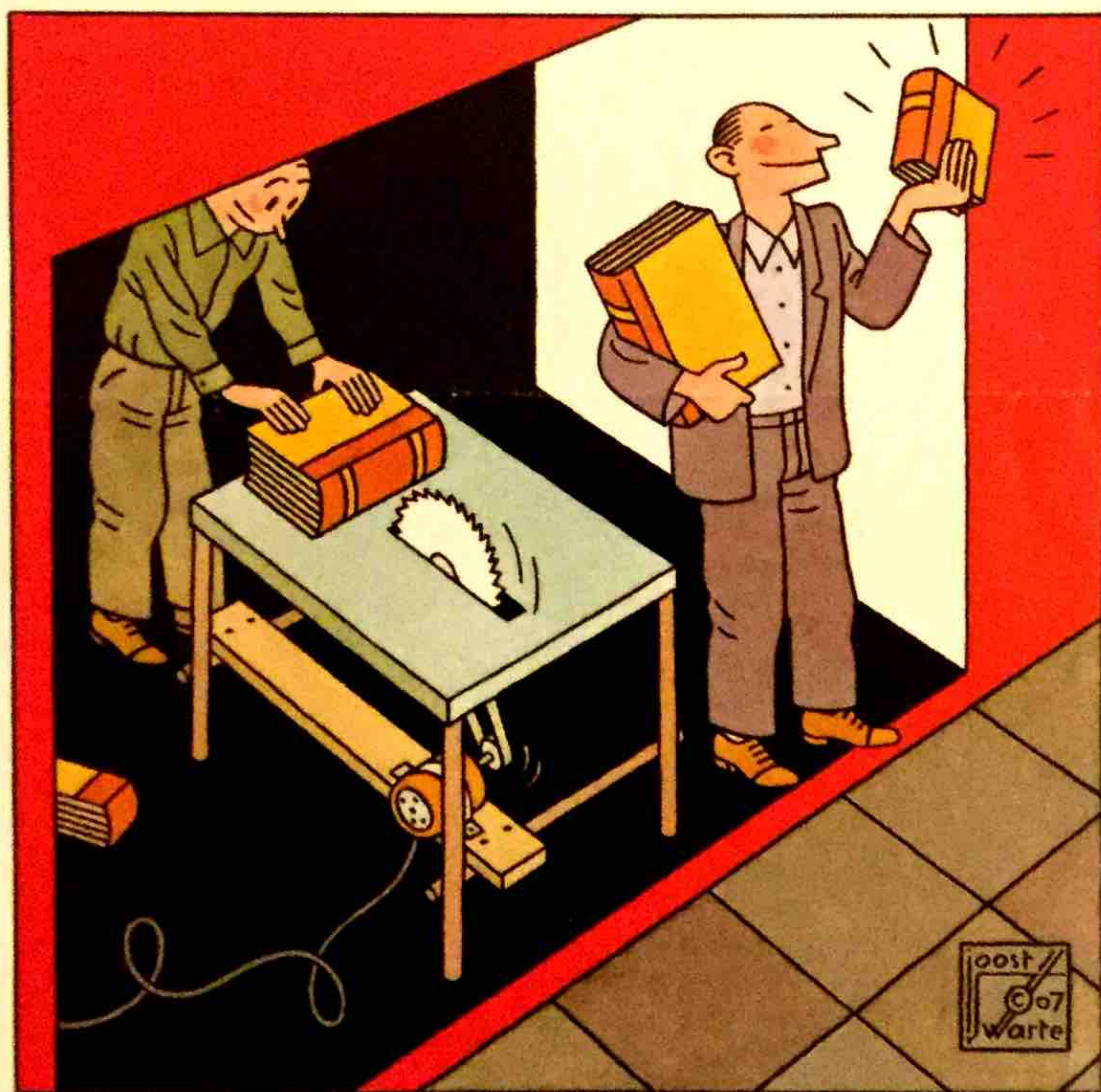
THE CORRECTIONS

Abridgment, enrichment, and the nature of art.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Our theme today is addition and subtraction, abridgment and expansion, and their effects on works of art and entertainment. (Sorry, what was that? No, the seminar on history of the cinema is in the next classroom.) What can be taken away from a book or a movie, what can be added to it, and what does it tell us about what we bring to both?



A British publisher has issued neatly cut versions of nineteenth-century classics.

The first form to consider is subtraction, or what might more grandly be called the aesthetic of abridgment, as illustrated by a new and ambitious series of "compact editions" produced by the British publisher Orion. "The great classics contain passionate romance, thrilling adventure, arresting characters and unforgettable scenes and situations," an explanatory note tells us. "But finding time to read them can be a problem." So Orion has taken nineteenth-century classics—among them "Moby-Dick," "Anna Karenina," "Vanity Fair," and "The Mill on the Floss"—and cut them neatly in half, like Damien Hirst animals, so that they can be taken in quickly and all the more admired.

Although the tone of the blurbs and the back matter is defiantly unapologetic, the names of the abridgers are mysteriously absent, suggesting that, with the shyness of old-fashioned pornographers, they don't want to be quite so openly associated with the project as their publisher's pride would suggest they ought. Who was the mohel of "Moby-Dick"; who took the vanity out of "Vanity Fair"; who threw Anna under the train a hundred pages sooner than before? Orion isn't telling. Yet the work had to be done with considerable tact and judgment. A good condensation of a hard book is hardly a crime; if Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson, an editor at *Reader's Digest*, hadn't labored over their "skeleton key" to "Finnegans Wake," readers would still find Joyce's book not just difficult but unapproachable. The Orionites should be proud of their work; their abridgments are skillfully done.

Take "Moby-Dick," a book that, if every reader has not always wanted shorter, then certainly, as Dr. Johnson said about "Paradise Lost," no reader has ever wanted *longer*. The first chapter of the compact edition is typical of the Orion approach. Most of the famous first paragraph, most of the famous first chapter, is presented as Melville wrote it. No muscle is removed—unlike, say, A. L. Rowse's modernization of Shakespeare, no attempt is made to simplify or improve the author's vocabulary and knotty, convoluted syntax. Ishmael asks us to call him so, and the story proceeds.

What is cut in the first chapter is the two long passages that depart from the Ishmaelian specifics: a reflection on people watching boats in Manhattan and the allure of the sea even in a city ("Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries"), and Melville's invocation of the history of ocean worship ("Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity?"). These passages are, by modern critical standards, "showy" and "digressive," nervously intent to display stray learning and to make obscure allusion more powerful than inherent emotion. The same thing happens in the subsequent chapters. Melville's story is intact and immediate; it's just that the long bits about the technical details of whaling are gone, as are most of the mock-Shakespearean interludes, the philosophical meanderings, and the metaphysical huffing and puffing. The entire chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale," where Melville tries to explain why white, the natural symbol of Good, is

JOOST SWARTE