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What “Moby-Dick” Means to Me

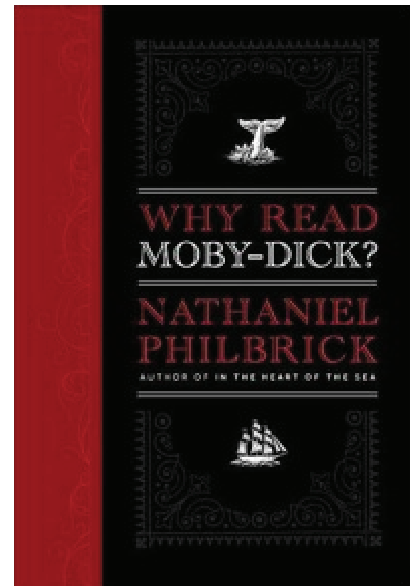
Posted by *Philip Hoare*

The author in the Azores, among friends.

For years, “Moby-Dick” defeated me. I think I was put off the book when, as a child, I watched the 1956 John Huston film on our tiny black-and-white television, at home in suburban Southampton, England. Seeing it on the ghostly cathode-ray tube, which was housed in a veneered cabinet, was more like viewing some Victorian apparatus for contacting the departed spirits, forever imprisoned behind its glass.

Huston’s film promised so much—the rearing white whale, a monster of my deepest imaginings—but it delivered a wordy worthiness, quite remote from what I wanted from the story. Later, I’d look at the book itself and fail to find any way into its prose, as impermeable as that TV screen. I didn’t know then what I do now: that “Moby-Dick” can be whatever you want it to be. It took me thirty years to discover what the book was—or what it was not.

Now along comes Nathaniel Philbrick’s brilliant and provocative new work, “Why Read Moby-Dick“—a collection of elegant essays, an eclecticism that it shares with its subject. Philbrick seeks to make us look again at the paradoxes of what he, like many others before him, acclaims as “the greatest American novel ever written.”



But “Moby-Dick” is not a novel. It’s barely a book at all. It’s more an act of transference, of ideas and evocations hung around the vast and unknowable shape of the whale, an extended musing on the strange meeting of human history and natural history. It is, above all, a sui-generis creation, one that came into the world as an unnatural, immaculate conception.

To my mind, there are only two other works with which it bears comparison: Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein” (1818), and Emily Brontë’s “Wuthering Heights” (1847). The former, in its own witness to one man’s obsessive interference with nature, was a direct influence on Melville, who acquired a copy on a visit to London in 1849, even as the whalish shades were beginning to swirl about in his imagination.

We don’t know if Melville read Brontë’s rural, gothic creation, but its uncontained spirit—in which the wild Yorkshire moors themselves become the monster—would seem to me to be an apt fellow-traveller for the author who launched the Pequod into the mid-nineteenth century. All three books are caught between the primeval old and the impossibly new, between an abiding sense of certitude and the dissembling future.

In an age of uncertain faith, then as now, “Moby-Dick” resembles a religious tract, an alternative testament. Little wonder that one of its early set-pieces is Father Mapple’s fire-and-brimstone sermon from the prow-shaped pulpit in the Seamen’s Bethel, New Bedford, or that Philbrick takes the title for his own first chapter, “The Gospels in This Century,” from Melville’s wry and rather Wildean remark on the unsalability of his work: “Though I wrote the Gospels in this century, I should die in the gutter.” As he told Nathaniel Hawthorne, “I have written a wicked book, and I feel as spotless as the lamb.”

When I finally began reading “Moby-Dick” (had I wasted my time before then?), I found I couldn’t put it down. I’d carry about with me a tiny, Oxford World Classics edition, anonymously bound in blue cloth, to be studied chapter by chapter, like the Bible or the Koran, as I sat on the Tube or on an airplane, or in the early hours of the morning. As Philbrick exhorts his readers, ” ‘Moby-Dick’ is a long book, and time is short. Even a sentence, a mere phrase will do.”

Much of the impact of Melville’s book on any fierce new convert is implicit in that sense of time travel. Sometimes I read it and I feel like I’m going backward, fast. It reads like something that was written before books were invented, yet it is utterly modern—pre-postmodern, perhaps. It is part of its own prediction, as if it and its characters had been there all along, and had only been waiting to be written. Just as in the real New Bedford’s Bethel a pulpit-prow had to be built, in the nineteen-sixties, because so many visitors expected to find one there; and, just as Melville wrote vividly of Nantucket, an island that he had yet to visit, much of “Moby-Dick” is conjured out of the air and the sea.

That’s why the book appeals so much to modern artists, like Frank Stella and Matthew Barney. Its oceanic reach and perverse digression provide endless sources of inspiration and interpretation. In chapters such as the famously sublime “The Whiteness of the Whale”—almost hallucinatory in its associative suspension of normality and subtle obscenity—Melville takes up his theme, then takes it apart, teasing it out to impossibly filigreed tendrils, until you wonder how you, or he, got there in the first place.

While reading “Moby-Dick” is a bit like being stoned, it also evokes an Asperger’s air. Ishmael will tell you everything you wanted to know about the whale, and much that he has made up. (Few books are so filled with neologisms; it’s as if Melville were frustrated by language itself, and strove to burst out of its confines.) At the same time, “Moby-Dick” stands both as a historical reference for the great age of Yankee whaling and as a work of imagination in which whales become avatars as much as they are real animals. Melville would never have finished his book today—he’d be constantly Googling “whale.” “God keep me from ever completing anything,” his existential alter ego complains. “This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!”

It always astonishes me that, just as my schoolmates and I were made to wade through Shakespeare and Dickens at an inappropriate age, American high-school students are subjected to Melville’s madness, with its subversion and, to modern eyes, overtly homoerotic passages. Indeed, part of the power of “Moby-Dick” lies in its latency, its delayed, time-bomb quality. It was virtually ignored in the author’s lifetime—its first edition never sold out, and the remaining copies went up in flames in a fire in the publisher’s downtown Manhattan warehouse in 1853.

Like a protean seed awaiting germination, the book needed a new element to bring it to life. As a result, when it burst into the new century, it came invested with a terrific momentum of its own—as if the world had just caught up with its fiery power. In the nineteen-twenties, this lost book was rediscovered by the Lost Generation. And, just as it was stoked up by the dark streets of London on that 1849 visit, “Moby-Dick” owed more than a little of its rebirth to a foreign land and the British writers who led the way in its reappraisal.

In 1923, D. H. Lawrence published his idiosyncratic, if not faintly crazy, “Studies in Classic American Literature.” Lawrence proclaimed Melville to be “a futurist long before futurism found paint,” the author of “one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world.” Lawrence’s paean was only the public eruption of a reputation already in revival. The year before, in 1922, T. E. Lawrence, of Arabia fame, reported that “Moby-Dick” took prime position on his “shelf of ‘Titanic’ books (those distinguished by greatness of spirit),” and two years after that, in 1924, noted, “Someone is working a Melville boom, & I’ve sold all my early editions profitably.”

In the summer of 1936, the aristocratic aesthete the Honourable Stephen Tennant was entertaining his friend Morgan Forster, at tea in a genteel hotel in the English Home Counties, talking avidly of Queequeg. Could Melville have ever imagined that his book would travel so far, and find such unlikely readers?

In the alchemical process of critical and cultural assimilation, Melville's monstrous creation—like Shelley's Creature, like Brontë's Heathcliff and Cathy—took on, especially through its susceptible adaptations to other media, a modern typology of Manichean and cinematic proportions. A century and a half after it first played out, Ahab's wanton chase was evoked in the "war on terror," and the attempts to pursue an apparently uncatchable foe, even as it sourced an epic designed to reflect America's first imperial venture—the getting of the oil that lit and lubricated the Western world.

Yet it has an even timelier message, one that, like so many of Melville's literary grenades, seems to have been lying in wait for us. "Does the Whale's Magnitude Diminish?—Will He Perish?" the book asks. Although, having posed this question, Melville, a perennial contrarian, comes to a contrary conclusion, his summary is certainly predictive. Three hundred and sixty thousand blue whales died in the cetacean Armageddon of the twentieth century, reducing the world's largest animal to a population of just a few thousand.

Yet, in the wake of the moratorium on the hunting of great whales implemented by the International Whaling Commission, in 1986, whales appear to have recovered. Earlier this year, in the waters of the Indian Ocean off the tip of Sri Lanka, I saw dozens of blue whales, their thirty-foot blows as tall as houses. That vast biomass was an Edenic sight, a glimpse of the world before "Moby-Dick." Blue whales now swim up the Irish Sea, and last month Captain Mark Dalomba was astonished to see one from the wheelhouse of his Dolphin Fleet whale-watch boat off Provincetown, on Cape Cod.

This summer, in the deep waters of the Azores, I swam with sperm whales. In the silence of their world, listening to the rhythm of their sonar clicks, feeling the scale of their social cohesion, I was more aware than ever before of the history that has passed between us. Now, as I pick up "Moby-Dick" again, prompted by Philbrick's provocative book, I'm reminded of a salutary notion: that the whales that inspired Melville were around long before us, and may, with luck, outlive us, too.

"Wherefore … we account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in individuality… . In Noah's flood he despised Noah's ark; and if ever the world is to be flooded again, like the Netherlands, to kill off its rats, then the eternal whale will still survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed defiance to the skies."

Philip Hoare is the author of "The Whale." He is currently Artist-in-Residence at the Marine Institute, Plymouth University, U.K., and is working on an audio edition of "Moby-Dick," read by Tilda Swinton, John Waters, Stephen Fry, Simon Callow, and others.

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