

Herman Melville's Whale
The International Magazine of Literature, Art and Science (1851)

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The new nautical story by the always successful author of *Typee*, has for its namegiving subject a monster first introduced to the world of print by Mr. J. N. Reynolds, ten or fifteen years ago, in a paper for the *Knickerbocker*, entitled *Mocha Dick*. We received a copy when it was too late to review it ourselves for this number of the *International*, and therefore make use of a notice of it which we find in the *London Spectator*:

“This sea novel is a singular medley of naval observation, magazine article writing, satiric reflection upon the conventionalisms of civilized life, and rhapsody run mad. So far as the nautical parts are appropriate and unmixed, the portraiture is truthful and interesting. Some of the satire, especially in the early parts, is biting and reckless. The chapter-spinning is various in character; now powerful from the vigorous and fertile fancy of the author, now little more than empty though sounding phrases. The rhapsody belongs to wordmongering where ideas are the staple; where it takes the shape of narrative or dramatic fiction, it is phantasmal—an attempted description of what is impossible in nature and without probability in art; it repels the reader instead of attracting him.

“The elements of the story are a South Sea whaling voyage, narrated by Ishmael, one of the crew of the ship *Pequod*, from Nantucket. Its ‘probable’ portions consist of the usual sea matter in that branch of the industrial marine; embracing the preparations for departure, the voyage, the chase and capture of whale, with the economy of cutting up, &c., and the peculiar discipline of the service. This matter is expanded by a variety of digressions of the nature and characteristics of the sperm whale, the history of the fishery, and similar things, in which a little knowledge is made the excuse for a vast many words. The voyage is introduced by several chapters in which life in American seaports is rather broadly depicted.

“The ‘marvellous’ injures the book by disjointing the narrative, as well as by its inherent want of interest, at least as managed by Mr. Melville. In the superstition of some whalers, (grounded upon the malicious foresight which occasionally characterizes the attacks of the sperm fish upon the boats sent to capture it,) there is a *white* whale which possesses supernatural power. To capture or even to hurt it is beyond the art of man; the skill of the

whaler is useless; the harpoon does not wound it; it exhibits a contemptuous strategy in its attacks upon the boats of its pursuers; and happy is the vessel were only loss of limb, or of a single life, attends its chase. Ahab, the master of the Pequod—a mariner of long experience, stern resolve, and indomitable courage, the high hero of romance, in short, transferred to a whale-ship—has lost his leg in a contest with the white whale. Instead of daunting Ahab, the loss exasperates him; and by long brooding over it his reason becomes shaken. In this condition he undertakes the voyage; making the chase of his fishy antagonist the sole object of his thoughts, and, so far as he can without exciting overt insubordination among his officers, the object of his proceedings.

“Such a groundwork is hardly natural enough for a regular-built novel, though it might form a tale, if properly managed. But Mr. Melville’s mysteries provoke wonder at the author rather than terror at the creation; the soliloquies and dialogues of Ahab, in which the author attempts delineating the wild imaginings of monomania, and exhibiting some profoundly speculative views of things in general, induce weariness or skipping; while the whole scheme mars, as we have said, the nautical continuity of story—greatly assisted by various chapters of a bookmaking kind.

“Perhaps the earliest chapters are the best, although they contain little adventure. Their topics are fresher to English readers than the whale-chase, and they have more direct satire. One of the leading personages in the voyage is Queequeg, a South Sea Islander, that Ishmael falls in with at New-Bedford, and with whom he forms a bosom friendship.

“Queequeg was a native of Kokovoko, an island far away to the West and South. It is not down in any map; true places never are.

“While yet a new-hatched savage, running wild about his native woodlands in a grass clout, followed by the nibbling goats, as if he were a green sapling,—even then, in Queequeg’s ambitious soul lurked a strong desire to see something more of Christendom than a specimen whaler or two. His father was a high chief, a king; his uncle a high priest; and on the maternal side he boasted aunts who were the wives of unconquerable warriors. There was excellent blood in his veins—royal stuff; though sadly vitiated, I fear, by the cannibal propensity he nourished in his untutored youth.

“A Sag Harbour ship visited his father’s bay; and Queequeg sought a passage to Christian lands. But the ship having her full complement of seamen, spurned his suit; and not all the King his father’s influence could prevail. But, Queequeg vowed a vow. Alone in his canoe, he paddled off to a distant strait, which he knew the ship must pass through when she quitted the island. On one side was a coral reef; on the other a low tongue of land, covered with mangrove thickets, that grew out into the water. Hiding his canoe, still afloat, among these thickets, with its prow seaward, he sat down in the stern, paddle low in hand; and when the ship was gliding by, like a flash he darted out—gained her side—with one backward dash of his foot capsized and sank his canoe—climbed up the chains—and throwing himself at full length upon the deck, grappled a ring-bolt there, and swore not to let it go though hacked in pieces.

“In vain the captain threatened to throw him overboard—suspended a cutlass over his naked wrists: Queequeg was the son of a king, and Queequeg budged not. Struck by his desperate dauntlessness, and his wild desire to visit Christendom, the captain at last relented, and told him “he might make’ himself at home. But this fine young savage—this sea Prince of Whales—never saw the captain’s cabin. They put him down among the sailors, and made a whaleman of him. But, like the Czar Peter content to toil in the ship-yards of foreign cities, Queequeg disdained no seeming ignominy, if thereby he might haply gain the power of enlightening his untutored countrymen. For at bottom—so he told me—he was actuated by a profound desire to learn among the Christians the arts whereby to make his people still happier than they were, and more than that, still better than they were. But, alas! The practices of whalers soon convinced him that even Christians could be both miserable and wicked, infinitely more so than all his father’s heathens. Arrived at last in old Sag Harbour, and seeing what the sailors did there, and then going on to Nantucket, and seeing how they spent their wages in that place also, poor Queequeg gave it up for lost. Thought he, it’s a wicked world in all meridians! I’ll die a Pagan.”

“The strongest point of the book is its ‘characters.’ Ahab, indeed, is a melodramatic exaggeration, and Ishmael is little more than a mouthpiece; but the harpooners, the mates, and several of the seamen, are truthful portraiture of the sailor as modified by the whaling service. The persons ashore are equally good, though they are soon lost sight of. The two

Quaker owners are the author's means for a bit at the religious hypocrisies. Captain Bildad, an old sea-dog, has got rid of every thing pertaining to the meeting-house save an occasional 'thou' and 'thee.' Captain Peleg, in American phrase, 'professes religion.' The following extract exhibits the two men when Ishmael is shipped:

"I began to think that it was high time to settle with myself at what terms I would be willing to engage for the voyage. I was already aware that in the whaling business they paid no wages, but all hands, including the captain, received certain shares of the profits, called *lays*; and that these lays were proportioned to the degree of importance pertaining to the respective duties of the ship's company. I was also aware that, being a green hand at whaling, my own lay would not be very large: but, considering that I was used to the sea, could steer a ship, splice a rope, and all that, I made no doubt that, from all I had heard, I should be offered at least the two hundred and seventy-fifth lay—that is, the two hundred and seventy-fifth part of the clear net proceeds of the voyage, whatever that might eventually amount to. And though the two hundred and seventy-fifth lay was what they called a rather *long lay*, yet it was better than nothing; and if we had a lucky voyage, might pretty nearly pay for the clothing I would wear out on it, not to speak of my three years' beef and board, for which I would not have to pay one stiver.

"It might be thought that this was a poor way to accumulate a princely fortune; and so it was, a very poor way indeed. But I am one of those that never take on about princely fortunes, and am quite content if the world is ready to board and lodge me while I am putting up at this grim sing of the Thunder-cloud. Upon the whole, I thought that the two hundred and seventy-fifth lay would be about the fair thing, but would not have been surprised had I been offered the two hundredth, considering I was of a broad-shouldered make.

"But one thing, nevertheless, that made me a little distrustful about receiving a generous share of the profits, was this: ashore, I had heard something of both Captain Peleg and his unaccountable old crony Bildad; how that they, being the principal proprietors of the Pequod, therefore the other and more inconsiderable and scattered owners left nearly the whole management of the ship's affairs to these two. And I did not know but that the stingy old Bildad might have a deal to say about shipping hands, especially as I now found him on board the Pequod, quite at home there in the cabin, and reading his Bible, as if at his own

fireside. Now, while Peleg was vainly trying to mend a pen with his jack-knife, old Bildad, to my no small surprise, considering that he was such an interested party in these proceedings—Bildad never heeded us, but went on mumbling to himself out of his book, ‘Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth—’

“ ‘Well, Captain Bildad,’ interrupted Peleg, ‘what d’ye say—what lay shall we give this young man?’

“ ‘Thou knowest best,’ was the sepulchral reply; ‘the seven hundred and seventy-seventh wouldn’t be too much—would it—’ where moth and rust do corrupt, but *lay*—’

“Lay indeed, thought I, and such a lay!—the seven hundred and seventy-seventh! Well, old Bildad, you are determined that I, for one, shall not *lay* up many *lays* here below, where moth and rust do corrupt. It was an exceedingly *long lay* that, indeed; and though from the magnitude of the figure it might at first deceive a landsman, yet the slightest consideration will show that, though seven hundred and seventy-seven is a pretty large number, yet when you come to make a *tenth* of it, you will then see, I say, that the seven hundred and seventy-seventh part of a farthing is a good deal less than seven hundred and seventy-seven gold doubloons. And so I thought at the time.

“ ‘Why, b_t your eyes, Bildad!’ cried Peleg, ‘thou dost not want to swindle this young man! He must have more than that!’

“ ‘Seven hundred and seventy-seventh,’ again said Bildad, without lifting his eyes; and then went on mumbling—‘for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.’

“ ‘I am going to put him down for the three hundredth,’ said Peleg; ‘do ye hear that, Bildad? The three hundredth lay, I say.’

“Bildad laid down his book, and, turning solemnly towards him, said, ‘Captain Peleg, thou hast a generous heart; but thou must consider the duty thou owest to the other owners of this ship—widows and orphans, many of them; and that, if we too abundantly reward the labors of this young man, we may be taking the break from those widows and those orphans. The seven hundred and seventy-seventh lay, Captain Peleg.’

“ ‘Thou Bildad!’ roared Peleg, starting up, and clattering about the cabin. ‘B_t ye, Captain Bildad; if I had followed thy advice in these matters, I would afore now had a

conscience to lug about that would be heavy enough to founder the largest ship that ever sailed round Cape Horn.’

“ ‘Captain Peleg,’ said Bildad steadily, ‘thy conscience may be drawing ten inches of water or ten fathoms—I can’t tell; but as thou art still an impenitent man, Captain Peleg, I greatly fear lest thy conscience be but a leaky one, and will in the end sink thee foundering down to the fiery pit, Captain Peleg.’ “

“It is a canon with some critics that nothing should be introduced into a novel which it is physically impossible for the writer to have known; thus, he must not describe the conversation of miners in a pit if they *all* perish. Mr. Melville hardly steers clear of this rule, and he continually violates another, by beginning in the autobiographical form and changing *ad libitum* into the narrative. His catastrophe overrides all rule; not only is Ahab, with his boat’s-crew, destroyed in his last desperate attack upon the white whale, but the Pequod herself sinks with all on board into the depths of the illimitable ocean. Such is the go-ahead method.”