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Very Like a Whale

Richard A. Card

This is a true story. Really. Recently, with a woman who was then my fiancée, I set out to visit the house in which Herman Melville lived when he was writing *Moby-Dick*. Much of Melville's most enduring work, including *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Israel Potter*, and a smattering of the Civil War poetry collected in *Battle-Pieces*, was written when Melville lived in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in a house he called Arrowhead for the artifacts that kept turning up under his plow. Melville moved there in September of 1850, staying for thirteen years. Then, in October 1863, at the height of the Civil War, when he became so thoroughly vexed by country squiredom or aggrieved at the death of Nathaniel Hawthorne, his former neighbor in Lenox, he traded the whole barns/hills/hearth/literary retreat for his brother Allen's townhouse on Twenty-sixth Street in New York City — a midlife return to the environs of his childhood that signaled his abandonment of prose and the growing obscurity of his late years.

The author of *Moby-Dick*, with the book most likely to be canonized as “great” and “American” and “novel” behind him, was to become a Customs House officer. It was in the years at Arrowhead, however, that some of the mightiest works of American literature were written, and my fiancée and I had come here to see the place that was midwife to the great white whale. I was, furthermore, making a pilgrimage to seek communion with a writer who looms over the imaginations of all American writers. With a species of hero worship that is democratic in its assumption of community with genius, I would gain sustenance by proximity to his tableware, chandeliers, and bed warmer.

On a late Saturday afternoon in August, we pulled into the driveway and the parking lot in the back of the house. We climbed out of the battered Chevy truck that had brought us there and gazed at the house, which gave us its indifferent back. Flies buzzed. The hollyhocks defended themselves against the midday sun. Some other pilgrims, dismounting a behemoth pod of a bus, stared expectantly, checking their guidebooks, puzzled, I suspected, at being dropped into a landscape so alien from the bus's cushioned interior. From this view, the house is a stock New England type farmhouse: nothing remarkable, mustard yellow with gray-blue trim and a few outbuildings painted the same colors. In Melville's time, livestock must have been maintained in these buildings, tools stored. There is a kitchen garden — its parsley, chive, and fennel would have added tang to the Melville family's mid-afternoon dinners. As always when touring places where great books were conceived, great battles fought, great visions seen, one is on the lookout for liniments of divine ghosts.

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None of these appeared to us immediately, but you imagine the farmer rising early, before anybody else is astir, poking around complaining cattle and hogs, picking fennel with his sleeves rolled up, sweat rolling off his corrugated farmer's beard, a man drawing stamina from the glacial hummocks that perked out of the land. Arrowhead must have been even more cloistered in the days when Melville lived here than it is today. Yet even now, suburbia encroaching, there is stillness in its rural seclusion, a gravitas that remands a writer to consider again the vanity of stringing together his letters and words, his primitive symbols, as bulwark against an ever-expectant, ever-prosperous mortality. Writing stories, making things up, dressing up strangers in our hats, is inspired reflex, at once acknowledgment of one's impotence in life, but occasionally when the letters align themselves in felicitous order, when the words ramify into some unexpected ether, it is the triumph of the boogeyman's spell, the creation of eternal life so awesome that it must have given even Yahweh pause on the seventh day.

By the time he moved to Arrowhead, Melville had pretty much given up sea tales like *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *White Jacket*, which were written with a pell-mell productivity that seems lost to a Victorian age intent on filling the existential chasm that yawned wider and wider beneath it with each continent conquered, each scientific shibboleth broken, each mammoth novel written. At Arrowhead, Melville's writing, always verging on the obscure, grew more willfully cumbersome, baroque in its autodidacticisms, and as he ventured into the metaphysics of *Moby-Dick* and later *Clarel* — a rhyming iambic tetrameter epic poem of spiritual expatriates in the Holy Land — it represented, I am inclined to think, his growing unease with perfection in form. The minor perfection of the best-selling sea tales was, after all, self-reflective, limited, biased toward the cult of the conventional, polished surfaces. His prose and poetry were probing the limitations of geography, growing chiaroscuro, seeking to strike through the pasteboard mask of visible objects (quote unquote), urging writer and reader alike into a margin of ambiguity and shadow.

God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught — nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash and Patience! (*Moby-Dick*)

The Berkshires — far removed from dithering Cambridge or Emerson-dominated Concord — were uncompleted allegories, the thought crosses my mind, of the vistas that unfurled on those whaling ships on which Melville had sailed nine years before *Moby-Dick*. If his imagination seems never to have fully extricated itself from the creaking of mizzens, the unremitting South Seas sun, shanghai'd scrimshaw-carving boys, it was his exile in the Berkshires from those ships that compelled his imagination to re-envision, with a new range of images and symbols, scenes that had faded from actual memory. Looking at the hump of Greylock, I wondered if some cabalistic sea visions might have appeared to him, as they seemed to me now: Ahab's ivory leg, the phantasy fire-worshipping Parsees, the whale itself. . . .

It was while gliding through these latter waters that one serene and moonlight night, when all waves rolled by like scrolls of silver; and by their soft, suffusing seethings, made what seemed a silvery silence . . . a silvery jet was seen far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow. Lit up by the moon, it looked celestial; seemed some plumed and glittering god uprising from the sea. (*Moby-Dick*)

Now our group of tourists was herded together and escorted into the anteroom of the house. My fiancée and I, along with a family from Wisconsin, it turns out, and

an Asian couple who spoke no English, one or two professor types, were introduced to the Melvillian furniture. It seemed to our mutual surprise that actually only a few of the chairs and sideboards were here when Melville was. The group, balkanized within its artificial singularity, the Wisconsin mother fixing the clasp on her daughter's bracelet, the professors adjusting their cuffs, my fiancée thoughtfully pondering the pattern of the wallpaper, looked away, mumbling its disappointment. But soon enough our guide, a cheery woman in her sixties or seventies who knew her charges, drew our attention to some dishes, books from Melville's library, mannequins in dresses worn by Melville's two daughters — *actual* Melville artifacts. The reasons for our pilgrimaging to Arrowhead were no doubt various in their psychological or sociological origins, but there is some singular inexplicable bond that draws pilgrims everywhere to their shrines and drew us to these tattered remnants of Melville's domestic life, somewhat as though we mistrusted our own imaginations to fully engage the fictive world, as Melville had mistrusted the visible world to render his own longing. But as we crowded closer to the porcelain, we looked vaguely skeptical of these venerable objects once we had them in our sights. Melville, we sensed, was not far away.

"The Melvilles, by the way, were not always the happiest couple" — the information was imparted to us sotto voce, as from a neighbor widow who had overheard the quarrels while on her way to borrow a tin of lard —

"Hmm."

"Herman was working very hard to provide for his family, so hard that some said he was becoming mentally unstable."

Melville indeed worked like a man possessed in his years at Arrowhead. His wife, Elizabeth, on whose family money Melville depended, on some level must have resented his increasingly unprofitable vocation, his intractability in its pursuit. After *Moby-Dick*, Melville had tried to write in a popular style, exploring, like Hawthorne, domestic romance in *Pierre*, and, like Whitman, national upheaval in *Battle-Pieces*. He wrote shorter pieces for *Harpers* and *Putnams* magazines, guaranteed to sell more copies than his novels. For a year or so he managed a living from writing, a rare enough thing for any writer who would propound (there is no other word I can think of) belief in the salvational possibility of literature, let alone one who took as his starting point a determination to explicate the soul of a nation to itself, and a nation the very messy twitchy democraticness of which was designed to keep such explications at bay, especially highfalutin literary ones. But in the long run his bids for the convention and the magazine market did little to pull him out of his financial straits. As the Civil War approached, he tried lecturing on Roman statuary, his travels in the South Seas. By the lectern he earned more than he had with sales from stories or novels, but to keep things going he still depended on handouts from his father-in-law, the eminent Boston jurist Lemuel Shaw, despairing of ever supporting his growing family from book earnings.

We approached the back stairs that led up to the office, the room where *Moby-Dick* was written that fall of 1850.

"I've heard that he abused his wife," the husband from Wisconsin said, sounding not as guilty as he might have wished. "Didn't he push her down the stairs?"

Our Virgil sighed.

This was not the first time she'd heard a question like this, her demeanor let us know. She unpacked her smile, her eyes emitting a steady beam across the husband's

face. “The Melvilles had their problems, like any modern couple, as I said. Herman was always very hard at work, and this put a tremendous strain on him, and sometimes on his marriage. But I must tell you,” she offered confidently, “they really loved each other. They stuck with each other through thick and thin.” Pause. “That rumor has been around for a while, but there’s no concrete evidence that it’s true. We know that he was in some physical pain. He was stressed, as they say now, which came from his work, and he may have been drinking too much at times, possibly to ease this pain.” Pause — slightly longer, just. “That’s all we know for sure.”

Faux pas overcome, we were whisked through the parlor and up on the staircase in question. The children of the Wisconsin family clamored up it, eager to be free of their bungling father, expectant of more mannequins, a video. The professors nodded. The Asian couple whispered something, gesturing. Eventually tour guides become wedded to the master or mistress of the house — the phantom in the daguerreotype, the bewhiskered patriarch in the gilt-framed painting, the firebrand in her day now safely tucked away in the rococo keepsakes and crochet-work — retelling their anecdotes to the pilgrims who kneel at an altar that has become, through a mysterious transference of energies, theirs. They guard it with a love that is savage for the impossibility of its requital. We look away, faintly embarrassed at the upwelling of this love. Are we not here to ruminate on the same object ourselves?

Upstairs, the *pièce de résistance*, Melville’s office, seems sparsely furnished to one expecting a certain Victorian ripeness of décor, a culminating fustiness. There is a sideboard where Elizabeth might have set a spot of tea. A few chairs are placed along the walls. (Might Hawthorne have sat in one of them, regal and a bit of a momma’s boy: a gloomy American Byron to Melville’s sensual American Milton? You wonder if he brought along some gin, and the two got quietly stewed on one of those winter afternoons with shadows quickly lengthening outside the window and the hiss of sleigh runners announcing unexpected guests.) A harpoon that leans incidentally against a wall was not here in Melville’s time. Donated by some local civic group to add atmospherics, it is a prop, a literary symbol turned pop icon and brought back a hundred and fifty years later to the author’s room, like a mouse carcass dropped off by a dutiful cat. In the center of the room is the desk. No rope to cordon it off. Just the desk. The visible object. There are only a few books on it, some feather pens, a candle with a fresh white wick. Not that any real writer would have kept a desk that way, you think. It would have been spilling over with volumes, mice-gnawed candle fragments, botched drafts. . . .

There was a temptation to touch it, but before any of us could, we were scolded: “Thank you for not getting too close.”

It had belonged to Arrowhead’s previous owner. In 1850, when Melville pulled it out of his barn, it was chalky with guano, a surface on which the farmer must have written out his orders for feeds and fertilizers. Melville himself scraped it off and helped bring it up the stairs and into the room we were standing in. We looked from the prescribed distance, awed. This unremarkable piece of furniture after all is the fetish symbol, the altar of high-church American lit in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Touching, in one way or another, is the reason we, all of us, had come here, as though this mild group might gain by a stolen rub the genius that plumbed the “intangible malignity of life.” I myself, in clandestine moments, have brushed my fin-

ger against other sacred monuments — James Joyce’s shillelagh; the corners of the Rembrandts; an edge of Lenin’s sarcophagus — and would not necessarily extol this method of telepathy with the dead to those who expect a Ouija board revelation or an electric charge up the spine. But failing, even for a moment, to trust the unyielding laws of physics or the iron conventions of our predecessors, rejecting the port, as Melville said, has always seemed to express the highest form of moral faith in the universe’s bounty. If you could just smudge the decomposing trace molecules left by Melville’s thumb on the desk onto your own thumb, you could strike through the material forms that Melville, like the Transcendentalists with whom he held no truck, believed circumscribed our yearning souls.

In landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee. (*Moby-Dick*)

The next day my fiancée, a landscape gardener, and I visited the Berkshire Botanical Gardens. We try to plan our trips with a mutually benefiting itinerary. As we strolled the grounds, a familiar visage appeared amid the potted dahlias, butterburs, heathers, and heaths. The face was a known one, yes, but in a quite different context. Its combination of clergyman’s self-satisfaction and the brash good will of a boy-most-likely-to-succeed who has returned to his hometown fifty years later, a genuine success, the sum of what was predicted for him, reminded you in this August sunlight of some enduring thistle. His downy hair, trimmed expertly by a barber, became disarrayed in a wind that blew from the east. His mouth manifested a preformed bemusement, habituated as I supposed it was to public utterances, but it showed for a moment a sliver of self-conscious dental work, a preference for the imagined life that originates from a toddler’s first grasp of the world’s bright strangeness. The appearance here of this gentleman was so unexpected indeed that for a moment I did not believe it was he. We had met once, at some party or literary function, but his celebrity was such that I expected he would not have any memory of the meeting, and rather than run the risk of awkward reintroductions I walked past with a nod that could have been intended for any stranger.

When I whispered his identity to my fiancée, she did a double take. In the midst of a backswing of a phantom four iron, he caught her eye. His own eye moved appraisingly over her figure, and the club head came down in a neat arc, sending the ball sailing over some fairway that stretched into its own illimitable history of primeval forests, Wampanoag hunting parties, and woolly mammoths.

There, on the tee’s earth platform, standing in his large white spiked Footjoys and blue sweat socks, drawing the long tapered steel wand of the Lynx Predator driver from the bag, he feels tall again. . . . So, in golf, the distances, the hundreds of yards, dissolve to a few effortless swings if you find the inner magic, the key. (John Updike, *Rabbit Run*)

The Berkshires have served as hideaway for literary coteries (fictional or not) that ran the gamut from Henry James and Edith Wharton motoring out of Wharton’s baronial estate in an open-coach Packard to root among the provincials to Saul Bellow’s crazy clairvoyant Moses Herzog holed up in a summer house eating beans out of a can, not to mention Hawthorne and Melville, so in a way it is not surprising to come upon the likes of John Updike. For it was he whose golf swing we were studying. Updike, it must be said, was among the first contemporary “literary” writers I had read outside those assigned in college literature classes. He came recom-

mended by a friend's mother, and late nights in my dorm room I had pored through his short stories in binges, stricken especially by the sureness of his eye, as if he were tracing life onto onionskin, then coloring in every so slightly. We had, as I said, crossed paths once, but here the coincidence seemed to point toward some conclusion I did not understand.

Updike's prose, with its majestically cascading sentences, its swaying allusiveness and epic feel for the bruised psyche of a middle class stranded in the plenty that has befallen it, seems at first to have nothing in common with Melville's protean effluence, a prose so dangerously close to hypno-lyric ranting that it threatens to burst its own medium. But was this a judgment made in haste, with the physiologic Updike a chip shot away? On second thought, the question presented to me by this accident deserved more consideration.

Updike himself, of course, has attained what Melville never did in his lifetime. He has written what he wanted, presumably, and made a living at it. No pleadings for cash, strength, patience, he seems blessed with an abundance of the above. . . . His novels, stories, works of criticism, meet a more or less faithful public. Updike subverts on some level — Harry Angstrom is the savant of drifting moral apoplexy — but this subversion is aligned with the deep suspicion in the American mind that what you get is not always what you need, a philosophical stance that would only thrive in a land of plenty. Thus, Updike, the outsider who has become the consummate literary insider, can practice his golf swing in the garden, eye my fiancée — pursuits of the reddest-blooded whitest-skinned males — simultaneously vivisectioning the moral landscape that unfurls under his eye.

Sadly, the trajectory of Melville's writing life was nearly opposite Updike's. When Melville died in September 1891, the newspapers observed that his popularity had fallen precipitously after *Typee*. Some admitted that they had assumed him dead years ago. After the outpourings of the antebellum years, he seemed to have dried up, vanished from public consciousness. The last novel published in his lifetime, *The Confidence-Man*, came out in 1857 and sold five hundred copies in England before its publisher went belly up (and in its death throes auctioned off the book's plates along with those of *The Piazza Tales*). By 1891, most of his books had been relegated to the bins of used booksellers, contemplated, like Yorick's dry bones, by the occasional browser.

One asks how this could be, how a writer that one generation accepts as preeminently "great" could be virtually forgotten by the generation to which his books were delivered. It is a reasonable question. One that begs to quarrel with the hubris of our illusions. But in a way the reasons are right before us. It is not for the difficulty of the works — not just. The writings of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce et al., Melville's heirs, presented obstacles to the general reader that were more daunting for sure, but these writers were eventually embraced by the Lost Generation publicists eager to prove consciousness and poetry relevant, and *Ulysses* and "Prufrock" were disseminated to a reading public that puzzled their obliquities as a way into the contemplation of its own condition, paving the way for more facile Updike (whose sensibility is indebted, mostly persistently, to Joyce's).

But Melville was out of step. The howling infinite overwhelmed the would-be domestic scenes and Polynesian reveries. Where was the recognizable drift of American life that was so manifest with domestic chroniclers like Hawthorne or Henry James, or Updike in our time? Where a decipherable stance on slavery or

Nature that had made Ralph Waldo Emerson sage to his epoch? All was condition based on nuance, balanced upon the head of an allegory. Little to hold on to. Like Dostoevsky's, the Mellvillian landscapes, especially in later works, begrudge only the faintest tokens of descriptive stage setting, or idiosyncrasies that give breath to a character. Clearly, comically sketched in the first chapters, Ishmael himself vanishes into the tempest of *Moby-Dick's* narrative only to bob up at the end, allegorically, saved by Queequeg's coffin. This most famous of characters in American literature is hardly a character at all but a character manqué. In rejecting conventional narrative strategies, opting for the open waters of metaphysics, Melville proved too elusive, too despairing, too uncongenial to a generation struggling to assert its Manifest Destiny platitudes upon the "howling infinite" of the continent that they found themselves washed up on. As long as he pleased his readers by writing descriptively or lecturing about being marooned among the cannibals, he would be a celebrity, feted at dinners at high-class restaurants, but the writer of *Moby-Dick* and *Clarel* was a stranger to the reading public he'd hoped would delve with him into the "intangible malignity of life." Even our tourist group, guided by a representative of civic decorum, was not permitted to touch the desk; we could only gaze on it at a secure generational remove.

We walked through the gardens. Updike disappeared from view now and then, only to pop up again unexpectedly, like a snowdrop in a February thaw. His raised hands were clasped together, the shaft of the imagined club glinting in the sun. The ball was dispatched over a water hazard suspended like a hammock just below the green. . . . In other strangers, I would find this jockish rehearsal boorish. With Updike however, a practice swing seemed sacred, like a supplicant's nodding toward heaven. Golf, or something like it, the incidentals of American life, the restaurant parking lots where domestic arguments spill out into public view, the depressed downtowns of middling crumbling cities, compromised marriages that limp toward an uncertain denouement, these are the province of Updike's earthbound heaven. If writing indicates supreme faith, it is Updike's gift to render this faith in mundane prosody symbols on which to hang our own prayers. His symbols are indeed just what is asked for in a secular world that has not completely discarded its God-saturated past.

In the four novels of the *Rabbit* series, to take the most well-known example, the protagonist, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, a tediously self-absorbed former high school basketball star, lives out an adulthood of disappointed obsolescence. Read in sequence, you fear the novels stretching thin without sufficient moral arbitration (which may or may not be Updike himself running out of steam). Rabbit seems, after almost as many pages as *War and Peace*, to occupy the same plane of agnostic insensibility as he did at high school graduation. But just as you start to turn an arbitrary clump of pages, Rabbit rises out of his driftingness into a moment of lyric, I hesitate to say epiphany or self-understanding, but merger, let's say. Here from *Rabbit, Run*:

The land grows wilder. The road evades great lakes and tunnels through pines. In the tip of the windshield the telephone wires continually whip the stars. The music on the radio slowly freezes; the rock and roll for kids cools into old standards and show tunes and comforting songs from the Forties. . . . Growing sleepy, Rabbit stops before midnight at a roadside café for coffee. Somehow, though he can't put his finger on the difference, he is unlike the other customers. They sense it too, and look at him with hard eyes, eyes like metal studs pinned into the white faces of young men. . . .

Here, in *Rabbit at Rest*, dying:

Still, the sun feels good, springing sweat from his pores like calling so many seeds to life. The nature of this exertion is to mix him with the earth and sky: earth, the packed pink-tan glaring dust printed over and over with the fanned backs of his Nikes and the cagelike grid of Tiger's black sneakers, stamped earth in the rim of his vision as he dribbles; and sky, wide white sky when he looks up to follow his shot or the other's.

In *Rabbit*, as in many of the short stories (still my favorites), the profane honors the sacred. We can feel ourselves rising, with Rabbit, with Kierkegaardian faith through lapsed promises to the empyrean and — though it may sound pious to say it — to America. Much American writing, from Rip Van Winkle to Tom Sawyer, the poems of Anne Bradstreet to those of Robert Lowell, concerns itself with mortals trying to attain a heavenly throne for a better view of the frenetic couplings of their fellows below: a bifurcated vision of heaven and earth, religious longing, and home-sick regret at the separation engendered by that longing. Emily Dickinson, another writer stranded in the thickets of western Massachusetts, in choosing to remain on earth sighed at the road not taken:

“For you served Heaven, you know, / Or sought to; / I could not. . . . / So we must keep apart, You there, I here, / With just the door ajar / That oceans are, And prayer / That pale sustenance, /Despair!”

A two-part *New Yorker* piece, collected in *Licks of Love*, Updike's newest clutch of short stories, features the remnants of the Angstrom family carrying on with Harry gone. His son, Nelson, has emerged from the haze of the drug-addled seventies and eighties well-meaning and somewhat detached, informed by remembered sins and preaching liberal middle-class rectitude, echoing, surprisingly, some minor note of his father's. Throughout the sequel, one senses the dead Harry presiding over his survivors. Janice, Harry's widow, has remarried — a detested boyhood rival of Harry's — and Nelson and Harry's illegitimate daughter, Annabelle Byer, try to get it together to conjure a father looking down not so much from exalted heaven as, like a spying Tom Sawyer, from a roost not so different from the reclining chair he sat in in life. Their father, or Father, all-seeing, hardly omniscient. . . . “They felt something out there, reflecting back from their own good sense of themselves,” thinks Janice in the aftermath of this stranger, Annabelle, showing up at her door. “Exalted. External. The yellowing memorial plaques along the wall at St. John's, the stained-glass Jesus above the altar, His hands out in a gesture of embrace or despair. You need something.”

Something is all the assurance Updike can offer, but it is not a nothing Something. Having traded the pieties of old-time religion for the sexual avant-garde of new religious freedom, for all their carnal semi-secrets and freedoms Updike's characters in general seem to have reached an apotheosis no more transcendent than Hester Prynne's, their optimistic sexual and religious self-expression going out not with a bang, but petering out in a series of accidental encounters in shopping malls or restaurant parking lots with old lovers they barely recognize. But it is Something. Beauty made visible. The recognition of a life's battles, concessions, comforts, found in the face of a stranger who turns out to have been a lover once upon a time. What more exalted than a Deity with knees as weak as ours who can come up with such bounty? The question of the dead's nostalgia for the lost world becomes

reconfigured into a meditation on the simultaneity of loss and love, purgatory and paradise. . . .

Melville, who may or may not have been homosexual, which may or may not matter in thinking about his meaning as a literary figure, could scarce accord the ostensible comforts of domesticity with the white Calvinist unknown. Domesticity offered no assurances: it strangled him even as he sought its ultimate reward: enduring fame, assurance of the paradise he could not bring himself to believe in nor bring himself to deny. Given a choice, Melville, unlike Emily Dickinson, would serve Heaven, one suspects. But from that vantage he would have preferred, one also suspects, to wrangle with a fierce Deity rather than gawk at the mortals below. If the pilgrimage on which my fiancée and I had set out to discover the spirit of Melville led quite by accident to John Updike, the barb-tipped harpoon raised to pierce the back of the white whale now a golf club on this late summer afternoon, the psyche of American life still splits along this divide, caught halfway between the visible shapes of the material world and the yawning beyond, with just the door ajar. ❧

