

Around and About *Moby-Dick*

1.

Unending Gifts, Christmas Day

On Christmas Day, in Chapter 22, the *Pequod* left Nantucket for the high seas. It is Christmas Day now, and New York City is quieter than New Bedford was then, when “the short northern day merged into night.” In the rare absence of traffic, the dogs and I freely — and against the light — gallop across the highway. There’s no snow; still the white denseness of the sky is suggestive of snow; it resembles, as well, a sweeping chunk of unpolished marble. And with the river trembling like crushed gray tissue, the sight — quite a gift this Christmas morning — is that of an immense stone sculpture of, say, a giant hoary whale, lying unwrapped upon packing and paper.

Bordered by iron fences and short-term bulwarks of lath, the vast lawns by the water are “closed” for the winter, bedded under tarps. The little sunflower garden resembles a blasted heath: the neglected plots and weathered wharf-gray planter might be in potter’s field. The colors of vegetal remains span the spectrum of boiled green, but amid escarole and chard there spouts a stand of plume grass, pale blond in the wan light. Its tawny feathered scrolls and eddies nod above a tangled skein of straw stalks.

Near the North Cove, construction has stopped on a high-rise which, conforming to the curve of the land, resembles the hull of a ship being built, complete with looped lanyards, halyards, rigging and poles projecting upward like bowsprits. Webbed nets waft in the wintry breeze; bundled tarps mimic furled sails. A hoist-hook resembles a dangling anchor. Atop the heap is a cabin-like edifice that resembles a deckhouse. Above it all whips an American flag, like a ship’s pennant. This structure seems on the brink of casting off and sailing through the harbor out into the Atlantic.

This nautical imagery comes from reading *Moby-Dick*, which I am doing at the moment, curled in my narrow listing bunk-bed, in an unheated little cabinet-room, with struts athwart the ceiling, in the fo’c’s’le of a house close to the water, which was probably a mariners’ inn as, I like to think, *Moby-Dick* was being written. To keep warm, there are the dogs and cats, and Ishmael’s advice, from his bed at the Spouter-Inn, Chapter 11:

...to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.... if, like Queequeg and me in the bed, the tip of your nose or the crown of your head be slightly chilled, why then, indeed, in the general consciousness you feel most delightfully and unmistakably warm. For this reason a sleeping apartment should never be furnished with a fire.... For the height of this sort of deliciousness is to have nothing but the blanket between you and your snugness and the cold of the outer air. Then there you lie like the one warm spark in the heart of an arctic crystal.

2.

What the Horror Flick Owes Moby-Dick

The Suspense of the Unseen: The Wholeness of the Whale

As I continue to swim the vast, magnetic ocean of *Moby-Dick*, I see how many contemporary horror films (*Alien*, *Jaws*, *The Abyss*, etc.) share Melville's ploy: keep the creature hidden until the climax of the tale. The revelation will coincide with the climax; and the elaborate cloaking devices which lead to that moment are meant to build terror as we are fed scant rumors and innuendos, as in *Moby-Dick*, accounts of terrible effects (damage, carnage), and fragmented glimpses (fluke, fin, spout) of something too appalling (Melville's word), too nightmarish to apprehend all at once.

That which is ultimately revealed (visible) holds profound significance; here, as the embodiment of the appalling. The words "monster" and "demon" are embedded in "demonstrate"; and exactly what the White Whale demonstrates is the thrust of the novel.

Melville postpones our full acquaintance with Moby Dick. One means of deflecting the inevitable is through Ishmael's obsessive research on whales and whaling, a lot of conceptual information that interrupts the action of the novel and delays the empirical encounter. In chapters 55 and 56, for example, the narrator details errors in book illustrations; we glean a partial sense of the whale as Ishmael critiques mistakes in the rendering of one anatomical part or another: "the prodigious blunder...of representing the whale with perpendicular flukes." After pointing out such gaffes, he concludes: "So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like" -- except by going whaling, but at the "risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan" -- a threat and challenge that builds fascination and suspense,

and which prepares the reader for the final full, physical vision of the breaching whale.

In Ch. 48, "The First Lowering," the proximity of a whale is deduced by the white water he has churned up. Then the hump is glimpsed. And in true horror-movie fashion his awful impact on the whale boat is described: "Then all in one welded commotion came an invisible push from astern, while forward the boat seemed striking on a ledge; the sail collapsed and exploded; a gush of scalding vapor shot up near by; something rolled and tumbled like an earthquake beneath us." But the whale stays hidden and the drama proves inconclusive: "Squall, whale, and harpoon had all blended together; and the whale, merely grazed by the iron, escaped."

An ominous reverberation of the whale (and reminder of its mythic measure) occurs in Ch. 59, when the *Pequod* encounters a monstrous squid, "a great white mass" ... "like a snow slide" -- the sperm whale's food, whose size suggests the scale of its consumer. Like the whale, the great squid appears and disappears from sight, until we get a full view of him:

A vast pulpy mass, furlongs in length and breadth, of a glancing cream-color, lay floating on the water, innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas, as if blindly to clutch at any hapless object within reach. No perceptible face or front did it have; ... but undulated there on the billows, an unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life.... As with a low sucking sound it slowly disappeared again...

And the point of view of sober, reliable Starbuck, who, "still gazing at the agitated waters where it had sunk, with a wild voice exclaimed -- 'Almost rather had I seen Moby Dick and fought him, than to have seen thee, thou white ghost!'" The monster could have been designed by ILM and the scene directed by Ridley Scott.

The squid shows up in a moment of suspicionless tranquility "one transparent blue morning, when a stillness almost preternatural spread over the sea." The word "preternatural" -- perhaps a 19th-century Romantic favorite - arouses chills itself; its use is ironic and telling in a work so imbued with the data of *natural* history. Melville continues the lullaby: "when the slippered waves whispered together as they softly ran on; in this profound hush...." Out of the calm scene this alternate white monster is spied by Daggoo from his watch. He, the ship, and the reader least expect the encounter. Catching us off-guard in "calm before the storm" or "out of the blue" style is another familiar tactic of horror films.

Horror films titillate with similar well-timed peek-a-boos, designed to anticipate the exposure of the monster in all its gory-glory. For a horror film to work, for a creature to be truly “appalling,” the sum of its parts is always surpassed by the whole; suggestion gives way to manifestation. It seems that *Moby-Dick* — from fin, fluke and spout to final epiphanic breaching, prefigures the convention of gradual revelation in the horror films of today.

3.

More On Moby

One recent frigid February day, I completed my first reading of *Moby-Dick*. Naturally, as soon as I closed the book, I dashed down to the river, despite ferocious winds. At the embankment the frozen Hudson lay all crumbled, broken in flat gray shards like miniature Arctic plates. It took some moments to realize they were animate -- almost imperceptibly rocking in gray-green mercury, breathing in deep sleep. Caught in the white-rimed chips was a tiny seagull, frozen to death. The sky, the water, and that bird were all in a palette of gray-and-white -- as was the grizzled sea, barely visible beyond the harbor -- and the slowly moving tugs and barges beyond; even the yellow ferries were grayed out by mist and distance. A fitting scene with which to say so-long to Ishmael, clinging to the lifebuoy of Queequeg's coffin.

Unaccountably, I wondered if humans and whales perhaps had changed places, ages ago -- because of our fetal phylogeny and the salt water in our blood; because of the whale's and dolphin's vestigial legs, the digits in their fins. (Ch. 55: “...in the side fin, the bones...almost exactly answer to the bones of the human hand, minus only the thumb. This fin has four regular bone-fingers, the index, middle, ring, and little finger.”) In any case, we are doubtless related to the sea and the sea mammals therein. And *Moby-Dick* makes that abundantly clear, though Melville himself called the whale a fish.

Now, a bit more about Melville's intimations, his apportioning of fragmented evidence, his suspension of disclosure and of discovery. Just as we fully apprehend the eponymous whale only at the end of the book, so Ishmael (and we) encounter others piecemeal. Ishmael meets Queequeg first by gossip and sinister hint; Peter Coffin teases that Ishmael's future roommate “eats nothing but steaks, and likes 'em rare”; and that the harpooner is out at the moment, peddling shrunken heads. Alone in the room they'll soon be sharing, Ishmael's apprehension builds when he sees

the collection of strange effects (bone-fish hooks, harpoon, incomprehensible poncho) – emblems of their owner. Enter at last the cannibal; it is some time before Ishmael, hidden in the bed, sees his face; when he does, the tattoos, at first misinterpreted as surgical wounds, give him a start. More Queequegian emblems and artifacts follow (tomahawk, wallet, the unsold embalmed head). Then the cannibal doffs his beaver hat to reveal a bald, purple-yellow skull and scalp-knot. It gets worse. Undressing, his tattooed chest, arms, back and legs are revealed. Ishmael's fear fabricates ghastly assumptions; and when the unwitting Queequeg finally jumps into bed, their dread and shock are mutual. But soon Ishmael's prejudice dissolves into respect for this strangest of bedfellows, as Queequeg's uneasiness is allayed into affection — thus, the dissolution of stereotype and acceptance of otherness. As Ishmael muses: “What's all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself — the man's a human being just as I am: he has just as much reason to fear me, as I have to be afraid of him. Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian.”

Ishmael becomes acquainted with Ahab in hints and stages as well, but with the opposite results. As with Queequeg, Ahab's reputation precedes him; danger is adumbrated by Elijah on the wharf. When Ishmael mistakes Peleg for Ahab, he is asked, “Have ye clapped eye on Captain Ahab?” Peleg says Ishmael will know the captain by his ivory leg — the living one having been “devoured, chewed up, crunched by the monstrousest parmacetty that ever chipped a boat!” — which also introduces the formidable danger of Moby Dick himself. Aboard the *Pequod*, Ishmael's tension and “perturbation” about the captain grow, and for days Ahab remains below in his cabin (even as Moby Dick remains deep in the sea). Not until Ch. 28 does Ahab appear, and then so abruptly (as suddenly as when, in Ch. 134, the whale breaches) that Ishmael's usual loquacity collapses. You can almost hear his intake of breath when he says: “Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarterdeck.” Before him stands a larger-than-life being with a cicatrized face (as Moby Dick's body is scarred by wounds and Queequeg's flesh is ubiquitously tattooed). “So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me and the livid brand which streaked it,” says Ishmael, “that for the first few moments I hardly noted that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood....fashioned from the polished bone of the sperm whale's jaw.” Little by little Ahab's insanity emerges and swells. His bionic limb symbolizes the fact that he is not fully human. Obsession has reified a human who's been swallowed by monomania just as his leg has been swallowed by the

whale. He has been “dismasted,” yet is likened to a fourth mast; his advancing pride and hate will push ruthlessly through the novel, a juggernaut en route to annihilation.

It goes without saying that *Moby-Dick* is a universe of themes and symbols, and it would be sheer luxury to spend time analyzing some of them; for example, the meanings of the different “gams”— those nine strange encounters with passing ships, to which Ahab instantly sings out, like the refrain among stanzas: “Have you see the white whale?” It would be interesting to examine the balance of comedy and tragedy; and the recurrence of such themes as ingestion, glyphs, and scale (physical, emotional, spiritual). In Ch. 56, e.g., is described an illustration of the “...full length of the Greenland whale” along with, by the same illustrator, a rendering, “with the microscopic diligence of a Leuwenhoeck ... a shivering world ninety-six facsimiles of magnified Arctic snow crystals.” It would be marvelous to examine the significance of the recurring numbers 3, 9, 30. And the motif of astrology. And the different vocal registers of the characters. And the symbols of all the elements.

It would be interesting even to chart inconsistencies. For example, the *Pequod* is steered sometimes by a tiller made from a whale's jawbone; at other times by a wheel. Or, in Ch. 130, “The Hat,” Ahab significantly loses his “slouching hat” to a hawk (“Ahab's hat was never restored”) — but two pages later: “From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea...” And what about Bulkington, whom Melville describes in detail and builds up at the beginning of the novel (“he became my comrade on the sea”) but who hardly appears again?

It would be interesting to discuss the foils and paradoxes, such as the accurate, the measured, the scientific — contrasted to the fabulous, the ineffable, the hyperbolic (nautical instruments vs. the numinous mystery of the whale). It would be a lark to parse each described member of the 30-man crew — pagans vs. Christians. It would be interesting to dive into the countless poetic, imagistic passages, like “...the green palmy cliffs of the land soon loomed on the starboard bow, and with delighted nostrils the fresh cinnamon was snuffed in the air...” (Ch. 87). Or the *Pequod's* sinking, Ch. 135:

For an instant, the tranced boat's crew stood still; then turned. “The ship? Great God, where is the ship?” Soon they through dim, bewildering mediums saw her sidelong fading phantom, as in the gaseous Fata Morgana; only the uppermost masts out of water; while fixed by infatuation, or fidelity, or fate, to their once lofty perches, the pagan harpooners still maintained their sinking lookouts on the sea.

It would be great to recount Melville's original aphorisms ("Warmest climes but nurse the cruellest fangs: the tiger of Bengal crouches in spiced groves of ceaseless verdure" [Ch. 119], "For whatever is truly wondrous and fearful in man, never yet was put into words or books" [an arguable statement]). And parallels with Homer, Plato, Shakespeare (Ahab as unrepentant Lear), Poe. It would be wonderful to examine a few of the tropes, like paradox ("careful disorderliness [ch. 82]; "queerest looking nondescripts" [Ch. 6]; "the personified impersonal" [Ch. 119] "humorously perilous" [Ch. 72]; "coffin life buoy" [Ch. 135].

Now as I begin *Moby-Dick* again, from my perch in the Manhattoes near "extreme downtown...the Battery," I'll pay closer attention.

4.
"Boggy, Soggy, Squitchy"

These enviable words, belonging to Herman Melville, describe Ishmael's encounter with a certain strange painting at the Spouter-Inn (ch. 3) – and describe the effects of our weeklong nor'easter here in New York. Central Park, I hear, registered over seven inches of rain, a month's worth falling in one day. The East Coast is boggy, soggy and squitchy indeed.

Last Thursday I sloshed down to the South Street Seaport, to join a discussion group on *Moby-Dick*. The Melville Gallery, on Water St., is part of the seaport museum, and only an anchor's throw from the very spot where Melville had set *M-D* in type, on Fulton Street at the corner of Dutch. Much about Melville goes on down here, I'm discovering.

The weather certainly was appropriate for a maritime immersion. Strange how the environment seems to mimic whatever's in mind: As I zagged along squitchily, the route became increasingly Melvillian. As if to embellish the swelling downpour, the large stone fountain in City Hall Park was redundantly spouting geysers like a head-to-head quartet of invisible whales. The swaying lanterns at each spout resembled "yard-arms... [each] tipped with a pallid fire [ch. 119]. The bare branches of the plane trees looked like tangles of masthead rigging, manned by beady-eyed squirrels on the lookout for whales – or worms.

The protracted rain obfuscates time and space like a shaggy grey beard a face; its long twilight confounds familiar daylight pointers and

erases the horizon. The Hudson has become brim full, crashing and churning against the bulwarks, breakers sending chilling sprays over the low guardrail. The normally placid waves of the river were white-capped, as was the vaporous ocean beyond the Statue of Liberty. Pilings that before were always high and dry (haven to an endangered species of barnacles, which has halted the renovation of the pier), were all but underwater. The sky itself, mirroring the aqueous commotion, teemed with gaseous whitecaps. A few mad gulls wheeled between sea and sky, all arrayed in every hue and cry of gray.

To quote the refrain from the seaman's song in ch. 119: "Such a funny, sporty, gamy, jesty, joky, hoky-poky lad, is the Ocean, oh!"

5.

Melville Day, Hooray

After weeks of terrific heat, hardly relieved by epic thunderstorms (and even tornadoes, at least in Brooklyn), Saturday, August 11 dawned cool enough for a sweater, and humidity-free. Melville's birthday is August 1 (the day before mine — we are 130 years and one day apart), but the South Street Seaport celebrated its second annual Melville Day on the 11th. For me, it was a twelve-minute walk upriver to Pier 45, at Christopher Street, where the tour began. Our guide, Jack Putnam, is an acknowledged Melville expert; I'd been impressed to hear him speak and read before at the Seaport. He has Melvillian charisma: a commanding bearing, full white beard and fair, august features. I'd brought along my fluke-eared, curly copy of *Moby-Dick*, with its inky marginalia and pages stuffed with magazine pictures of ships and whales. I'd chosen the Norton Critical Edition because that's what my students at NYU use. Among its supplementary material of "Contexts" and "Criticism" is an elegant chapter titled "Whaling and Whalecraft: A Pictorial Account" by John B. Putnam. I hadn't realized till that day that John B. and Jack are one and the same; and there he was, almost larger than life, our Melville host.

From the pier, Jack gestured northward to Gansevoort Street, named after Melville's mother's family, where by coincidence Herman had served for nineteen years as a customs inspector. Quoting from memory the rhapsodic beginning of *Moby-Dick*, Jack gestured to the approaching crowds and intoned:

Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the Battery..." and . . . "But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a

dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice...

At 12:30 we clambered aboard a sun-yellow water taxi destined for the Seaport by way of the World Financial Center, Battery Park, Governors Island and Red Hook. I stood as far forward as I could, balancing euphorically, like a circus rider on a galloping, surf-white horse. At Pier 17 we disembarked.

On Fulton Street Jack indicated an unprepossessing five-story brick building, #112, with a shoe store on the street level, where Melville had set *Moby-Dick* in type. We saw the original site of Harper and Bros., now a dismal courtyard behind a sneakers store, where the American version of the novel was first published. Apparently the last plate with the last chapter had gotten lost on the voyage to England, so British readers were at a loss as to how the story could have been told if everyone aboard the *Pequod* had drowned. At Nassau Street (the center of the publishing world, 160 years ago), Jack Putnam pointed out a rare view of four buildings from the 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. We went into Bowne & Co., a working 19th-century press on Water Street. We heard an erudite lecture. Melville Day ended with a glass-of-wine-aboard-the-*Peking* (in lieu of the *Pequod*?), which I didn't stay for, but made my way instead to the Battery, settled at the brink of the U.S.A., and gazed beyond the Narrows to the sea.



Post Script:
Full Circle

It is Christmas Eve. The landscape is quite empty; its colors are orchestral: henna-brown, a touch of brass, ample silver, ivory, ebony. Faint clouds smudge the oyster-pearly sky like fingerprints. The north meadow is protected from frost by widespread tarps that resemble sails drying out on a pier. They're a luminous sea-glass-gray and luff ominously, mimicking in color and movement the scopic Hudson River beyond. Earlier, the tarps were dotted with hundreds of seagulls, skating to a muted duet of mournful foghorn and caterwauling train. And then the birds, keening mightily, rose in unison, their whelken whiteness merging with the oyster sky. Each branch and twig stands out in folk-art clarity, painted with a tiny brush. In one tree clings a passel of sparrows like remnant brown leaves. At the tree's roots grumbles a flock of puffed pigeons. Some Canada geese

bask on the lawn like a fleet of freighters. The koi in the lotus pond float beneath a plywood shelter camouflaged with stones. They'll stay hidden in refuge 'til spring.

Being so involved in *Moby-Dick*, I just made two miniatures of the Spouter Inn—the room in New Bedford where Ishmael and Queequeg stayed; and a replica of the inn's rain-damp façade, with the “dim sort of out-hanging light” and the Spouter-Inn with its forlornly creaking swinging sign. . .

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Tribeca's first bookstore has just opened. My initial purchase was an elaborate pop-up *Moby-Dick*, by Sam Ita. As I was examining the real rope rigging in the pop-up book, I glanced up to the undulant mural of literary giants spanning the café. Next to Whitman, Melville sits close to a pipe-smoking Queequeg. A figment of fiction may not be an author per se, but Queequeg did scribe one oeuvre when he copied his glyphic tattoos onto his coffin. Was this act the creation of a new literary genre, i.e, autonecrology? In any case, I hope he's enjoying his Starbuck's, for tomorrow he and Ishmael set sail.

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