

PART I

Introduction

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CHAPTER 1

Melville's Life

Melville's life and career, which spanned nearly three-quarters of the nineteenth century, display many of the patterns of self-making and literary invention he explored in his writing. The son of a man who reinvented himself a number of times as he launched one unsuccessful business venture after another, Melville similarly made himself up as he went along: as sailor, novelist, civil servant, poet. He may seem to readers today the man who represents one nation, one novel, one thematic obsession – whaling – but it might be safer to take him at his word in *Billy Budd* when he ruefully called himself “a writer whom few know” (p. 114).

Born in Manhattan, New York on August 1, 1819, in the same year as Queen Victoria and Walt Whitman, Melville was reared in the Dutch Reform Church and middle-class propriety of his mother, Maria Gansevoort, and her Albany Dutch forebears. His father, Allan Melvill (the family added the final “e” after Allan’s death in 1832), also came from an established family; Allan’s father, Thomas Melvill, participated in the Boston Tea Party and reminisced about the American Revolution for the rest of his life. Committed to upholding the status of two such respectable clans, Maria and Allan Melvill nevertheless suffered serious reversals in their generation. Allan, an importer of dress goods and fashionable accessories from Europe, managed to ride out a period of tremendous financial volatility in US markets after the War of 1812, long enough for Maria to bear eight children with clockwork regularity: Gansevoort (1815), Helen (1817), Herman (1819), Augusta (1821), Allan (1823), Catherine (1825), Frances (1827), and Thomas (1830). But in numerous dubious financial schemes, Allan Melvill borrowed

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until he could borrow no more. The family was forced to leave New York in 1830 and move to Albany, closer to Maria's relatives. In 1832, massively indebted and raving with a fever, Allan died, leaving his family dependent on the powerful Gansevoorts.

Herman had probably been educated for a career in business or commerce, since the family could not have afforded to send its sons to college. He and his brother Gansevoort attended the Albany Classical School and later the Albany Academy. Although his father had early considered him a bit slow, even backward compared to the glib and polished Gansevoort, Melville proved an apt pupil.¹ As a teenager in the village of Lansingburgh (now incorporated into Troy, New York, near Albany), where the family moved in 1838, he also joined a debating society, wrote scathing letters to the local newspaper deriding his rivals, and penned various love poems. Two early sketches, called "Fragments from a Writing-Desk" and published in the *Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser* in 1839, suggest that he saw himself potentially as an author, although they imitated styles that he would eventually renovate: the anecdotal pose of the urban spectator, and the Gothic mode of Poe's tales of mystery.

Although he experimented with literary pursuits in his late teens, Melville needed more secure employment. Having worked in 1835 in Gansevoort's fur store, in 1837 he began teaching in the Sikes District School in the Berkshires, near his Uncle Thomas Melvill's farm. The following year he studied surveying at Lansingburgh Academy, hoping to get work on the Erie Canal, but with his chances for engineering jobs looking dim, he shipped out in the summer of 1839 on the *St. Lawrence*, a packet, to Liverpool. Melville's first voyage lasted only four months but gave him a taste of adventure that he would never forget. When he returned he taught at the Greenbush and Schodack Academy in Greenbush, New York, and then in Brunswick, New York. In 1840, with his friend E. J. M. Fly, he journeyed to Galena, Illinois, where Uncle Thomas had moved his family. The trip exposed him to the rough and adventuresome waterways of the Great Lakes region and the Mississippi and Ohio rivers; but the two men returned to Manhattan without prospects.

In New York City Melville took some time to ponder his next move: he decided on whaling. Factory work, farming, or mining would have been no less monotonous, brutish, or poorly paid, and the fact that he chose whaling, one of the most dangerous of the maritime trades,

speaks as much to his economic desperation as to his spirit of adventure. It may have been with a free heart, however, that in late 1840 he packed a small bag, betook himself to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and shipped on the whaler *Acushnet*, which sailed from nearby Fairhaven on January 3, 1841, bound via Cape Horn for the Pacific whaling grounds. Most of his nautical novels record the joy of setting sail, even when that joy proves to be short-lived.

For Melville scholars and biographers, the significant events of Melville's voyages are the ones that ended up in his books. Most sensational was his desertion in the Marquesas. In July 1842, while anchored in Nuku Hiva Bay, he and a friend, Richard Tobias Greene, jumped ship and fled inland to escape discovery. From this point on, the primary evidence we have of his movements appears in *Typee*, a fictional account. Most scholars have assumed that Melville made his way to the Taipi Valley and stayed several weeks.² According to what he wrote in *Typee*, because of a leg injury, or perhaps because the Taipis saw the two white sailors as valuable hostages, or even, as he may have imagined, because they intended to eat him, Melville was held in an extended but pleasant captivity. Toby journeyed back to the coast to get help for his friend, who waited anxiously, and vainly, for news of his return. Thinking himself abandoned, Melville plotted his escape, but not before sampling the island's many delights. Although the Taipis treated him hospitably, he eventually made his way to the beach and signed on another whaler, the *Lucy Ann*, beating a hasty retreat from this island Eden. His experiences shaped his first book, *Typee* (1846). When news of its publication reached Toby Greene, who had returned to the US, having been frustrated in his efforts to retrieve Melville, Toby wrote to his friend, who added "The Story of Toby" to his next edition.

From the Marquesas, Melville's journey took him to Tahiti. On the *Lucy Ann* he encountered a crew dissatisfied with its ailing captain and drunken first mate; eventually they mutinied, and were jailed in Papeete. Melville may have supported the revolt reluctantly, for the crew were, he said in his second book *Omoo* (1847), "villains of all nations and dyes; picked up in the lawless ports of the Spanish Main, and among the savages of the islands" (p. 14). But he seized the opportunity to abandon an unlucky vessel and, with the implicit permission of his lenient Tahitian jailers, wandered the islands with a friend from the ship, John Troy. After a period of beachcombing, Melville and Troy

made their way to a neighboring island, Moorea (or Eimeo), where in November 1842 Melville shipped on the *Charles and Henry* for further whaling. The early sections of his third novel, *Mardi* (1849), take place on a ship much like this one.

His whaling came to an end in May 1843 in the Sandwich Islands (Hawai'i), where Melville was discharged in Lahaina, Maui, and worked in Honolulu at various jobs, including setting pins in a bowling alley. After three months, he tired of onshore labor, and shipped out once again, this time on the US naval frigate, the *United States*. Melville may have had little taste for naval life, but he knew that he could be seized and prosecuted for desertion if he signed on a whaler. The navy, as he would make clear much later in *Billy Budd* (published posthumously in 1924), gladly accepted even the "promiscuous lame ducks of morality" (p. 65).

Life aboard the *United States*, where numerous public floggings schooled the men to perform their tasks unquestioningly, was hard. The experiences chronicled in his fifth book, *White-Jacket* (1850), published shortly after *Redburn*, appear a grueling round of duties that nevertheless exposed him to a new class of men. Jack Chase in particular, the captain of the foretop, struck Melville as a romantic figure of revolt and leadership. Not only did he picture him in *White-Jacket* as a charismatic hero, but he also dedicated one of his last works, *Billy Budd*, to his memory.

Melville returned to Boston in October 1844 an experienced seaman, though by no means a wealthy one. He was encouraged to write, however, by family and friends who relished his stirring tales, and urged on as well by necessity to make a living, as he contemplated marriage with Elizabeth Shaw. She was the daughter of his father's old friend Lemuel Shaw, chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Hoping to succeed as other educated maritime authors like Richard Henry Dana had done in his *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), Melville turned to writing to make his name. His first effort, *Typee*, dedicated to Lemuel Shaw, won him remarkable success, and on the strength of that public acclaim and the equally enthusiastic reception of his second novel, *Omoo*, he and Lizzie married in the summer of 1847 and moved to the city of New York, where Melville took up authorship in earnest.

The rapid succession of his first novels – *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850) – bespeaks

Melville's creative energy, the quick flowering of his reputation, and his considerable professional anxiety as well. For he soon found the demands of writing for an aggressively expanding commercial literary market more onerous than he might have expected. The births of four children – Malcolm (1849), Stanwix (1851), Elizabeth (1853), and Frances (1855) – during the years of his most intense literary output strained his financial and emotional resources.

At the same time, he undertook a furious process of self-education, reading avidly in a range of authors, from writers of travel and maritime literature to the great poets and playwrights of the past: Dante, Rabelais, Montaigne, Browne, Milton, Shakespeare, Jonson, to name just a few. Traveling to Europe in 1849, ostensibly to negotiate contracts for his books in London, Melville soaked up literary and artistic culture with the wonderment of the self-taught provincial he may still have considered himself to be. The persona of sailor-author or democratic naïf at first served him well as proponent of the Young America literary movement, among whose members Melville found a kindred interest in carving out a new literary world, apart from the superannuated models of Europe. In time, as he implied in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), he came to consider himself an American Shakespeare and began to feel confined by the genres and limited expectations of maritime adventure.

Yet those early books, which he later thought of as apprentice or experimental work, prepared him well for a period of concentrated literary experimentation and achievement that began with his metaphorical novel *Moby-Dick* (1851). Drawn to the Berkshires region of western Massachusetts by family connections, Melville decided to settle in 1850 on the farm he called Arrowhead, hoping to enjoy a growing literary community that included Nathaniel Hawthorne, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others. Meeting Hawthorne at a point well along in the writing of *Moby-Dick*, Melville recast his novel along more ambitious lines, inspired by Hawthorne's example to believe that he could reach the full potential of literary genius. Their extraordinary friendship encouraged Melville to explore new latitudes of thought and invention, as he had done in his earlier philosophical novel, *Mardi*, and to pour his febrile excitement into long letters to Hawthorne. Although their period of proximity did not last long – Hawthorne moved his family back to the Boston area in 1852 and to England in 1853 – Melville's tide of enthusiasm carried

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him through an astonishing range and variety of literary endeavors for nearly a decade: his sensational romance *Pierre* (1852); a series of magazine stories of the mid-1850s, some of them eventually collected in *The Piazza Tales* (1856); his picaresque historical fiction, *Israel Potter* (1855); and a dark comedy, *The Confidence-Man* (1857), his last published work of prose fiction. These works did not garner for him the success of his earlier adventure narratives, but they did sustain his considerable reputation.

The effort of supporting his family on dwindling earnings and increasingly burdensome loans exhausted Melville. By the time he finished *The Confidence-Man* in 1856, his health was failing, and his alarmed family, particularly the perennially supportive Lemuel Shaw, sent him to Europe and the Levant for a six-months' journey. During that time he visited Hawthorne, then American consul in Liverpool; toured the pyramids of Egypt, the Greek isles, and the city and environs of Jerusalem; came back through Italy and Europe; and throughout his travels reveled in ancient and European art, architecture, and culture, storing up impressions for later works.

Back in the US, Melville began composing not stories but poems based on his travels; but no published volumes emerged until after the Civil War. Instead he attempted a brief career on the lyceum circuit, writing and delivering lectures on topics he thought might prove popular: "Statues in Rome" (1857–8), "The South Seas" (1858–9), and "Travel" (1859–60). Receiving mixed to tepid reviews, he made scarcely enough money to consider prolonging his efforts. Another journey, this time a restorative global sea voyage with younger brother and sea captain Thomas Melville in 1860 turned out to be similarly abortive. His manuscript, *Poems*, which he had left with his brother Allan while he went off to sail around the world, was not accepted for publication; feeling ill and homesick, Melville ended the journey in San Francisco and returned home.

Little is known of Melville's literary activities during the Civil War except that he appears to have actively pursued writing poems during a time when he also sought civil service employment, as Hawthorne and other authors had successfully done. His family had long wished to leave Arrowhead and return to Manhattan, and in 1862, after a painful accident when his carriage overturned on the road, Melville finally found farm work too hard to maintain. In 1863 he and his family, including his mother and some of his sisters, moved to 104 East

26th Street, where he lived for the rest of his life. Although he was not as active in New York literary circles as he had been over ten years earlier, Melville took a keen interest in political and cultural issues of the day, reading newspapers and following the course of the war with close attention. Hoping for a post in President Lincoln's civil service, he traveled to Washington, DC, in 1864 and visited army units and battlefields in Virginia. These experiences and his intensive reading of the *Rebellion Record* culminated in a collection of poems, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, published in 1866. Although the volume won him only modest attention, it announced Melville's emergence as a poet concerned with patriotic themes. Rather than reaching the status of national bard that Walt Whitman enjoyed, Melville gained a political appointment after the war, as District Inspector of Customs in the New York Custom House, where he began employment in December 1866.

Here Melville maintained a steady, mainly uneventful (as far as we know) career for nineteen years, traveling each day from his house to the office, inspecting cargoes for contraband, and engaging with sailors and captains on very different terms from those he had experienced as a seaman before the mast. Still plagued by the ill health that had beset him since the 1850s, he endured and indeed caused considerable family tension as well. These tensions erupted in 1867, when Elizabeth Melville sought advice from her pastor about her marital problems, which had gone so far that she and her brothers considered a plan to kidnap her to get her away from Melville's heavy drinking and black moods. She decided against such a sensational proposal, continuing in a situation that clearly strained her devotion and, according to family letters, Melville's sanity. Conflicts with his eldest son Malcolm escalated in September 1867, when the boy returned late from an evening out, locked himself in his room, perhaps to avoid a harsh paternal scolding, and was found the next day dead with his pistol at his side.

In spite of these considerable shocks, Melville embarked on his most ambitious poetical work, *Clarel: A Poem and a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, published in 1876 in a limited printing financed, in an act of characteristic generosity, by his uncle Peter Gansevoort. Melville did not expect a large readership for this long, often knotty poetic narrative of a young theological student's exploration of the rigorous geographies and faiths of the ancient world. Nevertheless, in his profound engagement with the period's most pressing religious questions, as well

as its vexing political debates and cultural conflicts, Melville produced one of his era's most complex expressions of doubt and faith. Almost completely ignored in his lifetime and little valued for a century or more, *Clarel* has emerged among many readers as one of Melville's most challenging yet rewarding works.

After his retirement from the Custom House in 1885, Melville embarked on a period of revising and consolidating earlier poems, publishing two collections, *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon, Etc.* (1891) in private printings and leaving a third collection, "Weeds and Wildings, Chiefly: With a Rose or Two," unpublished at his death. He also wrote sketches and narrative poems on topics related to art, aesthetics, and politics. As part of his twin concerns with sailors from voyages long gone (explored in *John Marr*) and questions of art and aesthetics (*Timoleon*), he wrote a ballad, "Billy in the Darbies," that eventually grew into a longer prose work, now titled *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*, which consumed him in multiple revisions until his death on September 28, 1891. Although the work exists only as a loosely shaped and never finished narrative, twentieth-century editors saw it as a late masterpiece and constructed Melville's presumed intentions into the print editions we have today.

Melville earned his greatest success and reputation from the early works he regarded least (*Typee* and *Omoo*) and lived long enough to understand that he would never win recognition for the achievements, especially in poetry, he valued most. That reputation changed in remarkable ways after his death. The so-called Melville Revival, beginning in the 1920s with the discovery and publication of *Billy Budd*, along with his collected works and the first full biography by Raymond Weaver, culminated in the mid-twentieth century with major scholarship by such leading critics as D. H. Lawrence, Lewis Mumford, Charles Roberts Anderson, Stanley Williams, F. O. Matthiesson, Charles Olson, Nathalia Wright, Elizabeth Foster, Walter Bezanson, Harrison Hayford, Wilson Heflin, Merrell Davis, Merton M. Sealts, Jr., Leo Marx, Howard Vincent, Eleanor Metcalf, Jay Leyda, Leon Howard, William Gilman, and Hershel Parker, among many others. This large body of critical and scholarly work established Melville as central to the so-called American Renaissance, a literary canon of texts in which *Moby-Dick* stood squarely at the center, along with Dickinson's poems, Emerson's essays, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Succeeding generations of critics discovered his short fiction and less highly appreciated works, especially *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*. Beginning in the 1960s, with heightened interest in issues of race, gender, class, and religion, stories like "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby, the Scrivener," and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" became newly relevant, and questions about Melville's attitudes to slavery and abolition more pressing. Burgeoning scholarly attention to American territorial expansion and colonial adventurism renewed debate over Melville's politics in *Typee* and other works set in the contested islands of the Pacific. Among other recent developments, growing interest in Melville's poetry and in the output of his later, seemingly private, career has raised new questions about this complex body of work and about texts and textuality in an author who seems to travel across generic boundaries with bold abandon.

In a long career, Melville wrote many works of fiction and poetry but relatively little about *how* he wrote. We turn now to an instance, one of few, in which he speaks directly about his own creative process in ways that illuminate the entire body of his writing: the story of "Agatha" in his correspondence with Nathaniel Hawthorne. While Melville changed the subjects of his fiction and poems many times over a long lifetime, he remained consistently fascinated by the problem of literary invention itself. As we will see, that process often grew out of chance encounters, lucky accidents, like his meeting with a New Bedford lawyer; and it worked because he knew a good find when he saw it.