
Part I Travels

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A Traveling Life

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By 1819, the year Herman Melville was born, New York, the “insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs” (*MD* 3), was a bustling seaport, a labyrinth of streets and alleyways where names like Canton, Guinea, Curaçao, Java, New Orleans, Papua, Calcutta, Maracaibo, and Marseilles rolled like poetry off the tongues of tattooed ruffians. A proverbial “forest of masts” swayed above the waterfront, and from the docks, great wooden cities of sail set forth carrying cotton, tobacco, spirits, furs, lumber, whale oil, cheese, livestock, potash, grains, and flours to the farthest reaches of the globe and returned with sugar and rum from the West Indies, spices and teas from India and Ceylon, porcelain and silk from China, Flemish lace and Belgian linens, bushels of cocoa beans, and slabs of rosewood, teak, and mahogany.

Melville was born at 6 Pearl Street, a stone’s throw from the Battery, where a baby in a carriage on the promenade could inhale salt and spicy air from oceans half the world away. His earliest boyhood memories were of ships and sailors and strange languages. His mother and grandmother conversed in Dutch, his father and Uncle Thomas both spoke French, and, from an early age, the apple-cheeked boy dreamed of exploring exotic shores and distant seas.

Both of Melville’s grandfathers were heroes of the American Revolution, which made the family’s history coeval with the history of the new nation. Melville’s maternal grandfather, the late Colonel Peter Gansevoort, had owned slaves, as many northern gentlemen did in those days, and he had cracked the heads of several Iroquois during the French and Indian Wars. His paternal grandfather, Major Thomas Melvill,¹ a Boston merchant and sometime customs inspector, kept a glass vial on his mantel filled with tea leaves from the Boston Tea Party that conjured images of himself and the other Sons of Liberty dressed up as Mohawk Indians, war-whooping their way to Boston Harbor to dump the British tea. A neighborhood fire warden in his old age, the eccentric patriot wore the knee breeches, silk stockings, buckled pumps, and tricorne hat of the Revolutionary War until his dying day.

Melville's father was both an epitome and a victim of the era of good feeling that followed the War of 1812. By the time Allan Melvill met Maria Gansevoort at a ball honoring Admiral Oliver Hazard Perry in 1813, the confluence of military victory and economic prosperity had given rise to a fulsomely nationalistic rhetoric that conflated the Puritan vision of Boston as "a city on a hill" and English settlers as a Christian army in the heathen wilderness of the New World with the secular vision of America as an entrepreneurial Eden where hard-working people could get ahead – everyone, that is, except American Indians, enslaved Africans, immigrant laborers, and women, all of whom lacked property and voting rights.

The suave Allan, an importer of fancy dry goods from France, and the lovely Maria were married in Albany in 1814, and the following year Maria gave birth to a son whom they named Gansevoort. Although Maria preferred to remain near her family and friends, so many merchants were competing for shrinking markets in Albany that Allan decided to move his family to Boston, where his father would help him set up his business. Their first daughter, Helen Maria, was born there in 1817. The following year, with New York's trade with Europe and the Far East far outstripping that of both Boston and Philadelphia, Allan decided to move his family and his business there. Maria, who was certain her husband's enterprise and ambition would earn them a place among the city's fashionables, half-reluctantly agreed.

By the spring of 1818, thanks to loans from his father that enabled him to purchase luxury French dry goods, Allan sailed for France, stopping first in Edinburgh, where he hoped to establish the family's descent from Scottish nobility. In Paris, he purchased fine linen handkerchiefs, kid gloves, lace mantillas, Leghorn hats, merino shawls, ostrich feathers, Moroccan reticules, satin, taffeta and velvet ribbons and perfumes from Cologne and had them shipped home to America. He also dined with the Marquis de Lafayette and the French family of his brother Thomas's first wife.

Allan Melvill approached business with a kind of missionary zeal. He repeatedly expressed the conviction that religious piety guaranteed material success, and that commercial success was a sign of the favor of GOD, always capitalizing that name. The letters he wrote to his wife echo the Calvinism old Major Melvill repudiated when he left the Congregational Church to become a Unitarian. For Maria, a faithful communicant of the Dutch Reformed Church, Allan's piety was proof that he was destined to succeed.

Confident of his future success, Allan leased an elegant house at the opposite end of Pearl Street from his office and moved his family there, but by midsummer, business was absolutely stagnant. By the time the couple's third child, a robust boy, was born on a hot, muggy August 1, 1819, the first of the antebellum boom and bust cycles had forced twelve to thirteen thousand people in New York to go on relief. The baby was christened Herman, after his first ancestor in the New World, Harmen Harmense Gansevoort, a master brewer who emigrated from the Netherlands in 1656 and settled in Fort Orange (Albany), where he opened a brewery and taproom and, like other Dutch immigrants in the Hudson Valley, founded a dynasty.

Shortly after his first birthday, baby Herman was “entirely weaned” (Allan Melvill to Thomas Melvill, Jr., August 15, 1820, BA), and a year later his father was boasting that he was “rugged as a Bear” (Allan Melvill to Peter Gansevoort, November 3, 1821, Leyda 1: 9). Meanwhile, on August 24, 1821, he gained a younger sister named Augusta who, like her brother, developed a “literary thirst” (Augusta Melville to Fanny Melville, March 17, 1954, MFP). After Augusta was born, Maria suffered a postpartum depression that dragged on for months. It is not clear how well Maria understood the extent of her husband’s mounting debts and incongruously grandiose schemes, but money worries did not prevent her from giving birth to a fifth child, a “noble boy” named Allan, after “hours of peril & anguish” (April 8, 1823, Leyda 1: 13). Three more children, Catherine, Frances Priscilla, and Thomas, followed in alternate years.

When Herman was six, his parents enrolled him in the Dutch Reformed Sunday School on Broome Street, where he was required to memorize the Calvinist catechism. Even that strict introduction to schooling did not prepare him for the rigors of the New-York Male High School, which was founded on the Lancastrian system of heavy punishments and light rewards. The school’s masters and student monitors considered boys who asked questions dangerous free thinkers, and free thinkers, like boys who misbehaved in ordinary ways, were dealt with harshly. To avoid humiliating punishments such as being suspended from the ceiling in a sack, shackled in a corner, or forced to wear a log around his neck, Herman learned to blend in and observe – a skill that would later serve him well on whaleships and a man-of-war. He was so shy his parents thought him backward: “As far as he understands men & things [he is] both solid & profound, & of a docile & amiable disposition . . . [but] very backward in speech & somewhat slow in comprehension,” Allan Melvill warned his brother-in-law Peter Gansevoort before sending Herman to stay with him in Albany (AM to PG, August 10, 1826, Leyda 1: 5). More than likely, Melville, who was a sensitive child, was traumatized by the Male High School. Fortunately, his next school, Columbia Grammar School, was more liberal and humane.

Despite the fact that both parents favored the glib Gansevoort over the inarticulate dreamer, Herman had fond memories of his worldly father. Allan sometimes took his two older sons with him to the office, and as they walked down Pearl Street, Herman peered at the “old-fashioned coffeehouses” to see the “sunburnt sea-captains going in and out, smoking cigars, and talking about Havanna [*sic*], London, and Calcutta.” Even shipping notices held “a strange, romantic charm” (*R* 4) for the imaginative boy.

Between the ages of eight and twelve, Herman spent three summers with his Boston grandparents and a summer with his Aunt Mary and Uncle John DeWolf in Bristol, Rhode Island. Captain John DeWolf had sailed to Archangel in Russia and crossed Siberia by dogsled from the Sea of Okhotsk to St. Petersburg with Georg H. Langsdorff, the naturalist who had accompanied the Krusenstern expedition. Visits with globe-trotting relatives put Herman in touch with the world of exploration and discovery, but he probably did not know his uncle John owned a slave plantation in Cuba.

Before Melville was ten years old, his parents moved three times to larger houses in better neighborhoods, first to Courtlandt Street, next to Bleecker Street, then to Broadway. One more move – to one of the marble mansions on Bond and Great Jones Street – would have meant Mr. and Mrs. Allan Melvill had “arrived,” but that was not to be. As addicted to easy credit as a gambler to his dice, Allan borrowed constantly and fell deeper and deeper into debt. In desperation, he signed a promissory note for money he did not have and could not obtain when the note was called in. Forced to declare bankruptcy, he packed his family off to the Gansevoorts in Albany, liquidated his business, and left Manhattan in disgrace.

As difficult as it was to be uprooted, the move to Albany gave Herman Melville the opportunity to attend Albany Academy – whose fine classical curriculum included Geography, Natural History, Greek, Roman, and English History, Jewish Antiquities, and Latin – and the Albany Classical School, where the boy developed a “love for English composition” that led to his first attempts at writing fiction (Stedman).

Although Allan rehabilitated himself to some extent in Albany, he was determined to re-establish himself in Manhattan. Tragically, as a result of exposure during an unsuccessful steamer trip to New York in sub-zero weather, he contracted lobar pneumonia and died in Albany in January, 1832, quoting the Bible and raving deliriously. The shock Herman suffered was profound: “never again can such blights be made good; they strike in too deep, and leave such a scar that the air of Paradise might not erase it,” he would write in 1849 (*R* 53).

Left with eight children and dependent on her brother Peter to dole out funds from her late husband’s estate, Maria relied on her oldest sons to contribute to the family bank account. Gansevoort took over his father’s fur business, and Herman was forced to interrupt his schooling to work as a bank messenger. To escape, he spent several summers working on his Uncle Thomas’s Berkshire farm. Like Major Melvill, Thomas Melvill, Jr. was a colorful character. Having lived in Paris for a number of years with a French wife, he fancied himself something of a *boulevardier*. He wore his Sunday clothes and took pinches of snuff while raking hay in the fields. Herman enjoyed both his uncle’s foppish affectations and the rustic manners of his country cousins, especially Julia Maria, a bright girl who seems to have been a close friend.

In 1838, Melville’s mother moved her household across the river to Lansingburgh, a planned community of Albany expatriates that included several friends and relatives. Far from being a sleepy backwater in the 1830s and 40s, Lansingburgh, the oldest incorporated village in the United States, was a hub of transportation and trade. Because of its accessibility from the river and good roads, Lansingburgh was the transfer point for mail that traveled by boat between Albany and New York and by stagecoach between Boston and the Berkshires. Village industries manufactured guns, scales, brushes, ink for United States currency, shirts and collars, furniture, and oilcloth linoleum, which was popular with working-class families who could not afford costly carpets; and the shipyards along the tree-lined river built ocean-going merchant vessels to transport these local products around the world.

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At age nineteen, Herman enrolled in Lansingburgh Academy, whose principal had a theology degree and a passion for zoological taxonomy that he shared with his students. Melville studied engineering and surveying on the theory that he would almost certainly find work on the Erie Canal. Unfortunately, the nation's economy had not fully recovered from the recession of 1837, so even technical training and his uncle Peter's help were not enough to land Herman work on the canal. With Gansevoort running the fur business, and younger brother Allan apprenticing in the law offices of Peter Gansevoort, Herman felt pressure to find employment. He tried teaching in a country school in the hills above Pittsfield but found that his job consisted more of trying to control obstreperous louts than of inspiring future scholars.

In his free time, he strolled beside the river reciting the poetry of Byron and Tennyson to various belles of Lansingburgh. The anonymous love lyrics he addressed to a girl named Mary Parmalee appeared in the local newspaper, as did two melodramatic gothic sketches that appear to have been influenced by Edgar Allan Poe. Unfortunately, the satisfaction Herman derived from his studies, friendships, adolescent flirtations, early literary endeavors, and the attainment of his surveyor's license could not compete with the preference for working outdoors he had developed on his uncle's farm. He had little inclination to confine himself to a country school for the rest of his life, much less embrace the claustrophobic drudgery of office work or the roller-coaster of commercial life, and although he had a longstanding desire to go to sea, he had no wish to become a naval officer like his stuck-up cousins Guert and Stanwix.

Instead, Melville made up his mind instead to sign on a whaleship bound for the South Seas – a decision of which the Gansevoorts disapproved. Whaling was a dangerous, dirty job fit for the lower classes, not gentlemen. In an effort to dissuade him, Leonard Gansevoort, who had gone whaling against his family's wishes, advised him to try a short voyage before signing on a “blubber-hunter” for a voyage that could last several years.

Thus, in June, 1839, Herman joined the crew of the *St. Lawrence*, a fast-sailing packet ship bound for Liverpool with thirty-two passengers and a cargo of cotton headed for England's “dark satanic mills” (William Blake, “Jerusalem”). In *Redburn* (1849), Melville notes that Liverpool's immense wealth came from the slave and cotton trades with the southern United States. Two of Melville's shipmates, the steward and the cook, were of African descent, and Melville's fictionalized account of his six-week summer voyage includes horrific allusions to the Atlantic slave trade and a daring reference to the sight of the ship's black steward walking arm in arm with a white English woman as a sign that in some things, other countries did a better job of carrying out the principles of the Declaration of Independence than the United States, as he wrote in *Redburn*.

The voyage to Liverpool introduced Melville to the dark underside of Anglo-American civilization and whetted his appetite for travel. Returning home to find his mother living in comparatively genteel poverty, Melville took a teaching job in a

village school east of Lansingburgh. The pupils in East Greenbush were much easier to teach than the farm boys at the Sykes District School, but halfway through the year, the school closed without paying the teachers their wages. Perhaps feeling his mother ought to be satisfied that he had at least tried to settle into a respectable profession, but more likely glad of an excuse to travel, he and his friend Eli James Murdock Fly headed west to Galena, Illinois, the lead-mining town where Thomas Melville, Jr. had relocated his family after his Berkshire farm failed.

The trip west held out a promise of adventure to Melville, and he must have wondered what his life would have been like if he had been hired as a surveyor on the Erie Canal. A triumph of modern engineering, the canal spanned New York State from the Hudson River to Lake Erie, a gentle, meandering boat-boulevard forty feet wide and four feet deep with a series of aqueducts and locks. Travelers hiked along the towpaths, dodging the droppings of the mules who hauled the barges and the trotters who pulled the faster packet boats. The hard-drinking, tobacco-spitting young Canalers who hung out along the busy waterway resembled sailors in many respects, and the work songs and ballads they played on their banjos and harmonicas resembled the chanteys sailors sang at sea.

At the western terminus of the canal, Melville and Fly had a chance to see two of New York State's wonders, one natural and one man-made: Niagara Falls and the quintessential frontier city, Buffalo, where Indians in colorful blankets and buckskins strolled alongside German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian immigrants. They were, as he wrote in *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), "a piebald parliament, an Anarcharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man" (9). In Melville's eyes, Buffalo epitomized "the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide" (9).

Melville and Fly arrived in Illinois when the prairie flowers were in full bloom and stayed with Herman's family until the ripe, golden wheat was harvested and the corn husks had turned brown and brittle. Then they said their goodbyes and took the steamboat to Cairo, Illinois, passing the Mormon settlement at Nauvoo and stopping to explore the Indian mounds at St. Louis, before drifting downriver past towns like Herculaneum and Cape Girardeau, whose cliffs bore ominous names like Devil's Oven and the Devil's Anvil.

At the end of the summer, Melville came home to a mother oppressed by debt and illness and aggravated by her son's inability to get a job, so he and his friend Fly decided to look for work in New York City. They rented rooms in the city at \$2.50 a week, and Fly found a job copying documents in a nearby office. Melville, however, preferred not to do routine copying; his fictional scrivener, Bartleby, stands as a monument to the acts of resistance he stored up in his soul.

He was reading James Fenimore Cooper's *The Red Rover*, whose pirate protagonist appealed to the rebellious young man, and Richard Henry Dana's bestseller *Two Years Before the Mast*, a book that stirred the salt water in his blood. He could not have been

trying terribly hard to get a job, because he let his hair and beard grow until his “savage” appearance became “a great source of anxiety” to his priggish brother Gansevoort, who urged Herman to get “his hair sheared & whiskers shaved” before going home again. By the time he saw his mother in Lansingburgh, he looked “more like a Christian than usual” (GM to AMjr., November 26, 1840, BA, and GM to MGM, November 26, 1840, BA), but he had made up his mind to go to sea.

To Herman, signing aboard a whaler meant a few years’ steady employment as well as a chance to escape the pieties of the parlor by going native in the South Seas. Being a sailor was infinitely easier than mastering the complex tasks of young adulthood in a family where a young man had to tack around submerged emotional reefs and navigate the treacherous shoals of Victorian sexuality. Gansevoort, who took his role as paternal surrogate quite seriously, accompanied his younger brother to New Bedford, Massachusetts, the whaling capital of the world. On January 3, 1841, the *Acushnet*, under the command of Captain Valentine Pease II of Edgartown, cleared its mooring and sailed for the open ocean with Herman Melville aboard. Three months later, somewhere off the coast of Brazil, the future author of *Moby-Dick* experienced the thrill of his first hunt, and for the next ten months, the men succeeded in harvesting 720 barrels of oil on their way to the Marquesas.

A year and a half later, after stops in Rio, the Galapagos, and Santa, Peru, the *Acushnet* sailed into Taioa Bay, Nukuhiva. Not far from their anchorage they could see French warships that had brought four thousand soldiers to the island to prepare the way for colonization, and on shore were the remains of the “city” built by Protestant missionaries in 1833. No sooner had the ship dropped anchor than the men saw a flotilla of naked “whihinees” swimming out to welcome them. They held garlands of flowers above their heads as gifts for the sailors, who had already broken out the rum to celebrate the sexual favors the island women were about to bestow on them.

Eager as he might have been to experience the sexual freedom of the islands, Melville may have found the orgy that ensued when the island women boarded the ship as disgusting in reality as “Tommo” claims in *Typee*. Confined to the ship with a tyrannical captain and a crew of crude, uneducated men, Melville and his shipboard chum Richard Tobias Greene decided to jump ship and hide in the island’s interior to escape capture and punishments as deserters.

In *Typee*, his fictionalized account of his four-week sojourn in Polynesia, Melville claimed he and “Toby” spent four months living among the Taipi, a tribe Captain David Porter and other westerners called cannibals. Melville, by contrast, found the islanders courteous and kindly, and their peaceful, prosperous society a contradiction to Porter’s accounts of their savagery. Melville was attracted by the physical beauty of the tattooed islanders and fascinated by their androgynous style of dress – or undress, to be more precise. Intrigued by their casual enjoyment of sex as well as by their religious practices and social mores, Melville concluded that Christian missionaries were guilty of destroying a peaceful, utopian pagan culture. Re-examining his own society through the lens of an Edenic world, he found the “examples of civilized barbarity, the vices, cruelties and enormities of every kind that spring up in the

tainted atmosphere of a feverish civilization" (*T* 125) to be just as barbaric as the ritual of cannibalism which, for the missionaries, marked Oceanic peoples as "savages."

Despite the attractions of carefree island life, Melville could not quell his restlessness and anxiety. If the account he gives in *Typee* is at all accurate, Melville felt if he chose to stay in the islands, he would have to be tattooed – a practice that both attracted and repelled him. In any event, it would have marked his face indelibly, making it difficult, if not impossible, for him to go home again. Fearing their hosts might actually be cannibals, "Toby" had gone to the coast to get help for Melville, who had an infected leg, and although Toby was unable to return, he sent a boat to rescue his injured friend. To avoid capture, Melville signed on the Australian whaler *Lucy Ann* as an able seaman. Serving on the *Lucy Ann* was much more arduous than languishing in the Typee Valley. Badly captained and unlucky in the hunt, she had taken only two whales since leaving Sydney, and the crew finally struck, refusing to take orders from the captain.

For their part in this mutiny, Melville and his friend Dr. John B. Troy were taken ashore at Papeete and clapped in the "Calabooza Beretanee," a makeshift outdoor jail where prisoners were confined to stocks. Luckily for them, the jailer was a sympathetic chap who let them free during the day if they promised to spend their nights in jail. This leniency gave Melville a chance to see the effects of colonization on the Tahitians, who suffered from venereal diseases, alcoholism, and other ailments as a result of contact with westerners. Protestant missionaries condemned their sexual behavior, forced them to wear ill-fitting western clothes donated by church groups, and banned their native dances, games, festivals, and religious rituals. The result, Melville observed in *Omoo* (1847), was loss of cultural identity, depression, and despair.

Once the *Lucy Ann* left port, the jailer let his captives go, and to avoid detection, they sailed to Moorea and worked on a potato farm for nearly three weeks. In October, 1842, after a series of adventures, the two men went their separate ways, and Melville signed on as a boatsteerer aboard the *Charles & Henry*, a Nantucket whaler that had experienced bad luck all the way. By the time the ship reached the Hawaiian port Lahaina, an American colony ruled by missionaries since 1821, Melville had decided to spend some time in Honolulu. There, he evidently set pins in a bowling-alley before signing an indenture with an educated English merchant named Isaac Montgomery. On July 13, 1843, Melville began work as a clerk-bookkeeper at an annual salary of \$150 to be paid quarterly, plus free board, lodging, and laundry. His duties consisted of measuring calico, waiting on customers, keeping the ledgers, and doing inventory.

Once again, his sense of social justice was offended by what he observed. Old men and boys, harnessed to carts, pulled the wives of missionaries to Sunday services, which for Melville perfectly epitomized the evils of colonialism: "Not until I visited Honolulu was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilised into draught horses and evangelised into beasts of burden. But so it is. They have been literally broken into the traces, and are harnessed to the vehicles of

their spiritual instructors like many dumb brutes!" he wrote in *Typee* (196). The missionaries had built schools and playgrounds for white children and then surrounded them with high fences "the more effectually to exclude the wicked little Hawaiians," he observed sarcastically in *Omoo* (188).

Melville witnessed first-hand the competition between Britain and America for control of the Sandwich Islands that paved the way for the brutal and shameful annexation of Hawai'i by the United States later in the century. For various reasons, not least among them the sight of Kamehameha III wearing western-style military uniforms and aping the affectations of the conquerors, Melville formed an intensely negative view of the Hawaiian people. Although in *Typee* and *Omoo* he dismissed the Hawaiians as lazy and ignorant, by 1859 he was supporting the right of Hawaiians to speak their native language in their schools and expressing his opposition to American annexation of the islands.

By August, he was ready to go home, and his boss Isaac Montgomery, who had become a friend, released him from his indenture. Wary of signing on another whale-ship whose captain might recognize him as a deserter, on August 17, 1843 he signed on the *USS United States*, a naval frigate bound for Boston.

He could not have chosen a more rigidly hierarchical, oppressive, undemocratic world to enter than that of a man-of-war. Once a month, the entire crew had to stand at attention on deck for the ritual reading of the Articles of War, with its solemn refrain, "SHALL SUFFER DEATH!" Almost every day, the ship's company was piped on deck to watch some poor fellow tied to the gratings and flogged with the cat-o'-nine-tails, that tore strips of bloody flesh from a sailor's back. In the six months Melville was stationed on the gun-deck of this floating hell, he was forced to watch 163 of his shipmates flogged, often by mercilessly sadistic officers.

On the positive side, the *United States* had a well-stocked library, and two or three members of the crew told stories and wrote poetry, skills that made them pleasant companions for Melville when they had time to relax and spin yarns or sing chanteys during their watches. In *White-Jacket* (1850), his bitterly satirical account of his six months' cruise in the Navy, he immortalized seagoing bards like Jack Chase, foreman of the maintop, who recited whole cantos of Portugal's epic poem, the *Lusiad*.

The frigate reached the shores of Massachusetts in mid-October, 1844, and Melville lingered in Boston before heading home to Lansingburgh, perhaps to reacquaint himself with Elizabeth Shaw, the daughter of his father's friend, Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. At home, he regaled his family and friends with such entertaining stories of his adventures in the South Seas that they urged him to write a book about his experiences. Measuring his own perceptions against those of travelers prejudiced against native cultures, he drew on European models of contact with "primitive" peoples to challenge American racial and ethnic stereotypes and to contradict prevailing assumptions about what constitutes "civilized" and "savage" societies. In addition to being a picturesque, suspenseful, and informative first book, *Typee* (1846) is a paean to Polynesian culture and a scathing critique of Christian imperialism. The book's sequel, *Omoo* (1847), takes the

case against “snivelization” even farther by describing the disastrous effects of contact with “the white civilized man . . . the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth” (*T* 125) on the Tahitians and Hawaiians.

By 1848, Melville was a successful author and a married man, having wooed and won Elizabeth Shaw while writing two popular travel narratives. Friends and family members referred to him affectionately as “Typee” and his new household as the “Happy Valley.” His third book, *Mardi* (1849), a sprawling allegorical romance whose flights of philosophical fancy and political satire dismayed fans of *Typee* and *Omoo*, nearly destroyed his literary reputation. Heavily influenced by Melville’s reading of eighteenth-century English and Continental authors, *Mardi* transforms the archipelagos of the Pacific into a metaphysical landscape not bound by space and time.

Mardi contains some of Melville’s most beautiful descriptions of the sea and sea creatures as well as some of his wildest explorations of the mind and soul. Chapter 119, “Dreams,” anticipates passages of *Moby-Dick* in which Melville starts from an identifiable object or place and soars above both earth and sea until earth, sea, sky, and stars become swirling galaxies. His dreamer is “like a frigate . . . full with a thousand souls,” scudding before the wind and nearly dashed against “shoals, like nebulous vapors, shoring the white reef of the Milky Way, against which the wrecked worlds are dashed; strowing all the strand, with their Himmaleh keels and ribs” (*M* 367). The ambitious *Mardi* foreshadows *Moby-Dick* with its elaborate sentence structures and headlong metaphors, similes, allusions, and analogies linking the concrete and the cosmic, the physical and the metaphysical, the known and the unknown.

Unfortunately, readers were baffled by *Mardi*, and it garnered bad reviews, so Melville retaliated by writing two books he considered potboilers. *Redburn* was published in 1849, and the following year, *White-Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War*, which was so critical of the US Navy that no American firm would publish it. Not one to give up easily, Melville said goodbye to his wife and infant son, Malcolm, who was teething while his father was writing *White-Jacket*, and sailed for England to sell his manuscript to Richard Bentley, a London publisher. On the voyage out, he made the acquaintance of several other passengers, notably a philosophy professor named George Adler, who became his traveling companion and friend. After a trip rich in impressions, at the beginning of February, 1850, Melville returned to the crowded New York townhouse he shared with his wife, his brother Allan and Allan’s wife Sophia, two toddlers, his mother, and whichever of his sisters happened to be visiting. Although he soon began working on a book about the sperm-whale fishery that he referred to affectionately as his “Whale,” he found it difficult to concentrate, and by July, he was so desperate to escape the heat that he packed up his wife Elizabeth and their infant son and went to stay with Aunt Mary Melville and her son Robert in the Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

By October, largely as a result of his meeting that August with Nathaniel Hawthorne, the darling of Boston’s literary establishment, Melville’s “Whale” had

evolved into a mythopoeic epic of the sea, and Melville had purchased a farmhouse not far from his cousin's inn. Between visits to the red cottage overlooking Lake Mahkeennac where Nathaniel Hawthorne lived with his wife Sophia, their son Julian, and their daughter Una, and philosophical discussions in the barn at Arrowhead with the author of dark tales of Puritan New England, he finished writing *Moby-Dick* (1851). Melville's oceanic cadences and cosmic images infuse *Moby-Dick* with magic and mysticism. From the magic of "the pool in the stream" Ishmael evokes in "Loomings" to the "mystical vibration" he says he felt when, during his maiden voyage, he realized he was out of sight of land, Ishmael puts before us "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (5) that drew Melville to the American West, the South Seas, Europe, the Holy Land, and, in 1860, California.

Ishmael speaks for the iconoclastic Melville when he boasts that he is "King of the Cannibals, and ready at any moment to rebel against him" (*MD* 270). Unfortunately, *Moby-Dick* was not popular in Melville's day, and his next book, an ambiguous psychosexual melodrama called *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* (1852), scandalized readers and panicked critics like the hysterical reviewer for New York's *Day Book*, who pronounced "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY" ("Historical Note," *P* 380).

Neither *Israel Potter* (1853), a picaresque novel whose hapless protagonist meets Benjamin Franklin, Ethan Allen, and John Paul Jones, nor the short stories and sketches published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* could rehabilitate Melville's reputation. While stories such as "Benito Cereno" and "The Encantadas" combine maritime lore and Melville's own experiences, others like "The Apple-Tree Table" and "Bartleby the Scrivener" draw on Melville's knowledge of folklore and urban legends prevalent in New England and New York. To modern readers, some of Melville's stories and sketches are masterpieces, whereas others seem dated and comparatively slight. In any case, Melville managed to bridge the gap between the red and white chowder literary worlds. He even received decent remuneration for his short fiction, so it was a shock when *Putnam's* ceased publication in 1856. Financial worries, physical ailments, and marital stresses, plus a familial dependence on alcohol, drove Melville to the verge of a nervous breakdown. In the fall of 1856, a dispirited Melville sailed for Europe and the Holy Land.

Melville's *Journal 1856–57* is a much richer document than his 1849–50 *Journal* of the trip to London and the Continent. The sections describing his experiences in Egypt, Italy, and the Middle East approach the depth and intensity of his best prose fiction, and the emotional exhaustion and spiritual fervor of his entries undoubtedly reflect his precarious mental health.

Disembarking in Liverpool, Melville presented his passport to his old friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who countersigned it and stamped it with his seal. Hawthorne had been awarded a consular post in Liverpool for writing the presidential campaign biography for Franklin Pierce, a Bowdoin classmate and friend. In his *English Notebooks*, Hawthorne noted that Melville looked "a little paler, and perhaps a little sadder" than before and still retained "his characteristic gravity and reserve of manner"

(*J* 628ff.) At the Hawthornes' home in Southport, a seaside village twenty miles from Liverpool, the two men conversed "on pretty much our former terms of sociability and confidence." The next day they took a long walk on the beach and sat down "in a hollow" out of the cold wind to smoke cigars and talk. Melville began "to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated, but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief," wrote Hawthorne. His poignant reminiscence of Melville continues:

It is strange how he persists – and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before – in wandering to and fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other. If he were a religious man, he would be one of the most truly religious and reverential; he has a very high and noble nature, and better worth immortality than most of us. (*J* 628–9)

Melville's entry for November 12 is telegraphic and terse: "At Southport. An agreeable day. Took a long walk by the sea. Sand & grass. Wild & desolate. A strong wind. A good talk" (*J* 51).

If Melville had hoped to find renewed faith in the Holy Land, he must have been sorely disappointed. He was profoundly depressed by everything from the diseased and dirty street urchins to the vendors shrilly hawking cheap souvenirs at holy shrines. At the base of the Pyramids, he was gripped by "awe & terror" (*J* 75) at the concept of monotheism, and peering into passageways that led to burial chambers made him feel dizzy and faint. In his journal, he returns obsessively to the claustrophobic Egyptian tombs and imagines the arid deserts, sacred to Christians, Moslems, and Jews, as symbols of spiritual death.

Given what we know about the disappointments and frustrations Melville had suffered in publishing, his failure to secure a comfortable government job, his physical ailments, and his wife's family's fears for his mental stability, it's not surprising to find Melville experiencing "a genuine Jonah-feeling" in Joppa, where he felt "emphatically alone" with the wind "rising and the swell of the sea increasing, & dashing in breakers upon the reef of rocks within a biscuit's toss of the sea-wall" (*J* 80–1).

Judea's "accumulation of stones" made him question whether "the desolation of the land" was "the result of the fatal embrace of the Diety" (*J* 91), and wandering in Jerusalem, a "city besieged by [an] army of the dead" (*J* 86), he began to feel like one "possessed with devils [*sic*]" (84). The "foam and beach & pebbles" on the shore of the Dead Sea looked "like the slaver of a mad dog" (*J* 83), and at Mount Zion he felt "the mind can not but be sadly & suggestively affected with the indifference of Nature & Man to all that makes the spot sacred to the Christian" (*J* 85).

In Italy, by contrast, Melville was rarely alone; most of the time, he was with other Americans he had met along the way. Individual paintings or sculptures such as the “touchingly maternal” Madonna by Raphael in Naples, the Giotto frescos in Padua, and the statues of the “beautiful” Antinous and the Dying Gladiator which showed “that humanity existed amid the barberousness [*sic*] of the Roman time” (*J* 106), impressed him so favorably that the first talk he wrote for his lecture tour in 1858 was on “Statues in Rome.” Although European cities did not arouse the same dread in Melville as the cities of the Near East, the obsessively morbid tenor of his entries points to a depressed state of mind.

More than mere exploration of Europe and the Near East, this trip was an exploration of his doubts and beliefs, an odyssey of psychic survival and painful self-discovery. In addition to *Clarel* (1876), the fruits of Melville’s desperate pilgrimage include “Statues in Rome” and the poems about art, architecture, ancient history, and sexual identity that later appeared in the privately published volume *Timoleon* (1891).

“Statues in Rome” focuses on great works of art as “realizations of the soul” and “representations of the ideal. They are grand, beautiful, and true, and they speak with a voice that echoes through the ages” (*PT* 408). The lecture, however, was a complete flop with audiences who had come to hear “the man who lived among the cannibals” talk about his adventures; thus, for his next lecture tour, Melville wrote “The South Seas.” Unfortunately, Melville focused not on retelling the adventures that had made him so popular as the author of *Typee*, but instead on using the lecture platform for romantic comparisons between utopian primitive cultures and the degraded modern world. Blaming Christian missionaries for turning “an earthly paradise into a pandemonium,” he called on Christians to eschew contact with native cultures until they had created “a civilization morally, mentally, and physically higher than one which has culminated in almshouses, prisons, and hospitals” (*PT* 420). A reviewer in Pittsfield deemed the talk “redolent of the spicy odors of the South Seas, and sparkling with original thoughts” (*Berkshire Eagle*, December 17, 1858, Leyda 2: 597). Most people in the audience, however, felt let down by Melville, who eschewed the role of entertainer and wanted to make his listeners think.

In his third lecture, “Traveling: Its Pleasures, Pains, and Profits,” he extolled travel as a way to “get rid of a *few* prejudices” (*PT* 422), but instead of relating personal experiences, he gave generalized illustrations of his ideas: “the stock-broker goes to Thessalonica and finds infidels more honest than Christians; the teetotaller finds a country in France where all drink and no one gets drunk; the prejudiced against color finds several hundred millions of people of all shades of color, and all degrees of intellect, rank, and social worth, generals, judges, priests, and kings, and learns to give up his foolish prejudices” (422). He made such obvious advantages as leaving home to experience new sensations and returning to the comfort of the “old hearthstone” sound much less exciting than “the persecutions and extortions of guides” (422) and endless battles with vicious bedbugs and fleas.

Although his pronouncement – “Travel to a large and generous nature is a new birth. Its legitimate tendency is to teach personal humility, while it enlarges the sphere of comprehensive benevolence till it includes the whole human race” (*PT* 423) – is a strong expression of his global vision, most listeners were disappointed. They preferred dramatic anecdotes and spicy stories to noble ideas. Worn out and feeling ill after this engagement, he stayed in Manhattan for a week reading Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters*, visiting art galleries and museums, and stocking up on books, like a squirrel hoarding nuts for another winter.

By New Year’s, 1860, Melville was reading and writing poetry. The trip to the Holy Land was the last Atlantic crossing Melville made. Later that year, he sailed to the West Coast with youngest brother Thomas, captain of the *Meteor*, a merchant ship bound for Manila and the Far East. After waiting in San Francisco for a shipment of goods for the Far East, Tom told Herman they might not be sailing for China after all; Melville, who by then was homesick anyway, went home via steamship and train across the Isthmus of Panama.

With government positions overseas still among the main sources of income for American writers and artists, Melville traveled to Washington to ask for Senator Charles Sumner’s help in securing a consular post soon after the election. Missing Lizzie and the children, he attended the inaugural reception and shook hands with Abraham Lincoln, but he failed to secure a diplomatic posting overseas.

Soon after the Civil War broke out in 1861, Melville began reading *The Rebellion Record*, a compendium of war dispatches followed by dozens of pages of conventional patriotic verse. Soon, he was writing his own poetry, some of it in response to the news, and some to memorialize the dead relatives of his friends. In 1862, badly shaken up in a carriage accident while driving with his friend Joseph E. A. Smith, editor of the *Berkshire Evening Eagle*, he sold Arrowhead to his brother Allan and moved his family to a brownstone at 104 East 26th Street in Manhattan. Walking in Manhattan, browsing through stacks of old books, prints, and engravings had a rejuvenating effect. In 1864, he felt spry enough to take the train to Washington for a visit to his cousin Colonel Henry Gansevoort in his camp and even rode out with the scouting party pursuing Mosby’s Raiders.

Melville’s *Battle-Pieces*, etc., a volume of Civil War poems, was published in 1866. It garnered respectful reviews, but little understanding or appreciation of its anti-war attitudes and its innovative, proto-modernist style. Contemporary reviewers made no mention of the paternalistic prose supplement and the almost complete absence of persons of African descent, slave or free, in Melville’s poems, despite their author’s consistent opposition to slavery. Before the year was out, Melville took a job as a Customs Inspector for the New-York Port, earning \$4 a day.

In May of 1867, his long-suffering but devoted wife Lizzie sought the advice of her pastor about divorcing her husband. Against the advice of her family, she decided not to leave, but tragedy followed, for reasons largely unfathomable, despite the abundance of rumor and innuendo. In October, the Melvilles’

oldest son Malcolm shot himself in the head. In whatever free moments he could find at work, Melville coped with his son's tragic suicide and his own tumultuous and troubled psyche by focusing on poetry. In 1876, with a generous subvention from his uncle Peter, he published *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*.

Malcolm's death and the illnesses and deaths of close friends and relatives combined with advancing age and intimations of his own mortality gradually mellowed Melville, and the Melvilles' marriage lasted. In 1885, he retired from the Custom House, and a year later, 35-year-old Stanwix, the Melvilles' second son, died in San Francisco of tuberculosis, guilt, and grief. Their daughter Bessie, crippled by arthritis by the time she was 26, lived at home. Her sister Frances married happily and had four daughters who were the delight of their grandmother's old age.

In March, 1888, Melville made his last ocean voyage, to Bermuda, arriving back in New York to find the mountains of snow from the great blizzard of '88 piled up before his house. During the last three years of his life, Melville completed three volumes of poetry he had been working on for years, and with Lizzie's help he published them privately: *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), *Timoleon* (1891), and *Weeds and Wildings, with A Rose or Two* (1891).

On September 28, 1891, less than a month after he presented an inscribed copy of *Weeds and Wildings* to Lizzie, Melville died in his sleep of "an enlarged heart" (E. S. Melville's *Memoir*, 171), leaving an unpublished manuscript in a breadbox.

The posthumously published *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* poignantly expresses the sorrow and guilt that haunted Melville as he reflected on his losses and all the small, corrosive failures of his heart. He worked on this masterpiece until a few months before his death, focusing first on the innocent Billy, then on the malevolent Claggart, and finally on the rationalizing, murderous Captain Vere until he created a tragic portrait of the modern world at war that ceased to resemble its putative source, the 1842 mutiny aboard the brig *Somers*. Although to Lizzie and the children, Melville could seem heartless when his demons possessed him, in the end, he stood for the heart, condemning Captain Vere's Caesar-like dismissal of "the feminine in man" (*BB* 111). The result of Vere's cold casuistry was the sacrifice of a young sailor he knew to be innocent to "forms, measured forms" – in other words, to "military necessity" (128).

In his lecture "Traveling: Its Pleasures, Pains, and Profits," Melville had asserted that "The sight of novel objects, the acquirement of novel ideas, the breaking up of old prejudices, the enlargement of heart and mind – are the proper fruit of rightly undertaken travel" (*PT* 423). Like his Quaker captains, he was a man of "greatly superior natural force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart," who "by the stillness and seclusion of many long night-watches in the remotest waters, and beneath constellations never seen here at the north," was "led to think untraditionally and independently" (*MD* 73). A voracious reader, he traveled in books and in his imagination as well as in ships and carriages and trains and wrote more than one

“mighty book” (MD 497) whose “bold and nervous lofty language” (MD 73) takes us through “the great flood-gates of the wonder-world” (MD 7). As Emily Dickinson observed, “There is no Frigate like a Book / to take us Lands away,” and fortunately for us, Melville’s books have survived to tell the story of his marvelous voyages of mind and spirit.

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NOTE

- 1 Melville's mother added a final “e” to the family's name after her husband's death (Robertson-Lorant 622).