

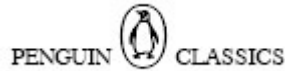
P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

HERMAN MELVILLE

MOBY-DICK
OR, THE WHALE



MOBY-DICK

HERMAN MELVILLE was born on August 1, 1819, in New York City, the son of a merchant. His father died when he was only twelve, and Herman worked as a bank clerk and later an elementary school teacher before shipping off on a whaling ship bound for the Pacific. Upon his return, he published a number of books based on his experiences at sea, which won him immediate success. By 1850, he was married and had acquired a farm near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he wrote *Moby-Dick*. His later works, including *Moby-Dick*, became increasingly complex and alienated many of his readers. In 1863, during the Civil War, he moved back to New York City, where he died in 1891.

NATHANIEL PHILBRICK is the author of the *New York Times* best-selling *Mayflower* (Penguin, 2006), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for History, and *In the Heart of the Sea* (Penguin, 2000), winner of the National Book Award. He has lived on the island of Nantucket since 1986.

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HERMAN MELVILLE

**Moby-Dick
OR, THE WHALE**

A Penguin Enriched eBook Classic

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FOREWORD

Even though I hadn't read a word of it, I grew up hating *Moby-Dick*. My father was an English professor at the University of Pittsburgh with a specialty in American maritime literature, and that big, battle-scarred book came to represent everything I resented about his job: all the hours he spent in his attic study, relentlessly reading and writing, more often than not with *Moby-Dick* spread out before him.

Sometimes at dinner he even dared talk about the novel, inevitably in an excited, reverential tone that only exasperated me all the more. And yet, despite my best efforts to look as bored as possible, I found myself hanging on every word. For you see, when my brother and I were very young, my father had told us a bed-time story.

The story was about a whale, a real whale that had rammed and sunk a ship in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The men had taken to their little whaleboats, and instead of sailing for the nearby islands, they headed for South America, thousands of miles away. When a rescue ship found them three months later, only a few of the men were left alive, and in their hands were the bones of their dead shipmates. (That my brother and I grew up without permanent psychological damage is a testament to our mother's remarkable parenting skills.) I was a little hazy on the details, but I understood that *Moby-Dick* had something to do with that ship-ramming whale. But, of course, there was no way I was going to crack open the novel and find out for myself.

I resisted until my senior year in high school when my English teacher made it clear that I had no choice but to read *Moby-Dick* if I was going to graduate in the spring. By that point I had developed an insatiable love of sailing—not your normal recreational activity for a teenager from the Steel City. For reasons too improbable and complex to go into here, I had dedicated myself to racing a Sunfish sail-boat, practicing every weekend on a little manmade lake about an hour outside the city. The previous year I'd

qualified for the Sunfish World Championship in Martinique. I finished near the bottom of the fleet, but I was hooked. The exotic tang of saltwater had intoxicated me; I found myself dreaming about the tide-heave of the sea. For me, a shy kid in a big urban high school, sailing seemed my only hope of escape. Then, in February of 1974, I discovered Herman Melville.

The voice of Ishmael, the novel's narrator, caught me completely by surprise. I had expected to be bored to death, but Ishmael sounded like the best friend I had always hoped to find. In the first paragraph he admits to a state of almost clinical depression—"a damp, drizzly November in my soul"—to which any adolescent can relate. But not to worry, Ishmael reassures us, he has found a solution to this condition. Instead of doing damage to himself or to others, he seeks solace in the sea. What's more, he insists, he is not alone: "If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me." As proof, he describes the city of New York on a Sunday afternoon, its cooped-up inhabitants lingering on the waterfront, looking out longingly toward the sea in search of "the ungraspable phantom of life."

Needless to say, this was a scene that spoke to me with a direct, almost overwhelming power. "I am tormented," Ishmael confesses, "with an everlasting itch for things remote." I found myself nodding in agreement. Then, six hundred pages later, came the final pay off when the white whale smashes into the *Pequod*. Here was the event that had been a part of my consciousness for as long as I could remember. And as Melville makes clear early on in *Moby-Dick*, a whale did, in fact, ram into a whaleship from Nantucket back in 1820. So this was the story my father had told us in our bedroom all those years ago. As Ishmael says in the very first chapter, "the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open." It was more than I could comfortably comprehend. But as I've since discovered, that is a common reaction to *Moby-Dick*.

Twelve years later, in 1986, I moved with my wife and our two young children to Nantucket Island. Melissa had always dreamed of practicing law in a small town like the one she had grown up in on Cape Cod, and when she saw an ad for a position on Nantucket, she immediately sent in her resume. At the time, I was a freelance sailing journalist and could live just about anywhere. And besides, even though we didn't know a soul on the

island, I figured I was already pretty familiar with the place. I'd read about it in Chapter 14 of *Moby-Dick*.

It was, and remains to this day, my favorite chapter of the novel: a five-paragraph *tour de force* that creates a mesmerizing sense of bustling enchantment. At this early stage in the book, what will become a dark and disturbing portrayal of Captain Ahab's mono-maniacal quest for the white whale is more like the literary equivalent of a buddy movie as Ishmael and Queequeg make their uncertain, sometimes hilarious way to the island that was once the whaling capital of the world.

Nantucket is, in Ishmael's words, an "elbow of sand; all beach without a background." The island's greatness has nothing to do with its beauty or its natural resources; it is a mere setting-off point—a place wholly dedicated to an activity that occurs on the other side of the world. In fact, the island is, to Ishmael's way of thinking, a kind of joke, and the second paragraph of the chapter becomes a running gag about the island's lack of vegetation. Ishmael claims that weeds have to be planted on the island since they don't grow there naturally; that wood is so rare that tiny splinters are coveted like pieces of the "true cross in Rome" that Nantucketers are reduced to planting toadstools in an attempt to create some shade; and that the sand is so deep that the islanders clamber around in their own sand-adapted version of snow-shoes.

Once he's gotten the jokes out of his system, Ishmael plunges into an account of the Native American origins of the island. He tells of the myth of the giant bird that swooped down over a native village on Cape Cod and carried an Indian boy out across the water. The child's parents set off in frantic pursuit in a canoe. Many miles later they discover an island that would become known as Nantucket, and beneath a tree they find their son's whitened skeleton. Ishmael then recounts the amazing achievements of an island nation whose dominion is nothing less than all the oceans of the world: "Let America add Mexico to Texas, and pile Cuba upon Canada; let the English overswarm all India, and hang out their blazing banner from the sun; two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer's. For the sea is his; he owns it, as Emperors own empires."

If I had stopped to think about, instead of becoming totally captivated by Ishmael's miraculous prose, I would have realized that he is not describing a real-life place as much as he is evoking a phenomenon, what he calls elsewhere "a fine, boisterous something." The Nantucket of *Moby-*

Dick is an idea, not a town, and yet I had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. I thought that nothing could be better than to live on this wondrous “ant-hill in the sea.”

Not long after relocating to Nantucket I discovered that Melville had never set foot on the place prior to writing *Moby-Dick*. I had been hoodwinked, seduced by an author’s enticing but purely imaginary construct. But the more I learned about the island’s history, the more I realized that this was not really the case. Even if Melville had never visited the island prior to writing his masterpiece, he was exceedingly familiar with its inhabitants, having spent several years of his youth as a whaler in the South Pacific. At the core of the dazzling rhetorical display of *Moby-Dick*’s Nantucket is an imperishable historical truth. What I didn’t realize then was how long it was going to take to discover just what that truth meant to me.

I would write two books of Nantucket history before I turned my undivided attention to the story I had first heard as a child. By that point I’d begun to appreciate the ballast of reality hidden in the *Pequod*’s hold. For us, distanced by more than a century from the time when whale oil was the petroleum of its day, it is difficult to believe that a process as ghastly and strange as whaling was an integral part of the American economy and culture. Having grown up in Pittsburgh at a time when the city was dominated by smog-belching steel mills, I had been unexpectedly prepared to appreciate the dirty, often brutal conditions aboard a whaleship: floating factories dedicated to ripping blubber from the whale’s corpse, chopping the blubber up, then boiling it into oil amid a stinking pall of sooty smoke. *Moby-Dick* may be, on occasion, mythic and metaphysical, but it is also an extraordinarily detailed and accurate account of American whaling in the nineteenth century. As Ishmael insists, again and again, he is not making this up.

But the novel is much more than a historical document. As I’ve already indicated, it can be quite funny; in its flights of language *Moby-Dick* can be more than a little intimidating, as if Shakespeare and the translators of the King James Bible teamed up to write a very weird book about whaling. Once the tale of Ahab’s pursuit of Moby Dick clicks into high gear, the novel becomes an adventure story. Then there are the fascinating sidebars that begin to take up more and more of the novel as Ishmael openly

discusses his attempts to write a book as ungovernable as the white whale itself.

But it wasn't until the writing of *In the Heart of the Sea* that I came to understand that Melville had gotten much more than a dramatic conclusion from the story of the *Essex*. He had gotten a point of view. If nothing else, *Moby-Dick* is the tale of a survivor. And just as I'd analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the men who'd survived the *Essex*, I found myself trying to figure out who was this Ishmael and why fate, or at least Melville, had chosen him alone to tell the *Pequod's* story.

At the beginning of the novel, Ishmael informs us that all this happened “[s]ome years ago—never mind how long precisely.” We subsequently learn that he has been living with the story for a very long time, shipping out on a string of whaling voyages in the years since the sinking of the *Pequod*. All this time he has been preparing the book we are now holding in our hands. Taking a writer's fact-gathering to an unheard-of extreme, he has even had the dimensions of a gigantic sperm whale skeleton tattooed to his arm.

But if Ishmael has thrown his lot with the sea, he has done so with more than a little regret. As he knows better than anyone, the sea is a most unforgiving task-master. “No mercy, no power but its own, controls it,” he says in the chapter titled “Brit,” then launches into a simile that ends as an anguished warning: “For as the appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle; thou canst never return!”

To my mind, the novel's masterpiece is the chapter “The Grand Armada,” in which Ishmael discovers the vision of domestic bliss that he has denied himself but which is nonetheless crucial to our humanity. After being dragged through the chaotic fringes of a vast school of whales, he and his whaleboat crew come upon a lake-like still center, where whales gently copulate and mother whales suckle their young. Even if this “enchanted calm” is all too quickly destroyed by a whale entangled in the line of a cutting spade, it remains an enduring example of everything the demonic Ahab is not:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the center freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concernments; yea, serenely reveled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.

The imagery of this passage anticipates the novel's final scene, in which the whale-rammed *Pequod* and all the chaotic plentitude of the book are sucked down into the swirling vortex of the void. The sole exception is Ishmael. Clinging to a life-buoy fashioned from Queequeg's unused coffin, he seems to have drifted into the welcoming stillness at the maelstrom's center, where he remains miraculously immune to the sea's hazards. "The unharmed sharks," he recounts, "they glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths; the savage sea-hawks sailed with sheathed beaks." Two days later Ishmael is rescued, and as is the blessing and curse of all survivors, he must begin to live the rest of his life.

The publication of *Moby-Dick* marked the beginning of a difficult time for its author. What is generally considered the greatest American novel ever written proved to be a critical and popular disappointment in the fall of 1851. Even Melville's friend and literary confidante Evert Duyckinck panned it in what must have been a humiliating review for Melville. The novel's poor sales put him under increasing pressure to support his large and growing family. Then, the following summer, Melville visited Nantucket for the first time.

Like the author of *Moby-Dick*, the island had fallen on hard times. In just a few years, Nantucket had lost more than a quarter of its voting population to the gold fields in California. Where he had once imagined Ishmael walking the streets with his cannibal cohort Queequeg, Melville found a ghost town.

He made a point of meeting George Pollard, the captain of the ill-fated *Essex*. Pollard had given up the sea and become the town's nightwatchman. "To the islanders he was a nobody," Melville would later record, "to me, the

most impressive man, tho' wholly unassuming even humble—that I ever encountered.”

In the years to come, Melville's professional life as a novelist would go the way of Pollard's whaling career. Having lost a readership for his books, he would be forced to take a job as a customs inspector on the wharves of New York City. As if mocked by Ishmael's vision of domestic bliss in “The Grand Armada,” Melville's family life proved difficult. There are indications that he drank too much, that he may have physically abused his wife; one of his sons would die of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Finally, in 1885, a small inheritance allowed Melville to retire from the customs office at the age of sixty-six. After years of composing arid, intellectually complex poetry, he wrote what many regard today as one of the greatest novellas ever written, *Billy Budd*, about an incident; aboard a British man-of-war. Pasted to the side of his wooden writing desk was a simple slogan: “Keep true to the dreams of thy youth.”

What these words meant to Melville can only be guessed. But what unites his two masterworks, *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*, is the watery wilderness in which Melville came of age: the sea. It is one of the ironies of history that 150 years after *Moby-Dick*'s publication, the frontier that most Americans associate with our national identity, the West, has long since been civilized beyond recognition. The sea, on the other hand, has never been tamed, and it is the sea that, with Melville's help, we are beginning to rediscover. He is, in the end, one of our greatest literary survivors.

—Nathaniel Philbrick

INTRODUCTION

Not many years ago, at an elite northeastern university, a prominent English literary critic was asked which was the greatest English novel. The room was paneled and lit by a chandelier, the windows heavily draped, the bookshelves lined with leatherbound classics—furnishings all carefully assembled to replicate an Old World atmosphere. There was not a whiff of sea air in that room. With the combination of eagerness and resentment that sometimes greets the proclamation of a standard, the students leaned forward to hear from their eminent guest. “*Middlemarch* would be my candidate,” he said tentatively, “unless by English novel you mean novel *in English*, in which case it would, of course, be *Moby-Dick*.”

That *Moby-Dick*, this sea monster of a book, could be declared self-evidently the greatest work of fiction in the language by an arbiter of literary taste would have amazed Herman Melville—not because he did not believe it to be true, but because he doubted the palatability of his truth. Melville was an artist of the highest ambition, but he thought of himself as a writer whose insolence and candor would never become the currency of genteel common rooms. “A whaleship was my Yale College and my Harvard,” he wrote in *Moby-Dick*, which is a book full of wild and untamable characters—“mongrel renegades, and castaways,” Melville called them—and written in frank contempt for the genteel life:

The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities. But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship’s direst jeopardy; she must fly all hospitality;... With all her might she crowds all sail off shore... seeks all the lashed sea’s landlessness again; for refuge’s sake forlornly rushing into peril; her only friend her bitterest foe!

These lines about the fatality of coziness and comfort bear Melville's unmistakable stylistic signature. No one in America had ever written prose of such compressed intensity ("the lashed sea's landlessness") and taunting contradictions ("for refuge's sake forlornly rushing into peril"). As anyone encountering *Moby-Dick* for the first time will discover, it is a book that struggles to maintain its narrative drive against the impulse to digress and meditate and play. One reason for this is that Melville was indefatigably alert to what might be called the stages of a word's career—as in his use of "pitiful," a word that vibrates between its old meaning (full of pity) and the more modern meaning it was acquiring in Melville's time: pathetic, exhausted, impotent. Melville does not employ words in *Moby-Dick*; he savors them.

A noisy book written in a braggart's voice ("Give me a condor's quill! Give me Vesuvius' crater for an inkstand!"), *Moby-Dick* is also a book of exquisite refinement. With all its sprawl and bluster, it can suddenly subside into the mood of "mowers...sleeping among the new-mown hay" and evoke the "snow-white wings of small, unspeckled birds...the gentle thoughts of the feminine air." Even its most dramatic chapters rarely end in crescendo but tend to resolve themselves into a reflective quiet that chastens like the sound of strings after brass.

Despite its patent beauties, Melville's novel was, like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a "language experiment" that struck many of its, first readers as overwrought and bewildering. "Not worth the money asked for it, either as a literary work or as a mass of printed paper" was the judgment of the *Boston Post*, and although other reviewers appreciated its "easy, rollicking freedom of language and structure," *Moby-Dick* was regarded at best as a curiosity and at worst a botch. In some moods Melville claimed to be unhurt by the public rebuke; he was, he wrote to Hawthorne, "content to have our paper allegories ill comprehended." But in other moods he was devastated that he had failed to touch the nerve of the American public. That Melville was disappointed is hardly surprising, but that he was bitterly shocked is a sign of what was at stake. He wrote *Moby-Dick* in a messianic fervor because he wanted to save his country from itself.

One way to approach Melville's forbidding text is to regard it as part of his lifelong meditation on America. The country into which Melville was born in 1819 was a nation where the vestiges of aristocracy were fading, and

where anyone who defended the idea of inherited privilege ran the risk of being charged with treason. National politics, the conduct of which had once been handed back and forth between New England blue bloods and Virginia gentry, was becoming the scene of feisty combat among populist heroes like Andrew Jackson and political professionals like Martin Van Buren. But even as the disfranchised Melville chafed in this vulgar country, he relished its impatience with pretension and the liberation it promised from the burdens of the past. In *Pierre: or the Ambiguities*, the novel he wrote just after *Moby-Dick*, he remarked that

in countries like America, where there is no distinct hereditary caste of gentlemen, whose order is factitiously perpetuated as race-horses and lords are in kingly lands; and especially, in those agricultural districts, where, of a hundred hands that drop a ballot for the Presidency, ninety-nine shall be of the brownest and the brawniest; in such districts, this daintiness of the fingers, when united with a generally manly aspect, assumes a remarkableness unknown in European nations.

Melville's early years were spent in an effort to come to terms with his own "remarkableness." It was a strenuous effort, in which the young man struggled against an insurgent biliousness that he disliked in himself. Both his grandfathers had been heroes of the Revolutionary War, and when his less distinguished father died—a failure in the haberdashery business—the young Melville was compelled to fight his own resentment at being overtaken by men of lesser heritage. Among the novels that preceded *Moby-Dick*, several were records of this struggle: *Redburn* (1849), in which a young man journeys down the Hudson from his once-glorious family seat and endures the embarrassment of being unable to pay his passage; *White Jacket* (1850), in which another gentle youth enters a mariners' world, where the, only measure of status is competence in the rigging. These books were retrospective meditations on Melville's years of wandering—first aboard a merchant vessel that took him to Europe, later as a crewman on a United States frigate in the Pacific.

Through these books Melville began to enlarge his private trials into an allegory of the nation's. In Liverpool, trying in vain to navigate the city with the help of his father's outdated guidebook, *Redburn* comes face to

face with the dark underside of England's industrial power. When he encounters the shriveled form of a starving woman, chilled to blueness, and hears her whimper a faint cry from the gutter, he suspects a portent for Americans who were still claiming exemption from such horrors even while moving to challenge Britain for world primacy. In *White Jacket* Melville went on to explore, through the allegorical dilemma of a seaman about to be flogged for an infraction he did not commit, what it means to be stripped like a slave of all legal recourse and to feel in one's hatred of the imperial master the very assertion of self that the law forbids. Preparing to rush headlong against the captain and hurl him into the sea, White Jacket reflects that

Nature has not implanted any power in man that was not meant to be exercised at times, though too often our powers have been abused. The privilege, inborn and inalienable, that every man has, of dying himself, and inflicting death upon another, was not given to us without a purpose. These are the last resources of an insulted and unendurable existence.

It was in *Redburn* and *White Jacket* that Melville began to confront the gathering crisis of his time—the inevitable collision between industrial and slave culture in the United States—but the books through which he had discovered himself as a writer were his earlier South Sea adventures, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847). Quasi-autobiographical works that recounted (with embellishment) his brief stay in the Marquesan islands and his beachcombing days in Tahiti, these books were full of shameless olive-skinned women and intimately attentive native boys. Received as factual accounts of tribal life in the tropical world, they established (to his lasting regret) Melville's reputation as “the man who lived among cannibals.” In fact, they were sophisticated explorations of the experience of cultural dislocation, written by a prodigious storyteller who negotiated carefully between his audience's prurience and its prudery. Yet as late as the *Cambridge History of American Literature* of 1917, Melville was accorded merely an appreciative paragraph in the chapter on “Travellers and Explorers”—and without *Typee* and *Omoo* there may have been no mention at all.

When Melville began work on *Moby-Dick*, he was, in other words, a young writer (only thirty-one) who had already experienced the flush of literary celebrity and the fickleness of an audience that rejected him when he turned earnest in his huge metaphysical novel of 1849, *Mardi*. He referred to *Redburn* and *White Jacket* as “two jobs, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood,” and although in 1847, with his sailor days behind him, he had married the daughter of a distinguished jurist, he never fully escaped from enervating economic pressure. By 1850 he was settled in substantial domesticity in a Berkshire farmhouse, but “the calm, the coolness,” he wrote to Hawthorne, “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.” Melville was wrong about missing the fertility of tranquillity. In the harried months between the early spring of 1850 and the fall of 1851, he produced the greatest work of imagination in the history of our literature.

Moby-Dick opens conventionally enough. Writing in his old marketable mode, Melville begins with the intention to accommodate his estranged readership. But he soon swerves, away from the adventures of a young man in flight from his own despondency, and he finds himself swept up by a larger tale—about a maimed sea captain and the prodigious white whale that has “dismasted” him. Although scholars still disagree over the evolution of the manuscript, there is general agreement that it went through several radically different versions. Melville’s friend, the influential critic Evert Duyckinck, read and approved an early draft but denigrated the final text as an “intellectual chowder” and there is other evidence that *Moby-Dick* lurched forward in spasms rather than being built systematically according to some initial plan. Yet despite efforts to match allusions to contemporary events, and otherwise to trace the process of revision, it remains impossible to see exactly how *Moby-Dick* grew from an adventure yarn into the giant work it became. Some of the incendiary events for Melville’s imagination are recoverable—especially his passionate friendship with Hawthorne, whose work and person inspired him beginning in the summer of 1850; and his renewed exposure to Shakespeare, whose blank-verse grandeur stirred him to emulation. But like the painting that Ishmael peers at in the Spouter Inn, *Moby-Dick* will always remain “a boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly,

enough to drive a nervous man distracted,” at least if one is intent on making out its compositional history.

It is clear enough that as he rushed along, Melville had no particular concern to tidy up his book by sweeping it clean of the traces of its superseded stages. Three chapters into the story, for instance, we meet a figure named Bulkington, “six feet in height, with noble shoulders, and a chest like a coffer-dam,” who seems a likely candidate to play a major part in the ensuing drama because of his ability to command from his crewmates a reverence that is neither worship nor fear. But Bulkington recedes from view until twenty chapters later: after Ishmael has befriended Queequeg and found his way to the *Pequod* and Ahab’s service, Melville buries him in a “six-inch chapter [that] is [his] stoneless grave.” Yet it is an open grave. Melville does not conceal Bulkington; he memorializes him, leaving him visible as a hinted alternative to Ahab. He is not revised out of the manuscript but remains as a tremor in the text—an idea of democratic leadership, whose ripples continue to move within the range of our awareness but who finds no fulfilled place within the world that Melville imagines into being.

More than a crafted fiction, *Moby-Dick* is an outburst of a fluid consciousness in which ideas and persons appear and collide and form new combinations and sometimes drop away. If it begins as a young man’s adventures, by the thirtieth chapter Ishmael has all but vanished, and the narrative voice is no longer subject to laws governing conventional narration. Ishmael describes Ahab, for instance, dining with his officers in his quarters, and later in his cabin “by the stern windows;...sitting alone.” A little later Starbuck, humiliated in his efforts to hold Ahab to the ship’s commercial purpose, delivers a soliloquy by the mainmast where no one can overhear him—and yet Ishmael reports it all with the certainty of a confidant. After these inexplicable witnessings, the narrative, as if breaking under the weight of its improbabilities, gives way to stretches of song from the scattered crew.

Moby-Dick is simply too large a book to be contained within one consistent consciousness subject to the laws of identity and physical plausibility. The narrating mind (called Ishmael at first) hurtles outward, gorging itself with whale lore and with the private memories of men who barely speak. Sometimes this narrative voice breaks out into choral effusion or splinters into the competitive chatter of the sailors. Yet the compositional

principle of *Moby-Dick* is more than whim; it is as if Melville creates Ishmael in the image of his earlier versions of himself and then invites us to share the excitement of his self-destruction.

Moby-Dick is in this sense a lethal book. Hostile to all conventions, it reveals the suffocating airlessness of Ishmael's initial consciousness, which comes to know itself as little more than an anthology of received opinions. Staring at the "boggy, soggy" picture, Ishmael concludes that "the artist's design seemed this: a final theory of my own, partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons." He is at first a prig and a prude, offended by Queequeg's habit of washing his chest and leaving his face unscrubbed, not to mention the savage's genuflections before his little wooden idol, Yojo, which strikes Ishmael as "the color of a three days' old Congo baby." But Ishmael's saving charm is his capacity for humor at his own expense. He grows amused by his own absurdities, and by the time he sails aboard the *Pequod* in the protective company of his now-beloved Queequeg, he has eliminated almost all his inherited conceptions—religious, social, political, even linguistic—from the categories of the sacred and the prudent and has moved them into the category of the arbitrary. Everything becomes unmoored, vulnerable, dispensable.

This process of divestiture is represented in an extraordinary chapter titled "The Counterpane," in which Melville reviews what in effect was the construction of Ishmael's self. In the bed they share in the Spouter Inn, Queequeg's tattooed arm lies across the quilted counterpane that covers Ishmael's chest, and in the first waking moments, when the line between consciousness and unconsciousness remains indeterminate, Ishmael feels himself dissolve into the flesh and fabric that are touching him. He cannot distinguish between Queequeg's arm and the quilt, or even between his own body and the coverings that press upon it. Through this liberating confusion he relives a childhood experience (whether dream or reality he cannot say) in which he had waked from an enforced sleep that had been his punishment for trying to climb up the chimney. Dimly making out in the darkness his hand hanging off the bed, he had not known it as his own; it seemed an alien object clasped in the hand of some threatening phantom, and he had not dared try to move it to see if it were free to be withdrawn. He feared breaking the uncertainty as much as submitting to it, and under the spell of fright and fascination, he transformed his stepmother's anger

into guilt. This was the moment, he seems now to realize, in which he discovered the proscribed otherness of his body and of the world it craved.

Having relived this discovery, it is through the uninvited intimacy with Queequeg that Ishmael begins to unlearn his guilt. The reversal goes quickly, and he becomes both terrified and exhilarated by his new freedom. In a sexually redolent phrase, Melville has him remark “how elastic our stiff prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them,” and from that moment on, Ishmael achieves a certain distance from the *Pequod*’s hell-bent quest. The central theme of *Moby-Dick* begins to emerge in this implicit contrast between the transfigured Ishmael, whose consciousness has been diffused into a promiscuous taste for all experience, and the wracked captain of “fiery eyes” who refuses all distraction from his crusade. As the book moves on, Ishmael can hardly be located, while Ahab stands immovable, his pegleg anchored in his “stand-point”—the auger hole bored into the deck to keep him steady in a gale. “There was... a determinate, unsunderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of [Ahab’s] glance,” while Ishmael’s eyes are dreamy and roving. He frees himself from fear and anger and the appetite for retribution that they foster (“No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world”), while Ahab cannot be deterred from conquest and possession and revenge—not by Pip or Starbuck or even by the pleas of the captain of the *Rachel*, who begs for help in searching for his son lost at sea.

It is through the encounter between these two principles—the widening embrace of Ishmael and the “monomania” of Ahab—that *Moby-Dick* takes form. Yet the book never becomes merely a contest between them, because Melville himself incorporates both, and he feels their claims with equal fervor. The expansion and unstiffening of Ishmael’s mind are more and more manifest in Melville’s own ecstatic wordplay, in his generic mischievousness and irreverent associations: the peeled pelt of the whale’s penis (“grandissimus,” the sailors call it) is worn as a “surplice” by the crewman who minces the blubber; and the King of England, Melville reports with glee, unknowingly pomades his hair with sperm-whale oil “in its unmanufactured, unpolluted state.” Yet despite his love of such imaginative frolic, Melville is also enchanted by his inhuman and entirely humorless captain. As Milton does for Satan, he gives many of the best lines to grim Ahab, whose contempt for the trivial greed of the *Pequod*’s

owners is immensely attractive, and whose rage, however fatal, is simply magnificent:

Aye, aye! it was that accursed white whale that razeed me; made a poor pegging lubber of me for ever and a day!...Aye, aye! and I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it, now? I think ye do look brave.

Ahab speaks with what Melville elsewhere calls a "Niagara" roar and is dignified even when he is at his most appalling. He is on a mission, Ishmael is on a cruise—and *Moby-Dick* is the record of their irresolvable confrontation.

Though this conflict played itself out independently within Melville's mind, it also had specific corollaries in the actual scene of American politics. In one of its dimensions, *Moby-Dick* was a prophecy that the American experiment of separate political entities "federated along one keel" was imperiled, that the ship of state (a common metaphor in contemporary oratory) was foundering. When Melville began to work in earnest on *Moby-Dick* in early 1850, the Congressional debates over the provisions of what became known as the Compromise of 1850 were reverberating in all the papers and parlors of the land. In early March a dying John Calhoun sat in silence in the Senate chamber as his speech was read by a fellow Senator—a speech full of foreboding and predictions of catastrophe unless the antislavery agitation ceased. Daniel Webster's reply ("I speak today not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American"), in which he defended the compromise—including the provisions demanding manumission of fugitive slaves—cost him the respect of many Northern intellectuals but saved the situation, at least for a time. Yet the real news out of Washington was that the fissure in the country was becoming unbridgeable, and that the last efforts of the great survivors from the early republic—Clay, Calhoun, and Webster—would ultimately prove unavailing. The nation would go on intact for a few more years, until the Kansas-

Nebraska Act and the Dred Scott decision set the stage for civil war; but to astute observers it was already clear in 1850 that the dispute could be brokered no more.

Among them was Melville. *Moby-Dick* can be seen as a sustained meditation on the sectional crisis, and as such some readers have tried to assign specific political correspondences to its cast of characters: Ahab as the unrelenting Calhoun; Starbuck as New England prudence; Stubb as the eager Westerner; Flask, whom the “noble negro” Daggoo carries “on his broad back...[like] a snow-flake,” as exemplar of the slave South; even Moby Dick itself as the principle of whiteness in whose very pursuit the nation insured its doom.

Imputing such allegorical fixities to Melville’s text is a tempting way to distribute and gain control over its inventory of unruly characters, and Melville was certainly alert to national politics. His brother Gansevoort had been active in the Democratic party, and he himself had indulged in long stretches of thinly disguised political commentary in *Mardi*. But *Moby-Dick* is not a medieval morality play with a decipherable iconography. It is a disorderly elegy to democracy, which Melville saw as threatened on many sides: by the spirit of utilitarianism (represented comically by Bildad and Peleg), by the accelerating pace of expansionism (the *Pequod* is named after an Indian tribe obliterated in a seventeenth-century war with the Puritans), and by the drive toward industrial power (in the great “Try-Works” chapter the ship becomes a floating factory), which degrades men into mere instruments of a technological process. “To accomplish his object,” we are told, “Ahab must use tools; and of all tools used in the shadow of the moon, men are most apt to get out of order.” And yet with all his revulsion for the surging commercialism and land hunger of his time, Melville was equally suspicious of the motives and efficacy of reformers who whined from the sidelines. “With what quill,” he asks with Emersonian disdain, “did the Secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Cruelty to Ganders formerly indite his circulars?”

Melville, in short, extracted a human sample from a culture he both loved and abhorred, and he made of the *Pequod* a kind of Noah’s ark. Its crew and officers are representatives of a nation for which the “native [white] American...provides the brains, the rest of the world [“tiger-yellow” Fedallah and “gigantic, coal-black” Daggoo] as generously supplying the muscles.” Yet it is not exactly coercion that keeps the brawn