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The Humor in “Moby Dick”

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The Humor In "Moby Dick"

MOTHER MARIE LAURENTINA C.M.S.A.

In *Mardi* the humor is often uncomfortably hearty, jovial and broad. In *Moby Dick* it is lyrical and heroic; it expresses itself in a subtly flowing stream of fantasy, alternately gay, grim, festive, erotic, regretful and sad.

Richard Chase *Herman Melville* p. 67

Moby Dick is a symphony: every source of language and thought, fantasy, description, philosophy, natural history, drama, broken rhythms, blank verse, imagery, symbol, are utilized to sustain and expand.

Lewis Mumford *Herman Melville* p. 182.

I

IT has become customary to look on Melville as a pessimist and on *Moby Dick* as a symbolic parable on evil. What is generally overlooked is the genuine humor that pervades the book.

After having been discovered by W. Clark Russel, Melville has been reconsidered as a novelist, especially since the 1920's. His novels have been re-evaluated and great interest in his achievement has been aroused by the valuable studies of Raymond Weaver, Richard Chase, John Freeman, Lewis Mumford, Henry D. Sedgwick. But frequently enough he is called the "painter with dark colors," the "pessimist par excellence," the man who writes "out of the bitterness of his heart." As for

Moby Dick, it is often classified merely as "America's most skillful allegory on the problem of evil" or as "an exploration into the nature of the ever-present evil."¹

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the humor in *Moby Dick*, the novel whose epic and mythic qualities are too frequently misunderstood. Melville himself testified in a letter to Hawthorne that his intention was not to write an allegory but a mighty book on the sea and its ways, on a whaling voyage with all its hardships and terrors; an epic therefore not in the tradition of Homer's *Odyssey* or Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* but a truly American folk epic in the best spirit of the nineteenth century.

In *Moby Dick* the multiform humor is in the theme (the tall tale) and in the technique (a folk epic), in the tone and in the style, in the descriptions and in the characters, in the soliloquies and in the conversations, in the parenthetical expressions and in the unexpected snappers, in the long digressions and even in the footnotes. And though the sophisticated reader rivets all his attention on the problem of evil and on the so-called pessimism of the novel, the humor is omnipresent and all-pervading. If evil is defined as the absence of being, the humor in *Moby Dick* may be called that presence of light and shadow that makes life endurable in spite of the Fall.

The purpose of humor in a work of art may be manifold. In *Moby Dick* humor serves many ends: first, to provide relief against the grim reality of the long, tenuous and strenuous whaling experience; secondly, to place the characters of this American epic in their true perspective, for the typical American folk spirit has always been humorous;² thirdly, to keep the reader's interest from lagging and to make the long book not only readable but enjoyable; fourthly, to expose all there is

¹ R. Deferrari "Herman Melville *American Profile* (New York 1944) pp. 162-163.

² R. Chase *Herman Melville: a critical study* (New York 1949) p. 67: "for whatever reason... the American folk spirit has been humorous."

of the ridiculous, incongruous and absurd in man, specifically in the man who wants to attain the stature of a demi-god. The fact that among all the characters Ahab alone escapes Melville's bantering, supports this. Therefore (aside from its other uses mentioned above) the humor which helps in isolating the monomaniac has an important functional relationship to the structure of the novel and may be said to be an intrinsic part of it.

II

We cannot define humor. The humorists themselves—Mark Twain, Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw or Monsignor Ronald Knox—give the impression that it is undefinable. "It would be regarded as a deficiency in humor to search for a definition of it."³ But we can describe humor as that indefinable, diversified personal quality in man that makes him neither optimist nor pessimist. It elevates him to the rank of observer without lifting him away from the observed: "the humorist runs with the hare."⁴ It presupposes intelligence, understanding of human nature, sympathy with human foibles, the ability to suffer and endure, the actual experience of deep grief, and sufficient detachment of soul and sufficient serenity of mind to see the light-and-shadow motif in all things and to express that motif subtly but not acutely.

Unlike satire, humor contains no malice whatsoever. Unlike irony which implies more contempt than satire and which laughs at men furtively, humor takes man for what he is without much dignity. Humor appeals to the sense of the ludicrous, the absurdly incongruous. And though the satirist uses the weapons of the humorist, humor can be non-satirical. American humor particularly is commonly "humor for humor's sake"—without, as it were, any axes to grind. Melville follows that tradition.⁵

³ G. K. Chesterton "Humor" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (14th Ed.) II 883-885.

⁴ R. A. Knox *Essays in Satire* (New York 1930) Introduction p.31.

⁵ R. Chase *Herman Melville: a critical study* (New York 1949) p. 102. See also Knox *op. cit.* pp. 29-30.

The works of Chaucer, Rabelais and Cervantes are illustrations of the fact that the devices and sources of humor are as various and indescribable as the movements of the heavenly bodies and as innumerable and diverse as the manifestations of the human soul. Chaucer teaches us how to have a good laugh at other people, Rabelais shows how some pressure of physical exuberance is humorous itself, and Cervantes introduces the new element of the Christian laughing at himself. In *Moby Dick* Melville blends all these techniques and exploits all devices and sources of humor. To these he adds his own specific technique, namely, a hovering between fact and fantasy. This peculiar method consists "in its surface reliance on fact while underneath the story wanders at large in fantasy."⁶

III

There is humor, first of all, in the style of *Moby Dick*. According to Chase there are three basic styles in the novel: the style of fact, the style of oratorical celebration, and the style of meditation moving toward mysticism.⁷ It is particularly in the second that much humor is found.

Take, for instance, this grandiloquent dissertation upon the male whale:

In cavalier attendance upon the school of females, you invariably see a male of full grown magnitude, but not old: who, upon any alarm, evinces his gallantry by falling in the rear and covering the flight of his ladies. In truth, this gentleman is a luxurious Ottoman, swimming about over the watery world, surroundingly accompanied by all the solaces and endearments of the harem. The contrast between this Ottoman and his concubines is striking; because, while he is always of the largest leviathanic proportions, the ladies, even at full growth, are not more than one-third of the bulk of an average-sized male. They are comparatively delicate, indeed; I dare say, not to exceed half a

⁶ Chase *op. cit.* pp. 70-73.

⁷ Richard Chase illustrates the three styles from chapter 14 ("Nantucket" pp. 77-79). But ch. 88 ("School and Schoolmasters" pp. 429-432) is at least as interesting. A passage from ch. 67 ("The Blanket" pp. 337-340) reminds one of Holmes' "The Chambered Nautilus" and the bombastic style of the preachers.

dozen yards around the waist. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied, that upon the whole they are hereditarily entitled to *en bon point*.⁸

Thus he continues on and on until he comes to the conclusion which may be called a meditation on the difference between the sexes:

Another point of difference between the male and female schools is still more characteristic of the sexes. Say you strike a forty-barrel-bull—poor devil! all his comrades quit him. But strike a member of the harem school, and her companions swim around her with every token of concern, sometimes lingering so near and so long, as themselves to fall prey.⁹

Melville's main stylistic devices are similes and metaphors, homeric similes and hyperboles, grotesque comparisons, antitheses and apostrophes, picturesque descriptions and a fine choice of words. "A wild set of mariners" is compared to "an eruption of bears from Labrador." Ishmael speaks of his fingers that felt "like eels, and began, as it were to serpentine and spiralize." A full grown leviathan cannot be hoisted on deck like a small whale: "this were as vain a thing to attempt as weighing a Dutch barn in jewelers' scales." Ishmael's room in the Spouter-Inn is "as cold as a clam" and when Queequeg arrives, he says, "I would have bolted out of it quicker than ever I bolted a dinner." "A gable-ended old house" is further described as "one side palsied as it were leaning over sadly." The Sperm Whale is to be pitied because he "only breathes about one-seventh or Sunday of his time." His spouting canal is "like a gas-pipe laid down in a city on one side of a street." On a holiday when the children have been good "we might descend into the great Kentucky Mammoth Cave of his stomach" and Stubb exclaims with sympathy over the immeasurable distress of the sick whale: "Lord, think of having half an acre of stomach-ache!" Ahab is named "Mogul" and "Old Thunder," but the whales get their appellations too. "Out of the way, Commodore!" shout the men, "to a great dromedary that of a sudden rose bodily to the surface."

⁸ *Moby Dick* ch. lxxxviii "Schools and Schoolmasters" (Clifton Fadiman ed., Harper and Bros., New York 1950, pp. 429-430. All references to *Moby Dick* in this paper are to this edition.)

⁹ *Ibid.* (p. 432)

One typical Homeric simile worth special attention for its allusions is the following description of the male whales from the chapter already alluded to:

The Forty-barrel-bull schools are larger than the harem schools. Like a mob of young collegians they are full of fight, fun and wickedness, tumbling round the world at such a reckless, rollicking rate, that no prudent underwriter would insure them any more than he would a riotous lad at Yale or Harvard. They soon relinquish this turbulence though and when about three-fourths grown, break up, and separately go about in quest of settlements, that is, harems.¹⁰

The following stylistic device of repetition is akin to punning:

... Stubb... darted *dart* after *dart* into the flying fish... And all the while, *jet* after *jet* of white smoke was agonizingly shot from the spiracle of the whale, and vehement *puff* after *puff* from the mouth of the excited headsmen.¹¹

Typical of the humor that appeals to the popular American taste is the description of the carpenter (the Jack-of-all trades, as the captain calls him):

So, if his superiors wanted to use the carpenter for a screwdriver, all they had to do was to open that part of him and the screw was fast: or if for tweezers, take him up by the legs and there they were.¹²

There is humor too in the snubs and snappers, unexpected turns and parenthetical expressions.

"In judging of that tempestuous wind called Euroclydon," says an old writer—of whose work I possess the only copy extant—"it maketh..."¹³

Of Jonah it is said:

Possibly, too, Jonah, might have ensconced himself in a hollow tooth; but on second thought, the Right Whale is toothless.¹⁴

Sometimes there is an attempt at mock-heroic philosophy:

Alive or dead a fish is technically fast, when it is connected with an occupied boat or ship, by any medium at all controllable by the occupa-

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*

¹¹ Ch. lxi "Stubb Kills a Whale" (p. 317)

¹² Ch. cvii "The Carpenter" (p. 509)

¹³ Ch. ii "The Carpet Bag" (p. 20)

¹⁴ Ch. lxxxiii "Jonah Historically Regarded" (p. 401)

tion or occupants—a mast, an oar, a nine-inch cable, a telegraph wire, or a strand of cobweb, it is all the same.¹⁵

Occasionally an elaborate exposition like that of the spouting of the whales which is supposed to lead up to some definite conclusion as to whether the whale spouts water or air, merely leads to a spouting statement like, "My hypothesis is this: that the spout is nothing but mist."¹⁶

There is humor even in the footnotes. In the chapter "Stubb Kills a Whale (where the whale is said "to transform himself from a bluff-bowed sluggish galliot into a sharp-pointed New York pilot-boat") we find a footnote:

Partly to show the undispensableness of this act, it may here be stated, that, in the old Dutch fishery, a mop was used to dash the running line with water; in many other ships, a wooden piggin, or bailer, is set apart for that purpose. Your hat, however is the most convenient.¹⁷

IV

There were four major influences that helped to shape the literary mind of Melville: Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, the Old Testament and the American folk hero. The Old Testament, as everyone knows, has been the source of much literary humor. An interesting comparison offers itself between *Moby Dick* and the Book of Job.¹⁸ *Moby Dick* is of course not as profound as Job, but the same type of humor is embedded in both, that of the folk epic.* In *Job*, God says of Leviathan, "Shalt thou play with him as with a bird, or tie him up for thy handmaids?"¹⁹ This type of humor appears to have inspired Melville in such passages as the following:

Sure it is nevertheless, that the Sperm Whale has no proper olfactories.

¹⁵ Ch. lxxxix "Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish" (p. 434)

¹⁶ Ch. lxxxv "The Fountain" (p. 410)

¹⁷ Ch. lxi (p. 316)

¹⁸ Chase *op. cit.* p. 87.

* Editor's note: While this issue was in press, an article appeared by Dermot Dobbyn C.P. entitled "The Birthplace of 'Moby Dick,'" (*The Catholic World* September 1957) claiming that the real source of *Moby Dick* is the Bible, and that the prototype of Ahab is King Achab in 3 Kings 22.

¹⁹ Job 40.24 (Douai trans.)

But what does he want of them? No roses, no violets, no Cologne-water in the sea.²⁰

Furthermore as his windpipe solely opens into the tube of his spouting canal and as that long canal—like the Grand Erie Canal—is furnished with a sort of locks (that open and shut) for the downward retention of air or the upward exclusion of water, therefore the whale has no voice; unless you insult him by saying, that when he so strangely rumbles, he talks through his nose. But then again, what has the whale to say? Seldom have I known any profound being that had anything to say to this world, unless forced to stammer out something by way of getting a living.²¹

Shakespeare's influence is even more pronounced. Witness the soliloquies and the songs.²² But it is best seen in Stubb as personifying man in his most primary aspects—man "untainted" by culture, free of any obligations which society brings with it, man at one with life in its most fundamental, material aspect. In such a man we are dealing with a character similar to Falstaff. Falstaff is earthy, jovial, gay, full of mischief. Falstaff quaffs his cup of ale while England is fighting for life, not because he does not love England, but because he happens to be full of *la joie de vivre*. He loves Hal and the King, but he himself is king. He is not just lazy or ever-drunk; his character includes all elements (without any question of good or evil, of dignified or ridiculous) that make him so thoroughly human, or rather give him the aspect of a certain amorality which we deplore but somehow cannot find it in us to condemn. Like Falstaff, Stubb is relief in time of trouble. He is also like the Shakespearean clown, humorous though pathetic. If Falstaff realizes all of England's woe, Stubb knows all the horror about the monomaniac Ahab. "I don't know that my little man; I never yet saw him kneel," he replies to Flask who has merely stated that Ahab "has one knee, and good part of the other left."²³ There is something of Falstaff in the redundant humor of Stubb's:

Ginger? Ginger? and will you have the goodness to tell me, Mr. Dough-Boy, where lies the virtue of ginger? Ginger! is ginger the sort

²⁰ Ch. lxxv "The Fountain" (pp. 407-408)

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 408.

²² Chapters xxxviii, xxxix, xl, cxix.

²³ Ch. 1 "Ahab's Boat and Crew" (p. 255)

of fuel you use, Dough-Boy, to kindle a fire in this shivering cannibal? Ginger? what the devil is ginger?—sea-coal?—firewood?—lucifer matches?—cinder?—gunpowder?—what the devil is ginger, I say, that you offer this cup to your poor Queequeg here?²⁴

Besides Shakespeare and the Bible, seventeenth century rhetoric too had its influence on Melville's style and humor. There is "rhythmical elaboration, highly colored language and conceit" so that the work is "a constant source of amusement, thanks to the irrelevancies, the digressions, the bizarre fancies, and the whimsical speculation" very much as in Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* or *Vulgar Errors*.²⁵ Chapter 86 ("The Tail") is a fine illustration of Melville imitating the man who was "inquiring into the habits of the unicorns and earwigs and glowworms and of the musical note of the swan before its death" and who found a "dead dog inherently more interesting than a live lion."²⁶

Melville's humor was also influenced by the American folk hero who emerged in the 1830's and 1840's in oral story and in popular almanacs, magazines, newspapers and drama. This folk hero was a mixture of two figures: the Yankee peddler and the backwoodsman of the West. The new composite American folk hero retained the penchant for yarn-spinning, practical joking and theatrical self-assertion which had characterized both figures. Melville himself had affinities with this folk hero. He was a master story-teller as Mrs. Hawthorne testifies. He is reported to have a "jocular, irrepressible spirit" and even an "inept sense of humor" that sometimes greatly offended his family.

V

But the chief source of humor are the characters themselves and the situations. When Queequeg screams, he is made to exclaim, "Ka-la! Koo-loo!" after Stubb's "Woo-hoo! Wa-hee!"

²⁴ Ch. lxxii "The Monkey-Rope" (p. 355)

²⁵ R. P. Coffin and A. M. Witherspoon eds. *Seventeenth Century Prose and Poetry* (New York 1946) pp. 345 and elsewhere.

²⁶ *Loc. cit.* p. 354.

and Daggoo's "Kee-hee! Kee-hee!" But when the sharks almost eat Queequeg's hand away, Queequeg is made to say,

Queequeg no care what god made him shark... wedder Fejee god or Nantucket god; but the god wat made Shark must be one dam Injun.²⁷

The most obvious humorous character on board is Stubb, the second mate. He has many virtues: strength, speed, size, power and a careless, ruthless humor.

Then again, Stubb was one of those odd sort of humorists, whose jollity is sometimes so curiously ambiguous, as to put all inferiors on their guard in the matter of obeying them.²⁸

Stubb's attitude is a mixture of affected boredom and humorous screaming. His is the attitude of the boasting hunter and the exaggerating fisherman, certainly very much like the American adventurer. Whether spoken of or speaking, Stubb is presented as *the* humorist. No one is as good as he in the matter of name calling. On the *Rosebud* he comments: "but how like all creation it smells!" To Daggoo's "He's dead, Mr. Stubb," he retorts crisply, "Yes; both pipes smoked out!" referring to the whale's two spout-holes.²⁹

His humor has often a touch of the sarcastic. When Flash insists that he has definitely changed his mind in connection with the success of the whaling journey, he replies, "Well, suppose I did? I've part changed my flesh since that time, why not my mind?"³⁰

Very hilarious (though perhaps not very much to the modern taste) is the episode following Stubb's killing the whale, namely his fooling of the negro cook. The chapter called "Stubb's Supper" is a typical illustration of antebellum popular humor at the expense of the negroes.

"A steak, a steak, ere I sleep! You Daggoo! overboard you go, and cut me one from his small."³¹

²⁷ Ch. lxvi "The Shark Massacre" (p. 335)

²⁸ Ch. xlviii "The First Lowering" (pp. 241-242)

²⁹ Ch. lxi "Stubb Kills a Whale" (p. 318)

³⁰ Ch. cxxi "Midnight" (p. 551)

³¹ Ch. lxiv "Stubb's Supper" (p. 323)

Of the sharks he says:

Cook, go and talk to 'em (the sharks); tell them they are welcome to help themselves civilly, and in moderation, but they must keep quiet.³²

His soliloquy on the Zodiac is in a whimsically humorous vein:

Come Almanack! To begin there's Aries, or the Ramlecherous dog, he begets us; then, Taurus, the Bull—he bumps us the first thing, then Gemini, or the Twins—that is, Virtue and Vice, we try to reach Virtue, when lo! comes Cancer, the Crab and drags us back; and here, going from Virtue, Leo, a roaring Lion, lies in the path—he gives a few fierce bites and surly dabs with paw; we escape, and hail, Virgo, the Virgin that's our first love; we marry and think to be happy for aye, when pop comes Libra, or the Scales—happiness weighed and found wanting.³³

To Starbuck during the famous night of storm, Stubb reveals in a few lines what many a humorist might occasionally have to say:

But I am not a brave man; never said I was a brave man! I am a coward, and I sing to keep up my spirits. And I tell you what it is, Mr. Starbuck, there's no way to stop my singing in this world but to cut my throat. And when that's done, ten to one I sing ye the doxology for a wind-up.³⁴

After some great flashes and peals of thunder, in an interval of profound darkness when all the members of the crew look pallid and are filled with fear, he approaches the first mate and says, "And look ye, Mr. Starbuck—but it's too dark to look. Hear me then." Mumford calls this the humor of desperation.³⁵

The characters of Stubb and Flask are not completely and clearly differentiated. There is even an instance where Melville speaks of "Stubb, the third mate," and Flask is occasionally given a share in the wit and humor of Stubb. In the description of the cabin-table, Flask is described as feeling perpetually hungry: "for what he ate did not so much relieve his hunger as keep it immortal in him."³⁶

³² p. 326.

³³ Ch. xcix "The Doubloon" (p. 472)

³⁴ Ch. cxix (p. 544)

³⁵ Lewis Mumford *op. cit.*, p. 170.

³⁶ Ch. xxxiv "The Cabin-Table" (p. 170)

VI

Multiform is the humor in *Moby Dick*. It pervades the whole novel. It is effected by an uncommonly varied technique and by innumerable devices. It fulfills many purposes. It draws its inspiration from the great masters of style and humor. It sets *Moby Dick* apart as the typically American folk epic.

And if this little exploration into the humor of Melville's *Moby Dick* has proved as exhausting an experience as the whaling voyage itself, we may take cold comfort from the whale:

Has the Sperm Whale ever written a book or spoken a speech? No, his great genius is declared in his doing nothing particular to prove it.³⁷

³⁷ Ch. lxxix "The Prairie" (p. 381)