

POLES TOGETHER: ROCKWELL KENT'S JOURNEY WITH *MOBY-DICK*

Rockwell Kent was only nine when Herman Melville died on September 28, 1891. At the time of his death Melville was better remembered for his south sea adventure novels *Typee* and *Omoo* than he was for *Moby-Dick*. Though their paths never crossed Melville's ghost shadowed Kent in his wanderings and work, and Melville's influence on Kent was perhaps more intensely felt than reasoned out. For all the long hours Kent spent working on the illustrations for *Moby-Dick* we find little mention of the book's language, plot, form or themes in Kent's writings. Though Kent and Melville had similar beginnings, though both had encyclopedic minds, and though both indulged a watery wanderlust that took them places in parts of the world that heightened their sense of the injustices inherent in western "civilized" ways, Kent followed his own northern lights. Kent understandably felt the connection to Melville in visual rather than literary terms, and in his illustrations of *Moby-Dick* he stamped his own identity on Melville's ghostly presence in his life.

Their kinship had a basis in similar social class origins. Melville was born into a prominent New York lineage with impressive Revolutionary War credentials. But the failure of his father's business ventures required Melville the youth to find work as a bank clerk, farm hand and schoolmaster. Soon, like Kent, he felt the lure of the sea, first as a cabin boy aboard a merchant ship sailing in 1839 from New York to Liverpool, then as a whaler aboard a ship that took him to the Marquesas and Tahiti in the South Seas, the scenes of *Typee* and *Omoo*, then again as a harpooner on another whaling ship based in Nantucket, and finally, in 1844, as an ordinary seaman aboard the military frigate *United States*. On returning from his sea adventures Melville settled into an unsettled respectability by marrying Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of the chief justice of Massachusetts. He then bought a farm within view of the Berkshires near Pittsfield, and committed himself, uncomfortably, to the writing life.

Kent also had genteel New York family origins, and was privileged to be educated (in architecture) at Columbia University (1900-03) and at the New York School of Art (1903-04). Following his "one full-packed year in Winona" (1912) his wanderings and sea-longings took him to Newfoundland (1914-15), Alaska (1918-19), Tierra del Fuego (1922-23), and Greenland on three separate occasions (1929, 1931-32, 1934-35). Like Melville he also found a need for the stability of land, and in 1927 established himself at the farmstead he called *Asgaard* ("farm of the gods") in the Adirondacks.

Ishmael opens *Moby-Dick* by explaining the tension he feels between the stasis of land and quixotic motions and healing powers of the sea, and Kent no doubt also saw the sea, in Ishmael's words, as "a way of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation." But these two, though driven by similar urges to explore the faraway and exotic and to express it with artistic accuracy and power, had opposite spatial orientations. Though Melville's white whale wanders widely in the seven seas, the most influential of Melville's sea-wanderings took him southward to the Marquesas and Tahiti, scenes of his first and most popular novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*. Kent felt a different allure—the pull of cold seas, ice, snow, and bare mountains luring him northward to Alaska, Newfoundland, and Greenland. As sea-kinsmen they were, in this sense, poles apart.

For us in the twenty-first century it is difficult to imagine how little was known about Antarctic regions even in Kent's times, and what a wonderland it must have seemed to him as he embarked on his own almost disastrous foray into the waters off the Tierra del Fuego. If it is reasonable to establish a connection between Melville and Kent as sea wanderers who went in different polar directions, it is perhaps useful to look at a few key literary influences that worked on Melville and through him eventually on Kent. Two works especially come to mind—Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Poe's *Pym*, his only novel and currently, like *Moby-Dick*, seldom read, was a literary hoax that generated widespread fascination about polar regions in a time when the poles were largely uncharted and unexplored. Pym's expedition to Antarctica, inspired by John Cleves Symmes' theory that the earth's core was hollow and that the poles were vast holes conveniently open to circulate the seas through the center of the earth, generated fascination with the South Pole as a bizarre, exciting and dangerous destination for adventurous souls. Jeremiah Reynolds, writer whose 1839 account of the legendary whale known as "Mocha Dick" inspired Melville to write his own white whale book, was a hollow earth advocate and promoter of the Great U.S. Exploring Expedition of 1838-39 that took an American fleet to Antarctica in an unsuccessful bid to find a hole at the bottom of the earth. Melville's sense of the terrifying blankness of the whiteness of his whale no doubt derived from Reynolds but also from Poe's picture of the white terrors awaiting Pym at the end of his southward descent. Though there is no evidence that Kent ever read Poe's strange novel, it's clear that Kent, like explorers before him, was fascinated by the mystery of frozen polar seascapes that was in the air even in his times.

The stronger literary and artistic influence—powerful for the way it shaped the work of such important writers as Mary Shelley (in *Frankenstein*), Nathaniel Hawthorne (to whom Melville dedicated *Moby-Dick*), and Edgar Allan Poe—was Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The major narrators of Coleridge's narrative poem and Melville's *Moby-Dick* are both "Wandering Jew" types compelled to tell their tales about what they've experienced at sea. The ship in Coleridge's *Rime* is drawn toward the South Pole, where

...there came both mist and snow
And it grew wondrous cold;
And ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

And through the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken—
The ice was all between.

In both tales, moreover, natural creatures—an albatross and a whale—function as symbols or agents of divine power and as scapegoat targets vital to the redemption of the wandering storytellers trying to make sense of their existential sea journeys. If the influence of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is indelibly stamped on many passages of *Moby-Dick*, it was also lurking in the mind of Rockwell Kent when he accepted the challenge to illustrate Melville's wonderful book.

The challenge was daunting, and he faced it in anticipation of and during his Greenland trips. Offered the opportunity to illustrate Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, Kent declined,

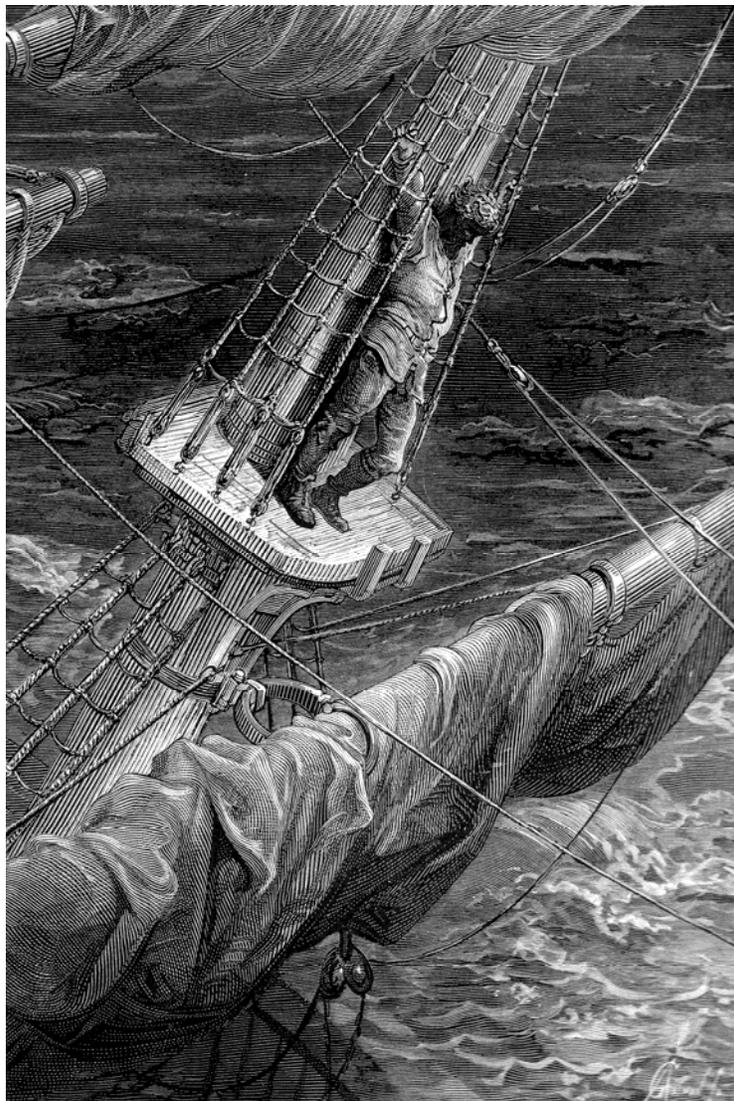
preferring *Moby-Dick* instead. "...in September of 1926," he writes in *It's Me O Lord*, "—I undertook to illustrate a great book, *Moby-Dick*. I have had it constantly in mind as throughout nearly four years I was to have it on my drawing table. Those drawings proved a monumental task not only in their actual making but in the preliminary research upon which they were based." [437-38]

The artistic challenge Kent does not mention was that posed by Gustave Doré, the celebrated illustrator of literary classics whose popular works were still being reprinted after his death in 1882. Hard to ignore were Doré's impressive illustrations of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, work Kent would have to take into account as he formulated his conceptions for *Moby-Dick*. If Coleridge's *Rime* has powerful presence in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Doré's illustrations are alluded to in some of Kent's picturings of the novel. Compare, for example, Doré's lonely sea vessel in Coleridge's *Rime* with Kent's in *Moby-Dick*:



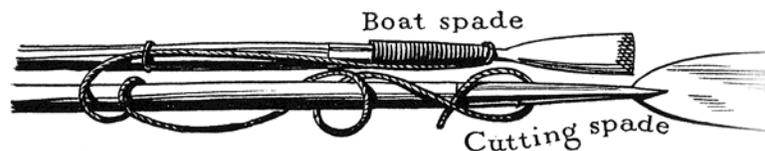


Though differences between the two artists are apparent, it seems that Doré's sense of form, if not detail, influenced Kent. Compare again, for example, Doré's ancient mariner figure with Kent's Ishmael:

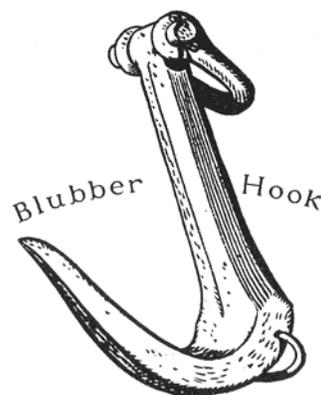


While Kent tipped his hat to Doré he also understood that if he were to succeed Doré as master illustrator of literary classics he would have to develop a style, or styles, as impressive and distinctive as the Frenchman's. The new abstract modernisms—Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism—struck Kent as self-absorbed and obscurantist responses to experience that over-inflated the importance of the subjective. He wanted, instead, art that captured the “elemental,” a “realism” that spared details so that essential forms of nature and human nature could be revealed. The *Moby-Dick* project also posed the question of how to meld his vision with Melville's. Doré was not timid about “interpreting” Coleridge. Doré's powerful illustrations—eerie, crowded with human and angelic forms, crossed with gothic and Christian imagery—insistently promoted his romantic, and reactionary, interpretation of Coleridge's text. What could Kent do that was distinctively his without violating Melville's text?

Some of Kent's illustrations are safely “realistic,” their literalism almost photographic. These pieces—and they are merely “pieces”—are spot art that provide snapshots of nautical artifacts and life. Consider, for example, the illustrations of the “Boat spade” and “Cutting spade,”



and “Blubber hook.”



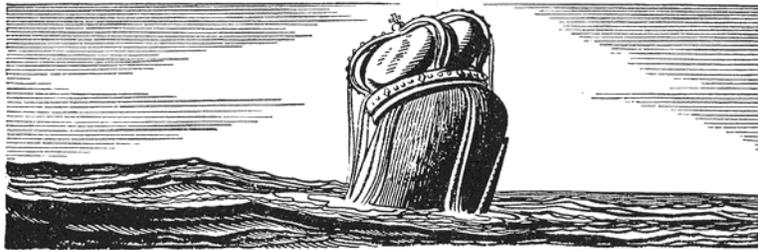
Pictures of this type function as props that authenticate the stage on which *Moby-Dick's* larger dramas are played. They are hardly “elemental,” and not qualified to represent either Melville's or Kent's larger sense of reality.

But Kent also was intrigued by the mysterious grandeur of the whale, incomprehensible creature so ironically labeled by Melville “for all time to come as, . . . in short, a spouting fish with a horizontal tail.” “There you have him,” Melville concludes, with tongue deeply buried in cheek, for there indeed we do not. Kent well understood that to pin down the whale as such is to miss what Melville called “the constituents of a chaos,” a creature Kent also saw in its sleek beauty, power, and majesty. Depictions of whales—there are many of them—dominate Kent's

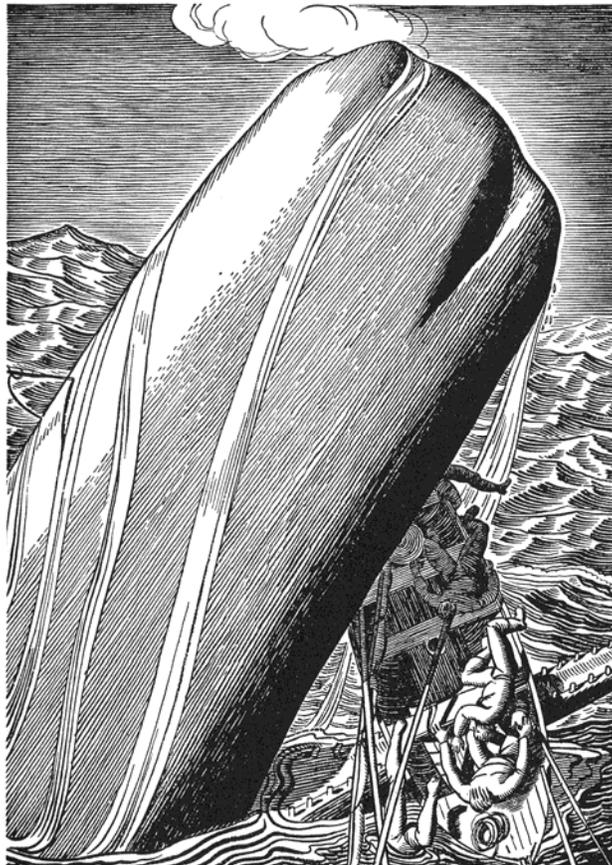
Moby-Dick world, some of them realistic snapshots, others re-enacted as “fabulous” creatures seen as fictive monsters in books,



or as symbolic whale “crowned” with regal authority



or raised in grandeur to huge natural form with rocklike power,



and elevated still further to whale as cosmic presence swimming in space,



And then again to whale as veiled mystery with sunburst power.

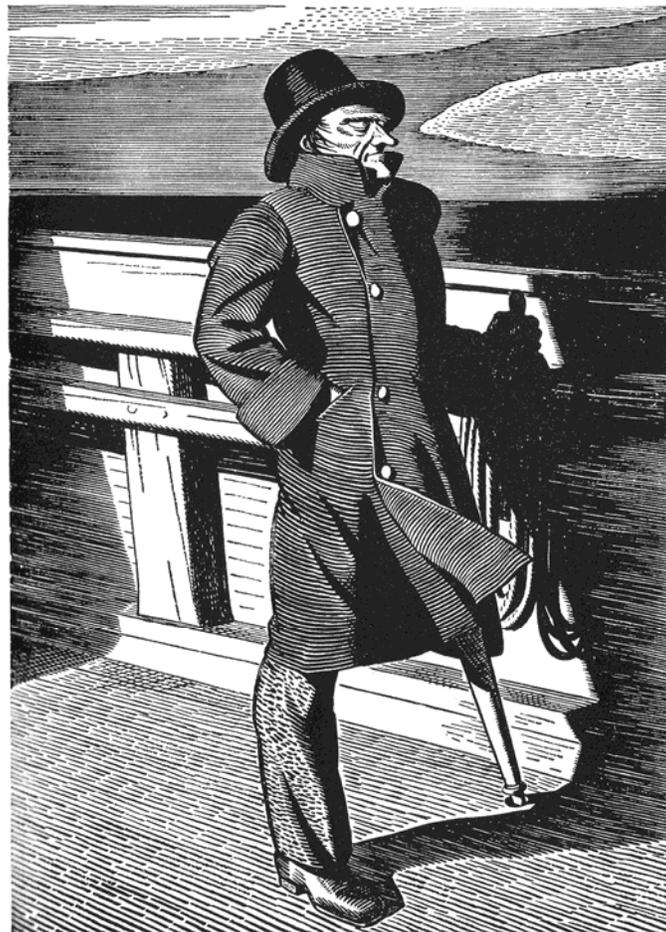


When we look to the human forms in Kent's illustrations we find a sympathetic connection to Melville. Because both men had traveled "back to basics," as it were, in diverse watery parts of the world, and because they went less as tourists than as thoughtful seekers, they shared an anthropological vision that most Americans, landlocked into parochial views, lacked. Both were severe critics of the "civilizing" influences of Christianized materialism and empire-building, both had profound sympathies for the oppressed, including people of color, and both found "primitive" cultures sexually liberating. Both were reformers, with Melville's novel *White Jacket* leading to significant changes in the U.S. Naval Code, and Kent's life and work addressing socialist causes. Both were intrigued by the question: What is the nature of human nature? And both gazed beneath details and surfaces of skin and ornament for what one of Kent's favorite poets, William Blake, called "the lineaments of human form."

Kent's human figures in *Moby-Dick* are not depicted in a uniform style. Some examples seem like caricatures, with broad lines emphasizing grotesque features we associate with demonic states of mind. These grotesques seem exaggerations, overdrawn. Take Elijah, "The Prophet," for example, whose visionary power is masked by suggestions of vacuous madness,

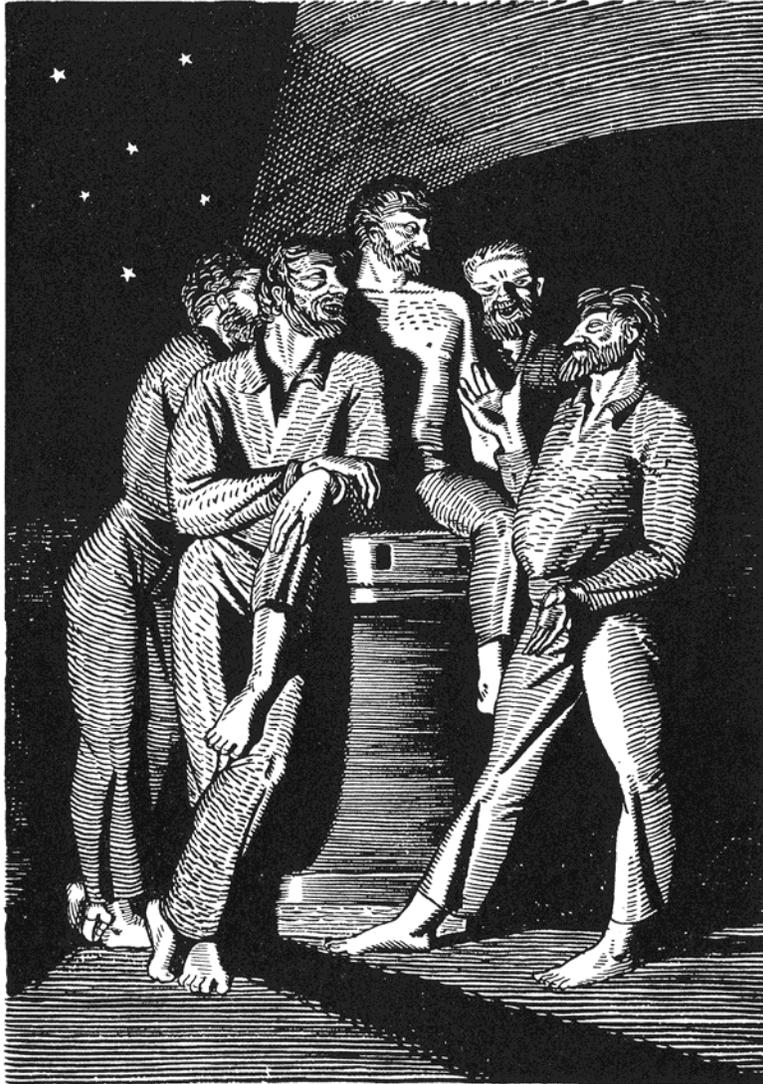


or this celebrated image of Ahab himself, his demonic visage belying whatever dignity, pride, and status his top hat and coat afford him.



If Carl Ruggles, his Winona neighbor who allegedly was Kent's model for Ahab, had met Kent on a Winona street corner following the publication of this image, Kent might have suffered Ahabian wrath at Ruggles' hands.

The inclination toward grotesque caricature is indulged even in more benign representations of the Pequod's crew, where Kent captures the communal spirit of the crew members but exaggerates the sharp, quasi-grotesque, features of their faces:



That Kent also could capture genuine human emotion is evident in several of the illustrations. Take this one for Chapter XXXVIII, “By the Mainmast; Starbuck leaning against it,” where Starbuck’s meditation on his soul’s being “overmanned; and by a madman” is captured with profound sympathy through simple accurate lines.



More abstractly Starbuck appears again on the next page expressing his grief, here not so much as real person but as iconic suffering type.



Kent seems to have settled on no specific representational style. Occasionally he gives us a picture resembling a traditional portrait—of Stubb, for example, in Chapter L.



Or he gives us a literary and sentimentalized picture, such as this one of Ishmael setting forth, as if from one of Blake's engravings or the pages of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:



In his Carpenter we see Kent's loyalty to common working people expressed in conventional 1930s socialist realist style:

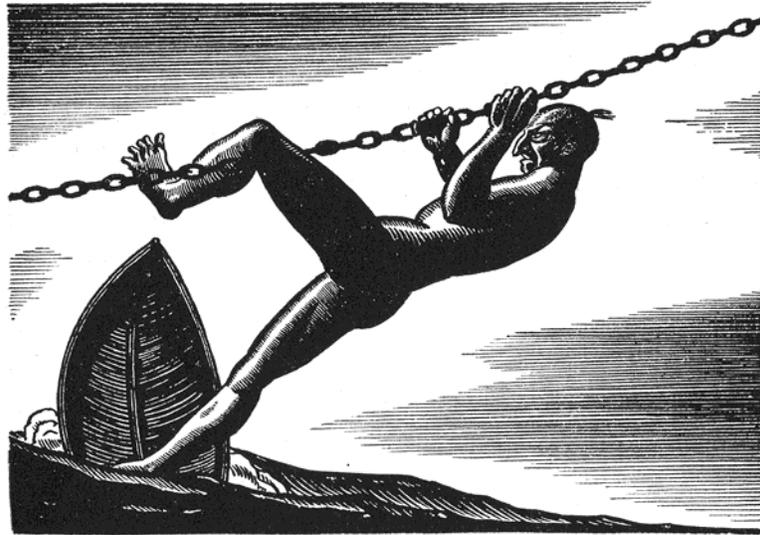


And in his Tashtego we see the idealized symmetry of line and muscular form common in Federal Art Project murals.



As adventurers both Melville and Kent had unique opportunities to bring back fresh views of native peoples to insular Americans. Melville's Pequod is a little world society, a United Nations of sorts having representatives from various parts of the globe. Like Melville, Kent does not sentimentalize the native crew members or idealize them into noble savages. Indeed they more often than not have grotesque qualities, and sometimes are stereotypically devilish. Consider these three views of Queequeg:





The movement in these three illustrations is from the awkward squat of the frightful pagan worshipping his idol Yojo against a black blaze of fire, to the sleek muscular form of a black man grappling with his chain. In the third illustration Kent gives us “elemental” lines to depict, in more abstract terms, the heroism of a man whom Melville calls a “whitewashed Negro”—emerging from waters after having just saved a Christian man from drowning in the sea. The movement, in short, is away from the stereotype of pagan as grotesque and devilish toward the stereotype that makes a statuesque monument of Queequeg. As such Queequeg is no particular human being, individualized by detail or revealing line. Rather he is cannibal native as new stereotype, abstracted in the third rendition, for public, call it “socialist,” approval.

It was no accident that when the Random House edition of *Moby-Dick* was published in 1930 it was Kent’s name that appeared on the dust jacket, not Melville’s. If Doré intruded on Coleridge’s text to impose his interpretation of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* on the poem,

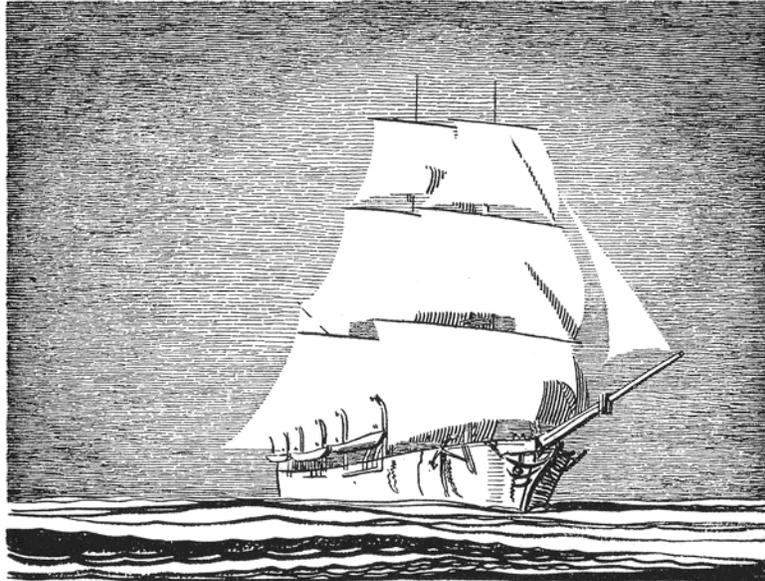
Kent had his own statement to make. He was not eager to let Melville's text dictate the terms of his own free-spirited art. His illustrations, their simple and often elementary lines, are poles apart from Melville's verbal complexities—Melville's subtle ironies, poetries, rhetorical flourishes, and humor. Kent favors the plainly starker truths of the book. One wonders if it was the whiteness of the whale that most powerfully intrigued Kent, a whiteness, as Melville writes in Chapter XLII, "that is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors;...a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows." This landscape, the northern regions, had a polar attraction Kent found hard to resist:



It is as symbolically intriguing as the simultaneously meaningful and meaningless doubloon in *Moby-Dick*:



It is implicit in the stark whiteness of Chapter LII, “The Albatross,” a chapter so-named by way of Coleridge, as this ghost ship sails southeast from the Cape of Good Hope toward the Antarctic that so fascinated Poe and his peers.



It is present in the whale’s “spirit-spout” itself (in Chapter LII):



And it is, figuratively, a Greenland scene too:



The blankness that made Melville's white whale so terrifying is conspicuously present in much of Kent's work, and not merely as unworked background. If Melville, facing the blank page with pen in hand, had to wonder what to make of things by writing words on the whiteness staring up at him, Kent had to wonder what to make of the whiteness of the canvases he was drawing on. Melville's great classic remains largely unread because he insisted on writing in complex ways that left most common readers in the dark. But Kent's illustrations, true to his socialist beliefs and to the allure he felt for polar regions, are powerfully and enduringly appealing to common folk.