

REVIEWS OF MOBY-DICK

By DAVID POTTER

The following article, which is based on an examination of magazine files in the Rutgers Library, helps to correct the popular misconception that *Moby-Dick* was not well received when it was first published. Mr. Potter, a true Melville enthusiast, graduated from Rutgers in 1937 and immediately afterward joined the staff of the University as an instructor of Public Speaking.

DESPITE the number of articles and volumes written about Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*, the general reading public, including many "Melvillites," has long fostered the unfounded, but remarkably persistent, belief that Melville's novels and, especially *Moby-Dick*, were unfavorably received by the American public. While working through some old American periodicals in the Rutgers University Library, I recently came across several hitherto neglected reviews of *Moby-Dick* which shed further light on the researches initiated by Anderson, Hetherington, and Thorp.¹ But before examining the contents of these reviews, let us consider the American reputation of Melville up to 1851.

When *Moby-Dick* was published in London and New York in October, 1851, Herman Melville was riding on the crest of a tremendous literary popularity. *Typee*² (1846) and *Omoo*³ (1847) had been instantaneous successes, accepted by the vast majority of contemporary American magazine critics as truthful and beautifully written accounts of exciting adventure. Not even the philippics against Melville of G. W. Peck of the changeable *American Whig Review*, and the earnest denunciations from the clerical *New Englander* and the equally zealous *New York Evangelist* could dim their great popularity. Even the religious press,

¹ Anderson, Charles Roberts, "Contemporary American Opinions of *Typee* and *Omoo*," *American Literature*, IX (March, 1937), 1-25; Hetherington, Hugh W., *The Reputation of Herman Melville in America*, an unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, 1933; Thorp, Willard, *Herman Melville: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*, New York: American Book Company, 1938.

² Hitherto unmentioned reviews of *Typee* found in the Rutgers University Library include: *American Whig Review*, X (August, 1849), 218; *Biblical Repository and Classical Review*, V (October, 1849), 754; *Debow's Commercial Review of the South and West*, VII (November, 1849), 465; *Littell's Living Age*, IX (April 11, 1846), 82-93; *New York Illustrated Magazine*, I (April, 1846), 380.

³ Hitherto unmentioned reviews of *Omoo* include: *Debow's Commercial Review of the South and West*, III (June, 1847), 586; *Eclectic Magazine*, XI (July, 1847), 408-419; *Literary World*, I (April 24, 1847), 274-275.

which had so roundly scored the original edition of *Typee* for its alleged immorality and inaccuracy and for its vicious attack on the Protestant missions, received the expurgated *Typee* with warm praise. *Mardi*⁴ (1849) also was greeted during the first few months of its sale with glowing reviews, which, one must admit, were not very penetrating. But as 1849 wore on, the reviews of *Mardi* became increasingly hostile. Its allegory and symbolism apparently presented increasingly irritating problems to a reading public which seemed to insist that everything Melville wrote be in the simple and understandable pattern of *Typee* and *Omoo*. The appearance of *Redburn*⁵ four months later temporarily saved the day for Melville's American reputation. Except for the *Southern Quarterly Review*, all the reviews of this book which I have been able to find were favorable, the great majority joyfully welcoming it as a deservedly popular addition to Melville's earlier successes. *White-Jacket*⁶ (1850) called forth even more widespread acclaim. The clerical and secular journals united in praising its humanitarian motive and its spirited composition, and many critics went so far as to claim for Melville the position of an "American Defoe."

Most book reviewers in the important contemporary American periodicals were favorably impressed by Melville's masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, when it appeared in 1851. Few of the critics, to be sure, grasped the greatness and significance our present generation attaches to the book, and, unfortunately, the hostility incurred in some quarters by touches of "irreverence" in *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi* became magnified by the tone of *Moby-Dick*. The elaborate style first employed in *Mardi* also caused much adverse criticism, while even the loyal Duyckincks suspected more than a taint of Carlyle's "unholy" influence in Melville's latest work. Despite these increasingly numerous objections to Melville's style,

⁴ Hitherto unmentioned reviews of *Mardi* include: *Eclectic Magazine*, XVII (May, 1849), 144; *Godey's Magazine And Lady's Book*, XXXVIII (June, 1849), 436; XL (January, 1850), 78; *Literary World*, IV (June 16, 1849), 519; V (August 4, 1849), 89-90; V (August 11, 1849), 101-103; *Littell's Living Age*, XXI (April 28, 1849), 184-186.

⁵ Hitherto unmentioned reviews of *Redburn* include: *Albion*, VIII (November 17, 1849), 545-546; *Godey's Magazine And Lady's Book*, XL (February, 1850), 149; *Literary World*, V (August 4, 1849), 92.

⁶ Hitherto unmentioned reviews of *White-Jacket* include: *Albion*, IX (March 2, 1850), 99-100; *Biblical Repository and Classical Review*, VI (July, 1850), 561; *Debow's Commercial Review of the South and West*, VIII (June, 1850), 590; *Godey's Magazine And Lady's Book*, XL (June, 1850), 418; *Home Journal*, April, 1850.

philosophy, and irreverence, *Moby-Dick* still retained for Melville much of the popular favor his earlier works had won for him.⁷

The early popularity of *Moby-Dick* was testified to by the *Home Journal* in the following review:

If we mistake not, the author of "Typee" and "White Jacket," conscious of the vivid expectation excited in the reading public by his previous books, resolved to combine in the present all his popular characteristics, and so fully justify his fame . . . The result is a very racy, spirited, curious and entertaining book, which affords quite an amount of information, excites the sympathies, and often charms the fancy.⁸

Godey's Magazine And Lady's Book hailed *Moby-Dick* as a "perfect literary whale, and worthy of the pen of Herman Melville, whose reputation as an original writer has been established the world over."⁹ *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, in a review no more penetrating than the *Home Journal's*, found *Moby-Dick* to be "an agreeable and entertaining volume" though "in some parts it may be rather diffuse."¹⁰ The *Eclectic Magazine* also praised *Moby-Dick*:

Mr. Melville's new work, *Moby-Dick*, published by the Harpers . . . gets a severe handling in the *Athenaeum*—not with its accustomed candor, as it seems to us. Faulty as the book may be, it bears the marks of such unquestionable genius, and displays graphic powers of so rare an order, that it cannot fail to add to the popular author's reputation.¹¹

Even more enthusiastic than the *Eclectic Magazine* in its welcome of Melville's masterpiece, and far more acute, was *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Not only did it publish the most appreciative contemporary American review of *Moby-Dick* in December, 1851, but also in the following April it reprinted with evident patriotic pride the following comment of the *London Leader*:

. . . Want of originality has long been the just and standing reproach to American literature; the best of its writers were but second-hand Englishmen. Of late some have given evidence of originality; not *absolute* originality but such genuine outcoming of the American intellect as can be safely called national. Edgar Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville are assuredly no British offshoots; nor is Emerson—the German American that he is! . . . To move a horror skillfully, with something of the

⁷ These conclusions are based upon material presented in my master's thesis, *American Magazine Opinion of Herman Melville From 1846 Through 1852*, Rutgers University, 1939.

⁸ *Home Journal*, VII (November 29, 1851), 4.

⁹ *Godey's Magazine And Lady's Book*, XLIV (February, 1852), 166.

¹⁰ *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, XXVI (January, 1852), 140.

¹¹ *Eclectic Magazine*, XXIV (December, 1851), 572.

earnest faith in the Unseen, and with weird imagery to shape these phantasms so vividly that the most incredulous mind is hushed, absorbed—to do this no European pen has apparently any longer the power—to do this American literature is without a rival. What *romance* writer can be named with HAWTHORNE? Who knows the horrors of the seas like HERMAN MELVILLE?¹²

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. To be sure, the “diffuseness” noticed in *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* was re-echoed more forcibly by other less friendly critics, and the “faults” admitted by the *Eclectic Magazine* were multiplied and listed in other periodicals. All in all, however, the contemporary American magazine estimate of Melville and *Moby-Dick* from 1851 through the opening months of 1852 may be summarized in the following review reprinted by *Littell’s Living Age* from the *New York Courier*:

No American writer is more sure, at every reappearance, of a more cheerful welcome than the author of *Typee*. His purity and freshness of style and exquisite tact in imparting vividness and lifelikeness to his sketches long since gained him hosts of admirers on both sides of the water. This book has all the attractiveness of any of its predecessors; in truth, it possesses more of a witching interest, since the author’s fancy has taken in it a wilder play than ever before. It is ostensibly taken up with whales and whalers, but a vast variety of characters and subjects figure in it, all set off with an artistic effect that irresistibly captivates the attention. The author writes with the gusto of true genius, and it must be a torpid spirit indeed that is not enlivened with the raciness of his humor and the redolence of his imagination.¹³

¹² *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, IV (April, 1852), 711.

¹³ *Littell’s Living Age*, XXXII (January 17, 1852), 130.