

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



HERMAN MELVILLE

Edited by Robert S. Levine

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
HERMAN MELVILLE

EDITED BY
ROBERT S. LEVINE



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1998

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1998

Printed in the United States of America

Typeset in Sabon

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Cambridge companion to Herman Melville / edited by Robert S.
Levine.

p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 0-521-55477-2 (hb). – ISBN 0-521-55571-X (pb)

I. Melville, Herman, 1819-1891 – Criticism and interpretation.

I. Levine, Robert S. (Robert Steven), 1953- . II. Series.

PS2387.C28 1998

813'.3 – dc21

97-33339
CIP

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 521 55477 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 55571 X paperback

CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN BRYANT is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. He is the author of *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* (1993) and of many essays on Melville. He has also edited *A Companion to Melville Studies* (1986) and (with Robert Milder) *Melville's Evermoving Dawn* (1997), and he is the current editor of *Melville Society Extracts*.

LAWRENCE BUELL, John P. Marquand Professor of English at Harvard University, is the author of numerous books and articles on nineteenth-century American literature, including *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (1986) and *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature, Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995).

ANDREW DELBANCO is Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. Among his books are *The Puritan Ordeal* (1989), *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (1995), and *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now* (1997).

JENNY FRANCHOT is Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (1994).

PAUL GILES is Lecturer in American Studies at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Hart Crane: The Contexts of the Bridge* (1986) and *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (1992).

WYN KELLEY is Lecturer in the Literature Department at MIT. She is the author of *Melville's City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century*

CONTRIBUTORS

New York (1996). Her essays have appeared in a number of books and journals, including *Melville's Evermoving Dawn* (1997), *American Literature*, *Partisan Review*, and *Melville Society Extracts*, of which she is Assistant Editor.

ROBERT S. LEVINE is Professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (1989) and *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (1997).

ROBERT K. MARTIN is Professor of English at the University of Montreal. He is the author of *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (1979), *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville* (1986), and numerous essays on British and American literature. He is also the editor of *E. M. Forster: Centenary Revaluations* (1982) and *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman* (1992).

ROBERT MILDER is Professor of English at Washington University. He is the author of *Reimagining Thoreau* (1995) and editor of *Critical Essays on Melville's "Billy Budd, Sailor"* (1989), *"Billy Budd, Sailor" and Selected Tales* (1997) and (with John Bryant) *Melville's Evermoving Dawn* (1997). His essays on Melville have appeared in a number of books and journals, including *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), *American Literature*, *Prospects*, *Approaches to Teaching Melville's "Moby-Dick"* (1985), and *Melville Society Extracts*.

SAMUEL OTTER is Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Melville's Anatomies: Bodies, Discourse, and Ideology in Antebellum America* (1998).

ELIZABETH RENKER is Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University. She is the author of *Strike through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* (1996).

STERLING STUCKEY is Presidential Chair and Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside. Among his many published works are *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (1987) and *Going through the Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History* (1994).

CONTRIBUTORS

CINDY WEINSTEIN is Associate Professor of English at the California Institute of Technology. She is the author of *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature: Allegory in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (1995).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's been a pleasure and an honor to edit this collection. My thanks to T. Susan Chang for the invitation and for her invaluable assistance at the planning stages. Anne Sanow at Cambridge University Press has been wonderfully skillful in helping me to bring things to completion; I am especially grateful for her enthusiastic support of a volume she inherited. My thanks as well to the indefatigable Louise Calabro and Helen Greenberg for their expert work in production and copyediting.

The contributors performed their parts in this joint effort with professionalism, intelligence, good humor, and grace. One of the sad results of actually completing this volume will be the loss of their regular e-mail companionship. For their help along the way, I'm particularly indebted to Jonathan Auerbach, John Bryant, Leonard Cassuto, Ivy Goodman, and Wyn Kelley. Finally, I wish to thank Stephen Donadio for introducing me to the endless fascinations of Herman Melville.

CHRONOLOGY OF MELVILLE'S LIFE

- 1819 Born New York City, August 1, third child of Allan Melvill, merchant and importer, and Maria Gansevoort Melvill, daughter of American Revolutionary hero General Peter Gansevoort. Brothers and sisters: Gansevoort (1815-46), Helen Maria (1817-88), Augusta (1821-76), Allan (1823-72), Catherine (1825-1905), Frances Priscilla (1827-85), Thomas (1830-84).
- 1825 With Gansevoort, enters New-York Male High School.
- 1828 Named best speaker in the high school's Introductory department.
- 1829 Enters the grammar school of Columbia College, joining Gansevoort.
- 1830 After Allan Melvill liquidates his failing business, the Melvills move to Albany. With Gansevoort, Herman enrolls at the Albany Academy. Lemuel Shaw, Allan's friend and Herman's future father-in-law, named Chief Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts.
- 1831-2 For financial reasons, Herman is withdrawn from the Albany Academy in October 1831. Allan journeys to New York in late November 1831 to take care of business matters. On his return to Albany, on December 10, he's forced to cross the frozen Hudson River on foot. Feverish, delirious, and in debt, he dies on January 28, 1832. Herman begins clerking at the New York State Bank. Sometime between 1832 and 1834, perhaps to dissociate the family from the father's failures, Maria adds the "e" to "Melvill."
- 1833-7 Continues with his bank job until spring 1834, when he begins working at Gansevoort's cap and fur store. Attends the Albany Classical School in 1835 and then the Albany Academy (1836-7). Continues working for his brother until the

- business fails in 1837. In the fall of that year he teaches at the Sikes District school near Pittsfield.
- 1838 Publishes in the March 24 issue of the *Albany Microscope* satirical remarks on the area's young men's debating clubs. In November, after the family's diminished finances force a relocation to Albany, Melville enrolls at Lansingburgh Academy, where he studies surveying and engineering.
- 1839 Under the pseudonym "L.A.V.," publishes two sketches, "Fragments from a Writing Desk," in the May *Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser*. On June 4 he signs on as a "boy" with the merchant ship *St. Lawrence*. Sails from New York to Liverpool and back from June 5 to October 1. Shortly after his return, he begins teaching at the Greenbush and Schodack Academy in Greenbush, New York.
- 1840 Leaves his position at Greenbush because of the school's inability to pay him. Teaches in the spring in Brunswick, New York, and then, accompanied by his friend Eli James Murdock Fly, visits his uncle Thomas Melvill in Galena, Illinois, to explore vocational possibilities in the West. Returning East, he signs on with the whaling ship *Acushnet* in New Bedford after failing to find a job in New York.
- 1841-4 Departs for the South Seas on the *Acushnet* on January 3, 1841. On July 9, 1842, he jumps ship with Richard Tobias Greene at Nukahiva Bay in the Marquesas Islands, remaining among the islanders of Taipi Valley for four weeks before signing on with the Australian whaler *Lucy Ann*. At Tahiti, he is sent ashore and nominally imprisoned as a mutineer, only to escape in October with John Troy. He then signs on with the Nantucket whaling ship *Charles and Henry* in November 1842. (At around the same time, his first cousin Guert Gansevoort is involved in putting down the "mutiny" on the U.S. brig *Somers*.) Discharged in May 1843 in the Hawaiian Islands, Melville works at various jobs – pin setter in a bowling alley, clerk in a store – until enlisting in the United States Navy in Honolulu and sailing as an ordinary seaman aboard the frigate *United States* on August 20, 1843. He returns to Boston on October 3, 1844, and soon after his discharge rejoins his family in Lansingburgh.
- 1845-6 Writes a narrative of his adventures among the Typee islanders, which is rejected by New York's Harper & Brothers in May or June 1845. Gansevoort, after stumping for Polk

- in 1844, is rewarded in spring 1845 with the position of Secretary of the American Legation in London. Once there, he helps to place his brother's Typee manuscript with John Murray, who publishes it in his prestigious "Colonial and Home Library" in late February 1846 under the title *Narrative of a Four Months' Residence Among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands*. On March 17 the book, now titled *Typee*, is published by New York's Wiley & Putnam. After meeting Toby Greene in Rochester, who "authenticates" the facts of *Typee*, Melville prepares a "Revised Edition" with an appended "The Story of Toby," which is published later that year. Gansevoort dies in London on May 12, 1846.
- 1847 Attempts to find a government job in Washington, D.C. *Omoo* published by Murray in London (March) and by Harper & Brothers in New York (May). On August 4, Melville marries Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw. After honeymooning in New Hampshire and Canada, they move into a large row house in Manhattan purchased with the help of Lemuel Shaw. Living with Herman and Elizabeth are Allan Melville and his wife, the four unmarried Melville sisters, mother Maria Melville, and (on occasion) brother Tom Melville. Writes for the *Literary World*, edited by Evert A. Duyckinck, and for *Yankee Doodle*, edited by Cornelius Mathews.
- 1849 Rejected by Murray, *Mardi* is published by Richard Bentley in London (March) and by Harper in New York (April). *Redburn* is published by Bentley (October) and Harper (November). Birth of son, Malcolm, on February 16. In October, Melville departs for a trip to London and the Continent, returning January 31, 1850.
- 1850 *White-Jacket* published by Bentley in London (January) and by Harper in New York (March). On August 5, Melville, while vacationing in Pittsfield, meets Hawthorne and they quickly become friends; later that month he publishes "Hawthorne and His Mosses" in the *Literary World*. In September, with money borrowed from his father-in-law, Melville purchases a 160 acre farm in Pittsfield, which he names "Arrowhead," and moves there with his family.
- 1851 Dedicated to the "Genius" of Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Whale* published by Bentley in London (October) and, with

- the title changed to *Moby-Dick*, by Harper in New York (November). Birth of second son, Stanwix, on October 22. In a famous test of the Fugitive Slave Law, Chief Justice Shaw, in April, orders Thomas Sims returned to his southern owner (in 1854, in another famous case, he orders the fugitive slave Anthony Burns returned to his owner).
- 1852 Rejected by Bentley, *Pierre* published by Harper in New York (August) and by Sampson Low in London (November).
- 1853 Between 1853 and 1856, Melville publishes fourteen tales and sketches in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Birth of daughter, Elizabeth, on May 22. Melville's family makes an unsuccessful effort to secure him a consulship. Evidence suggests that he completes a book manuscript, *The Isle of the Cross*, which the Harpers choose not to publish.
- 1855 Serialized in *Putnam's*, *Israel Potter* published by Putnam in New York (March) and by George Routledge in London (May). Birth of second daughter, Frances, on March 2.
- 1856 *The Piazza Tales*, which collects five of the pieces in *Putnam's*, including "Bartleby, The Scrivener" (1853) and "Benito Cereno" (1855), published by Dix & Edwards in New York (1856) and distributed in England by Sampson Low. Concerned about his son-in-law's health, Shaw finances Melville's travels to Europe and the Holy Land (October 11, 1856, to May 20, 1857). Melville visits Hawthorne in Liverpool in November 1856.
- 1857-60 *The Confidence-Man* published by Dix & Edwards in New York (April 1857) and by Longman in London (April 1857). Between late 1857 and 1860 Melville undertakes three lecture tours, speaking first on "Statues in Rome" (1857-8), next on "The South Seas" (1858-9), and finally on "Traveling" (1859-60). In 1860 he fails in his efforts to publish a poetry manuscript. With his brother Thomas at the helm, he embarks for California on May 30, 1860, aboard the clipper ship *Meteor*. Shaken by their perilous journey around Cape Horn, Melville in November returns via Panama to New York without his brother.
- 1861 Journeys to Washington, D.C., in another failed quest to obtain a consulship. Lemuel Shaw dies in Boston on March 30.
- 1862 After returning to Pittsfield, Melville is severely injured when thrown from a wagon.

CHRONOLOGY OF MELVILLE'S LIFE

- 1863 Purchases his brother Allan's home at 104 East Twenty-Sixth Street and moves to New York. Allan purchases Arrowhead.
- 1864 Visits Civil War battlefields on the Virginia front with Allan. Hawthorne dies May 19.
- 1866 Publishes four Civil War poems in *Harper's. Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, a collection of Melville's war poetry, published by Harper in New York (August). On December 5, he assumes the duties of District Inspector of the United States Customs Service at the port of New York.
- 1867 Unhappy in her marriage and evidently fearful of her husband, Elizabeth Melville discusses with her minister, Henry Bellows, the possibility of a legal separation. In May, Bellows proposes a kind of kidnapping scheme to help Elizabeth obtain sanctuary with her Boston relatives, a scheme which she and her family eventually reject. On September 11, the Melvilles' son Malcolm dies from a self-inflicted gunshot to the head.
- 1872 Maria Gansevoort Melville dies April 1 at the age of eighty-two.
- 1876 *Clarel* published in New York by Putnam (June). Melville's uncle Peter Gansevoort pays for the publishing expenses.
- 1885 Resigns from his position as District Inspector of Customs (December 31).
- 1886 The Melvilles' son Stanwix dies in San Francisco on February 23.
- 1888 Privately publishes *John Marr and Other Sailors* in an edition of twenty-five copies after receiving a bequest of \$3,000 from his sister Frances Priscilla.
- 1891 Privately publishes *Timoleon* in an edition of twenty-five copies. Dies September 28. An unpublished volume of poems, titled "Weeds and Wildings Chiefly," the sketch "Daniel Orme," and *Billy Budd* are left in manuscript. The first published version of *Billy Budd* appears in 1924.

CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>Chronology of Melville's Life</i>	xv
 Introduction	 I
ROBERT S. LEVINE	
1 "Race" in <i>Typee</i> and <i>White-Jacket</i>	12
SAMUEL OTTER	
2 The Tambourine in Glory: African Culture and Melville's Art	37
STERLING STUCKEY	
3 <i>Moby-Dick</i> as Revolution	65
JOHN BRYANT	
4 <i>Pierre's</i> Domestic Ambiguities	91
WYN KELLEY	
5 "A ——!": Unreadability in <i>The Confidence-Man</i>	114
ELIZABETH RENKER	
6 Melville the Poet	135
LAWRENCE BUELL	
7 Melville's Traveling God	157
JENNY FRANCHOT	
8 Melville and Sexuality	186
ROBERT K. MARTIN	
9 Melville, Labor, and the Discourses of Reception	202
CINDY WEINSTEIN	

CONTENTS

IO	“Bewildering Intertanglement”: Melville’s Engagement with British Culture PAUL GILES	224
II	Melville and the Avenging Dream ROBERT MILDER	250
	Afterword ANDREW DELBANCO	279
	<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	287
	<i>Index</i>	299

ROBERT S. LEVINE

INTRODUCTION

But I dont know but a book in a man's brain is better off than a book bound in calf – at any rate it is safer from criticism.

Melville to Evert A. Duyckinck, letter of 16 August 1850

This collection is both a handbook to Melville and a provocation. As expected of a Cambridge *Companion*, it provides readers with comprehensive analyses of the major writings and motifs of a canonized master of world literature. At the same time, this volume has been conceived in a Melvillean spirit of suspicion and revision. Accordingly, it is animated by a dialectical interplay between traditional and newer approaches to Melville. This is a particularly opportune time for such a volume. Over the past two decades or so, the “American Renaissance” has been dramatically reconceived by feminist, African-American, new historical, and other critical approaches. Such key works as Michael Rogin’s *Subversive Genealogy* (1983), Waichée Dimock’s *Empire for Liberty* (1989), and Eric Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations* (1993) are but three of the many books that have offered new ways of thinking about the ideological and political implications of Melville’s art. There have also been major developments in more traditional, archivally based Melville scholarship. Recent discoveries of Melville family papers (now at the New York Public Library), the publication of such important works as John Bryant’s *Melville and Repose* (1993), Stanton Garner’s *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* (1993), several volumes in the nearly completed Northwestern–Newberry edition of Herman Melville, and biographies by Laurie Robertson-Laurant (1996) and Hershel Parker (1996) have helped us to make better sense of Melville’s compositional practices, aesthetics, sources, biography, and relation to contemporaneous literary debates. The renewed attention to Melville hasn’t been confined to the scholarly world. As the contributors to this *Companion* were completing their essays, Hershel Parker’s reworking of *Pierre*, replete with illustrations by Maurice Sendak, was published to considerable fanfare

by a commercial press; the Robertson-Laurant and Parker biographies appeared one after the other (also to widespread public notice); Melville scholars were featured in a television special, "Great Books: *Moby-Dick*," on the Learning Channel; and a debate in Melville studies between "traditional" and "revisionary" scholars on the subject of Melville's possible misogyny (and wife beating) was the subject of a feature article in a December 1996 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*.¹

Discovered – or rediscovered – in the early decades of the twentieth century, Melville now more than ever seems *the* monumental writer of nineteenth-century America whose presence on the literary and cultural landscape is all but inescapable. And yet with the monumentalizing of Melville comes the risk that his texts will lose their ability to speak to readers in fresh and provocative ways. Emerson's warning about the pitfalls of canonization seems particularly apt today. As he writes in "The American Scholar" (1837), there is the danger that the "love of the hero" will become corrupted into the "worship of his statue." When such hero worshiping occurs, acolytes tend to perform the "grave mischief" of making the celebrated author's genius a matter of "the record" and "accepted dogmas." Tendencies toward cultural monumentalization may suit the annotating needs of the "bookworm" but, Emerson continues, they risk doing infinite damage to the possibilities of what he calls "creative reading," the sort of reading that encourages dynamic interactions between reader and text.²

Melville was acutely aware of the harm the canonizing practices of his own literary times could do to readers and writers (see especially Book XVII of *Pierre*). In remarks perhaps antithetical to the very title *Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, the narrator of *White-Jacket*, in the course of discussing his seemingly undisciplined reading practices on the *Never-sink*, refers to the "companionable" text: "My book experiences on board of the frigate proved an example of a fact which every book-lover must have experienced before me, namely, that though public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there; those which seem put into our hands by Providence; those which pretend to little, but abound in much." Though it's difficult to imagine a reader who could pick up a Melville volume these days without sensing its "imposing air," I think we should take the sentiments of this passage seriously as a statement of Melville's desire to engage readers outside the imposing networks of institutional and cultural authority. For the reader willing to "*dive*," the act of adventurous, unmediated reading, a kind of taking to sea, could provide an enviable education,

what Ishmael, with reference to whaling, calls “my Yale College and my Harvard.”³

I would suggest that Melville could write so buoyantly in *White-Jacket* of the excitement and value of extra-institutional reading because his narrative strategies really do make him the best sort of guide to his works. Throughout his career, even in the seemingly elusive *The Confidence-Man*, Melville has regularly assumed a metacritical role of guiding and challenging readers’ responses to his works by foregrounding issues of interpretation. Consider, for example, the ways in which Melville in *Typee* links tattooing with writing (and reading); the ways in which he develops connections between reading *White-Jacket* and reading *White-Jacket’s* white jacket; the numerous moments in *Moby-Dick* when he elaborates analogies between reading whales and reading his complex novel about whales. Melville hardly provides interpretive answers or reassurances, but, even if one grants that the motif of con artistry is central to his writings, his numerous efforts to complicate the reading process are mostly done with the intention of helping readers to become better readers of his texts. As he suggests in *The Confidence-Man*, reworking *Redburn’s* notion of the novel as a kind of guidebook, “true” novels offer something like a map to the reader: “the streets may be very crooked, he may often pause; but, thanks to his true map, he does not hopelessly lose his way.”⁴

Convinced of Melville’s status as “companion” to his texts, I should confess that before I took on the job of editing this volume I had to question its need, even with the upsurge of critical and popular interest in Melville. I also recalled my own experience of beginning to learn how to read Melville. In the 1970s, when I was an undergraduate, I talked myself into a graduate lecture class on Melville, where I expected to be immersed in the latest structuralist, poststructuralist, and historicist approaches to an author I had always found to be imposing and distant. Instead, much to my surprise (and retrospective delight), the professor simply had us read most of everything Melville wrote, in the order in which he wrote it, starting with *Typee* and concluding with *Billy Budd*. (At least I thought he had had us read everything Melville wrote until I learned several years later that Melville was also a poet of the first rank.) The professor’s method of regularly calling our attention to those moments in Melville’s texts when the narratives reflect critically on the interrelated dynamics of writing, reading, and interpretation – and demanding that we come to terms with those moments as central, defining occasions in Melville – quickly helped me (and my classmates) to feel a more intimate connection to Melville’s art. And so we spent a good deal of time discussing analogies between the