

MOBY-DICK, by Herman Melville. Edited with commentary by Harold Beaver, Penguin, Hamondsworth. 1016 pp. \$2.85.

Harold Beaver begins his introduction by quoting Joseph Conrad :

Lately I had in my hand Moby-Dick. It struck me as a rather strained rhapsody with whaling for a subject and not a single sincere line in the 3 vols of it.

"Even now," says Beaver, "there may still be some rebel support for such a view." Unfortunately, the main effect of this copiously annotated edition (one-third of it commentary, by weight), is to make one agree with Conrad. Moby-Dick seems to flounder badly in precisely those features Beaver has singled out for exegesis; its merits lie not in its heavy-handed approaches to Faust or Paradise Lost, but in the much less grandiose territory of Melville's earlier "potboilers" (as Beaver calls them): White-Jacket, Typee, Omoo.

Melville is a pedant, take the overtones of that word how you will. He has read a lot and is determined to show it. Look no further than the Leviathan list of extracts guarding the entrance to the book; it is not only a heavy sort of authorial joke (all his jokes are heavy), but an emblem of the book as a whole: ponderous, learned, and without coherence. Does anybody ever read them all except editors? The novel really comes to life not in Ahab's interminable rants or his creator's grand gestures, but in the vivid, first-hand depictions of the shipboard life Melville knew. Moby-Dick suffers from a type of literary schizophrenia, and quite acutely: on the one hand it is the evocative document of White-Jacket, but set on a whaler rather than a man-o'-war; and on the other, a heavy conglomerate of allegory and myth, with a mechanism so creaky as to drown out the tale. And on top of all this, critical zeal has fathered a true monster: this edition is a handy compendium to all that, acting as summary of and guide to the volumes of Melvilliana.

Melville's symbols hardly ever seem to spring out organically, to make one feel they are a vital and inseparable part of the events. They are all part of his scheme, a mythic wallpapering to the tale, not really affecting or growing out of the qualities of the walls underneath. Even in the less pretentious works the same process is observable, though not nearly as acutely. Chronicling is Melville's strong point; when he starts spinning his webs of philosophic portent, the trouble begins. It is not enough to describe or present a rounded picture: he must eulogize, rhapsodize, build his own baroque marine pastoral of the idyllic life at sea, with jolly tars of purges and pristine vocabulary (one of whom in White-Jacket insistently quotes epic verse, in indifferent translation, from the mast-head), all of whom are grand fellows, the salt of the earth, and upstanding pillars of moral decency. It is the type of thing always written well after the event, and the longer after the more probably, just as people always pick childhood for the happiest time of their life. There is something manifestly distasteful in such whitewashing, involving as it does a willing forgetfulness of all but the "nice" bits, and it is found all the way through Melville. Maybe this is what Conrad meant when he complained of a lack of sincerity.

Maybe this is also why Moby-Dick in particular seems such a rootless mass of clogged symbols. It lacks any substratum of human reality. Ishmael,

Ahab, Stubb, Starbuck --none of them exist in any way as recognizable human beings, only as dolls for their creator to wheel out and display in various postures; in themselves, they are as dead as the mask in Greek tragedy once the living actor has gone. Even Ishmael, for all the directness of the famous opening ("Call me Ishmael") is not a character, but, simply a narrative vehicle; at the end we know no more about him than his first-person counterpart in Typee or White-Jacket. Ishmael has been through hell, the epilogue tells us, but the Ishmael who narrates is none the worse for it, keeping up the same chatty and homespun stream of words as any old Nantucketer with a week to tell you his tale in. There is more of sheer horror in the final catastrophe in Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom", as turgid as that may be.

Moby-Dick teeters on a foundation of rhetoric, and on this Melville builds his tower of symbols, allegories and myths. A whale is not only a whale but the Leviathan of Milton and the Bible, symbol of the Deceiver; Ahab is not only a mad sea-captain, but soul-seller Faust. The links are obvious, but the reader is not left to make them: they are hammered at him mercilessly. Yet the end effect is not of some vast cosmic tragedy; it is all rather unemotive and inconsequential. Ahab is no Oedipus, or Faust, or even a Miltonic Satan: for all his histrionics and interminable rhetoric, he is simply Melville's puppet, whose exit is noisier but no more moving than the hanging of Mister Punch.

It is this top-heavy superstructure of symbol that Beaver emphasizes in this Penguin edition. His method (I truly haven't the heart to say Melville's) is the card-index type that notes the adjectives used to describe something on page 28, and then the usage of something almost (or at least roughly) the same on page 364, then proceeds to forge (and that is certainly the word) the grand link of purpose between them. For example, here is his note on the description of Queequeg during his religious fast:

screwed down to the floor ... with stiff and grating joints cf. Bildad sitting "bolt-upright" with his legs "stiffly crossed". cf. The Pequod's masts standing "stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne". All religious experience, Melville seems to suggest, has something in common. (736)

And there are many, many more.

Then there are the puns, puns without end, and anagrams too. "Ishmael" suggests "is male", which by a partial anagram gives "I'm Sal"; now the significance of this is that Ishmael at the Spouter Inn, shown to the room he has agreed to share with Queequeg is told by his host Peter Coffin (now there's a name...) that "Sall and me slept in that ere bed". "The name," says Beaver, "by picking out alternate letters, is turned to 'Sal', just as its owner will be turned to a wife in the Coffins' wedding bed." Alternate letters? Never mind. Add the names of the Coffins ("Sall and me") and you have salpetre, a hint of perdition. The Coffins have two children, Samuel and John, one prophet from each of the Testaments; but the offspring of Ishmael and Queequeg, lying in bed between them, is a Tomahawk. Ishmael is also Sall because he is the only salvage from the wreck of the Pequod. And the two "salamed" together before Queequeg's idol Yojo ("O Joy!") for yet another "Sall and me." Ahab, meanwhile, is "dismembered Ahab", is "Ah! Mab", is Queen Mab, and therefore yet another fairy; but this should surprise no one, as the book is full of phallic harpoon thrusts, with sperm as the prize. Even Peleg's recruiting teepee on board the docked Pequod must be a penis, because it sticks up into the

air; Beaver chooses not to comment on its "tuffed point", a distinction which alone makes it totally unlike any penises in my recollection, at least.

All very ingenious, but so what? Even granted that all of this is Melville's and not Beaver's, where does this leave the novel, one's grasp of the full meaning of the catastrophe, of Ahab's obsession, of the nature of evil, and all those other Grand Subjects Moby-Dick pretends to be dealing with? Turn Ishmael into an anagram for the whole of the book, word by word, and he is still a bore and a cut-out; Ahab is still left without a drop of blood in his veins.

The blurb on the back cover talks about "the kind of learned playfulness we associate with Joyce and Nabokov and Borges." The comparison only serves to accentuate how unsatisfactory a mixture Moby-Dick is: Joyce and Nabokov and Borges do it all so much better; in all three, a solid human reality underlies what may not unfairly be labelled pedantry; characters appear to be more than embodiments of abstractions or grand gestures of passion; only when anchored to human in the specific does the machinery really move. John Barth (Giles Goat-Boy) borrowed a phrase from Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" to describe the intermingling in all creativity of passion and technique: fire and algebra. Melville is all algebra: all the elements have been combined in all the set ways, but the fire is lacking. Bloodless Ahab is wheeled out to rant, and wheeled back in; chorus Ishmael chatters on indefatigably; and the supporting cast comes in with its Gilbert-and-Sullivan refrain between the Ancient Mariner's verses. The critics sit poised.

Melville, in typical ponderous humour, devotes a chapter to "Jonah Historically Regarded", in which he discusses many explanations for the tale, including one that Jonah was after all merely picked up by a boat called "The Whale", "as some craft are nowadays christened the 'Shark,' the 'Gull,' the 'Eagle.'" (473) Did Beaver really keep a straight face when he wrote his annotation? --

the 'Gull' viz. such commentators gull the public, just as such exegetists, far from being life-preservers, are themselves inflated wind-bags. (852)

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