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A BOOK FOR THE ISLANDS

MAUREEN COBB MABBOTT

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Moby-Dick is a desert island book for me. I often read passages, any passage, at odd moments and, although I have never done so, may one day use it for advice or prophecy as some have used the Bible, as Gabriel Betteredge used *Robinson Crusoe* in *The Moonstone*.

— “My Last Bookshelf,”
Books at Iowa, April 1983.

Even more than for the desert island, *Moby-Dick* is a book for my “insular city of the Manhattoes.” I have been asked why I am so drawn to this monstrous compendium of phantasy and fact, poetry and prose which, as an early reviewer said, is “a romance, a tragedy, and a natural history, not without numerous gratuitous suggestions on psychology, ethics and theology.”¹ As is so often the case, there is no answer, only answers, and of the many reasons for my veneration of Melville’s book on whaling, I would like to present two although, perhaps, they include all the others.

As a child I had an intimate sense of the presence of the earth and the air and the sky from my own masthead at the top of an apple tree on a farm in central Missouri. Up high in the tree, my arm around a slender bough, my cheek pressed against its bark, I would stand and watch the white cloud castles form and reform in the surrounding blue immensity. In the early spring I would cling to the tree and gaze so long through the young green leaves at the moving clouds above me, feel so warm in the sun brushed by the air, that I could mesmerize myself into a kind of sisterly connection with the natural world.

On this city island where I live now and have no apple tree, I cling to *Moby-Dick*, which has more resources even than a tree and is formed like one being untidy, branching, organic. I turn to this book not only to renew a sense of my relationship to the physical universe, beneficent or terrifying, but also to keep an edge on my awareness of

the great struggles of humankind, so perceptively summed up by John Cowper Powys as "our battles with the First Cause, with Nature, with human beings, and our own insanities."² In the dailiness of human life, sometimes a wash with triviality, I read *Moby-Dick* and remember greatness.

It was fortunate, I think, that I came to the book on my own after college, never having had a course in American literature, but filled with the resonance of great poems — the work of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron and company — taught by the inspired teachers of my time at the University of Chicago. Among other things, that Milton assignment to memorize the whole of "Lycidas" was, I am now convinced, no small preparation for the reading of *Moby-Dick*. I had been permanently touched, too, by my childhood reading of the Bible and folk tales so that I was excited by the triumphs and tolerant of the failures of literary expression, having already encountered both in these giants. And I was widely enough read to rejoice in Melville's Olympian ability to connect his scenes with "the past and the distant, the world of books and the life of experience."³

Nevertheless, from the beginning, *Moby-Dick* was for me essentially a simple story of the humble hero of a folk tale, the young man from the provinces gone out to seek his fortune which is himself. To do that, he went whaling and even before he shipped on the Pequod, he found himself among immensities. So do we all, of course, all the time. But Ishmael was *aware*. It is that eloquent awareness of the immensity of his experiences, from his encounters with Queequeg and Ahab to the purely whaling routines of manning the masthead and trying out the blubber, that carries the reader into self-discovery, that makes the real more fantastic than the fantastical, and often lifts its expression into the gravest and most beautiful poetry. Indeed *Moby-Dick* says to the prospective reader what a poem says: "Read me, Read me again."

At each reading the searching rays of the mind's intuition play on other and different facets of this many-faceted book. In spite of its fascinations, I have never isolated the text-book on whaling imbedded in its pages, but I have made a little breviary of *Moby-Dick's* immensities, beginning with the description of the Nantucketer who, "out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales." In these descriptions, fired by Ishmael's awareness, are the "vast herds of wild horses whose pastures in those days were only fenced by the Rocky Mountains and

the Alleghanies"; the Pequod try-works flaming and roaring through the "blackness of darkness"; the gigantic calmness of the ocean viewed from the masthead and at the entrance of the Pacific — the great South Sea with its "wide-rolling watery prairies and Potter's Fields of all four continents." Most piercing of all is the psychological immensity of the obsession of the Pequod's captain who, driven by a force beyond himself, cries out "Is Ahab, Ahab?" as he pursues the evil he perceives in the First Cause, embodied for him in the White Whale, Moby Dick, whose "mighty mildness of repose" is "but the vesture of tornadoes."

Again, there are readings of *Moby-Dick* when what the early critic called its "gratuitous suggestions on psychology, ethics and theology" pierce the understanding with particular poignancy.⁴ An old diary records one such reading for me. It was during the war and not by any means my first reading but, I judge, a very telling one:

October 19, 1944

Now, in the evening of October 19, 1944, I have finished reading *Moby-Dick*. It stands up and goes out like a prayer as Rilke says a poem should. I keep thinking of a poem. It is more darkly powerful than Whitman, nothing but *Paradise Lost* can compare with some passages. There, at the end, is one when the Pequod, sinking, takes along, fastened to the mast, a sky-hawk "and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it."

Melville is an author who can channel particulars into universal application, indeed, point a moral, without offense. In his novel, whose supreme excitement is the chase, slabs of philosophy, excrescences of insight are the precious spermaceti of his whale-catch.

At the end of the chapter on The Line: "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whale boat, you would not feel at heart one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side."

But there is also ease for the darkest tensions — "if you be a philosopher." In *The Blanket* there is that discussion of the thick skin or blubber of the whale: "It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness.

Oh, man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too, live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter's, and like the great whale, retain, O man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own."

In 1944, during my last stem-to-stern reading of *Moby-Dick*, I read and marked these passages in my little brown leatherette Modern Library edition, so portable and companionable and, even then, so worn. I have not ceased reading in this novel and, as I say in another place, the little brown book has been lovingly cremated after sixty years of use.

Now, in 1984, I launch myself on the "unshored, harborless immensities" of *Moby-Dick* better equipped than I have ever been. Added to a long life of reading and experience, I have the definitive text and the clear type-face of the California edition (1981) with its woodcuts of whales and vessels, implements and processes to quicken my perceptions, and no interpretations of events or representations of characters to inhibit my imagination. Not omitting the prefatory quotations, I shall begin with "Call me Ishmael" and read again this greatest of sea adventures, missing no detailed description of techniques, tiresome interlude, soaring poem or philosophic aside. It would be hard to imagine with what pleasure I look forward to this enterprise.

NOTES

¹ Anonymous review ascribed to George Ripley, *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, 4 (1851), 137.

² *Philosophy of Solitude* (New York, 1936), p. 215.

³ Evert A Duyckinck, *New York Literary World*, 22 November 1851, p. 404.

⁴ Ripley, p. 137 [At the time of this writing, I lived on Lexington Avenue, in New York].