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## PRESENT DISCONTENTS

By CAREY B. JOYNT

A highly potent political development on the international scene in recent months is the enormous decline in American prestige among the nations of the West.

This development came to a head in the Atlantic alliance during and after the Geneva conference this past summer. The decline appears at first sight to be out of all proportion to any mistakes made by Mr. Dulles during the recent flurry of diplomatic activity. What might facetiously be called "The Second Look" reveals, I think, that the root causes are not primarily diplomatic. Recent diplomatic set-backs have simply helped bring them to the surface.

It is my conviction as a political scientist that, ultimately speaking, the new attitude to America derives in large measure from certain psychological and spiritual illusions present within the traditional American *Weltanschauung* and shared to a considerable extent by non-Americans as well. These illusions are three in number. They have persisted for a very long time and are now in the process of dissolution, or, at the very least, drastic modification. They are: The illusion of Utopia, the illusion of Omnipotence, and the illusion of Progress. Because they have been shared in whole or in part<sup>1</sup> by almost everyone in the assembly of free nations and because of their effect upon American political behavior, these illusions and their changing status are worthy of more than passing mention.

The present decline in the great prestige of America cannot be understood unless it be realized that America's pilgrimage

1. Americans share all three of these illusions. The illusion of American omnipotence often takes a peculiarly ambivalent form among America's allies. Although they do not share this particular illusion completely they would seem to believe it at least in part since they tend to attribute all diplomatic misfortunes suffered by the West as traceable in some degree to the United States.

is also the pilgrimage of Western man and that for many America has been the symbol of Utopia. This illusion of Utopia has been shattered—ironically enough by the generous use of American power in the defence of the free world. As long as “the great, good giant” could remain aloof, a haven, a refuge, a relaxed saint in the company of sinners, the illusion remained. But as soon as air-bases were built in other Countries; as soon as untried American statesmen displayed their human ability to make mistakes; as soon, in short, as America stepped off her pedestal and began to look and act, not like the state of Utopia, but like a great power in a hurry, the game was up.

The disclosure of an illusion, whether it concerns the loss of a first love or the emergence of a new world power, is always painful. What is not generally realized abroad is that the process has been as painful for Americans as for Europeans. For Americans believed that America was, to use Denis Brogan's phrase, “immune from the common ills of the distressed world.”<sup>2</sup> Not only did they dream of the United States as a green, safe shelter on an otherwise tortured globe but their vision of their nation, whatever form it took, always possessed, as the chief hallmark of its character, the quality of superior virtue. There has been a failure to realize that, although one's intentions may be pure, moral choices in history are always complex and difficult. In recent times this failure to grasp the ambiguities connected with the use of power has produced some lamentable political results. One of these is the “devil theory of history” exploited by the Nye Committee in an effort to show that munitions-makers caused wars and by Senator McCarthy and others to demonstrate that a Communist conspiracy was responsible for the loss of China and all other failures of American statecraft in the post-war period. This belief that the cause of righteousness always triumphs and that, if it does not, there must be treason somewhere in the ranks, has proved disastrous for the effective use of American power. The failure to comprehend the moral complexities which confront policymakers creates appalling problems for the average person when he tries to reconcile the talk of his leaders concerning a crusade against atheistic communism on the one hand and the utilization in the crusade of such ideological opposites as Chiang Kai-shek and Marshall Tito on the other.

The idea of America as Utopia has two other main components. The United States has been envisaged as an endless

2. Denis Brogan, “The Illusion of American Omnipotence”. *Harvard's Monthly*, December 21, 1952.

storehouse of wealth and as a haven shut from the world's tribulations. The first idea received a bad shock in the Great Depression; the second received its death-blow in the years of 1941-1945. Abundance and security have now ceased to be accepted by Americans as partaking of the nature of things. The destruction of the illusions we are discussing has had a most unhappy effect upon the alliance of free nations. To understand further the reasons for this it is necessary to realize that alongside the illusion of Utopia has stood the illusion of American Omnipotence.

Surrounded by weak, divided states and protected by the British fleet, which gave weight and substance to the famous doctrine of President Monroe, it is not strange that the United States had, in the nineteenth century, good reason to believe in its own omnipotence. Had the United States not fought a massive civil war without any noticeable weakening of its hegemony in the Americas? Was it not able, with the ridiculous ease and the greatest dispatch, to bring down in ruins the colonial empire of Spain?

Omnipotence seemed to be triumphantly confirmed by the diplomatic successes of Theodore Roosevelt and the conclusive intervention of 1917. Pearl Harbour provided the first terrible set-back to the illusion. And yet events from 1941-1945 restored the faith of Americans in their redoubtable military prowess. Sustaining Britain and supporting Russia, America moved triumphantly to victory. But the victory turned to dust and ashes within two years of the war's end. Weakened by precipitous disarmament and unprepared by knowledge or experience to meet the great problems produced by the disappearance of Germany and Japan as Great Powers, the United States rose gamely to the enormous challenge presented by the Soviet Union. Despite wise and generous efforts like the Marshall Plan and the successful creation of the Atlantic alliance, America's inability to secure the retreat of Soviet power from central and eastern Europe, and the terrible reverse occasioned by the loss of China.

The death of the illusion of American omnipotence is the main factor responsible for the hysterical pronouncements of the rapidly declining isolationist rump. Breathing threats of fire and slaughter whenever the name of Mao-Tse-tung or Chou En-lai is mentioned, they have severely handicapped Mr. Dulles and the President in their efforts to draw moderate conclusions from the facts of international life. The heirs of a fanatical Chauvinism they would ride roughshod over enemies and allies alike. This small but vocal group has increased



party antagonisms and exacerbated the delicate constitutional balance which exists between Congress and the Executive branch of government.

It remains a constant menace to the reasonable conduct of American foreign policy.

Not so obvious but more pernicious in its effects has been the gradual disappearance, with nothing to take its place, of the confident belief in progress. The shock of the first great war produced bitter jokes concerning the Wilsonism dream of a world made safe for democracy but in general it took the Great Depression and the awful threat of tyranny to shake, to any appreciable degree, the faith of the majority of people that "things" were getting better all the time. It was almost inevitable, given the phenomenal rise in living standards produced by modern science, that ordinary people should assume, however vaguely, that control over natural processes could be extended with comparative ease to the relations of man to his neighbor. This casual assumption completely overlooked one of the basic facts of human existence—namely, that each individual and each generation must learn and implement basic ethical standards and that in the realm of ethics science per se is ethically neutral. It has become increasingly clear to all our peoples that atomic energy can be used for both good and evil purposes. They stand uneasy before the prospect that it may be used to encompass their destruction.

The truth is, as John Baillie has noted,<sup>3</sup> that all the children of the West have cherished this illusion of progress and "we are all involved together in the tragedy of its fading".

The thought that perhaps the human race itself may be extinguished has paralyzed the hearts and minds of ordinary folk everywhere. The fear that the future may entail destruction has helped make the role of America as the leader of the free world immensely more difficult. All the actions and speeches of prominent Americans are surveyed with anxiety lest they bring the free world even one step closer to the abyss of total war.

The destruction of (the) illusions we have analyzed must inevitably bring the shaping of a new image of America in the minds of Americans and in the minds of those overseas. No one can foretell what the new image will be like since, in great measure, it will be shaped by future events and the reaction to them by a coming generation of Americans less infected by these illusions of the past. One can only hope that this new vision will be consonant with the partnership of the free.

3. John Baillie, *The Belief in Progress*, (Oxford, 1950), p. 180.

# YET ANOTHER NOTE ON *Moby Dick*

By LAWRENCE WILLSON

BECAUSE the critic is probably right in his statement that "*(Moby Dick)* will remain . . . America's unarguable contribution to world-literature," another note of comment about it is probably always in order, even such a tentative note as this. I offer it as a mild reassurance to the common reader that he still can find enjoyment in Melville's book—even understand it to a considerable degree—without being able to understand some of the more complicated discussions of it which have been published in recent years. Insofar as I can pose as a "critic," I belong to an old-fashioned group, most of whom of course—like most "common" readers, I suppose—are long since dead; the best title for critics of my stamp is the dreadful one: "moralists." Our principal justification is that we think literature is related to life as well as to other literature.

*Moby Dick* invites the critic of whatever label to lose his balance, of course; whoever turns its pages must pick his way carefully among ambiguities. Things are seldom what they first appear to be; the simple, innocent object is suddenly transformed by the ecstasy of madness. One comes here mad, or carries madness away with him. "He who has never known what madness is," said Melville, "has but a mouthful of brains." And he wrote to Hawthorne:

This is the book's motto (the secret one), *Ego non baptiso te in nomine (patris, sed in nomine diaboli)*.

When therefore, you approach *Moby Dick*, be aware that, though you seem at certain points to be in the temple, Satan stands pretty close by your elbow.

The principal value of recent discussions by Freudians and others is to remind us that the approach to Melville must be through an exploration of the symbol. Since in my reading of the novel, the most important symbols have a religious reference, I am led to reassert the thesis that no explanation of *Moby Dick* or of Melville's writing generally can pretend to completeness unless its primary emphasis rests on the grand theme of the 19th Century (and of every century): the search for a definition of God; and, once that definition has been achieved, the often tragic search for an evaluation of human life in terms of it, for some rational explanation of the existence of Evil. *Moby Dick* is in a very real sense Melville's *Paradise Lost*, his attempt to justify God's ways to man. If those ways are found wanting,

at least from the point of view of man—and they unquestionably are, in this book—that fact does not change the purpose of the book. Nor, be it remembered, does it budge Melville from his acceptance of the Grand Belief, the great central truth, that God, however cruel or malevolent or casual His nature, *is*. Consider Father Mapple's sermon, which in many ways serves as a text for the book:

See ye not then. . . that Jonah sought to flee world-wide from God? Miserable man! Oh! most contemptible and worthy of all scorn; with slouched hat and guilty eye, skulking from his God. . . . Woe to him whom this world charms from Gospel duty! . . . Delight. . . is to him who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven. . . . whom all the waves of the billows of the seas of the boisterous mob can never shake from this sure Keel of the Ages.

Although he was not one of them, but, like Hawthorne, expressed his contempt for their pale and to him lifeless speculations, he nevertheless shared the main purpose of the Transcendentalists and was subject to the same influences of time and place. What Emerson said of himself, Melville might also have said:

I cannot shake off the God;  
On my neck He makes His seat.

Melville's quarrel with the dominant philosophy of his time was grounded in his distrust of its bland assumptions: that man has an independent spirit, that he is the master of his fate and the captain of his soul, that reason can achieve, that God is sentimental, and that nature can be trusted as a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Nature sometimes is friendly, of course; the sea is sometimes calm—but the day of the hurricane is inevitable. Nature is even distrustful of herself and conscious of her own inherent cruelty. The innocent colt in Vermont is struck with terror when he sniffs the fresh buffalo hide from Oregon. "Here thou beholdest even in a dumb brute, the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world," and one must chart his course accordingly.

Though neither knows the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.

Melville would doubtless agree with Emerson that "Nature is a discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths," but their agreement would end at the beginning of interpretation. Emerson's reassuring statement that "Evil is merely privative" would be incomprehensible to Melville. So would any notion



that man's intellectual power is a divine power or possesses any absolute value:

Be a man's intellectual superiority what it will, it can never assume. . . practical, available supremacy. . . without the aid of some sort of external arts and entrenchments, always, in themselves, more or less paltry and base.

The mind, indeed, has no existence of its own; it exists only when it is "leagued with the soul," and the soul is hardly an intellectual entity.

Ahab may think himself an independent spirit with an "unconquerable captain in the soul," but he needs a well-stocked ship to carry him on his mission of revenge against the White Whale, and a crew to man it. When he dies, a victim of his own monomania, he carries the ship and the crew, good and bad alike, with him to the bottom of the sea. It is, Melville says, a "morally intolerable truth," but a truth nonetheless, that the spirit is bound, a slave, an instrument of destruction. The greater the soul, indeed, the more destructive it is. Witness, Captain Ahab himself.

One must note, of course, that Ahab has free will: he deliberately and of his own volition makes a choice which leads him to destruction; so do the crew, when they swear the oath of vengeance. So does Ishmael when he decides to go a-whaling and when he selects *The Pequod* in Nantucket. But there is more than a possibility that freedom of the will is apparent rather than real, that it is a delusion, a trap set for earnest and unwary man. Who can infallibly assert that Queequeg's black idol, Yojo, did *not* lead Ishmael to Captain Peleg. A noble doubt burgeons later, when Ishmael handles the monkeyrope for the savage harpooner. He stands on the deck, tied to Queequeg, who far below fixes the blubber-hook on the unsteadfast footing of a whale's slippery back. Ishmael muses thus:

My free will. . . received a mortal wound. . . (I saw) that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death.

Nor was this an "interregnum of Providence": "I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes." There is always "the warp of necessity," and there is also the "sword of chance," as Ishmael discovers when he and Queequeg weave the mat together.

It seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I. . . a shuttle mechanically weaving. . . away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration. . . merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other

threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity. . . . Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by the difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric. . . . this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity. . . . all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course—its every alternating vibration indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play. . . . by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.

Thus is man circumscribed, and thus deluded into the foolish conception of himself as divinity.

The ultimate ruler is fate, which to Melville is often—almost invariably—dark and sorrowful.

The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. . . . That mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him. . . . cannot be true. . . . The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows. . . . "All is vanity." All.

And the greatest vanity is man's imagination of himself as a creature of power, even when he knows that he is being manipulated—when, indeed, he assists the manipulation with his modicum of free will. This is the terrible vanity of Ahab when he refuses to help the bereaved captain of *The Rachel*, and when he later rejects the admonition of Starbuck to cease his pursuit of Moby Dick:

What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, so I keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? . . . By heaven, man, we are turned round and round in this world, like yonder windlass, and Fate is the handspike. . . . This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed. . . a million years before this ocean rolled.

The tragedy, like the folly, is implicit from the beginning, of course. Ishmael senses at the outset that he walks toward the pit, deliberately avoiding those inns in Nantucket whence issue light and the sounds of merriment. He is the eternal wanderer, forever doomed to walk in darkness. The first place he enters is a Negro church, and his premonitions make him recoil in fright.

It seemed the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. . . . the. . . text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there.

When he finally chooses a harbor, the ominously prophetic name



of the landlord is Peter Coffin—and he is bedded down with a cannibal.

The book is full of shadowy predictions of doom. Ishmael is warned away from *The Pequod* by the mad Elijah; when he boards the ship, he sees dim figures precede him in the mist, spirits which do not materialize until much later. When Ahab calls across the water to the captain of *The Goney*, to ask for news of the White Whale, some mysterious force strikes the trumpet from the captain's hand into the sea. When they meet *The Jereboam*, one is prepared to read that there is "a malignant epidemic on board," and not surprised to learn of its relation to Captain Mayhew's failure to heed the warning of mad Gabriel against the pursuit of Moby Dick. The next-to-last ship which they meet before disaster is *The Rachel*, appropriately "weeping for her children, because they were not." The prophecy in the wicked name of Ahab, who deserted Jehovah to worship Baal, is clear.

As the story increases in intensity, the portents become more compelling. Ahab, who has already rejected human love and companionship—save that of the mad cabin boy, Pip—casts aside his last dependence on reason and faith as he contemplates the quadrant and dashes it against the deck. It is the instrument of learning, the pitiful symbol of man's imagined victory over nature and fate.

Foolish toy! . . . the world brags of thee, of thy cunning and might; but what after all canst thou do, but tell the poor, pitiful point, where thou thyself happenest to be on this wide planet, and the hand that holds thee: no! not one jot more!

At the moment when Ahab submits to the ecstasy of madness, defying gods and men, singling out nature for his deity, like Edmund in *King Lear*, the gods frown—and then they laugh. Nature is, after all, their creature—their Caliban—and it jumps at their heartless but hardly capricious bidding. A typhoon descends with sudden fury upon *The Pequod*. The devilishly beautiful corpusants light on the yardarms and the masts, casting a preternatural and ghastly blue glow upon the grinning savages. An Ahab worships the fire, lightning demolishes his boat, and from the keen steel barb of his harpoon, baptised with pagan blood—in *nomine diaboli*—there comes "a levelled flame of pale, forked fire" like a serpent's tongue. "God, God is against thee, old man; forbear!" cries out the righteous Starbuck, "'tis an ill voyage."

During the storm heaven attends also to the mariner's

needle; the ship's level compass is turned. When Ahab seeks the guidance of log and line, the rotten line breaks and the log disappears. He tries to remove the curse by bestowing new affection on Pip, but he—and the gods—have gone too far to turn back now.

Tragedy is explicit from the moment when Ahab meets his mortal enemy. Moby Dick, wondrously beautiful and calm, gives Ahab on the first day of the chase his lazily contemptuous warning of defeat when he bites the boat in two:

Through every plank and . . . rib, it thrilled for an instant, the whale obliquely lying on its back. . . slowly and feelingly taking its bows full within his mouth, so that the long, narrow, scroled lower jaw curled high up into the open air, and one of the teeth caught in a row-lock. The bluish pearl-white of the inside of the jaw was within six inches of Ahab's head. . . In this attitude the White Whale now shook the slight cedar as a mildly cruel cat her mouse.

Ahab, shaken with demoniacal hatred at the insolence of the Whale and the sardonic humor of fate, "which placed him all alive and helpless in the very jaws he hated," should have recognized—and very possibly did recognize—the futility of further struggle. Whether or no, he fought; he *must* fight, for fate was also in control of him.

He seized the long bone (of the whale's jaw) and wildly strove to wrench it from its gripe. . . He. . . vainly strove, the jaw slipped from him; the frail gunwales bent in, collapsed, and snapped, as both jaws, like an enormous shears. . . bit the craft completely in twain.

On the following day the whale disposes of three boats, and Fedallah, Ahab's evil shadow, disappears. On the third day, sharks follow Ahab's boat, eating away the oars until they are reduced to splinters. The last terrible omen appears in the moment before the descent into the maelstrom, when Moby Dick, "combinedly possessed of all the angels that fell from heaven," flashes his great bulk out of the water for an instant, to reveal the horrible conclusion of Fedallah:

Lashed round and round to the fish's back; pinioned in the turns upon turns in which. . . the whale had reeled the involutions of the lines around him, the half torn body of the Parsee was seen; his sable raiment frayed to shreds; his distended eyes turned full upon old Ahab.

It remains only for Ahab to spit his final venomous curse upon the Whale, to hurl his last harpoon, and in the moment of hurling to become entangled in the flying line and vanish with *The Pequod* into the depths. The inscrutable fates send a bird to peck at the ship's flag, by way of concluding insult or concluding compliment to valor, however misguided. The divine symbol, caught in the flag, sinks too, for this doomed ship,



like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it.

The question naturally arises within the philosophic mind: to whom does the victory belong? Is it Ahab's, who has been true to his bitter principle until the end and carried a heavenly victim with him to the pit? Is it heaven's, in that divine justice has been visited on the monomaniac? Or does it belong to the Whale? Actually, of course, all three are victorious. In order to clarify such a conclusion, however, one must ask two additional questions. Just what is the tragedy of *Moby Dick*? And just what is the symbolism of the Whale?

The tragedy belongs wholly to Ahab, it seems to me. And who is Ahab? He represents mankind, but surely not all mankind. Nor is he, I think, Herman Melville. This book is not autobiography, at least not in the usual sense. Ahab is the extraordinary man, stricken by the knowledge of sin and impelled by his will, governed by the necessity of fate, into participation in sin. He is the heroic human soul, adrift and struggling to find his way over the pathless seas of the lonely universe. He is the noble soul who suffers but who learns from his suffering, not the lesson of humility—because he *is* the hero—but the lesson of rebellion. Since Ahab refuses humility, and proudly, defiantly rejects the promise of redemption—offered by the helpless dependency of Pip, by Captain Gardiner of *The Rachel*, finally by the devout Starbuck—I doubt the interesting thesis of Mr. Auden, that Ahab is the prototype of the Christian hero. There is nothing of the New Testament in Captain Ahab. His god is no god of love; He often seems, on the contrary, to be a god of hate. He does not listen to the prayers of men; His only voice is silence. Still—and here begins the tragedy—He *is*; one must therefore believe in Him and be true.

Ahab is the grand *individual* who must also be true to himself. The silent, possibly malevolent deity has decreed it. At once Ahab fights against God and for Him, for the terms are altogether God's. From the very outset Ahab is doomed to failure; yet the pity of it—and the grandeur—is that he must continue to the point of utter disaster. The terrible paradox is that the struggle is inevitable and there is no such thing as victory at last. What wonder, then, that Ahab embraces madness. What wonder that Satan becomes his god. Let it be a fair fight, Ahab cries, and—the tragedy granted—he casts away all the usual consolations: love, science, religion, even the comfort of his pipe.



Ironically, Ahab is at once God's enemy and His instrument. The paradox is inescapable. There is no question of acceptance or rejection: like God, it simply *is*. God is indifferent, as He can afford to be. So, incidentally, is the madman—Pip, for example:

He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised.

It is unnecessary to add that Pip's madness is hardly the intellectual dilemma of Ahab, whose real curse is his intellectual being, which struggles toward a logical faith. The indifferent God does not require faith, however—perhaps because He realizes that it is unavoidable.

Ahab's tragedy is the tragedy of the hero, who, simply by being the hero, is doomed.

There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsunderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance. . . . Moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe.

He is a fitter adversary for God than, say, Starbuck, who symbolizes the average good man: "the incompetence of mere unaided virtue of right-mindedness." Nor would Ahab select a gentler opponent:

From storm to storm! So be it, then. Born in throes, 'tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs! So be it, then!

This theme runs throughout *Moby Dick*. Thus Ishmael addresses poor Bulkington:

Better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety! For worm-like, then, oh! who would craven crawl to land!

We find the identical theme in *Mardi*:

Better to sink in boundless deeps than float on vulgar shoals; and give me, ye gods, an utter wreck, if wreck I do.

Ahab, the tragic hero, dies with a curse, but in defeat he recognizes the further paradox that his defeat is synonymous with victory:

Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh,  
now I feel my topmost greatness lies in  
my topmost grief.

Such, to use the vulgar saying, is life.

The other hero of the tale is the White Whale himself, who

rises from among "the unspeakable foundations, ribs, and very pelvis of the world," "the largest inhabitant of the globe," who glides into the story with a gently deceptive mildness:

Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa. . . not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam. . . Through the serene tranquillities on the tropical sea. . . still withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding the wrenched hideousness of his jaw.

Powerful, insolent, terrible, encompassing all the cruel paradoxes of the universe, who or what is the Whale? If Ahab knew, his victory might not ring with the hollow mockery of coincident defeat. Moby Dick's identity must forever remain one with the riddle of the Sphinx, for

there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. . . The only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea. . . is by going a whaling yourself; and by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him.

Perhaps he is God or Fate or the Devil—or all three, if there be indeed essential differences among them. Perhaps he represents brute nature, with which men must be forever at war. To some he has been symbolic of "all the inexplicable suffering in the world"; to others, a symbol of all the obstructions to what man defines as happiness or success.

To gibbering Gabriel of *The Jereboam* he was "the Shaker God incarnated," and it is recorded that the dread Vishnu "by the first of his ten earthly incarnations. . . for ever set apart and sanctified the whale." As God's only voice is silence, so is the Whale's. "O head," cries Ahab, "thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!" Like God again, the Whale is indifferent. Though once he bit in twain the craft of the hero, he usually shows his exalted contempt for men by destroying them with his tail:

Out of the bottomless profundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven. So in dreams have I seen the majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell.

But the mystery remains,

For you see no one point precisely; not one distinct feature is revealed; no nose, eyes, ears, or mouth; no face; he has none. . . nothing but that one broad firmament of a forehead, pleated with riddles; dumbly lowering with the doom of boats, and ships, and men.

We can say with assurance, however, that whether God—"the unseen and unaccountable old joker"—or nature, Moby

Dick is at least no symbol of unadulterated good. His sight is distorted; he is cruel and malign, for all his beauty, his occasional calm and joyfulness. His very color indicates his deceptiveness. Remember the words of Ishmael: "It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me." Indeed, the White Whale stands at last as the figure of what men call Evil—alive, ubiquitous, and beautiful. It is the figure which all men pursue, albeit with deadly hate. "Ah! how they still strove through that infinite blueness to seek out the thing that might destroy them." Evil is his significance to mad, maimed, tortured, heroic Ahab:

He . . . came to identify with (Moby Dick), not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual aspirations. The White Whale swam before him as the . . . incarnation of. . . That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning. . . All that most maddens and torments. . . all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil. . . were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.

It is easy to see why this book was neglected by the age of Emerson and Whitman, when the cheerful flame of optimism burned high. Whitman too exulted, "Steer for the deep waters only, O my soul," but his soul traveled a far different errand from that of Ahab, or of Melville. But time turns back upon itself, and this age in which we dwell is an age of the Wanderer, the soul caught and squeezed between two inexplicable worlds, the human spirit crying hopelessly in the wilderness for a light which has unaccountably been lost. The globe today is populated by strangers who are

Afraid  
In a world they never made.

It is not unusual to feel "a damp, drizzly November" in the soul. We therefore are able to comprehend the majestic loneliness and the doomed courage of old Ahab; the constant, unrewarded search of Ishmael for peace, of *The Rachel* "weeping for her children," of Pip for his poor, lost self. The White Whale is no stranger to us; and we address the same question to his deaf brow: Is your malice intentional or is it accidental. We too are "half in love with easeful death," like the embittered Blacksmith; like him, flying from the unknown quantity of death even while we seek its repose, we listen to the voices of a thousand mermaids singing, inviting us to infinite Pacifics where hope turns to ashes: "Come hither, broken-hearted." The man of



our generation is not, he reminds us, Prince Hamlet, nor is he  
 Captain Ahab. He only remembers that he

heard the mermaids singing

and his pathetic conclusion is

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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## POEMS FOR SPRING

By THOMAS SAUNDERS

### i.

Now bursts the earth  
 In the million miracles  
 That are the miracle  
 Of spring:

A chain-reaction  
 Bursting in tree and flower  
 And grass.

The first stirrings  
 Of a wintered heart.

### ii.

Sudden is the word for spring. Now heat glows  
 In the sun again; frost rises in earth;  
 The snow, robbed of its crispness, sinks in fields;  
 Rivers, ice-gutted, burst in raucous mirth,  
 Crash the winter-barrier, speed the ice-flows  
 Lakeward for burial.

Now winter yields  
 On every front, knowing no strategy  
 To hold her lines. Before the onslaught  
 She knows one word, "Retreat." She cannot cling  
 To aught that she has gained. Her forces, caught  
 Exposed, look to the long road north, and flee  
 In terror from the soldiery of spring.