

WHITENESS

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On Johnnycake Hill in New Bedford, Massachusetts, a cobblestone street leads to the Jonathan Bourne Whaling Museum. There, in a glass case opposite a panoramic map of 19th century Pacific whaling grounds, lies a fading roster for the whaleship Acushnet, about to sail in January 1841. The twelfth name is Herman Melville. Across the street the Seamen's Bethel looms hospitably. The chapel next door, with its spacious second floor indented by a towering pulpit in the shape of a ship's prow, displays on its walls placques memorializing sailors lost at sea. A whaleboat smashed by the flukes of leviathan and six men drowned. A lightning loop of the harpooner's line, catching his ankle, and forcing him to sound with his prey. An eighteen year old youth, swimming off his ship near the Cape of Good Hope, fatally gashed by sharks. The whaleships Essex and Ann Alexander, however, were not New Bedford craft. Their sinkings, when Melville was a young man, after onslaughts by wounded sperm whales, left Nantucket women widows.

Father Mapple, in *Moby Dick*, preaches from the pulpit of this chapel the punishment of Jonah and his atonement - to speak Truth to the face of Falsehood. "Woe to him," howls the preacher, "who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale! . . . (But) Delight is to him whose strong arms yet support him when the ship of this base treacherous world has gone down beneath him. . . . Delight is to him, whom all the waves of the billows of the seas of the boisterous mob can never shake from his sure Keel of the Ages." Strong words of faith, misleading as to the character of Melville and the nature of his masterpiece.

For Herman Melville's life and works were a mass of contradictions. He was a city dweller and a farmer whose four years at sea unleashed an imagination which baffled his contemporaries. Vigorous as a foretopman in the Navy, he was soon regarded by his family as a chronic invalid. Instantly applauded for

his early books, yet in need of money to support his family, he preferred failure and the dull chores of a customs inspector when they released him to write as he pleased. He was fascinated by the blackest corners of the then undiscovered science of psychology, but formed few close friendships and was too self-absorbed to support his children's needs. He struggled without success to resolve the issues of the Book of Job, and his keen perceptions of the coexistence in man and in man's institutions of good and evil drove him to his greatest achievements. Melville's famous symbol, Moby Dick, was white.

Herman Melville went to sea because there was no money in his widowed mother's house and no job for him on land. His father had failed in business and had moved his family to Albany from New York. He died, not yet fifty, after two weeks of manic excitement ending in delirium. Herman was twelve at his father's death, and his boyhood in genteel poverty offered him little but a patchwork education, the dispiriting shadow of a brilliant, neurotic older brother, Gansevoort Melville, and occasional calm summers at his uncle's farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. In 1838, at age 19, he sailed for Liverpool on a ship carrying cotton. He was back in four months, taught at a school which failed without paying him in full, traveled West to visit relatives who proved as impoverished as his own family, and at Christmas, 1840, sought out New Bedford and the Acushnet so as not to be a burden to his family.

Eighteen months of whaling under an irascible captain proved sufficient, and in July, 1842, Melville and a young accomplice jumped ship in the Marquesas Islands, seeking refuge with the cannibalistic Typees. Rescue a month later by an Australian whaler meant worse conditions than aboard the Acushnet, and required a second desertion in Tahiti and a third whaling voyage which ended for Melville in Honolulu. In mid 1843 an opportunity to sail for home dropped anchor in the roadstead in the form of the Navy frigate United States. Melville joined up and on the year-long, indirect voyage East avoided the brutal discipline of flogging and accepted with relief assignment

to the ship's topmost piece of canvas, nearly two hundred feet above the deck. He reached Boston in October 1844, to greet in that harbor his cousin Navy Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort who had been courtmartialled (but not discharged) for his part in a shipboard trial which had decreed the hanging of a possibly mutinous sailor, Philip Spencer, son of the Secretary of War.

Melville returned with skills useless on land, little money and stories to tell. His family urged him to write. Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life was his first narrative. His brother Gansevoort, secretary to the American legation in England, peddled the manuscript there - the one successful endeavor of an erratic life in politics - and died five months later, age thirty. An American edition of Typee followed, and although critics unjustly questioned the tale's veracity, the book was well received by them and sold well, as did Omoo, a thinly disguised assault on missionaries reshaping native ways in Tahiti. Melville's publishers were eager for tales of adventure from his pen, and, more on expectations than with royalties in hand, Melville married Elizabeth Shaw of Boston, daughter of the distinguished Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. Without her family's resources, the Melvilles would have starved.

For Melville's third book, Mardi, was a picaresque romance, an allegorical voyage through a mythical archipelago, philosophizing on death, time, eternity, theology and religious doctrine. Melville had begun to read Spenser, Shakespeare, Montaigne and Emerson. Had he gone to Harvard as a student instead of to the Pacific as a sailor, solutions to philosophical problems would have been systematized in him before he encountered the problems they solved. Obligated to work things out for himself, he discovered in himself an intellectual energy which led him far more strongly than his economic need. He began to know himself - an idealist of the intellect, and a realistic cynic by experience, whose perceptions of his nation in 1848 foresaw civil war. Mardi failed, but its author's mind expanded.

Chastened but determined, Melville in 1849 wrote two books in three months:

Redburn: His First Voyage, based on his early trip to Liverpool, and White Jacket, a Navy tale. As he wrote to a friend, "no metaphysics, no conic-sections, nothing but cakes and ale." Yet his characters for the first time sprang from the page and exhibited depth. The man-of-war microcosm of White Jacket was a focussed, particular world, resonant with intended, larger meanings. Melville's readers and publishers, less aware than we can be of his development, were relieved and enjoyed the cakes and ale. Melville traveled in Europe to stock his mind for further creativity, visiting history and the London theater, and reading Rousseau, Boswell, Sir Thomas Browne, Carlyle and Byron. He returned to ponder Moby Dick.

Moby Dick was Melville's sixth book in seven years. He had bought Arrowhead, a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, scene of his childhood summers and adjacent to that enduring center of aristocratic intellect, Stockbridge. He was becoming, from necessity, a working farmer, and a several times father, but his neighbors were Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Begun in New York in February, 1850, Moby Dick was written and laboriously rewritten through the dark New England winter of 1851. Having exploited his four years adventures in the South Seas, Melville had intended to become an historical novelist. He became instead a major writer of his or any century.

Of the white whale, more anon. Melville's remaining years after Moby Dick's very modest success were almost 40, but they can be quickly told. He wrote a philosophical study, Pierre, dissecting a domestic triangle in a determined effort to "find out the heart of man." The book bordered unintentionally on farce and was denounced by the critics. "Herman Melville has gone clean daft." Untrue, but he wrote only one more full length prose narrative for publication. The magazine trade paid better for less effort, and he sold short stories, notably Bartleby the Scrivener, to Putnam's Monthly Magazine and to Harper's, and serialized Israel Potter; or, Fifty Years of Exile. A book of short stories, Piazza Tales, failed to make expenses, as did The Confidence Man, a volume of

loosely connected tales, comic without sufficient humor, emotionally inconsistent and stuffed with ironic allusions to the Bible and to Shakespeare. "Pages of crude theory and speculation to every line of narrative," as his brother-in-law put it.

Melville's back began to give out regularly, and before he was forty his family had become accustomed to worrying about his mental health as well. They treated him as an invalid, overstressed by compulsive scribbling and with eyes too weak to read by artificial light. His father-in-law, Judge Shaw, hoped to turn him from trying to make a living with his pen, and, when his search for a government appointment failed, Judge Shaw in 1857 sent Melville for his health to Constantinople, Greece, Egypt, the Holy Land and Italy. It was such a tour as a recent college graduate might take. If Melville gained intellectually, he expressed it largely in his conversation and was not stimulated to write.

He essayed the lecture circuit but chose to discourse on Italian art, about which he had not made up his mind, and his engagements became few and far between. He wrote clumsy poetry, and treated himself to a nostalgic voyage around Cape Horn to San Francisco with his seacaptain brother Tom. The Civil War inspired patriotic verse accounts of battles and a tour of the front, but the support of his family depended on his wife's legacy from her father and on Melville's appointment in 1866 by an old friend to the staff of the New York City customhouse.

"Herman's health is much better," his mother wrote to his cousin, "since he has been compelled to go out daily to attend to his business." His wages, four dollars a day, gave him an income equal to his wife's, and his inspector's duties afforded him time to brood over deeper investigations. He read Matthew Arnold, Hazlitt, Balzac, Tennyson, his friend Hawthorne and multiple histories of the Holy Land. These passing years of new security, however, were unaccompanied by peace of soul. His eldest son, age eighteen,

shot himself through the head. A beloved sister's death was shortly followed by that of his brother Tom. His younger son went to sea, jumped ship in San Francisco, and died penniless in the ward of a public hospital. Melville concealed from his friends the writing of *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, in which his characters represent varying degrees of faith and speculative doubt and say so endlessly. Like the Matthew Arnold of *Dover Beach*, Melville was intensely concerned with an unresolved conflict between the will to believe and an impulse toward skepticism. Ever original, however, Melville saw the problem not as the resolution of religious doubts but as the avoidance of complacency in indulging doubt! He had struggled with philosophy and in his maturity had become more interested in psychology. *Clarel* was written, not for a public of purchasers but for himself, and its publication costs were a gift from his perceptive uncle, Peter Gansevoort. Contemporary critics commented, "the reader soon becomes hopelessly bewildered . . ."

Melville retired from the customhouse in 1885 as he and his wife received further family inheritances. He continued to write poetry, but publication was of privately financed editions of twenty-five copies. An aging man, slipping comfortably into a routine of "unobstructed leisure," free of material cares, Melville could not tame his vigorous intellect. Among his papers at his death in 1891 was his brilliant short novel *Billy Budd*, based on the naval trial and hanging for which his cousin Guert Gansevoort had been courtmartialled, and exploring innocence and death in the rational but unjust world of a man-of-war.

When William Faulkner first read *Moby Dick*, he is said to have exclaimed, "I wish that I had written that book!" We who had the book assigned to us as teenagers mostly disagreed. The story is all right. A sailor, Ishmael, with a speculative turn of mind signs as crew on a whaling ship manned largely by an exotic collection of refugees from foreign lands, officered by brave

but passive Massachusetts men - Starbuck, Flask and Stubb - who knew only the discipline of the sea, and captained by a madman, Ahab, who ignores his owners' interests in the monomaniac pursuit of one particular whale. The whale drowns Ahab, a line around his neck, and destroys the ship Pequod. Ishmael alone escapes to tell the tale. But, as contemporary critics put it, the detailed lore of the whale fishery is more than we want to know, the mania of Captain Ahab is "too long drawn out," and the moralizing in "the run-a-muck style of Carlyle" seems sometimes as extravagant as Ahab. Yet Longfellow found Moby Dick "very wild, strange and interesting," and Hawthorne recognized it as a masterpiece. Indeed, upon first knowing Melville Hawthorne had written to New York friends, "the freshness of primeval nature is in that man."

Melville intended Moby Dick to be a romantic elaboration on the more pedestrian accounts of whaling voyages which were appearing as the whale fishery prospered and its intrepid captains tested the furthest reaches of the Pacific Ocean. He had no experience imagining a narrative in its entirety, nor did he need to. His method was to rely upon his own experiences, generously supplemented by the published works of others, and the log of Owen Chase, survivor of the sinking of the whaleship Essex by a sperm whale, came into his possession when he encountered Chase's son during a gam while still aboard the Acushnet. He knew the story he wanted to write, but by 1850 his self-education had given him a larger concept than literal adventure. He saw his Captain Ahab as a romantic, tragic figure, noble in his commanding will to destroy the white whale which had reaped away his leg with one swipe of its crooked jaw, but flawed in the extremes to which he drove himself and his crew. Gothic and transcendental romances, like Byron's verse drama Manfred, with their mysterious and larger-than-life heroes were popular in the early nineteenth century, and Melville saw an opportunity to apply the formula to the hunting of whales, achieving credibility with his readers

by demonstrating detailed familiarity with that trade. Melville in 1849 was rereading Shakespeare and understood the insight of Coleridge, in his essay on Hamlet, that "one of Shakespeare's modes of creating characters is to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess and then to place (the character) . . . , thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances." In Melville's words, "For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidness. Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease."

The first half of Moby Dick followed the author's original intention and was composed with industrious rapidity in the spring of 1850. The skeleton of the narrative was clear. Copious borrowings from technical accounts of whaling and whales, concerning particularly the ways of the largest leviathan, the sperm whale, were stuffed into a section on cetology. Melville even allowed himself some humor. The opening chapters in which Ishmael and the tattooed cannibal harpooner, Queequeg, come to share the only remaining bed at The Spouter Inn - Ishmael fearful for his life and Queequeg more interested in worshipping a small black mannikin - are truly funny. This Gothic tale looked to be light-hearted, at least in part. But in the summer of 1850 Melville met and befriended an older writer, to whom Moby Dick was dedicated, Nathaniel Hawthorne. The writing of Moby Dick was extended for a year, and the preoccupations of its sensitive author changed.

For Melville not only discussed with Hawthorne "ontological heroics," he read him; and in July 1850, midway through Moby Dick, Melville wrote an unsigned essay on Hawthorne's Mosses from an Old Manse which was published in a New York literary magazine. This fascinating critique extolled Hawthorne as an authentic American genius, more than a match for better known English and European authors. Melville recognized in Hawthorne an ambivalence toward the wildly conflicted nature of man which his own intellect and experience confirmed. Listen to Hawthorne's evocation of the fire-worshipping spirit

of the hearth, a symbol, not solely a disembodied abstraction:

"Nor did it lessen the charm of his soft, familiar courtesy and helpfulness, that the mighty spirit, were opportunity offered him, would run riot through the peaceful house, wrap its inmates in its terrible embrace, and leave nothing of them save their whitened bones. This possibility of mad destruction only made his domestic kindness the more beautiful and touching. It was so sweet of him, being endowed with such power, to dwell, day after day, and one long, lonesome night after another, on the dusky hearth, only now and then betraying his wild nature, by thrusting his red tongue out of the chimney-top! True, he had done much mischief in the world, and was pretty certain to do more; but his warm heart atoned for all. He was kindly to the race of man . . ."

Melville confessed ignorance of any Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin in Hawthorne, but he admired him because in "spite of all the Indian summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side - like the dark half of the physical sphere - is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world." Melville credited Hawthorne with sharing this background blackness "that so fixes and fascinates me" with Shakespeare, whose "occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth . . . (probing) at the very axis of reality" speak through the mouths of Hamlet, Timon, Lear and Iago. These dark characters articulate things "so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man . . . to utter or even hint of them." Melville concluded that Hawthorne's work reflected "the largest brain with the largest heart" known to American letters and announced "already I feel that this Hawthorne has dropped germinous seed into my soul."

The seed so sown fell on hospitable soil. Melville excitedly reworked his romantic design for Moby Dick to express what he had begun to believe, that man is not so innately good that he may not also have the source of the world's evil in his own nature. Under this new necessity Ishmael was largely relieved of his role as narrator by the omniscient author. What might have been a power struggle between mad Aha^b and Starbuck, his saner first mate, became a collision course between the captain's indomitable will and the

white whale, that massive embodiment of . . . what was it that Ahab had to destroy? Melville did not leave the reader in doubt, although scholars have chosen to supplement his explanation. Ahab himself soliloquizes:

"All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event - in the living act, the undoubted deed - there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask! . . . Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. (The whale) tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him."

It was no coincidence that Melville's favorite work of Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, contains these strikingly similar meditations of its demon-possessed hero: ". . . all visible things are emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken, is not there at all: Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and body it forth." Defying the Devil's claim to the Universe, the hero exclaims, "I am not thine, but Free, and forever hate thee!"

Lest the reader miss it, Melville's narrator made Ahab's point even more explicit:

"Ahab had cherished a wild vindictiveness against the whale, all the more fell for that in his frantic morbidness he at last came to identify with him, not only his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations. The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them . . . All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick."

We today might call Ahab paranoid, and suggest that he projected onto Moby Dick his own destructive nature. These terms were unknown to Melville, and he avoided the simplicities of psychological classification. He had learned enough of symbol and of art to relish ambiguity in his major characters, and his admiration for Ahab kept pace with his account of Ahab's folly. The captain is more than a leader, he is a magician in his manipulation of the crew to join the doomed pursuit of Moby Dick. His personal courage

inspires those less brave, but he has compassion for the cowardly cabin boy Pip, whose mind becomes unhinged after leaping from a whaleboat and spending hours swimming alone after his shipmates' Nantucket sleigh ride has taken them over the horizon. Ahab's musings to himself reveal occasional self-doubt, sternly repressed, and affection for his wife at home and their young child of his old age. Even while retelling the biblical tale of King Ahab - whose false spirit, evil in the sight of the Lord, led him to a not quite accidental death - Melville loved his creation. Others were quick to castigate Melville for his seemingly amoral and cynical insight that the human heart engenders its own evil and men are led to seek their own worst fate, but Melville himself wrote to Hawthorne, after Hawthorne had read *Moby Dick*: "A sense of unspeakable security is in me at this moment, on account of your having understood the book. I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb."

More than Melville's other books, *Moby Dick* is rich in a vivid balance of philosophy and narrative, of symbolic scenes and working detail. As obviously as Shakespeare, and as enthusiastically, Melville peppers *Moby Dick* with every sort of symbol. The Nantucket waterfront prophet, Elijah, darkly hints the *Pequod's* fate. Ahab's pipe, signifying comfort, satisfaction and peace, is tossed into the Atlantic. In the final stages of the chase, Ahab tramples to bits the *Pequod's* only aid to navigation by dead reckoning, the ship's sextant! Ahab commands the blacksmith to forge a fresh harpoon for *Moby Dick* and insists that only the blood of the pagan harpooners, Tashtego, Queequeg and Daggoo, shall temper the steel barbs. As the scorched blood smokes, Ahab howls, "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" Demented Pip's role enlarges as the chase becomes wilder; he is the chorus, the Fool, whose inappropriate laughter and gibberish Ahab cannot afford to heed. Before the *Pequod* sights the white whale, lightning at night tips the lightning rods along the yard-arms with white flames,

the corpusants, inspiring prayer among the crew and defiance from Ahab as the ship sails on, enveloped in hell-fire.

Moby Dick himself is the ultimate symbol. We know him for his towering spout, his enormous bulk, his unusual hump, his crooked jaw, his instinctive cleverness in evading capture and destroying pursuers - and his whiteness. He is a particular whale, made believably individual, but freighted with significance, and much of this significance resides in his whiteness. Of course, Moby Dick had to be white to enable Ahab to find him in an ocean full of his black and grey brethren. But Melville, turning the blackness of Hawthorne upside down, saw the horror of making his symbol of inchoate evil white. Hawthorne painted scenes of advancing dawn against the blackness of the night. Melville created an enigmatic, destructive creature which lives in blackness miles beneath the ocean's surface but which carries the color of innocence, love, purity, nobility and faith. Melville's chapter, The Whiteness of the Whale, elaborates upon the thesis that "the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in itself, (heightens) that terror to the furthest bounds." He cites as evidence the polar bear and the great white shark. His point nicely complements his general view on the inextricable mingling in man of good and evil and on the impossibility of divining either from appearances. His chapter is a tour de force, a brilliantly imaginative examination of every use and meaning of whiteness, including a metaphysical discussion of the physics of color and light and a speculation that we visitors in the Universe need tinted glasses to escape the snowblindness of the willful traveler in Lapland.

Melville was thirty-one when he wrote Moby Dick, young enough to set all sails before the tempest of his creativity and to develop a hero in whom he believed passionately. Critics have agreed that the grandeur of Melville's conception saved Ahab and his improbable rhetoric from derision.

For although a New York reviewer in 1851 complained that Melville's seamen do not talk like seamen and that Ahab was "grievously spoiled, nay altogether ruined by a vile overdaubing with a coat of book-learning and mysticism," he concluded that *Moby Dick* was "not lacking much of being a great work." Other reviewers took the same ambivalent approach. In London, *The Athenaeum's* review called the book "an ill-compounded mixture of romance and matter-of-fact" but recognized Melville's talent in allowing that "our author must be henceforth numbered in the company of the incorrigibles who occasionally tantalize us with indications of genius, while they constantly summon us to endure monstrosities." The magazine *John Bull* on the same day was far more generous: "Of all the extraordinary books from the pen of Herman Melville this is out and out the most extraordinary . . . the flashes of truth . . . which sparkle on the surface of the foaming sea of thought . . . The profound reflections uttered by the actors in the wild watery chase . . . and the graphic representations of human nature in the startling disguises under which it appears on the deck of the *Pequod*." An American newspaper agreed that "The author writes with the gusto of true genius, and it must be a torpid spirit indeed that is not enlivened with the raciness of his humor and the redolence of his imagination." Later critics have come to believe that Melville's borrowings from the Bible, Shakespeare and almost every other writer he had ever read enhanced, rather than detracted from, this psychological saga. The exceptional interest and value of Leon Howard's fine biography of Melville is in its successful tracing of Melville's reading and the influence this had on his writing.

It is possible to cut *Moby Dick* down to size, as Howard Mumford Jones does when he says, "Some of it is sheer tosh," and goes on to add laconically, "Ahab believes that the essence of the human character lies in the dauntless expression of will power . . . and like (Byron's) *Manfred*, Ahab seeks to impose his will power upon the inscrutability of the universe. In such a

contest the universe will always win, as it does in Oedipus Rex, King Lear, Faust, The Brothers Karamazov, The Scarlett Letter, and Moby Dick." However, this summing up is as wrong as every other attempt to compress the meaning of Moby Dick into an unambiguous declaration. One remembers Ahab and the White Whale and comes back, older, to the question of meaning to find new truths glimpsed through the book's symbolism.

When Melville had retired, he began to receive letters from Englishmen who had read Moby Dick and the adventure novels and wanted to know their author. Melville could not guess the thunderous impact which Moby Dick would have on later generations, but he learned before he died that intelligent readers here and there understood his masterpiece and were excited by it. He contented himself in his old age with the assurance that he had been truly devoted to Art, and to its essential business of holding opposites together in creative tension. He never found an answer to the conflict between the spontaneous impulses of the heart and the intellectual wisdom of the head, nor to faith versus doubt. Some years after the publication of Moby Dick, Melville visited Hawthorne in Liverpool where Hawthorne was consul, and they walked together by the shore. Hawthorne noted, "Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken . . . It is strange how he persists - and has persisted in wandering to-and-fro over the deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief." We also know of Melville's unresolved questions from Billy Budd, his posthumously published last tale, which raises the issue of justice and resolves it unhappily with the hanging of impetuous Billy, the guilty innocent. John Updike, in his new volume of essays and criticism, Hugging the Shore, calls Billy Budd "a counterfeit Christ . . . legend . . . shown in the coining" with Billy going to his death "blessing his condemner as credulous men everywhere go down to their doom

praising God." But perhaps Melville is saying only, and dramatically, that careful compromise is all that is possible in this incomprehensible world, and that some must suffer always. Billy Budd is, in a sense, a gloomier equivalent of Shakespeare's swan song, *The Tempest*, but it shares with that sunnier work a serenity and acceptance of what has been and must be. Melville's Prospero is himself as author, and some lines from his long poem *Clarel* reflect a mood of final blessing:

"But through such strange illusions have they passed
Who in life's pilgrimage have baffled striven -
Even death may prove unreal at the last,
And stoics be astounded into heaven."

Updike holds that after *Moby Dick*, Melville withdrew gradually into the life of his mind, in good part because the news he had for his readers - that life is a cruel fraud - was unacceptable, and he knew it. There is no shred of evidence, however, that Melville, unwilling skeptic though he remained, relinquished his fierce pride that in his youth and vigor he had sent Ahab forth to search out and destroy the White Whale.

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