



The Spirit of the Times Reviews Moby Dick

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shirt sleeves . . . no apish child of fashion; a veritable eagle of freedom, and, withal, kindly, tender to the little lame lamb—aye, bold, yet gentle, defiant of all convention, and yet simple in his manner even to kings." Crane rejected Howells (and Twain) because he was too conventional, too narrow-minded in his outlook on a modern tendency like naturalism, and not really progressive at all; if Crane had ever been influenced by Howells in any way, it was short-lived. In his usually striking manner, Crane said:

The name of W. D. Howells occurs to somebody. But, no; he wears collars. It is known; it is common talk. He has never had his photograph taken while enwrapped in a carelessly negligent bath towel. In the name of God, let us have virility; let us look for the wild, free son of nature. Mark Twain? At first it seems that he would have a chance. He growls out his words from the very pit of his stomach and is often uncivil to strangers. But, no; he, too, wears collars and a coat.¹⁵

THE *SPIRIT OF THE TIMES* REVIEWS
MOBY DICK

JOHN FRANCIS MC DERMOTT

AFTER an investigation of reviews of *Moby Dick*, David Potter wrote in the *Rutgers University Library Journal* in June, 1940: "The high regard shown Melville and *Moby Dick* in these reviews dispels any notion that the author and his masterpiece were completely ignored by contemporary American critics. Instead we find that Melville in the early months of 1852 was a highly respected and widely reviewed man of letters."

This opinion is certainly confirmed by one review which did not come to Mr. Potter's attention. On December 6, 1851, the *New York Spirit of the Times* devoted to the book two-thirds of a page, about one-half of which (say, fifteen hundred words) was comment. Since it has remained unnoticed and unknown (Jay Leyda did not cite it in *The Melville Log*), it is worth a few moments, for it

¹⁵ "Stephen Crane Says: Edwin Markham is His First Choice for the American Academy," *New York Journal*, March 31, 1900, p. 8. This article (and most of the others named above) is listed in the admirable Ames Williams and Vincent Starrett, *Stephen Crane: A Bibliography* (Glendale, Calif., 1948). It has never been reprinted nor critically examined.

is a very friendly and enthusiastic review. If the Melville scholar argues that it shows little understanding of the novel (that is, of its symbolic content), it can be urged that this was considerable space for the *Spirit of the Times* to give to one book and that the writer thoroughly approved of *Moby Dick* and admired Melville. It was clearly the sort of review to encourage buyers and surely no author entirely dislikes such notices.¹

"We confess an admiration for Mr. Melville's books," the reviewer began, "which, perhaps, spoils us for mere criticism. There are few writers, living or dead, who describe the sea and its adjuncts with such true art, such graphic power, and with such powerfully resulting interest. 'Typee,' 'Omoo,' 'Redburn,' 'Mardi,' and 'White Jacket,' are equal to anything in the language. They are things of their own. They are the results of the youthful experience on the ocean of a man who is at once philosopher, painter, and poet. . . . Mr. Melville's early experiences, though perhaps none of the pleasantest to himself, are infinitely valuable to the world. We say *valuable* with a full knowledge of the terms used; and, not to enter into details, which will be fresh in the memory of most of Mr. Melville's readers, it is sufficient to say that the humanities of the world have been quickened by his works. Who can forget the missionary *expose*—the practical good sense which pleads for 'Poor Jack,' or the unsparing but just severity of his delineations of naval abuses, and that crowning disgrace to our navy—flogging?"

Melville's graphic power and the corrective effect of his novels were to the reviewer only part of his achievement. "Taken as matters of art these books are amongst the largest and freshest contributions of original thought and observation which have been presented in many years." Most modern writers merely "elaborate and rearrange" the "common fund" of ideas, the "same overdone incidents" out of Scott and Radcliff. "It is only now and then, when genius, by some lucky chance of youth, ploughs deeper into the soil of humanity and nature, that fresher experiences—perhaps at the cost of much individual pain and sorrow—are obtained; and the results are books, such as those of Herman Melville and Charles Dickens."

Turning to the book under review, he spoke first of the whale.

¹ For a photostat of this review I am indebted to the Harvard College Library.

"Leviathan is here in full amplitude. Not one of your museum affairs, but the real, living whale, a bona-fide, warm-blooded creature, ransacking the waters from pole to pole. His enormous bulk, his terribly destructive energies, his habits, his food, are all before us. Nay, even his lighter moods are exhibited. We are permitted to see the whale as a lover, a husband, and the head of a family. So to speak, we are made guests at his fire-side; we set out mental legs beneath his mahogany, and become members of his interesting social circle. No book in the world brings together so much whale. We have his history, natural and social, living and dead. But Leviathan's natural history, though undoubtedly valuable to science, is but part of the book. It is in the personal adventures of his captors, their toils, and, alas! not unfrequently their wounds and martyrdom, that our highest interest is excited. This mingling of human adventure with new, startling, and striking objects and pursuits, constitute one of the chief charms of Mr. Melville's books. His present work is a drama of intense interest. A whale, 'Moby Dick,'—a dim, gigantic, unconquerable, but terribly destructive being, is one of the persons of the drama. We admit a disposition to be critical on this character. We had some doubts as to his admissibility as an actor into dramatic action, and so it would seem had our author, but his chapter, 'The Affidavit,' disarms us; all improbability or incongruity disappears, and 'Moby Dick,' becomes a living fact . . ."

But *Moby Dick* was more than a book about whales: it was many-sided. "Mingled with much curious information respecting whales and whaling there is a fine vein of sermonizing, a good deal of keen satire, much humor, and that too of the finest order, and a story of peculiar interest. As a romance its characters are so new and unusual that we doubt not it will excite the ire of critics. It is not tame enough to pass this ordeal safely. Think of a monomaniac whaling captain, who, mutilated on a former voyage by a particular whale, well known for its peculiar bulk, shape, and color—seeks, at the risk of his life and the lives of his crew, to capture and slay this terror of the seas! It is on this idea that the romance hinges. The usual staple of novelists is entirely wanting. . . . The thing is entirely new, fresh, often startling, and highly dramatic, and with those even, who, oblivious of other fine matters,

scattered with profusest hand, read for the sake of the story, must be exceedingly successful."

The reviewer, with no space for long quotation, then sampled the chapter "The Pequod Meets the Rosebud," "in which a whaling scene is described with infinite humor," and regretted that he could not extract the chapter on "The Castaway," which he thought a good specimen of Melville's "graphic power of description." *Moby Dick*, he concluded, was a "work of exceeding power, beauty, and genius."