

HERMAN MELVILLE, "ISHMAEL" OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY J. V. NASH

"ISHMAEL" HERMAN MELVILLE dubbed himself in his greatest novel, *Moby Dick*, and the name was appropriate. He is the "Ishmael" of American literature. Again and again he challenged the dominant social and religious institutions of the mid-nineteenth century. Disgusted with the hypocrisies of his day, and with the evidences of "man's inhumanity to man" which he saw all about him, he became an outcast and wanderer over distant lands and waters, hoping to discover, perchance, some Isle of the Blest, where the deepest yearnings of his heart might find realization and satisfaction. But the quest was vain; at last he abandoned geography and retired into the fastnesses of metaphysics.

The dates of Melville's birth and death are significant. He was born in 1819 and died in 1891. His life-span thus exactly coincides with that of Lowell, but that exclusive Brahmin in his ivory tower at Cambridge probably never heard of Melville. Melville's birth, too, was in the same year with Walt Whitman's, the bard of Camden surviving him by only a twelvemonth. P. T. Barnum, who accumulated a fortune by catering to a public which "loved to be humbugged," passed off the stage in a blaze of publicity in the very year of Melville's death in poverty and obscurity.

Melville was born in New York City and, like Whitman, was of mixed Dutch and English stock. His father, a merchant of the city, died while the boy was young, and Herman's upbringing devolved upon an uncle. His mother seems to have been a woman of great force of character, who exerted a considerable influence upon Herman for a time. But against the maternal influence he ultimately revolted.

Well born and nurtured in good manners and a cosmopolitan tradition, he was, as a child, faced with the premature necessity of coming to some sort of terms with life on his own account. "Before the death of my father," Melville later wrote, "I never thought of working for my living, and never knew that there were hard hearts in the world."

A childhood tragedy, such as the loss of a father, and the change from affluence to poverty, are likely to leave marks of embitterment upon the character, which are never afterwards effaced, and which predispose the mind to a pessimistic attitude.

Melville was a sensitive and impetuous child, of rich but undisciplined imagination. By temperament and circumstance he was soon at hopeless odds with himself and with his environment. Because of the family poverty, his schooling was of the scantiest. His scholastic career ended with a few months at the Albany Classical School. As he himself remarked, he learned to think much and bitterly before his time.

He worked in his brother's cap and fur store at Albany; later he was employed in the bank at that place. He found both of these occupations repugnant. Then he went to his uncle's farm in Massachusetts, where he experimented in farming and school-teaching. But this only heightened his discontent.

"Stirred by motives of desperation, and by the delusion that some stupendous discovery of happiness lay just over the world's rim, Melville planned a hegira."¹ Thus it was that, at the age of eighteen, goaded by hardship and lured by the promise of distant lands, Melville shipped to England on a merchantman as a common sailor.

Then began his long wandering over the face of the earth. He became "Ishmael." He liked the name. "Call me Ishmael," he wrote in *Moby Dick*. "Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little, and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. . . ."

The nature of the thoughts that filled Melville's mind as he was preparing to leave on his first voyage is strikingly revealed in the following reflection: "Talk not of the bitterness of middle age and after life; a boy can feel all that and much more, when

¹ R. M. Weaver, Introduction to *Redburn*.

upon his young soul the mildew has fallen; and the fruit, which with others is only blasted after ripeness, with him is nipped in the first blossom and bud." ²

His experiences on this voyage are set forth in *Redburn*, which was not, however, his first book. The journey was literally filled with hardships for the boy, though the physical privation and suffering were slight as compared with the mental torture caused by the heartlessness and cruelty of the sailors, in whom he could find no companionship.

He stood in the greatest fear of a certain individual named Jackson, whom he describes in a passage of startling realism: This sinister figure "was as yellow as gamboge, had no more whiskers on his cheek than I have on my elbows. His hair had fallen out, and left him very bald, except in the nape of his neck, and just behind the ears, where it was stuck over with short little tufts, and looked like a worn-out shoe brush. His nose had broken down in the middle, and he squinted with one eye, and did not look very straight out of the other. He dressed a good deal like a Bowery boy; for he despised the ordinary sailor rig; wearing a pair of great overall blue trousers, fastened with suspenders, and three red woolen shirts, one over the other . . . and he had a large white wool hat, with a broad rolling brim He might have seen thirty, or perhaps fifty years Nothing was left of this Jackson but the foul lees and dregs of a man; he was thin as a shadow; nothing but skin and bones" Throughout the voyage, Melville was the unfortunate victim of this ruffian's abuse.

But even more disillusioning experiences were awaiting Melville when he landed at Liverpool. Once, while in the vicinity of the docks, he heard a low, feeble wail. He found an opening that led to a nearby cellar. In his own words, "crouching in nameless squalor, with her head bowed over, was the figure of what had been a woman. Her blue arms folded to her livid bosom, two shrunken things like children, that leaned toward her, one on each side I never thought of relieving them; for death was so stamped in their glazed and unimploring eyes, that I almost regarded them as already no more. I stood looking down on them, while my whole soul swelled within me; and I asked myself, what right had anybody in the wide world to

² *Redburn*, p. 10.

smile and be glad when sights like this were to be seen? It was enough to turn the heart to gall; . . . For who were these ghosts that I saw? Were they not human beings? A woman and two girls? With eyes, and lips, and ears like any queen? With hearts which, though they did not bound with blood, yet beat with a dull, dead ache that was their life."

He went out to seek aid. When he informed a ragged old woman neighbor that the unfortunate was still alive, her rejoinder was: "Then she'll never die. She's been down there these three days with nothing to eat;—that I know myself." "She deserves it," muttered an old hag, who was just placing on her crooked shoulders her bag of pickings, and who was turning to totter off. "That Betsy Jennings deserves it—was she ever married, tell me that?" He soon met a policeman. "It's none of my business, Jack," said he. "I don't belong to that street." No one would even lend him a pitcher to carry water to the poor wretches.

Such was Melville's experience of "man's inhumanity to man," in the great Christian city of Liverpool. He had fled from New York and the New World, hoping to find a better civilization in the Old. It is not surprising that he fell into reflections of the most bitter and pessimistic character. He writes: "Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellow men, and yet given to follow our pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead?"

After this first taste of disillusionment abroad, he came home disgusted with everything. He then secured a position teaching school. This proved to be a nerve-racking experience, and once more he sought a means of escape. Again he turned to the sea. In 1841 he shipped on the whaler "Acushnet." But he was just as much dissatisfied with this voyage as with the first. In fact, he found life on board so intolerable that, along with a companion, he deserted the ship and took refuge on an island of the Marquesas group, where he spent four months among the natives.

His novel *Typee* tells of his experiences on the island. The South Sea Islands were the last part of the world to be opened to civilization. They did not come into notice until late in the eighteenth century, when the English gradually began to extend

their control into those far-off seas, primarily through the efforts of Captain Cook. In 1775 the London Missionary Society was organized, its chief object being to Christianize the world as speedily as possible. The South Sea Islands quickly engaged the interested attention of these zealous propagandists, and missionaries were sent out with plentiful supplies of Bibles.

The natives readily accepted the missionaries, little as they may have understood their theology. The Napoleonic wars temporarily interrupted this evangelical activity in England, but at the end of this period there came another movement of missionary zeal. In the wake of the missionaries came the traders, a profane, unscrupulous lot.

It was just at this time that Melville, with his companion—a young man by the name of Green—whom he had induced to escape with him from their ship, arrived on the scene. For four months Melville lived among the natives. In *Typee* he gives a fascinating account of his experiences on the island.

This was the most joyous book that Melville wrote. There was nothing that he would have liked better than to blot out all memories of civilization and live among the natives as one of them. This, he thought, was his one opportunity to find peace and happiness. But he realized that this could not be. He shrank from the ordeal of a complete bodily tattooing, which his native friends urged upon him. Four months later an opportunity came to leave the island, and he took it. A suspicion of the possibility of his being served up at a cannibalistic feast seems to have hastened his decision to get away from the island.

In *Typee* Melville mentions many charming incidents of his association with a native girl, Fayaway. He admits only that they became very good friends. It was considered perfectly legitimate for a man in Melville's position to take a comely young native girl for his mistress. But any suggestion of such a relationship was highly offensive to the Puritan prejudices of Melville's readers, and they damned the book on account of it.

This incensed Melville against the reading public, and his annoyance was increased by the reception accorded his later books. It culminated at last in a fixed attitude of scorn and contempt.

Typee was followed by *Omoo* in 1847. As the publishers put it: "With respect to *Typee*, *Omoo* is the reverse of the medal: as the former work presents the only account ever given of the

state of nature in which the Polynesians are originally found, so the latter production will exhibit them as affected by a prolonged intercourse with foreigners."

In *Omoa*, Melville describes his observations in a subsequent visit among these islands. He writes: "I was painfully struck by the considerable number of sickly or deformed persons; undoubtedly made so by a virulent complaint, which under native treatment, almost invariably affects, in the end, the muscles and bones of the body. In particular, there is a dislocation of the back, most unsightly to behold, originating in a horrible form of the malady."³ This and other bodily afflictions were unknown before the discovery of the islands by the whites.

In his preface he is careful to say: "In every statement connected with missionary operations, a strict adherence to fact has, of course, been scrupulously observed; and in some instances it has even been deemed advisable to quote previous voyages in corroboration of what is offered as the fruit of the author's own observations. Nothing but an earnest desire for truth and good has led him to touch upon this subject at all."

Melville was moved to many sad reflections when he compared the present condition of the natives with the state of things before the arrival of the missionaries and traders. He painted an exceedingly gloomy picture of native life under the new regime. His views regarding the effects of "civilization" are deeply pessimistic. To quote:

"It has been said that the only way to civilize a people is to form in them habits of industry. Judged by this principle, the Tahitians are less civilized now than formerly. True, their constitutional indolence is excessive; but surely, if the spirit of Christianity is among them, so unchristian a vice ought to be, at least, partially remedied. But the reverse is the fact. Instead of acquiring new occupations, old ones have been discontinued. . . .

"To me, so recently from a primitive valley of the Marquesas, the aspect of most of the dwellings of the poorer Tahitians, and their general habits, seemed anything but tidy; nor could I avoid a comparison, immeasurably to the disadvantage of these partially civilized islanders.

³ *Omoa*, p. 131.

"In Tahiti, the people have nothing to do; and idleness, everywhere, is the parent of vice. 'There is scarcely anything,' says the good old Quaker Wheeler, 'so striking, or pitiable, as their aimless, nerveless mode of spending life.' . . .

"The fact is, that the mechanical and agricultural employments of civilized life require a kind of exertion altogether too steady and sustained to agree with an indolent people like the Polynesians. Calculated for a state of nature, in a climate providentially adapted to it, they are unfit for any other. Nay, as a race, they cannot otherwise long exist. . . .

"In view of these things, who can remain blind to the fact that, so far as mere temporal felicity is concerned, the Tahitians are far worse off now, than formerly; and although their circumstances, upon the whole, are bettered by the presence of the missionaries, the benefits conferred by the latter become utterly insignificant when confronted with the vast preponderance of evil brought about by other means." His general conclusion is that "their prospects are hopeless."

His next book, *Mardi*, published in 1849, is divided into three parts: first, a novel of adventure, having nothing to do with the second part, which is a satire on contemporary civilization. The third part is an allegory. In this book he attacks the very foundation of American religion and commercialism. He spares no one. He is very daring, and never hesitates to say what he thinks. There are many satires on minor conventions. He has much to say on superstition and slavery, but the sharpest shafts of his ridicule are directed against the Fundamentalism of his day.

This book was followed by *Whitejacket* in 1850. It relates his experience on an American man-of-war, from Callao, South America, to the United States, in 1843. The conditions which he encountered on this voyage seemed to him the worst of any that he had as yet met. There were, in the United States Navy at that time, thirteen offenses punishable by death, and innumerable others punishable by flogging. Melville was aroused to intense indignation by reason of these barbarous punishments. He wrote his book in order to awake public opinion in favor of reform. It was the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of slavery in the navy, and its effect was noteworthy. It resulted in the abolishment of flogging and other savage punishments in the American Navy.

It was his experience with human cruelty as set forth in this book that led to the publication of *Pierre*, in 1852.

Meanwhile, however, Melville in 1851 published his best known novel, *Moby Dick*. "Melville," says Van Doren, "brought to the task a sound knowledge of actual whaling, much curious learning in the literature of the subject, and, above all, an imagination which worked with great power upon the facts of his own experience. *Moby Dick*, the strange, fierce white whale that Captain Ahab pursues with such relentless fury, was already a legend among the whalers, who knew him as 'Mocha Dick.' It remained for Melville to lend some kind of poetic or moral significance to a struggle ordinarily conducted for no cause but profit. As he handles the story, Ahab, who has lost a leg in the jaws of the whale, is driven by a wild desire for revenge, which has maddened him and which makes him identify *Moby Dick* with the very spirit of evil and hatred. Ahab, not Melville, is to blame if the story seems an allegory, which Melville plainly declares it was not; but it contains, nevertheless, the semblance of a conflict between the ancient and unscathable forces of nature and the ineluctable enmity of man."

In the light of Melville's other books, it is difficult not to read an allegory into *Moby Dick*. In Captain Ahab we may see humanity represented, and in *Moby Dick* the evil forces of nature. Ahab has been terribly injured by *Moby Dick*, and starts out to get revenge, but is in the end overpowered and killed. Man, after all, is powerless against the unthinking and destructive forces of nature. There are many extraordinary characters in the book; among them, Squeegee, a South Sea native who has become one of the whaling crew. To the author, the untutored savage seems vastly superior morally to civilized white men.

The book which raised the greatest furore of any that Melville wrote is *Pierre*. It is a mixture of autobiography, phantasy, and philosophy. The style is horrible; it is as badly written as possible. In it he tried to picture his own mental development, and maliciously satirized his own early attempts at writing.

Pierre tried to get justice done to his illegitimate half-sister, but he failed, and thereupon decided that morality does not pay. He fell into an abyss of pessimism, seeing nothing but selfishness in humanity. "The intention of this dark, wild book

of incest and death seems to be to show the impracticability of virtue; that morality is a luxury occasionally to be indulged in by a strolling divinity, but for man a dangerous form of lunacy." ⁴

This book cost Melville many friends, it ruined his reputation, and caused him to retire into obscurity. It virtually ended his literary career, and he sank into an oblivion that was destined to endure until about 1919.

His few literary efforts after *Pierre* passed almost unnoticed by the public. The only books belonging to this last period that deserve mention are *Israel Potter*, *The Confidence Man*, and *Clarel*.

In *Israel Potter*, "the unnecessary degradation of the hero with which the book closes is utterly inexcusable, both in art and probability; it is a cruel practical joke." ⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*

The Confidence Man comprises a series of melancholy episodes on a Mississippi River boat. The characters seem to be possessed of superhuman conversational endurance. The motto of the book might well be, "He who hates vice hates humanity."

Clarel is extremely difficult to follow. In it he lost his balance completely in metaphysics.

Melville tried marriage, and that also proved to be a disappointment. To one of his restless nature, the obligations of matrimony were irksome; nevertheless there was no escape from them for him. Literary disaster was followed by failing eyesight. Finally, he secured work in the custom house, to gain a scanty livelihood. Here he drudged for twenty-one years, until 1882, and his passing in 1891 was unnoticed. Practically a generation was to elapse before his resurrection as one of the outstanding figures in American literature.

⁴ R. M. Weaver, *Centennial of Herman Melville*.