Picturing Leviathan

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"THE MELVILLE BOOM," the critic Van Wyck Brooks wrote in 1921, is "only a question of time." By the 1930s the prediction had been borne out; after decades of neglect, "Moby Dick" (1851) was widely recognized as one of the greatest of all American novels. Crucial to its revival was an illustrated edition, with drawings by the artist and adventurer Rockwell Kent, who began the project in 1926 and published it in 1930 in a three-volume boxed set with the Lakeside Press of Chicago. The art was reissued later that year by Random House in a one volume trade edition, helping to make Kent's turbulent engravings—of Captain Ahab, the Pequod's crew and the elusive white whale—iconic.

Iconic but not always easy to acquire, as even recent reprintings of the Kent "Moby-Dick" can seem priced for collectors only. An affordable hardcover from the classics reprint series of Top Five Books (656 pages, $29.99) remedies the issue. Here is Melville's literary leviathan fantastically adorned with more than 270 of Kent's black-and-white illustrations, many of them a full page in size.

Kent was a fitting match for "Moby-Dick." Like Melville, he was a native New Yorker and an experienced seafarer. (He completed his "Moby-Dick" illustrations in Copenhagen after a voyage to Greenland, during which he barely survived a shipwreck.) His sharp, geometric style evinces a feeling for symbolism and monumentality. The drawings emphasize the allegorical side of Ahab's monomaniacal hunt, fixing the characters in expressive, statuesque postures. The intense chiaroscuro evokes the mysticism of William Blake. Kent's jet-black sea is indistinguishable from the cosmos, and his white whale glows like some luminary body within it.

Inspired choices in composition heighten the sense of drama. Images slope and slant, capturing the listing movement of the ship deck. Kent frames his illustration of Daggoo, the African crewman, darting a sperm whale from directly behind the harpooner, depicting him in muscular silhouette. The perspective angles skyward in the picture of a frenzied-looking Ahab displaying the gold doubloon he has promised to the man who can kill Moby-Dick.

The drawings inject suspense even into Melville's encyclopedic chapters on cetacean anatomy. For "The Tail," Kent portrays a whale's flukes above a mild sea (nearby). Behind, at some distance, is a rowboat with whalers. Perched on the horizon, the boat appears miniature and infinitely capsizable. It's a delicate harbinger of the great catastrophe to come.
—Sam Sacks

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