

The chapter in question, 'The Fountain', is an important moment in the book. After many detailed descriptions of many aspects of the whaling industry, after sketches of the whale from all angles, and after numerous semi-philosophical digressions on the meaning of the beast and its significance to man, Melville is at that point in his story when he can finally show what most makes a whale a whale. It is, after all, the fact that it breathes through a spout and into lungs that distinguishes a whale either, as Melville would have it, from its fellow fish, or, as modern taxonomy insists, from fish altogether. Either way, it's the spout and lungs that count.

Everyone knows that by the peculiar cunning of their gills, the finny tribes in general breathe the air which at all times is combined with the element in which they swim; hence a herring or a cod might live a century, and never once raise its head above the surface. But owing to his marked internal structure which gives him regular lungs, like a human being's, the whale can only live by inhaling the disengaged air in the open atmosphere. Wherefore the necessity for his periodic visits to the upper world. But he cannot in any degree breathe through his mouth, for, in his ordinary attitude, the sperm whale's mouth is buried at least eight feet beneath the surface; and what is still more, his windpipe has no connexion with his mouth. No, he breathes through his spiracle alone; and this is on the top of his head. [p. 306]

Melville spells this all out very carefully, as he does the difference between a whale's lungs and a human's.

In man, breathing is incessantly going on – one breath only serving for two or three pulsations; so that whatever other business he has to attend to, waking or sleeping, breathe he must, or die he will. But the sperm whale only breathes about one-seventh or Sunday of his time.
(pp. 307–8)

In other words, it is at the point when he is showing the whale most like itself – like a fish, but different; like a man, but different – and when he is in the midst of describing it in its most essential activity (breathing), that Melville chooses also to show himself, to liken the whale to the writer at work. The moment has the force of a revelation: Melville revealing himself not only to the reader, but also to himself by the act of holding up a mirror. It is almost as if by entering the lungs of the whale Melville has gone to the heart of his writing. As if in contemplating the process of the whale's breathing – air down through the spout, into the lungs, back out as mist – that he has come to understand something about the act of writing itself, that he has caught himself as a writer being most like himself.

Melville's image of the whale breathing *is* revealing. Think about it carefully and one begins to understand why *Moby-Dick* is the great, strange book that it is. In particular one begins to understand the book's obvious peculiarities: why it begins with definitions; why it is prefaced by extracts from earlier writers; why it is so frequently allusive; why it reads, at times, more like a whaling manual than a novel. And in understanding all of this, what one comes to learn is something profound about writing itself. Few writers ever understood the act of writing better, showed more insight into its basic properties, than Melville did when he was writing *Moby-Dick*. The result is a truly inspirational novel, one way into which is through the whale's spout.

I

When Melville started to write in the winter of 1844–5, aged twenty-five and only five years before he began *Moby-Dick*, it was largely as an expedience. He was born, in New York City in 1819, into what is best described as the American aristocracy.¹ Both sides of his family could

¹ For an excellent, highly detailed account of Herman Melville's life up to and including the writing of *Moby-Dick*, see Hershel Parker's, *Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume One, 1819–1851*. If not given in the note, for full details of this and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

trace their descent to European nobility: on his father's, the Melvills, to Scottish knights and lords; on his mother's, the Gansevoorts, to Norwegian kings. Both his grandfathers had been revolutionary heroes. Thomas Melvill had participated in the Boston Tea Party and Peter Gansevoort (the 'Hero of Stanwix') had famously obstructed the British at Fort Stanwix in 1777. But Melville's father, Alan Melvill, was a disastrous business man, squandering his inheritance and many paternal hand-outs, so that instead of the privileged upbringing Melville and his seven siblings were expected to receive, the family was frequently on the move, each time to smaller accommodation. The moves were sometimes hasty, as landlords lost patience with unpaid rent – Melville once accompanied his father on a midnight flit, leaving Manhattan for the grandparental house in Albany – and amid all this uncertainty Melville received only limited schooling; his school career ending at the Albany Academy, which he left at the age of twelve. His was, as he described it, an 'irregular education'.

There are benefits to be had from a limited schooling. What is *Moby-Dick* if not the work of an autodidact? What does it offer the active reader if not an irregular education? In the short-term, however, Melville's lack of formal qualifications made life difficult. The American labour market he entered in the 1830s was contracting, and unable to secure more than a clerical position, Melville eventually decided, at the age of nineteen, that like many of his cousins he would go to sea, sailing to Liverpool on the merchant ship *St Lawrence* on 5 June 1839. On his return, in October that year, he tried teaching, at the Greenbush and Schodack Academy, soon discovered that teaching didn't pay and, after some unsuccessful schemes and business adventures of his own, signed up to sail again, this time leaving New Bedford, at Christmas 1840, on the whaling ship *Acushnet*. This time he was away for the best part of four years, during which he served on various ships (the whalers *Lucy Ann* and *Charles and Henry* and the US Navy frigate the *United States*) and spent several months living among South Pacific islanders: on Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas, Tahiti, Eimeo and on the Hawaiian Island of Lahaina. When he returned, to Boston in October 1844, it was with a succession of extraordinary tales to tell – about life at sea and more especially about his time with the peoples of the South Pacific – and also with a new way of making a living to be found. Prompted by his family, who were thrilled by his tales, Melville decided to transform himself from sailor into novelist.²

2 See Parker, p. 354.

He wrote quickly – nine novels plus short stories in eleven years – and initially with considerable commercial success. *Typee, or A Narrative of a Four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands* was published in the spring of 1846, in London and New York, and *Omoo*, his second novel, a year later. Both were lushly described, sensationally elaborated accounts of Melville's adventures, notably his sexual adventures, among South Sea Islanders. Neither is without literary value, each articulating a highly open-minded appreciation of the ways of life Melville found there. But the fact that they sold well was due primarily to his adroit combining of Romance conventions with taboo encounters. *Mardi*, his third novel, was a very different kind of book.

What made the difference between *Omoo* and *Mardi*, it doesn't overstate it to say so, was Melville's reading of Rabelais. Later, in February 1849, Melville would write of the profound jolt he received on his first thorough reading of Shakespeare.

Dolt and ass that I am I have lived more than 29 years, and until a few days ago, never made close acquaintance with the divine William. Ah, he's full of sermons-on-the-mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus. I take such men to be inspired. I fancy that this moment Shakespeare in heaven ranks with Gabriel, Raphael and Michael. And if another Messiah ever comes 'twill be in Shakespeare's person.

Much has been made by critics, rightly so, of Melville's ecstatic response to Shakespeare, of the effect his discovery had on the writing of *Moby-Dick*, and on the conception and language of Ahab in particular.³ Ahab is thus understood as a modern-day Shakespearean tragic hero, his 'nervous lofty language' finally contrasted with the lunatic wisdom of Pip's fool. But Melville's reading of Rabelais at the end of January 1848 – when he borrowed the second book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* from his friend, the New York editor Evert Duyckinck – was hardly less important.

What Rabelais gave Melville was a way of handling his reading. His education having ended in a formal sense at the age of twelve, it was resumed, as Melville several times observed, at sea. In *White Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War* (the novel he wrote before *Moby-Dick*), Melville devotes a chapter to 'A Man-of-War Library' and makes it clear throughout the book that his time at sea was largely spent reading and discussing books. Likewise Ishmael's insistence that 'a whale-ship was

3 The richest discussions of Shakespeare's importance to Melville are to be found in Matthiessen and Olson.

my Yale College and my Harvard', not only makes the anti-institutional claim that he received his instruction from the University of Life – from the realities of sea-faring and the company of old tars – but also the biographical observation that it was as a sailor Melville became a serious reader (p. 93).

The poet, and great Melvillean, Charles Olson said of Melville that 'He read to write.'⁴ This is true, certainly, of *Moby-Dick*. Reading voraciously, Melville needed the constant nourishment of other people's words to produce his own. Or to change the metaphor, as Ishmael puts it in Chapter 32 'Cetology', Melville 'swam through libraries' to write *Moby-Dick* (p. 111). And it was reading Rabelais that enabled Melville to become this kind of writer, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* providing him with a model of a structure within which to make the kind of loosely associated philosophical and observational digressions which would eventually so characterise *Moby-Dick*. Rabelais's gift to later writers is to have given this structure metaphorical form, his first great character, Gargantua, being, from the moment of his birth, comically insatiable. Gargantua thus embodies the expansive procedure that enabled Rabelais to contain and present his vast learning, and in the process to document his historical moment (the shift in sixteenth-century France from the Gothic to the Renaissance). Rabelais's great insatiable baby, who grows up to be an adventuring man, is thus the prototype for what Henry James called 'the loose baggy monsters' of American literature: Whitman's 'Self', the Pound of *The Cantos*, Charles Olson's own Maximus, and before them all Ishmael, simple sailor and sub-sub-librarian.

Mardi didn't sell so well. It is an important book, containing many splendid and sometimes brilliant digressions. But in the excitement of writing a Rabelaisian novel, of which he proved surprisingly capable in his late twenties, Melville abandoned almost all sense of plot, save the loosest gesture, at the beginning of the book, of a thwarted romance between the narrator and the beautiful and elusive Yillah. In so doing he disappointed his audience, which had been primed by *Typee* and *Omoo* to expect a sensational yarn. The two books that followed, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*, were written more quickly than ever (both were out within a year of *Mardi*'s publication in March 1849), Melville resorting to much more straightforward accounts of his maritime experiences (the voyage to Liverpool and his time on the *United States* respectively) in an attempt to satisfy the Anglo-American public's enduring curiosity for life at sea.

But Melville wasn't, couldn't be satisfied with this kind of book. As he wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne in June 1851, when deep into the fabric

of *Moby-Dick*, and with a strong presentiment that despite his best wishes this wasn't a book that would satisfy the market: 'What I most feel moved to write, that is banned, – it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.'⁵ The pressure to make money notwithstanding – he married in 1847, and had a son in 1849 – Melville could no longer write the way the market required. His resistance, which increased the more he read, and which he put in the form of a religious imperative – 'Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot' – had much to do with his irregular education. Coming to literature relatively late in life, Melville did so not with the reluctance of an unwilling recipient of some institutionally imposed reading-list, but with the wide-eyed eagerness of the autodidact, hungry for the resources of the world's great books. Scholars searching for Melville's secrets have given great attention to his reading, tracking his borrowings from friends and from New York libraries.⁶ But Melville never made any mystery of his sources, passing them on (not showing them off) in the 'Extracts' with which *Moby-Dick* begins: the Bible, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, Milton, Pope, Goldsmith, Jefferson – the list is not endless, but it does go on. And the point is that the more he read, the more Melville wanted to emulate what he read, until he could not, simply could not, write 'the *other* way'. Or to go back for a moment to Rabelais, the more Melville read the more he wanted to find a way of writing that would enable him to meld together all that he found valuable in other works. And this, more or less, as his diaries and letters describe it, was the state of mind, the state of readiness, in which he sat down to write *Moby-Dick*: full to the brim with the world's literature, in a state of something like intellectual frenzy.

5 Davis and Gilman (eds), p.128. As the editors of the Newberry-Northwestern edition of *Moby-Dick* document, Melville's book sales from *Typee* to *Moby-Dick* trace a downward curve. The novel's first print run in America, where the publisher was Harpers, was 2,915, the same number as *Mardi*, a thousand fewer than *Omoo*, *Redburn* and *White-Jacket*. Melville's British publisher, Bentley, printed 500 copies of *Moby-Dick*, half the number for *Mardi* and two-thirds that for *Redburn*. It was clear to the publishers that Melville was losing his readers, and *Moby-Dick* duly sold slowly. See *Moby-Dick*, edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, Evanston and Chicago 1988, pp. 683–9.

6 The best documentation of Melville's reading is provided by Merton M. Sealts Jr, in his *Melville's Reading: A Check-List of Books Owned and Borrowed*, to which he added a list of additions and changes in an appendix to his later book *Pursuing Melville 1940–1980*.

There were a number of good reasons for Melville to write a book about a whale. One was that it was the only the aspect of his life at sea he hadn't yet turned into words. A second was that the public's appetite for such a book was large. Newspapers regularly carried stories of whaling disasters, and books written from first-hand experience of whaling had recently found a market. Owen Chase's *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale Ship Essex* (1821) (itself an important source for *Moby-Dick*, Chase telling the true and subsequently legendary story of a seemingly calculated attack by a sperm whale on a whale-ship), Richard Henry Dana Jr's, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) and J. Ross Browne's *Etchings of a Whaling Cruise* (1846) had all recently achieved the kind of sales for which Melville hoped. A third reason, more in the substrata of Melville's thinking perhaps, but there none the less as the novel brings out, was the importance of sperm whaling to the American economy. Charles Olson writes about this best, showing that until the discovery of petroleum in Pennsylvania in 1859, sperm oil was very largely how the life of the nation was fuelled. Olson makes the point statistically, showing that, for instance, in 1844 the vast sum of a hundred and twenty million dollars was tied up in whaling, a figure that was high compared with other burgeoning American industries.⁷ The consequence of this industrial and economic centrality, as Melville makes brilliantly clear in Chapter 24 'The Advocate', was that in writing about the whale and its products, the ambitious writer could justly encompass very disparate aspects of American, and for that matter European, society. Which points, in turn, to the overriding reason Melville had for making whaling his subject: the great theme it supplied his writing. As Ishmael puts it when considering 'The Fossil Whale':

One often hears of writers that rise and swell with their subject, though it may seem but an ordinary one. How, then, with me, writing of this Leviathan? Unconsciously my chirography expands into placard capitals. Give me a condor's quill. Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand! Friends, hold my arms! For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs. Such, and so magnifying,

⁷ One would have to multiply this figure by around a hundred to get its equivalent in today's money. See Olson, pp. 16-25.

is the virtue of a large and liberal theme! We expand to its bulk. To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. [p. 376]

The virtue of his subject, as this passage shows, was that Melville could hardly contain himself, his writing expanding into 'placard capitals', his sweep and scope becoming epic, sublime. Nothing it seems, not even the suburbs of the universe, could exceed his writing now he had embraced his great theme, which, as he indicates, is not only the whale, but everything man has ever encountered that he can neither fully comprehend nor bring totally into view. What Melville is writing about, in other words, is that which exceeds language – no matter how deep your inkstand, how big your quill – the consequence of which is that he finds himself at liberty to expatiate, to extend, almost until it has no limits, his 'outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep'. What Melville came to understand, then, was that *Moby Dick* was his Gargantua; that what the insatiable child had done for Rabelais, the whale might do for him: provide the form and theme that would hold together the speculations and digressions that were for him the very fabric of writing; a form and theme, moreover, for which the American public already seemed to have an appetite.

Not that Melville saw this all at once. As with *Mardi* – in which part way through a conventional, if stylised, adventure shifts abruptly into an intellectual excursion – the writing of *Moby-Dick* appears to have been a broken-backed affair. It is speculated that Melville began the book in February 1850. Certainly by 1 May of that year he was well on with it, writing to his fellow whalerman Richard Henry Dana to say, among other things, that the book was half done.⁸ This initial rate of progress was confirmed by Evert Duyckinck, who in a letter in early August that year told his brother in passing that Melville's book was nearly completed. *Moby-Dick* wasn't finally finished until the end of the summer of the following year.⁹

There were practical reasons for the delay. In September 1850 Melville bought a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts – the farm on which we find him when he is contemplating the whale's lungs – and the move itself and then the work involved in running the farm were undoubtedly very time-consuming. But not so time-consuming as to explain the gap of year between Evert Duyckinck's estimation and the book's actual completion, especially not given Melville's fluency. Scholars and critics have filled the gap, the consensus being that, as Olson first argued in *Call Me Ishmael*,

8 Davis and Gilman, p. 108

9 For a much fuller account of the period of *Moby-Dick*'s composition, see Olson.

there were in fact two *Moby-Dicks*: the one Melville was writing until August 1850, and the one he wrote after that time, the one we know. And what made the difference, so it is persuasively suggested, is a review Melville wrote for Duyckinck's *Literary World* entitled 'Hawthorne and his Mosses'. Ostensibly the review was of Hawthorne's book of tales *Mosses from an Old Manse*, published some four years earlier but which Melville, who had recently met Hawthorne, had only just read. But Hawthorne's book stirred something very deep in Melville, so that his review of it became an occasion for his reflections on Shakespeare (whom he had read, it will be recalled, only a year or so earlier), and, through those reflections, for a statement both of his ambitions for American writing and of his democratic aesthetic as he now understood it. In Hawthorne, Melville felt he had for the first time read an American author who might with justice be compared to Shakespeare, and the salutary effect of this would seem to have been to cause him to re-imagine the book he was then writing. Exactly how is a matter of confident scholarly speculation. The most significant change, it is generally agreed, is that Ahab only became the looming tragic presence that he is after August 1850, the darkness of Hawthorne's imagination perhaps enabling Melville to siphon Shakespeare into his prose in a way that previously he hadn't found possible.¹⁰ Perhaps, also, the change of direction in August 1850 explains the marked differences of tone between the first twenty or so chapters, with their comic, even Dickensian, social observations, and the epic sweep and ambition of the rest of the book. But whatever did or did not happen to the composition as a result of the thinking he did through 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', what is clear is that Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* in a state of considerable excitement, that he was consumed throughout by the act of composition. The result was a novel more eager to share the pleasure of writing with its readers, to pass on the satisfaction that comes from the process of composition, than anything to be found in the English tradition except *Tristram Shandy*.

You can hear Melville's excitement, his desire to communicate it, in the letters and reviews he wrote while at work on his whale. Witness his letter to Dana, May 1850, in which he makes the first reference to what he calls his 'whaling voyage':

It will be a strange sort of book, tho', I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho' you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a maple tree; - & to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in

10 A detailed discussion of the changes Melville did (and didn't) make to his novel after writing 'Hawthorne and his Mosses' is provided by Hershel Parker in his essay 'Unnecessary Duplicates'.

a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves.¹¹

The thing to notice here is the way everything gets tangled up: Melville's description of the act of writing the novel taking on the metaphors which are the substance of the novel itself. This, remember, proved to be early in the process, but already Melville is consumed. Already he is thinking about his writing in terms of the whale. Or to put it more strongly, the whale has become his way of thinking about writing. And not just writing. Consider this, from 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', in which Melville tries to get at the revelatory quality in Shakespeare:

But it is those deep far-away things in him; those occasional flashing-forths of the intuitive Truth in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality: — these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare.¹²

These are also the things that make Melville, Melville. Where, after all, do 'those short, quick probings' come from if not the whale hunt; from the late stages, perhaps, before the final flurry, when the harpooneer has done his work, and the whale killer has stepped in to finish the business. As when Stubb, for instance, 'firmly planting his knee in the clumsy cleat, darted dart after dart into the flying fish' (pp. 238–9). There are other ways, of course, of talking about the truth in Shakespeare. What is clear is that for Melville the processes of the whale hunt have become inextricably intertwined with his epistemology. But what about what makes Hawthorne, Hawthorne? Melville tells us, in related terms:

. . . unlike Shakespeare, who was forced to the contrary course by circumstances, Hawthorne (either from simple disinclination, or else from inaptitude) refrains from all the popularizing noise . . . content with the still, rich utterances of a great intellect in repose, and which sends few thoughts into circulation, except they be arterialized at his large warm lungs, and expanded in his honest heart.¹³

11 Davis and Gilman, p. 108

12 *Moby Dick*, edited by Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1967, p. 541. 'Hawthorne and his Mosses' can also be found in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Volume One (Fifth Edition).

13 Hayford and Parker, op. cit., pp. 542–3

Melville, we might conjecture, knew little about Hawthorne's lungs (they had, after all, met only the once). He did, however, know a good deal about the whale's lungs and, as we have seen already, in his consumed state, they were, for him, becoming inseparable from the act of writing.

Nor does the prose Melville wrote while writing *Moby-Dick* only show us the shape of his thinking at the time. What we learn also is that during this period Melville was as intimate with the rhythms and pulse of writing as perhaps any writer ever has been, his letters to Hawthorne in particular catching the state in which composition becomes possible. 1 June 1851:

I go to New York, to bury myself in a third-story room, and work and slave on my "Whale" while it is driving through the press. *That* is the only way I can finish it now, – I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances. The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man *ought* always to compose – that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar.¹⁴

This is how it was; Melville *was* still working on *Moby-Dick* while it was going through the press. But the thing to notice is that 'silent grass-growing mood', which brilliantly describes the state of concentration necessary to hold together a book as diverse and extensive as *Moby-Dick*. And if such a mood was seldom Melville's it must sometimes have been his, as elsewhere in his letters to Hawthorne he shows. Reading Goethe, he tells Hawthorne, 'I came across this, "*Live in the all*".' Upon which remark Melville offers the following commentary:

This 'all' feeling, though, there is some truth in. You must have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that man will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion.¹⁵

Or, as he puts it later, after Hawthorne has written praising *Moby-Dick*:

Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life? And when I put it to my lips – lo, they are yours and

¹⁴ Davis and Gilman, p. 128.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 130–1.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 142.

not mine. I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the Supper, and that we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling.¹⁶

Pieces that, when in the grass-growing mood, Melville believes the great writer capable of holding together. As he says in 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', with reference to Shakespeare, but in defence of the most modern American writing, and in a statement that makes Melville's occasional criticism comparable with Keats's: 'great geniuses are parts of the times; they themselves are the times; and possess a correspondent colouring'.¹⁷

What this amounts to – this state of mind in which truth can be probed, and the lungs are full – is what Sophia Hawthorne, Nathaniel's wife, in a letter to Evert Duyckinck, called Melville's 'enthusiasm'. Describing her delight at reading 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', she observed how

I keep constantly reading over and over the inspired utterances, and marvel more and more that the word has at last been said which I have so long hoped to hear, and said so well. There is such a generous, noble enthusiasm as I have not found in any critic of my writer.¹⁸

'Enthusiasm' is key. It was a central term in American literary culture at this time, not least because it was one of Emerson's favourite words.¹⁹ Returning to it time and again, and to its cognates, notably inspiration, 'enthusiasm' was variously crucial to Emerson's thinking. In the 'Oversoul', for instance, one of his clearest statements of what he meant by 'Transcendentalism' ('that Unity . . . within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other'), he judges that 'a certain enthusiasm attends the individual's consciousness of that divine presence'.²⁰ Emerson's use of 'enthusiasm' here is etymologically proper, the word meaning, in its original Greek sense, to breathe in and be possessed by a god. But Emerson is also allocating to the enthusiastic state of mind a highly significant social function. Such sense of society as Emerson's writing offers is located in the spiritual affinity that people have with one another as a result, as he sees it, of being party to the

17 Hayford and Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 543

18 Cited in Parker, p. 769

19 For a different and extended discussion of Melville's enthusiasm, see Fredricks.

20 Emerson, *Essays*, First Series, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston, pp. 252, 264