

The New Criterion

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The Critic's Notebook

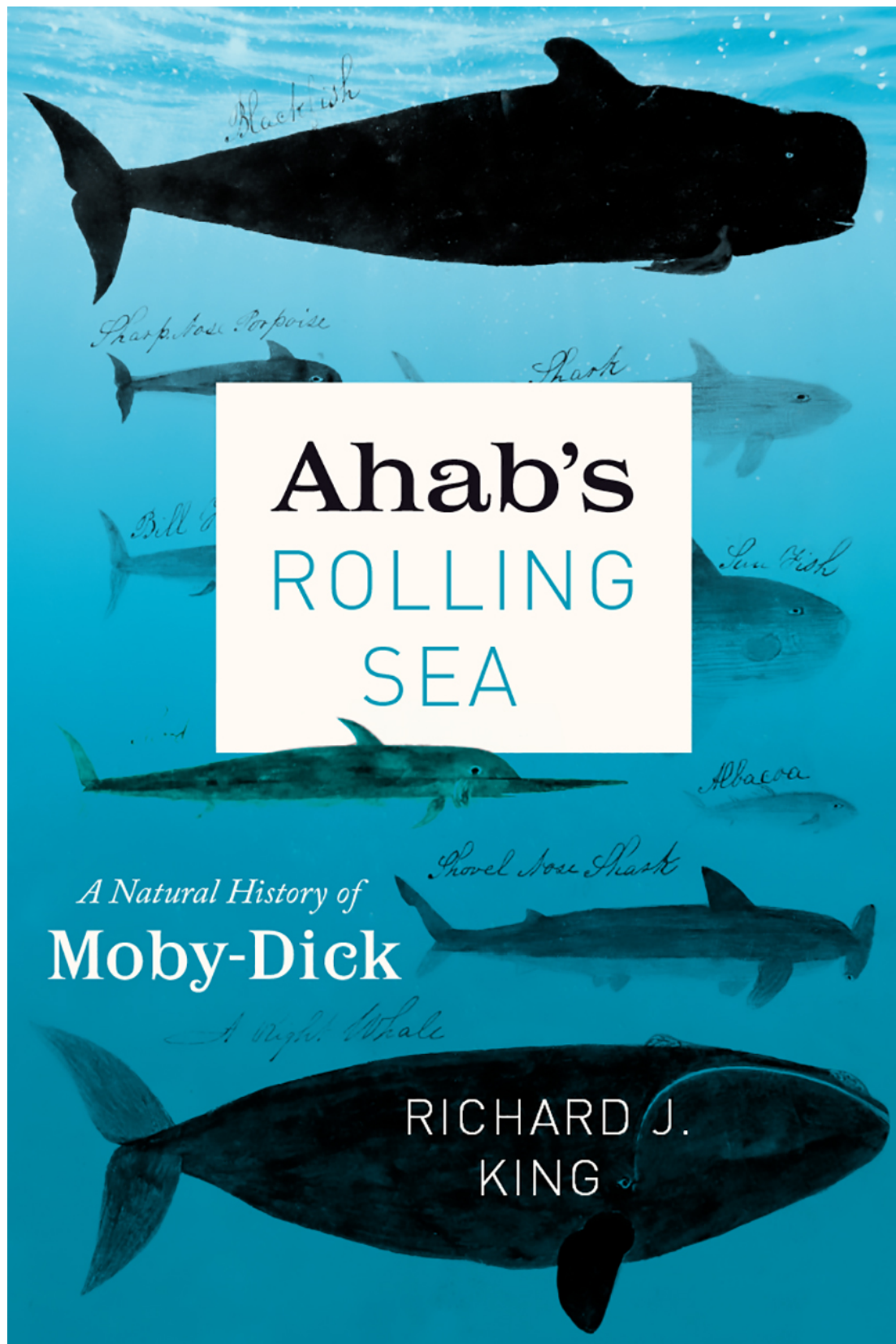
by The Editors

This week: Melville's whales, Westminster Abbey, C. K. Scott Moncrieff & more.



"The Art of Marriage: Helen Frankenthaler & Robert Motherwell," Mnuchin Gallery, Exhibition view.

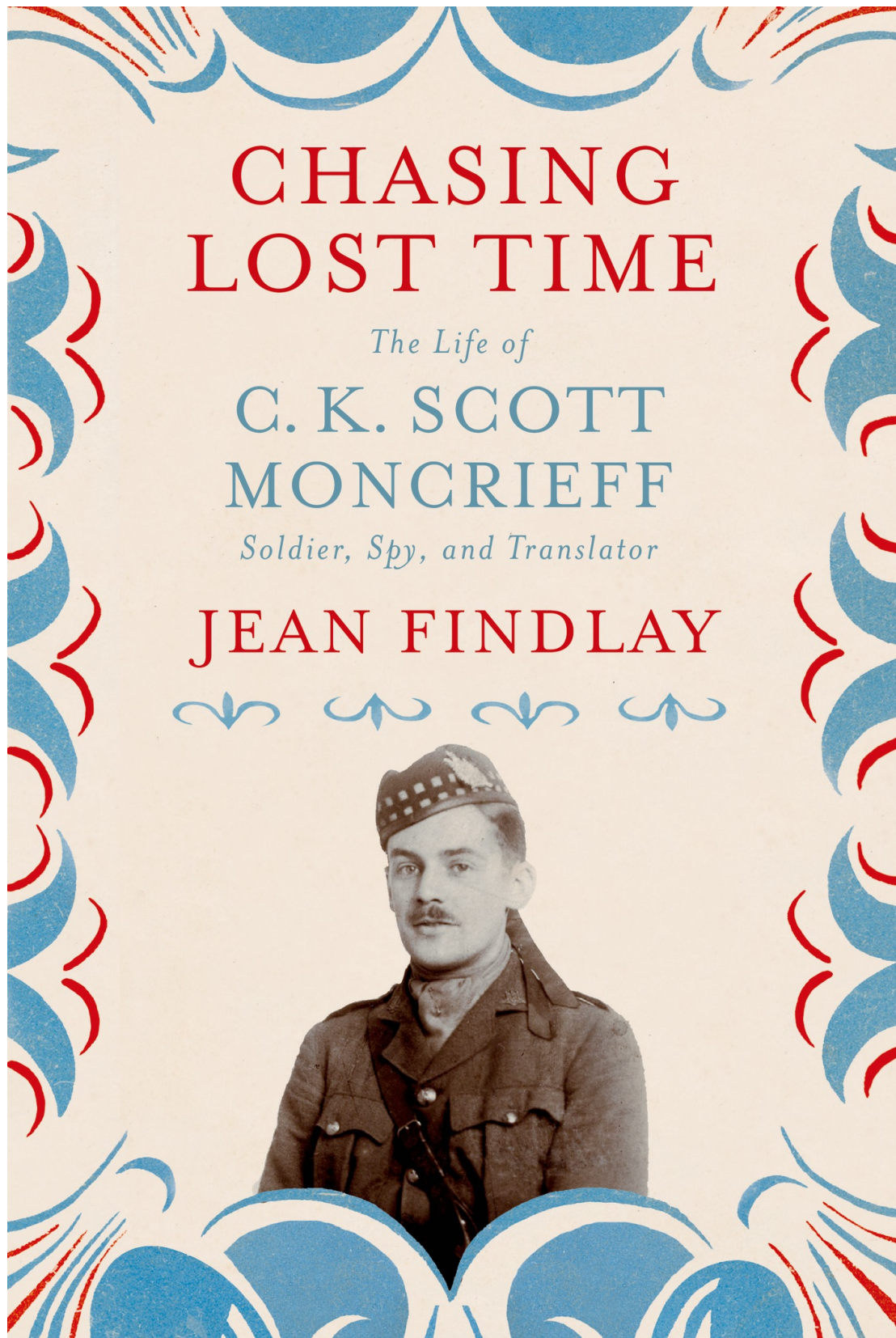
Nonfiction:



“Richard King on *Moby-Dick*,” at the Unterberg Poetry Center (November 17): Chapter XXXII of *Moby-Dick* is entirely devoted to the science of cetology and the classification of the different types of whales one might have encountered on a boat such as the *Pequod*. When we consider that the whole book, broadly construed, is the study of one whale in particular, Melville’s inclusion of some

context on the study of whales in general seems sensible. In thoroughly resembling a section ripped out of a college textbook, however, the chapter strikes many modern readers as long-winded, pedantic, and unnecessary. Anatomy and literature, we would like to believe, do not mix. But in reality there is a long and storied tradition of bean-counting among literary masters, stretching all the way back to the catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*, reaching a maximum of verbosity in the serial novels of the nineteenth century, and running up to and through Nabokov and his acrostic, anagrammatic, and downright antagonistic treatment of names and places in *Lolita* and elsewhere. This Sunday, join the scholar Richard J. King at the Unterberg Poetry Center for a conversation on his recent book, *Ahab's Rolling Sea* (University of Chicago Press), aiming to contextualize and explain the attention given to the minutiae of marine biology in *Moby-Dick*. —RE

Fiction:



“In Conversation with biographer Jean Findlay: Exploring the Life of Proust’s English Translator, C. K. Scott Moncrieff,” at Jefferson Market Library (November 14): In 1919, two years after sustaining a bad leg wound in the Battle of Arras, the Scottish writer C. K. Scott Moncrieff began the massive project that would mark the highlight of his career: the first English-language translation of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. On September 19, 1922, the first volume, which he titled *Swann’s Way*, was released. The critics were impressed, and rightly so. Joseph Conrad remarked “I was more

interested and fascinated by your rendering than by Proust's creation." But some thought there was a little too much Scott Moncrieff mixed into this new translation. Take just the titles: instead of the more literal "In Search of Lost Time," which became the more accepted English-language title in subsequent translations, Scott Moncrieff had decided to welcome Proust to the English-speaking world with a title lifted from Shakespeare's Sonnet 30 ("When to the sessions of sweet silent thought/ I summon up remembrance of things past."). And Proust himself wrote to Scott Moncrieff to lament that the name of the initial volume, *Du côté de chez Swann*, wasn't translated as "To Swann's Way." Regardless, the gift that Scott Moncrieff has given us Anglophones is undeniable. His great-great-niece Jean Findlay will be at the Jefferson Market Library this Thursday to discuss her 2015 book, *Chasing Lost Time: The Life of C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Soldier, Spy, and Translator*. —RH

Art:

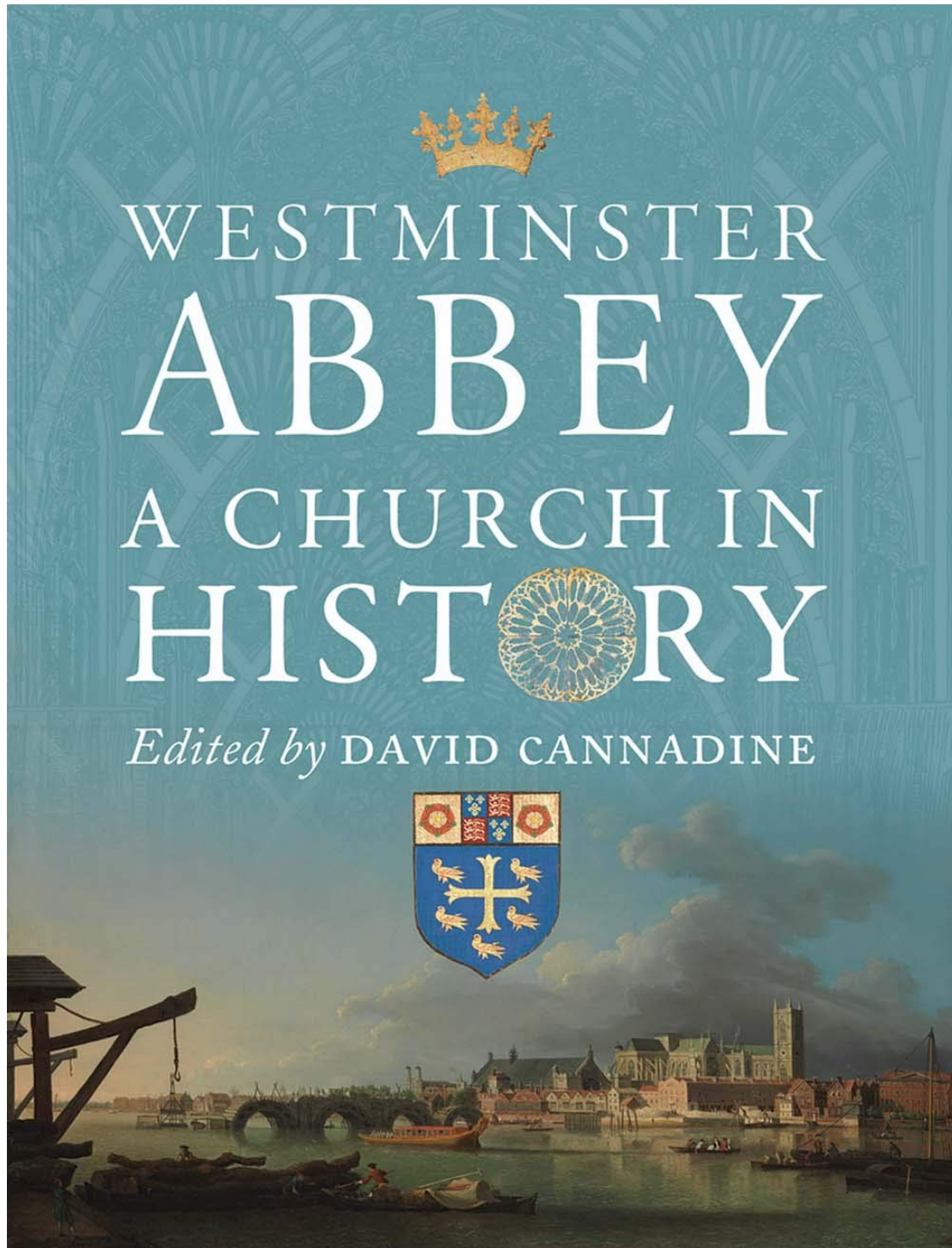


Helen Frankenthaler, Pompeii, 1965, Acrylic on canvas, Private collection.

"The Art of Marriage: Helen Frankenthaler & Robert Motherwell" at Mnuchin Gallery (through December 14): For our October issue, I wrote about "Abstract Climates," an exhibition at the Parrish Art Museum that celebrated and investigated Helen Frankenthaler's travels to Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the 1950s and '60s. These travels (after an initial stay in 1950 to study under Hans Hofmann) were occasioned by Frankenthaler's 1958 marriage to Robert Motherwell, with whom she would "summer" in the Cape Cod vacation town regularly for the next dozen years. Now, this marriage is itself the subject of an exhibition, at the Upper East Side's Mnuchin Gallery. With a catalogue essay by our own Karen Wilkin, the exhibition considers the symbiotic aesthetic relationship between Motherwell and Frankenthaler—how the marriage might have influenced the paintings—even as both remained resolutely independent artists at the heights of their powers. This exhibition of two

twentieth-century titans is not to be missed. —AS

Architecture:



Westminster Abbey: A Church in History, edited by David Cannadine (Yale University Press): The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art has long produced essential guides to the artistic fabric of historical and current Britain (including now the Pevsner Architectural Guides). If the new *Westminster Abbey: A Church in History* is any indication, the Centre, founded in 1970, appears to be as productive as ever. Edited by David Cannadine and including chapters from Henry Summerson, J. Mordaunt Crook, and Diarmaid MacCulloch, among others, the book is a sweeping guide to the many histories of the Abbey—religious, political, and architectural. With over 180

images (ingeniously referenced in the book's outer margins so as not to break up the text), a glossary, and appendices listing monarchs of the United Kingdom and the abbots and deans of Westminster, the book functions beautifully as both a history and reference work. Look out for a full review, forthcoming in *The New Criterion*, from Harry Adams. —BR

Podcasts:

Roger Kimball introduces the November issue. *The Editor and Publisher of The New Criterion discusses highlights in this month's issue and reads from its opening pages.*

From the archive:

"Honor wagered," by John J. Miller. *A review of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation by W. S. Merwin.*

Dispatch:

"Breaking the wrong ground," by James Piereson. *On the use of impeachment as an election strategy.*

Each week the editors of *The New Criterion* offer recommendations on what to read, see, and hear in the world of culture in the weekly Critic's Notebook. To get it first, subscribe to the free Critic's Notebook email by [clicking here](#).