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Trying All Things: An Introduction to *Moby-Dick*

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I

HERMAN Melville has been acknowledged, in our time if not in his own, as one of American literature's greatest authors. Our time has also seen *Moby-Dick* – probably more than any other American novel – enshrined in the ranks of literature's ultimate achievements. But we are in danger of missing the special quality of Melville as a writer and of *Moby-Dick* as an act of writing if we think of them as sitting peacefully inside such sedate categories. If *Moby-Dick* is a classic, it is so very much on its own terms. What sets it apart is not really its whaling subject, and not even its famous depths of symbolic meaning, so much as the stand it takes toward literature itself – its quite peculiar attitude, registered on every page, toward what literature is and can be, and toward what it can attempt as a work of literary making.

Moby-Dick's great hero gives one measure of what I mean. Melville's ravaged and fanatic captain, so overscaled in his energies and so restricted in his range of interests, is in one sense a variant on a classic American type. Monomania, a rare personality disorder in everyday life, has something of the status of a normal state of selfhood in American fiction. From Charles Brockden Brown's compulsive ventriloquist to Hawthorne's questers after knowledge and Poe's fetishists of tooth and eye to the rigidified regional obsessives of Sarah Orne Jewett and Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner's tracers of unalterable designs, and Flannery O'Connor's involuntary baptisers and tattoo seekers, American fiction's most distinctive fantasies have commonly featured the figure of the monomaniac, the self mastered by a single motive and so restricted to a single move or goal. Captain Ahab is, of course,

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the classic embodiment of this figure. But what is characteristic of Melville is that when he seizes on this common literary property, he instantly endows it with the power and presence of the full-fledged heroic self. He equips his obsessive with the hero's unforgettably distinguishing name – "*he's Ahab*, boy" (Chap. 16), Captain Peleg rightly underlines. He equips him with the hero's special linguistic register – the gorgeously musical metaphorical language Ahab seems less to speak than to declaim or sing. He equips him with the hero's magnanimity, his outsized capacities to will, do, feel, and suffer: Ahab wills not as we will but as a locomotive drives along a track; Ahab sobs not as we sob but with the superior woe of "a heart-stricken moose" (Chap. 36). And he equips him with the hero's memorable *story* or adventure – in this case, to hunt and to be destroyed by hunting the great white whale.

Captain Ahab is one of the few American contributions to that handful of resonant names – like Hamlet, or Lear, or Oedipus, or Faust – that seem to sum up some fact of human potential and to bare the contours of some exemplary human fate. If Ahab has joined this company, it is because Melville *imagines* him heroically: grasps and realizes him within a heroic conception of the self. This unattenuated heroicism is an impressive feature of *Moby-Dick* as a finished book. But it also bespeaks its distinctive spirit, the enabling literary attitude in which the book is attempted. When the author of *Moby-Dick* thinks of literature, his revival of the heroic mode reminds us, he associates it scarcely at all with the literary forms most active in his own time. Instead he drives literature back to its most primal and potent forms: identifies it with epic, quest narrative, and heroic tragedy, the forms of its most ancient and enduring achievements. And as he exhumes the idea of these forms, he also insists that they are still practicable now. He reads heroic literature in one way as a set of great achievements but in another as a set of imaginative *acts*, acts he asserts his right to do again in making a work of his own.

Part of what makes *Moby-Dick* stand out, in the company of literary classics, is its quality of raw literary presumptuousness – its cheeky confidence that nothing great has ever been done that it

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can't at least try to do again. And it is a correlative of this presumptuousness that although *Moby-Dick* lays claim to everything great literature has achieved, it also refuses to acknowledge traditional literature's systems of restraint. The traditional high literary forms – tragedy and epic, most notably – observe fairly strict literary protocols. They do things in certain ways and not in others. Melville knows this; and in his zeal to reclaim what he thinks of as the genres of greatness, he can follow their programs quite carefully, for two or three chapters at a time. But Melville refuses to accept that part of the traditional compact that says that, while writing one kind of work, one must give up the will to be writing another. The obvious proof is that although the rudiments of a Shakespearean heroic tragedy can be spotted in *Moby-Dick*, they share textual space with masses of material that lie quite outside that tragedy. The book in which we learn something great about the internal contradictions of unqualified will is also the book in which we learn all sorts of little things about whales and their habits – how they breathe, for instance (a constant number of surface breaths in a fixed interval); or how they see (with two nonoverlapping visual fields and a blind spot to the front); or how they mate [*''more hominum''* (Chap. 87)]. Similarly, the book that, in one of its aspects, thrusts irreversibly forward toward its hero's appointed end is also the book that traces, much more meanderingly, the sequence of tasks needed to put up a killed whale's blubber in the form of processed oil.

The so-called cetological center of *Moby-Dick*, that mass of chapters story lovers love to skip, in fact could make a vigorous book in its own right. Properly separated and slightly amplified, these chapters could form a great work of American commodity history. They do for whale oil lighting what Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* does for the cattle hides that become our shoes, or what Frank Norris's *The Octopus* and *The Pit* do for the wheat that becomes our daily bread: They bring back to visibility, behind some product so familiar as to be a precondition for everyday life, the forgotton process by which it has been first wrenched out of natural life, then worked or manufactured into a marketable good. (We will continue to lack our world's full equivalent for

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Moby-Dick until we have a great novel of the oil or nuclear power industry, a novel that will bring us knowledge of how the light we read it by is made.)[1]

But it is the nature of *Moby-Dick* that this commodity narrative is not given us as a book by itself, any more than Melville's quest tragedy is. Instead *Moby-Dick* delights in being heterogeneous – a work of mixed and discordant kinds, amalgamating into itself every form of writing (so it would seem) that strikes its fancy. Formally, *Moby-Dick* is always becoming something else, always deciding what kind of book it will be next; and its hectic shape shiftings bespeak, again, the peculiar *idea* of literature that governs this work. The book that will not pass up the chance also to do an Elizabethan soliloquy, and also a Calvinist sermon, and also a parody of a legal brief, and also an experimental operatic ensemble number (as in "Midnight, Forecastle") is a work strong in the sense of the whole, unfractioned power of literary utterance – a work that glories in the recognition, behind the separate generic forms that define and constrain it, of what *all* writing can express or do. Accordingly, its idea of the proper way of being literary is not to fill out the outline of some predetermined literary kind but rather to do everything at once: to embrace and display, in an exuberance of renewed invention, the full form of writing's expressive potential.

Moby-Dick's unwillingness to do one literary thing at the expense of another is part of what keeps it from pursuing its story straightforwardly. But another pressure keeps disrupting it too: the pressure of passionate philosophical surmise. As *Moby-Dick* describes it, the most elemental human passion is not love, or ambition, or acquisitiveness, but something more like anxiety – anxiety, specifically, about the ground of our being, an anxiety that drives us, whatever our immediate situation, to keep worrying the question how the world is framed and governed. Ahab is the most obvious victim of this passion. Ahab's disease is that he can't keep from extrapolating from local experiences to their cosmological implications – can't see elemental force, as in "The Candles," without thinking a world ruled by gods of force; can't see the insane Pip, as in "The Log and Line," without seeing too the "creative libertines" (Chap. 125) who allow such humanly intolerable sights.

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But the passion Ahab feels so unqualifiedly is lived, at different levels of intensity, by all of Melville's characters. (Stubb's "I wonder, Flask, whether the world is anchored anywhere" [Chap. 121] is a typical passing remark in this cosmologically anxious book.) And this same passion informs the book itself as an act of thought. The energies of literary composition are so interfused with the energies of philosophical surmise in *Moby-Dick* that every stray particular that enters the book is in immediate danger of being seized on and pressed to yield a model of the world. Whale-lines are functional tools, made of certain materials in certain thicknesses, but only until they get caught in the updraft of cosmological generalization: "But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale-lines" (Chap. 60). Sharks are fierce scavengers, fascinating wonders of natural ravenousness, but they too get pressed to yield a statement about the world's creator: "de god wat made shark must be one dam Injin" (Chap. 66).

Moby-Dick's always renewed thrust toward ultimate statement gives it its distinctive rhythm as a meditation in prose. It also produces what must be the most remarkable achievement in the book: the way *Moby-Dick* manages, not once but over and over, to project a vision of the world's essential constitution, and not vaguely but with sustained precision of articulated detail. "The Chapel" thus lets us see – where else did we ever grasp this possibility so concretely? – a world peopled with the dead, filled with the void of the nonexistent. "The Grand Armada" lets us see a world centered in generative and nurturing love, in its *Paradiso* vision of nursing mother whales; "The Castaway" lets us see a world formed through speechless, unmindful natural process; and so on. These acts of cosmic knowing are among the most distinctive literary accomplishments of *Moby-Dick*, and they remind us of something else Melville takes the literary to mean. For as *Moby-Dick* presumes to practice it, literature is simply not a secular art. First and last things, the state of the world and our place in it, are not the province of some other cultural system called religion, *Moby-Dick* asserts. They are instead literature's province, questions literature is empowered to address and explore. Moreover, Melville presumes that literature has the power not just to retell religious truth already arrived at but to deliver religion's realm *to*

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knowledge, to grasp and speak it into comprehensible form – as "The Whiteness of the Whale," to give one last example, literally *develops* the idea of a cosmic blankness outside the sphere of mind, through the churnings of its prose.

Melville's activation of literature as an art claiming these great powers gives *Moby-Dick* its peculiar form of seriousness. Like scripture or vision narrative or wisdom writing – genres that it also draws into itself – *Moby-Dick* makes the heightened claim on our attention not that good writing does, but of speech that engages the ultimate dimensions of our existence. But if *Moby-Dick* reaches beyond the usual registers of literary expression, this leads to no devaluation of writing, but to intensified care for writing as such. More persistently than anything else – more persistently than it is heroic, or philosophic, or whatever – *Moby-Dick* is a book in love with language. It is so in love with the sound of words that it savors their spoken heft as it writes them. It is so in love with the infinitude of language that it always wants to use more of it, to heap high all the actual or conceivable words that any textual space will support. ("He tasks me; he heaps me" [Chap. 36] is a *Moby-Dick* locution; so is "devoured, chewed up, crunched" [Chap. 16], or "infixed, unrelenting fangs" [Chap. 41], or "heathenish, sharked waters and . . . unrecorded, javelin islands" [Chap. 24].) But it is peculiarly the case with *Moby-Dick* that its addiction to the act of putting things in words, or what we could call its sheer indulgence in language, serves as the means by which it drives its insights into knowledge. *Moby-Dick* loves to amplify. Having half-said something, its urge is always to stop and say it again. And this process of rhetorical elaboration is, on page after page, how it finally manages to say what at first eluded its grasp. If we end up with some idea of the spiritual torments that fuel Ahab's quest for revenge, it is because Melville keeps naming what exasperates Ahab (I break the passage to mark its iterations):

> 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;

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> all the subtle demonisms of life and thought;
> all evil, to crazy Ahab, was visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. (Chap. 41)

If we finally begin to understand the dreadful blankness Ishmael associates with the white whale's whiteness, it is because he keeps renewing his surmise, more and more ingeniously naming the nothing he addresses:

> Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?
> Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors;
> is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? (Chap. 42)

If we come more fully to realize the blind, unmindful destructiveness embodied in the beautifully deadly sea, it is because Melville's repetitions drive through our usual obliviousness:

> But though, to landsmen in general, the native inhabitants of the seas have ever been regarded with emotions unspeakably unsocial and repelling;
> though we know the sea to be everlasting terra incognita, so that Columbus sailed over numberless unknown worlds to discover his superficial western one;
> though, by vast odds, the most terrific of all mortal disasters have immemorially and indiscriminately befallen tens and hundreds of thousands of those who have gone upon the waters;
> though but a moment's consideration will teach, that however much baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him, and pulverize the stateliest, stiffest frigate he can make;
> nevertheless, by the continual repetition of these very impres-

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> sions, man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it. (Chap. 58)

If we begin to grasp the mixed and quite elusive motives that drive Ishmael to that sea in the first place, it is because he does not just name his reasons, but rhetorically elaborates them:

> Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth;
> whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul;
> whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet;
> and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off –
> then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. (Chap. 1)

I have been claiming that *Moby-Dick*'s uniqueness as a work of literature lies in the pressure it puts *on* literature. My argument has been that *Moby-Dick* does not accept literature as an already defined notion, but searches the idea of it to its roots; that it not only *is* literature in some familiar sense, therefore, but dramatically reexposes literature's radical powers. Melville's revival of literature's powers of heroic imagination is part of this demonstration. So is his revival of fiction as a source of cosmological knowledge. But if we want to locate the most fundamental fact of literature that *Moby-Dick* displays, we need to look to the life of its language. *Moby-Dick* is, no more and no less than any literary work, a contrivance of language. Like all the other members of this category, it is, like the song of Wallace Stevens's singing girl at Key West, "uttered word by word." But *Moby-Dick*'s special marks, as a contrivance of words, are, first, that it displays the resources of language so splendidly, and second, that it makes its act of imaginative speaking be its agent of discovery, the very medium of its cognition. As such, *Moby-Dick* reminds us of what we know in a sense but usually fail to appreciate: that literature is not only created *in* words but creates *through* its words; that if it gives us the world to apprehend anew, it does not do so apart from its language, but through its vital working of the medium of words.

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When Ishmael sets out to track the sources of Ahab's obsession, he keeps feeling his way forward from one kind of explanation to another. And as he completes what would seem to be the climax of his explanation, he takes care to remember that no explanation can be fully sufficient to its object: "This is much; yet Ahab's larger, darker, deeper part remains unhinted" (Chap. 41). I want to say a few words here about the sources of *Moby-Dick*'s creation. But I do so cautioned that such an account will be useful only if it is flexible, and if it does not presume to be the whole of the truth.

The most provocative recent criticism of Melville has reminded us that *Moby-Dick*, although it makes little reference to the contemporary social world, is in fact steeped in the concerns of mid-nineteenth-century American culture. Michael Paul Rogin's *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* reminds us that the crisis of artistic creation that produced *Moby-Dick* coincided exactly with the national political crisis that helped bare the inevitability of civil war – the crisis induced by the Mexican War of 1848, the grand gesture of American expansionism, which in the act of adding new land to the American nation brought its old divisions between slave state and free state back to explosive life. Rogin's book helps us to recognize that Ahab, literature's classic figure of ego assertion brought to the pitch of an unswervable mission – "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run" (Chap. 37) – expresses in literary form the same energies that are expressed politically in American expansionism. Rogin also helps us to suspect that Ahab's tragedy might be read, on one level, as a meditation on the disastrous consequences that the raw expansionist drive might unleash. Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* reminds us that the culture Rogin describes as polarized over sectional interests was also going through a crisis of gender reorganization, a sharpening of the separation between the public and economically productive sphere of men and the private sphere of home, family, and culture reserved for women. *Moby-Dick* is a novel so outrageously masculine that we scarcely allow ourselves to do justice to the full scope of its masculinism. It is a masculine

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book in the obvious sense that it is all about men and mens' activities. (The feminine sphere as the nineteenth century described it – the sphere of piety, home, family love and nurture, and general sociability – is the missing element in a novel otherwise so inclusive.) But it is masculine too in its deepest dramatic fantasies: What is the hunt for the enormous sperm whale Moby Dick if not a quest for absolute potency, a quest in which the aggressive assertion of masculine strength calls up a fantastically enlarged version of that strength as its imagined nemesis? Douglas's account of history helps us see both the outrageous masculineness of Melville's imagining and also that this deeply personal feature of his imagining has a cultural source – derives from, even as it revolts against, the general social redivision of gender prerogatives taking place in Melville's time.[2]

Accounts like Rogin's and Douglas's are immensely helpful in recovering lost dimensions of *Moby-Dick*'s cultural origins. But taking them together is useful too – not least because it reminds us that the culture *Moby-Dick* comes out of is organized in not one but many ways, each of which this book could help us more actively understand. Accordingly, we might ask, what is *Moby-Dick?* A fantasia on themes of expansionism and masculinity, surely, but also a great exercise in declamatory rhetoric. And in its rhetorical display, *Moby-Dick* might remind us that American culture of the 1840s and 1850s is also a profoundly rhetorical culture – a culture whose dominant verbal form is still the spoken word, and especially the spoken word embellished into self-conscious oratory. (The prose style of *Moby-Dick* would seem less strange to us if we read it aloud alongside such contemporaneous forms as the sermon, the political oration, theatrical rant, or the school declamation piece.) Or we might start another investigation by asking: What is *Moby-Dick?* A feast of periodic rhetoric, but also a work of religious reflection and speculation. In this capacity, the book gives us an indication of the fact that American culture of the mid-nineteenth century is also a not yet secularized culture, a culture in which the world of literature (as of politics) is still directly open to religion's energies, idioms, and concerns. (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in so many ways the photographic negative of *Moby-Dick*, shares this feature with its exact contemporary: It is literary in a sense that

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