



palgrave▶pivot

In Pursuit of Moby-Dick Of Whales and Their Gods

Joseph S. Catalano

palgrave
macmillan

In Pursuit of Moby-Dick

Joseph S. Catalano

In Pursuit of Moby-Dick

Of Whales and Their Gods

palgrave
macmillan

Joseph S. Catalano
New York, NY, USA

ISBN 978-3-031-40356-9 ISBN 978-3-031-40357-6 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-40357-6>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover pattern © Harvey Loake

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland
Paper in this product is recyclable.

For my brother Charles and his family.

PREFACE: I WILL WRITE

The first reference to my new long book about whales and whaling was, I think, given by Richard Henry Dana Jr., who had recently published *Two Years Before the Mast*. I saved my reply:

About the “whaling book”—I am half way in the work, & am very glad that your suggestion so jumps with mine. It will be a strange sort of a book, tho’, I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho’ you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree;—& to cook the think up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, one ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this.¹

Yes, dear reader, that is the truth of my book, *Moby-Dick*. What truth? Why simply this, that the poetry comes from the marriage of whale’s blubber and those that seek deep within it. This is the clue to the proper reading of my *Moby-Dick*. Yes, to anticipate, there is Ahab’s mad chase after the great white sperm whale, Moby Dick, and a great deal about myself as Ishmael and my loyal cannibal harpooner, Queequeg? They are all present and important; but, do not be let astray, either separately or together, their personalities and adventures will never unite this tale into one great narrative. Only the life of whales and the adventure of whalers can give my book its true unity. This is my general claim in all that follows; but, I ask you, dear reader, to absorb the weight of this claim, for the largest whales can stand comparison with the biggest dinosaurs, and whales are still with

¹ Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography Volume 1, 1819–1851*, Page 724.

us—they have been with us for thousands of years. You know all of this? Still, let me go on, for we all need to find the right words in all that is important for us. Here is how it all began; the beginning was as strange as the voyage itself.

New York, NY, USA

Joseph S. Catalano

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Eileen Srebenik guided the book from beginning to end and it would not exist without her initial and continued interest. Esther Rani was the production editor, and V. VinodhKumar helped with the final stages. Everyone else at Palgrave has been efficient and courteous. My wife, Marisa, helped through many stages and helped with the Index.

CONTENTS

1	No Need to Rush	1
2	The Book Itself	11
3	Etymology and Extracts	19
4	A Tale Twice Told	25
5	Ishmael and Queequeg	35
6	Going Whaling and a Hint of Ahab	47
7	Ahab as Captain and Ahab as Ahab	59
8	Ahab and Moby Dick	69
9	The Town-Ho's Story and Other Gams	79

10	Whales! Conversation, Art, Dining, Business, and Poetry	91
11	Ahab's Leg and Ahab's Life	101
12	Conclusions, the Unity of <i>Moby-Dick</i> , and a Critical Reflection	113
	Index	127

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph S. Catalano Professor Emeritus of Kean College of New Jersey.

Publications:

A. Seven Books: (1) *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Being and Nothingness."* New York: Harper & Row, 1974; Rev. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Midway Reprint: University of Chicago Press, 1985. (2) *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason."*^a Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. (3) *Good Faith and Other Essays: Perspectives on a Sartrean Ethics.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996. (4) *Thinking Matter: Consciousness from Aristotle to Putnam and Sartre.* Routledge: New York and London, 2000. (5) *Reading Sartre: An Invitation.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010. (6) *The Saint and the Atheist: Thomas Aquinas and Jean-Paul Sartre,* University of Chicago Press, 2021. (7) *The Family Idiot: Abridged with an Essay by Joseph S. Catalano,* University of Chicago Press, January 2023.

B. In Progress: *One with a Book: The Magic and Mystery of the Written Word.*

C. About 30 or so articles, 15 or so reviews, 10 or so articles in Anthologies, most recent, two for Routledge, *Consciousness and the Great Philosophers*, 2017, and *The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers*, 2018, both on Sartre.

D. Honors, National Endowment for the Humanities: Year grant for independent study 1983–1984; three summer grants; two year post-doctoral grant, Princeton, 1984–1986. Papers delivered, On the average of one a year from about 1972–2003.



CHAPTER 1

No Need to Rush

Abstract I take my readers on a personal tour through Melville's great novel, *Moby-Dick*. I do not assume any knowledge about the book as I share more than twenty years of reading.

In reply to a letter by Richard Henry Dana Jr., author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, published about ten years before *Moby-Dick*, Melville gives us the first known reference to his forthcoming book.

About the “whaling book”—I am half way in the work, & am very glad that your suggestion so jumps with mine. It will be a strange sort of a book, tho', I fear; blubber is blubber you know; tho' you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree;—& to cook the think up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, one ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves. Yet I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this.

“I mean to give the truth of the thing, spite of this.” What truth? Why simply this, that the poetry comes from the blubber? Yes, and from the truth about the blubber. This is the clue to the proper reading of *Moby-Dick*. And, it is more than a clue. On every page we witness the marriage of poetry and blubber; on every page we witness truth being born from their marriage. If you separate these three—the poetry from the blubber and both from truth—you then hold in your hand not one great book but three novellas loosely pasted together.

The vastness and complexity of the literal meaning of *Moby-Dick*—the way poetical, religious, and philosophical reflections are intertwined with the flesh and skeleton of whales and the details of American whaling ships—has confused not only its early critics and readers but many of those of today.

It was not Ahab that drew me back to reading *Moby-Dick* on and off, at times only a chapter here and there, but, from beginning to end, at least ten to fifteen times. Nor was it my philosophical career, for aesthetics was never my forte. It was the *story itself*! Poetry and truth I could find elsewhere, but not as they are one with whales. These leviathans, traveling through all the oceans of the earth as easily as we walk our pathways and streets, spout not merely vapor but a story of the planet Earth itself.

There Leviathan
 Hugest of living creatures, in the deep
 Stretch'd like a promontory sleeps or swims,
 And seems a moving land; and at his gills
 Draws in, and at his breath spouts out a sea

These words from Milton's *Paradise Lost* are on the title page of the true first edition of *Moby-Dick*; and, further, its title is simply, *The Whale*. As I collector, I have always wanted to own that book, but it was beyond my means, for only 500 copies were printed in England by Richard Bentley in October 1851. Its production was strange and somewhat contradictory; for, while it came out in three impressive-looking volumes, it was incomplete. Bentley trimmed Melville's classic by thirty-five passages that he thought offensive. He also put the two preliminary sections of the book, "Etymology," and "Extracts," at the end; and he left out the last page, "Epilogue," describing Ishmael's escape from the doomed ship, Pequod, with the result that the British readers and critics wondered how this tale of more than 600 pages could have been narrated.

A short time after its publication in England, Melville delivered a complete and properly organized manuscript to Fletcher Harper, one of the Harper brothers, of Harper & Brothers in America. There was one important change. Harper had recently published Henry T. Cheever's, *The Whale and His Captors*, and, perhaps, anticipating complaints, Melville altered the title to *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*. Notice the semi-colon; it does not point to a redundant expression: Moby Dick=The Whale. Rather,