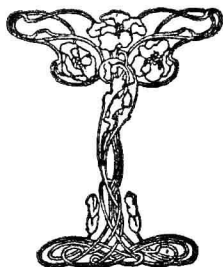


Shorter Novels of
Herman Melville

SHORTER NOVELS *of*
HERMAN MELVILLE

With an Introduction by
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BLACK AND GOLD EDITION
JANUARY, 1942

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*Manufactured
in the United States of America*

INTRODUCTION

I

ON Monday, September 28, 1891, at 104 East 26th Street, New York City, an obscure and elderly private citizen quietly died in bed. His funeral, at Woodlawn Cemetery, was attended by his wife and his two daughters—all of his immediate family that survived—and a meagre scattering of family acquaintances. The *New York Times* missed the news of this demise, but published a few days later an editorial which began:

"There has died and been buried in this city, during the current week, at an advanced age, a man who is so little known, even by name, to the generation now in the vigour of life, that only one newspaper contained an obituary account of him, and this was of but three or four lines."

In 1885, Robert Buchanan, in speaking of a pilgrimage he had made to these shores, wrote of Melville in the *London Academy*: "I sought everywhere for this Triton, who is still living somewhere in New York. No one seemed to know anything of the one great writer fit to stand shoulder with Whitman on that continent."

The man who had created Moby-Dick had, in early manhood, prayed that if his soul missed its haven that it might, at least, end in utter wreck. "All Fame is patronage," he had once in the long past written to Hawthorne; "let me be infamous." But as if in contempt even for this preference, he had, during the last half of his life, cruised off and away upon boundless and uncharted water; and in the end he sank down into death, without a ripple of renown.

Though for the twenty years between 1866 and 1886, Melville had been employed as Inspector of Customs, and the world at large had seemed utterly to have forgotten him as a man-of-letters, his wife, though temperamentally unfitted to understand him in any profound essential, had borne with him gallantly through poverty, sickness, and apparent failure, and on his certificate of death she declared her faith by giving his "Occupation" as that of "Writer." And the funeral once over, Mrs. Melville returned to his bedroom study, with its black, narrow bed, its black bookcases lined with volumes of poets and philosophers, with its prints and etchings that Melville had collected, and at the massive and ornate desk (brought over from France by Melville's father before Melville's birth) she went through Melville's papers. What was destroyed will never be known. What has survived she sorted, tied with pink tape into orderly bundles frequently labelled in pencil in her hand, and deposited the slight bulk of it all into a miniature trunk hardly larger than an average sized suit-case, where they reposed untampered with for twenty-eight years.

Mrs. Melville died; and then the older of her two daughters. The other daughter had married, and to *her* daughter, Mrs. Eleanor Melville Metcalf, descended this trunk.

As a small girl, Mrs. Metcalf had been perhaps as intimate a companion to Melville's solitude as any human soul alive. In recollection of Melville, Mrs. Metcalf has written:

"I was not yet ten years old when my grandfather died. To put aside all later impressions gathered from those who knew him long and coloured by their personal reactions, all impressions made by subsequent reading of his books, results in a series of childish recollections, vividly homely scenes wherein he formed a palpable background for my own interested activities.

"Setting forth on a bright spring afternoon for a trip to Central Park, the Mecca of most of our pilgrimages, he made a brave and striking figure as he walked erect, head thrown back, cane in hand, inconspicuously dressed in a dark blue suit and a soft black felt hat. . . .

"We never came in from a trip of this kind, nor indeed from any walk, but we stopped in the front hall under a coloured engraving of the Bay of Naples, its still blue dotted with tiny white sails. He would point at them with his cane and say, 'See the little boats sailing hither and thither.' . . .

"Once in a long while his interest in his grandchildren led him to cross the river and take the suburban train to East Orange, where we lived. He must have been an impressive figure, sitting silently on the piazza of our little house, while my sister and I pranced with a neighbour's boy and his express wagon, filled with a satisfied sense of the strength and accomplishment of our years. When he had had enough of such exhibitions, he would suddenly rise and take the next train back to Hoboken.

"Chiefly do I think of him connected with different parts of the 26th Street house.

"His own room was a place of mystery and awe to me; there I never ventured unless invited by him. It looked bleakly north. The great mahogany desk, heavily bearing up four shelves of dull gilt and leather books; the high dim bookcase, topped by strange plaster heads that peered along the ceiling level, or bent down, searching blindly with sightless balls; the small black iron bed, covered with dark cretonne; the narrow iron grate; the wide table in the alcove, piled with papers I would not dream of touching—these made a room even more to be fled than the back parlour, by whose door I always ran to escape the following eyes of his portrait, which hung there in a half light. Yet lo, the paper-piled table also held a little bag of figs, and one of

the pieces of sweet stickiness was for me. 'Tittery-Eye' he called me, and awe melted into glee, as I skipped away to my grandmother's room, which adjoined.

"That was a very different place—sunny, comfortable and familiar, with a sewing machine and a *white* bed like other peoples'. In the corner stood a great arm chair, where he always sat when he left the recesses of his own dark privacy. I used to climb on his knee, while he told me wild stories of cannibals and tropical isles. Little did I then know that he was reliving his own past. We came nearest intimacy at these times, and part of the fun was to put my hands in his thick beard and squeeze it hard. It was no soft silken beard, but tight curled like the horse-hair breaking out of old upholstered chairs, firm and wiry to the grasp, and squarely chopped.

"Sad it is that he felt that his grandchildren would turn against him as he grew older. He used to forebode as much. . . ."

In the case of Mrs. Metcalf, at least, his persecution pattern was misplaced. She it was who elected herself to the trust of preserving all possible records of her grandfather. And with Mrs. Metcalf it was my privilege to examine the trunk of Melville papers just arrived in her possession, and to untie and examine the neatly docketed parcels that Mrs. Metcalf had preserved.

Not the least exciting bundle in the trunk was a batch of some 340 sheets of yellow paper, about six by eight inches, covered with an incredibly crabbed manuscript in pencil in Melville's hand. A posthumous novel it turned out to be: *Billy Budd*. "Friday, November 16, 1888, Begun," it started off; "End of Book, April 19, 1891," it concluded. Here then seemed a completed work finished within a few months of Melville's death: a last testament to a world he

had come to rate as being too inconsiderable to address, written in the room that had filled Mrs. Metcalf with such mystery and awe, and by the man whose beard she had crumpled in her hands,—the man whose published works had marked him as the most completely disillusioned of American writers.

This, as everything else, I was permitted to copy. In 1924, in a limited edition, *Billy Budd* was published for the first time by Constable and Company, in England,—and never since.* And between that edition and this present one there are certain minor variations which need a word of comment.

Such is the state of the *Billy Budd* manuscript that there can never appear a reprint that will be adequate to every ideal. In the first place (though this is not the worst difficulty) the script is in certain parts a miracle of crabbedness: misspellings in the grand manner; scraps of paragraphs cut out and pasted over disembowelled sentences; words ambiguously begun and dwindling into waves and dashes; variant readings, with no choice indicated among them. More disheartening than this even, is one floating chapter (Section IV in both this and the Constable Edition) with no numbering beyond the vague direction "To be inserted." The manuscript is evidently in a more or less tentative state as to details, and without some editing it would be in parts unintelligible. In such editing for intelligibility with the least possible departure from accuracy, I have only occasionally varied from the Constable text. In several cases I have been persuaded to change a single word; less frequently, the order of words; and once, in Section XXV, I have shifted a paragraph.

The three other narratives herein contained—*The Encantadas*, or *Enchanted Isles*; *Bartleby the Scrivener*; *Benito Cereno*—appeared originally in *Putnam's Monthly Maga-*

zine in 1853-4-5, and were included by Melville among the six pieces of *The Piazza Tales* (1856). *The Piazza Tales* have been but once reprinted—in the limited Constable Edition of Melville's Works; *Benito Cereno* separately has been once reprinted again—in a limited edition of the Nonesuch Press. Until this volume, these things have been practically unavailable. They are of prime importance, not only for their inherent qualities as works of art, but because of the very peculiar position they hold in Melville's development both as an artist and as a man.

II

The early effulgence of Melville's genius, and its long obscurity—the brilliant early achievement, the long and black eclipse: here is the most striking single aspect of his career. Yet, in its popular statement, this apparent discontinuity in his development has been surrounded by a lot of unnecessary mystery, with whispers from elegiac synods that he went insane. Romantically and irresponsibly viewed, Melville's career is like a star that drops a line of streaming fire down the sky—and then the dark and blasted shape that sinks into the earth. The figure is profoundly misleading. It is a fact that Melville was thirty-two when he produced *Moby-Dick*, his undoubted masterpiece and his sixth narrative. It is further true that the forty years which lay ahead of him after this were largely spent in sedulous isolation, and deepening silence. But it is at once both true and perniciously deceptive to say that he gave up the attempt to support himself and his family by writing books "because of some odd psychological experience that has never been definitely explained."

In the midst of the composition of *Moby-Dick* Melville

wrote to Hawthorne: "My development has been all within a few years past. I am like one of those seeds taken out of the Egyptian pyramids, which, after being three thousand years a seed and nothing but a seed, being planted in English soil, it developed itself, grew to greenness, and then fell to mould. So I. Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself. But I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould." From a superficial view of Melville's life this seems strict history and sound prophecy. It is neither.

Not the least remarkable part of this pronouncement of Melville's is its discounting of the crowded years of his early manhood,—years of whaling, and captivity among practising cannibals, and mutiny, and South Sea drifting, and service in the Navy. His youth and early manhood he had spent in barbarous outposts of human experience. When, in October, 1844, Melville was in Boston discharged from the Navy, he made the dizzy transition from vagabondage in Polynesia to the stern yoke of self-supporting citizenship—and he made it at the age of twenty-five. "From my twenty-fifth year I date my life." And the first two steps in that initiation were singularly momentous: Melville sat down to the feverish making of books; he married the only daughter of Chief Justice Shaw of Massachusetts. The manuscript for *Typee* was bought in London by John Murray, by an agreement dated December, 1845. Melville was married to Elizabeth Shaw on August 4, 1847.

Although the evidence is almost wholly circumstantial, it would appear that at the time of his marriage there was every promise of a happy and brilliant career ahead. Behind, it is

true, lay morbidity, bitterness, and rebellion: traits that are manifested, after all, in the green immaturity of many of our most upright and seasoned pillars of society.

His childhood had been spent in Albany and in New York. Both of his parents were of powerful family connections. His father had been merchant importer of French notions: a man who, by the extensive records of him which survive, was a snob, a prig, an epic bore;—and by Melville's own intimation, a hypocrite besides. Though he died rich in ostentatious respectability, he died with no corresponding abundance of corruptible riches. And nothing in his life more ill became him than his failure in business and his bequest of poverty to his wife and eight children.

Herman, the second son and third child, was not thirteen years old at the time of his father's decease: young enough to cherish up into early manhood the most extravagant idealization of his male parent. His first venture to sea as a youth, for example, though provoked in part by poverty and discontent, had as one of its most clearly defined goals a pious pilgrimage to retrace the steps of his father in Liverpool as they were mapped out in an old dog-eared guide-book which Melville cherished.

But as Melville grew in years, he did not grow in charity towards either of his parents. In his novel *Pierre*, he draws a vindictive delight in pronouncing, under a thin disguise, an unsubstantiated libel upon his father's memory. This dark wild book of incest and disaster is of the greatest importance as a document in autobiography. Most of the characters in *Pierre* are unmistakably idealizations of actual people. The hero, Pierre Glendinning, is a glorification of Melville's self; the widowed mother, Marie Glendinning, owes more to Melville's mother, Marie Gansevoort, than the initials of her name. And in this book Melville exorcises the ghost of his

father, and traces the ambiguous steps by which Pierre, at the age of nineteen, arrived at the staggering conviction that his sainted parent had in his youth been a lecherous rake.

As a child, Melville's imagination had been unusually active. "I always thought my father," he says "a marvellous being, infinitely purer and greater than I was, who could not by any possibility do wrong or say an untruth." With this "dangerous predominance of the imagination" it was inevitable that he should early begin to experience a poignant incompatibility between reality and heart's desire—between the worlds of fancy and of fact. From his infancy, it would seem, he began to view perfect happiness as a possession lurking always just beyond the horizon. But to him, paradise were less than paradise if he could not return to the humdrum world to make an ostentation of his enviable superiority. He confesses that as a boy he used to think "how fine it would be, to be able to talk about barbarous countries; with what reverence and wonder people would regard me, if I had just returned from the coast of Africa or New Zealand: how dark and romantic my sunburnt cheeks would look; how I would bring home with me foreign clothes of rich fabric and princely make, and wear them up and down the streets, and how grocers' boys would turn their heads to look at me as I went by." The Narcissism here playfully flaunted—a trait fundamental and persistent in Melville's character—is more strikingly indicated where Melville asks in *Moby-Dick*: "Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother to Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the

ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to all." When he thus compares himself to Narcissus tormented by the irony of being two, he was perhaps hotter on the trail of the truth about himself than he was at the time aware.

"I am tormented," he said, "with an everlasting itch for things remote." This disorganizing appeal of other times and other places emerged early in his childhood. "We had several pieces of furniture in the house," he says, speaking of his early years, "that had been imported from Europe. These I examined again and again, wondering where the wood grew; whether the workmen who made them still survived, and what they could be doing with themselves."

It is one of the few certainties of life that a boy who sits abstracted in this mood, with his eye fixed upon a table leg, is not likely to die an efficiency expert. At the age of fifteen, introspective and morbidly sensitive, a poor relative in a family of well-to-do uncles and aunts, Melville found himself faced with the premature necessity of coming to some sort of terms with life on his own account. Helped by an influential uncle, he tried working in a bank. The experiment was not a tempting success. His next venture was clerking in his brother's fur-and-cap store. Banking and clerking drove him to the farm of another uncle, who had lived twenty-one years in France, where he alternated agriculture with rustic school teaching. The end result was desperation and the luxury of self-pity. "Talk not of the bitterness of middle-age and after-life," he wrote in retrospect; "a boy can feel all that, and much more, when upon his young soul the mildew has fallen. . . . Before the death of my father I never thought of working for my living, and never knew there were hard hearts in the world. . . . I had learned to think much, and bitterly, before my time." Had he been endowed with less impetuosity, with less abundance

of physical vitality, he might have moped tamely by the family hearth and "yearned." As it was, he resolved to slough off the irksome respectabilities of well-to-do uncles and cousins and aunts. Goaded by hardship, and lured by the mirage of distance, he decided to view the watery world. "With a philosophic flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. This is my substitute for pistol and ball."

Redburn: His First Voyage. Being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman (1849) is the only surviving record of Melville's initial attempt "to sail beyond the sunset." In the words of Mr. H. S. Salt: "It is a record of bitter experience and temporary disillusionment—the confessions of a poor, proud youth, who goes to sea 'with a devil in his heart' and is painfully initiated into the unforeseen hardships of a sea-faring life."

Before the time of Melville's hegira, many a young man of good family and education bade farewell to a home of comfort and refinement and made his berth in a smoky, fetid fore-castle to learn the sailor's calling. Ships were multiply-ing fast, and no really lively and alert seaman need long stay in the fore-castle. The sea was then a favourite career, not only for American boys with their way to make in the world, but for the sons of wealthy men as well. And Melville's relatives would doubtless have been agreeably surprised had he attempted to justify his sea-going by reminding them that at this time it was nothing remarkable for seamen to become full-fledged captains and part owners at the age of twenty-one, or even earlier. Melville's brother Tom chose such a career. But Melville was unmoved by any such vulgar and mundane considerations. "At that early age," he says, "I was as unambitious as a man of sixty."

In any event, this early recourse to the ocean was a

heroic measure, calculated either to take the nonsense out of Melville, or else to drive him straight to suicide, madness, or rum-soaked barbarism. It did none of these things. But he did return to his family still harbouring in his heart a fatal longing to repudiate the restrictions of the world of reality into which he was plunged, hankering still for a return to the happy omnipotence of infancy, for an escape into some land of heart's desire.

Of the details of his existence upon his return we have but the most sketchy records. In the brief record of his life preserved in the Commonplace Book of his wife, this period between Liverpool and the South Seas is dismissed in a single sentence: "Taught school at intervals in Pittsfield and in Greenbush (near East Albany), N. Y." In the interims between pedagogy, Melville "desired to write." In *Pierre* he devotes a whole book—half-satirical, half of the utmost seriousness—discussing his *juvenalia*. Two of the effusions of this period survive: and these ghastly attempts to be "literary" are, indeed, as Melville says in *Pierre*, "equally removed from vulgarity and vigour"—"characterized throughout by Perfect Taste." Melville proceeds ironically to praise these earliest writings for possessing those very defects which his maturer work was damned for not exhibiting. But Melville surely deceived himself if he in any degree believed that had he gone on in the dull and shallow tameness of his first manner he would thereby increase his royalties.

In the beginning, evidently, they brought him neither recognition nor release from poverty. His teaching, while keeping him fit by demanding pugilism as an instrument for discipline, was without further advantage. He did not comfortably fit into any recognized socket of New England respectability, and he had not disciplined himself against the teasing lure of some stupendous discovery awaiting him at

the rainbow's end. One night, during the years immediately ensuing, out on the Pacific, and in the glare and the wild Hindoo odour of the try-works of a whaler in full operation, he fell asleep at the helm. "Starting from a brief standing sleep," he says, "I was horribly conscious of something fatally wrong. I thought my eyes were open; I was half conscious of putting my fingers to the lids and mechanically stretching them still further apart. But, despite all this, I could see no compass before me to steer by. Nothing seemed before me but a jet of gloom, now and then made ghastly by flashes of redness. Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound for any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern."

In headlong retreat from all havens astern, on January 3, 1841, Melville sailed from Fairhaven in the whaler *Acushnet*, bound for the Pacific Ocean and the sperm fisheries.

Just what were the immediate and specific circumstances which precipitated Melville into this drastic step will probably never be known: what burst of demonic impulse, either of anger, envy, or spite; what passionate disappointment; what crucifixion of affection; what sinister discovery. But this is certain: that when a youth of Melville's temperament and history concludes the Christmas holidays by a mid-winter plunge into the filthy and shabby business of whaling, this shifting of whereabouts is hardly a sign of mere jolly animal exuberance.

Melville was away three and a half years. His experiences during this time, while beyond the pale of civilization, are widely known, and the basis of what popularity as a writer he enjoyed during his life. During his far driftings, however, Melville had sentimentally clung to thoughts of home, —his imagination treacherously caressing those very scenes

whose intimate contact had filled him with revulsion. "Do men ever hate the thing they love?" he asks in *White-Jacket*, perplexed at the paradox of his perpetual recoil. And until the final peace of his extreme old age, the present was always poisoned, for him, by bitter margins of pining and regret.

Of his impressions immediately upon his return he has left no account. Such was the calibre of his imagination, that he must have found the familiar scenes and people unbelievably like he knew they must be, yet incredibly different from what he was prepared to find.

Tanned with sea-faring and exuberant in health, he was effulgent with amazing tales. Deep in his heart, too, was the proud warm memory of a companionship which was to prove itself to be perhaps the happiest in his life. On board the man-of-war in which he had returned from the South Seas, Melville had been immediately under command of Jack Chase, first captain of the top. In *White-Jacket*, Melville glows with the same superlative admiration for Jack Chase that Ouida or the Duchess exhibit in celebrating the conquests of their most irresistible cavaliers. Of no other human being is Melville known to have spoken with such admiration and love, finding in him something heroic yet all human: an educated man, wise as Ulysses, shining as Nelson, azure-eyed, bright-hearted—"wherever you may be rolling over the blue waters, dear Jack, take my best love along with you." It would almost seem that Jack did, and that for this reason Melville lived unhappily many years afterward. This was the one glamorous and exultant attachment of Melville's that time never marred. And it was particularly appropriate that in the ultimate serenity of his old age he should have dedicated *Billy Budd* to Jack Chase.

Though bodily he was in a suburb of Albany, his com-