**[Roger W. Smith, “A Commentary on Nathaniel Philbrick’s Observations about ‘Moby-Dick'”](https://rogersgleanings.com/2016/09/07/roger-w-smith-commentary-on-nathaniel-philbricks-observations-about-moby-dick/)**

Posted on [September 7, 2016](https://rogersgleanings.com/2016/09/07/roger-w-smith-commentary-on-nathaniel-philbricks-observations-about-moby-dick/) by [Roger W. Smith](https://rogersgleanings.com/author/rogersgleanings/)

I have been reading Nathaniel Philbrick’s *Why Read Moby-Dick?* (2011).

Philbrick is a great admirer of Herman Melville. He states, in the first chapter, that he has read Melville’s novel *Moby-Dick* “at least a dozen times.”

I read *Moby-Dick* in a book borrowed from the New York Public Library in the 1970’s. I couldn’t put it down. The book and Melville were a revelation for me.

The following are some thoughts of my own about *Moby-Dick* based upon my reading of Philbrick’s excellent study cum *appréciaton*.

*-- Roger W. Smith*

*September 2016*

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(Page numbers below refer to *Why Read Moby-Dick?*)

**pg. 9**

Philbrick says, “I am not one of those purists who insist on reading the entire untruncated text at all costs.”

Although I agree with most of the points Philbrick makes, I disagree strongly here. To fully appreciate the book, you’ve got to take it all in, including the cetology.

**pg. 17**

“free and easy sort of genial, desperado philosophy”; Ishmael’s, approach to life, in his own words.

An apt characterization. Ishmael, the first person narrator, begins the book with the words “Call me Ishmael”--setting the informal, free and easy tone of the book, and establishing a level of UNformality notably American.

**pg.  21**

Philbrick comments on how, at intervals, Melville “slows the pace of his mighty novel to a magisterial crawl.”

Well put. The book is like a sea voyage under sail. There are very long stretches where land is not in sight, so to speak, and progress seems slow. By the time one finishes the book, one feels that one’s self has been on a long voyage.

**pg.  22**

I don’t agree with Ishmael’s statement (i.e., a statement made in the novel by Melville indirectly in the words of the main character Ishmael, not by Philbrick) that one ought to “forgo the cloying chunks of needless potato” in clam chowder. Clam chowder, which I love (*New England* clam chowder, that is), is so much better and filling with potatoes, which, in my view, are indispensable.

**pg. 37**

Melville:  “For all men tragically great are made so through a certain morbidness. Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease.”

Shakespearean language.

The influence of Shakespeare on Melville can be seen as plain as day.

**pg. 44**

Philbrick: “Hidden beneath his [Melville’s] lapidarian surfaces were truths so profound and disturbing that they ranked with anything written in the English language.”

YES. Melville fuses narrative with metaphysical speculation, reality with imagination, grim actuality with underlying truths.

**pg. 48**

Philbrick: “[Melville’s] metaphysical preoccupations perpetually threatened to overwhelm his unsurpassed ability to find the specific, concrete detail that conveys everything.”

Very true. A keen observation.

**pg.  59**

Philbrick writes of the “longings: of the twelve-year-old boy [Melville] for his dead father; of the author for fame; and *of the almost-middle-aged man for a friend*.”

*Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Such a heart rending story. Hawthorne was discomfited by Melville’s love and shrunk from it.

**pg. 61**

Philbrick mentions “the wisdom of waiting to read the classics.”

YES. An excellent point.

Waiting until you are ready, motivated, and receptive.

Waiting until the most opportune time.

This is precisely that happened to me with *Moby-Dick*. And, practically every other classic and/or “great book” I have ever read.

Hardly any of them – almost none – were read by me as school assignments.

**pg. 64**

Philbrick: “*Moby-Dick* is a true epic, embodying almost every powerful American archetype.”

A personal observation of mine: *Moby-Dick* is the Great American Novel. Though many admire the book, few, if any, seem to realize this.

**pg. 64**

Philbrick: “There is wonderful slapdash quality to the book.”

Very true. Well put.

*Slapdash*: The great writers seem to be able to write in this way, as if they were tossing something off and sort of “taking dictation” (from within), telling you a story or something or other in an unrehearsed, unscripted conversation. Their writing does not seem “studied” (does not read that way).

Melville excels at this, beginning with the novel’s opening words:  Call me Ishmael.” He picks up the story there, and, bang, you’re into it.

Another writer who, in my opinion, pulled this off – who would not ordinarily be thought of in this context – was Henry Miller in *Tropic of Capricorn*. (It seems to me that Melville might be diagnosed today as having been, at times, manic, as I imagine Henry Miller may also have been.)

Also, Daniel Defoe does the same thing. Defoe seems artless, like he’s merely there to write it down. It actually makes him a great read.

**pg.  64**

Philbrick: “Ishmael is the narrator, but at times Melville invests him with an authorial omniscience.”

A good critical insight.

**pg.  65**

Philbrick: “[T]he plot is [often] left to languish and entire groups of characters [in *Moby-Dick*] vanish without a trace.”

True. Cf. Bulkington.

**pg. 65**

Philbrick: “… Melville is conveying the quirky artlessness of life though his ramshackle art. ‘[C]areful disorderliness,’ Ishmael assures us, ‘is the true method.’ ”

Right on target as concerns Melville the writer (as well as Melville’s view of life).

**pp. 80-81**

Philbrick: “Melville has created a portrait of the redemptive power of intimate human relations, what he calls elsewhere [in *Moby-Dick*] ‘the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country.’ It is an ideal world that would sadly elude him for much of his married life.”

The quote is from *Moby-Dick*, Chapter XCLV.

**pg. 82**

Philbrick quotes from *Moby-Dick* (Chapter LXXXVII): ‘A low advancing hum was soon heard; and then like to the tumultuous masses of block-ice when the great river Hudson breaks up in Spring, the entire host of whales came tumbling upon their inner center. …’

This is wonderful descriptive prose. (Remember how, in the experience of most of us, one of the first writing assignments we had in school was to write a paper describing something?)

A personal note: In the 1970’s, when I was living in Manhattan a block away from Riverside Park, along the Hudson River, there was a particularly cold winter. The Hudson froze over, and I can remember the hissing and popping sounds as the ice was breaking up slowly.

**pg.  83**

There is a quote from Chapter XCIII of *Moby-Dick* (not so indicated by Philbrick): “flatly stretching away, all round, to the horizon, like gold-beater’s skin hammered out to the extremest.”

This is undoubtedly an echo of John Donne’s famous poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (another scholar confirmed my opinion):

Our two souls therefore, which are one,

Though I must go, endure not yet

A breach, but an expansion,

Like gold to airy thinness beat.

Melville, as the scholar put it, “knew seventeenth century English literature.”

**pg.  85**

“So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense. …” (*Moby-Dick*, Chapter XCIII).

A profound observation by Melville.

**pg. 103**

Philbrick: “[Melville’s] dangerously digressive, sometimes bombastic novel….”

An apt description -- perhaps one should say brilliant -- very much on target.

**pg. 114**

Philbrick: “No matter how fantastic it may seem, everything in these last three chapters [Chapters CXXXIII-CXXXV of *Moby-Dick*] could have happened.”

Very true. And, the ability the pull this off is what makes Melville and the novel great. As philosophic as the book gets, whatever flights of fancy Melville gets carried way with, the book is firmly grounded in reality.

pg.  115

Philbrick: “In the destruction of the two whaleboats [in Chapter CXXXIV of *Moby-Dick*], Melville is also portraying the destruction of his own talent.”

**pg.  117**

“[The *Pequod*], like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her” (Mo*by-Dick*, Chapter CXXXV).

This passage sounds Miltonic.

**pg.  119**

Philbrick mentions “the loss of [Melville’s] *shy muse.”*

Nathaniel Hawthorne.

**pg.  127**

“[A]t my years, and with my disposition, or rather, constitution, one gets to care less and less for everything except downright good feeling. Life is so short, and so ridiculous and irrational (from a certain point of view) that one knows not what to make of it, unless–well, finish the sentence for yourself.” (Melville to his brother-in-law Lemuel Shaw, April 23 1849)

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**Responses to *Roger W. Smith, “A Commentary on Nathaniel Philbrick’s Observations about ‘Moby-Dick'”***

Thomas Kranidas says:

September 7, 2016

I agree with your assessment of Philbrick. He has a carefree enthusiasm that is like Ishmael’s -- and Melville’s.

Roger Smith says:

September 7, 2016

Tom -- I believe you slightly missed the point of my blog.

Although I do admire Nathaniel Philbrick’s book on Moby-Dick, which is full of insights and shows great appreciation for Melville, the point of the blog as I see it is to use Philbrick’s book as a way or means for me to get back into Melville, who I hadn’t read for a while, and reach my own independent conclusions, as well as highlight those of Philbrick’s. In other words using Philbrick to augment and enhance my understanding of Melville.

The blog was intended to be more about Melville than Philbrick.

Roger

Thomas Kranidas says:

September 17, 2016

I too see Philbrick as a useful help into revisiting Melville. I did not mean to deflect attention away from appreciation of Melville -- the main point for both of us. Cheers, Tom