The Great Leviathan

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Herman Melville: A Biography, Volume 1, 1819-1851
by Hershel Parker
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Herman Melville; drawing by David Levine

1.

Son of one Revolutionary War hero and son-in-law of another, Allan Melvill had, as we would say today, good connections. Among the cousins of his wife, Maria, were the Van Rensselaers, and his own name was honored in the genteel circles of Boston and New York. But he failed miserably in his chosen business as an importer of fabrics and furs and spent his last decade begging his family for loans to ward off creditors unmoved by his pedigree. His health broken, he lived only a little more than twelve years past the birth, in 1819, of his second son, Herman. According to his brother-in-law, Peter Gansevoort, who attended his deathbed in the winter of 1832, he presented during his final illness "the melancholly spectacle of a deranged man."

Allan Melvill left a widow (who added an *e* to her married name soon after her husband's death), four daughters, and four sons without financial security or even immediate means. Herman, whom his father had judged, at age seven, to be "very backward in speech & somewhat slow in comprehension," spent the decade after Allan's death going sporadically to school (where he was overshadowed by his older brother Gansevoort), helping out at his uncle's Berkshire farm, clerking in an

Albany bank and in the hat store that Gansevoort was running, teaching at an academy eager for willing instructors, and working a stint on a merchant vessel that took him to Liverpool and back. None of these jobs opened into a career (he briefly considered surveying, and looked, without success, for work on the Erie Canal); and so, without prospects or plans, he decided to see more of "the watery part of the world." On January 3, 1841, he boarded the whaler *Acushnet* at Fairhaven, Massachusetts (in *Moby-Dick*, the *Pequod* sets sail on Christmas Day), and embarked on a voyage that was to last nearly the collegiate span of four years. "A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard," he wrote ten years later in *Moby-Dick*, with a mixture of resentment and relief at having missed the privileges of the caste into which he was born.

Sailing before the mast was a good choice for Herman Melville and for literature, but a bad one for his future biographers. Not even the log of the *Acushnet* survives—only brief notations on standard forms (known as the "abstract log") about wind and currents and hunting conditions, by which whaling captains gathered data they hoped would be useful for future voyages. No letters remain from Melville's sailor years, though the extant correspondence between family members does contain references to such letters having been received. "How Melville experienced the voyage, day by day," as Hershel Parker laments in his very long new biography, "is wholly undocumented."

Ashore, Melville left not much more of a trail. Fewer than three hundred letters, many of them perfunctory, survive from his life of seventy-two years, as compared, say, to the twelve thousand of Henry James. "Melville left no description of his experiences" on the Erie Canal, Parker tells us, and "not a single record of his life [as a teacher] has been located," and though "the itinerary of the honeymoon is recorded," it tells "little about anything more personal." Yet Parker has managed to produce a 900-page first installment of what will be a two-volume biography of this phantom. This long-awaited book by the dean of Melville scholars, a professor of English at the University of Delaware who has poured into it his staggering knowledge of his subject, will be an immensely valuable resource for generations to come. But reading it is something like what it must have been to travel with Ahab: this biographer hates the void, and stops at nothing to fill it. He treats every conceivable shred of evidence as a sign that his prey is near—from a dictated letter found in an archive in Australia that Melville wrote as a favor for an illiterate sailor, to library books that he might have glanced at. It takes seventeen chapters (some 175,000 words) to get to the point where Melville makes his first serious effort at writing fiction.

There is in this promiscuous detail a certain desperation, and a clue to how the book was composed. Nearly fifty years ago, the pioneer Melville scholar Jay Leyda assembled a chronological compendium, *The Melville Log*, of every

document then known to shed light on Melville's daily activities. Realizing that the *Log* would never be finished (an enlarged edition was published in 1969), Leyda liked to call it *Melville: The Endless Study*. As Leyda's scholarly heir, Parker agreed to take over the work for further expansion, and by the late 1980s he had transferred it onto his software, where it became an "ever-varying and digitized *Log*" that could be "corrected and augmented from day to day."

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In turning this digitized log into a biography of the traditional paper and cloth variety, Parker should have left more of it in his computer. He tells us that the standard English spelling of the word *taboo* (of Polynesian origin), might have been *tabu* if Melville had not switched from *u* to *oo* while revising the manuscript of his first book, *Typee*. He notes that the library aboard the *Charles and Henry* (one of the ships on which Melville resumed his Pacific voyage after deserting from the *Acushnet*) might have included a book on chastity by Sylvester Graham, whom Parker identifies as "the deviser of the popular antiaphrodisiac cracker." He gives the name of every person to whom Gansevoort sent the first reviews of his brother's first book. He discovers that a house on Martha's Vineyard once owned by Valentine Pease, captain of the *Acushnet*, was eventually purchased by the actress Patricia Neal. Reading through these minutiae, one is reminded, during the long stretches when Melville entirely disappears, of watching the Apollo space missions on TV: when the astronaut vanished behind the far side of the moon, the anchorman chattered on with compensatory noise.

Take, for instance, the undocumented whaling journey. We know that in July 1842, after eighteen months at sea, Melville deserted from the *Acushnet* at Nukahiva in the Marquesas Islands, where he spent roughly a month inland, held in what he later called "indulgent captivity" by the Typee tribe—rumored to practice cannibalism—before resuming his travels on the Australian whaler *Lucy Ann*. That's about all we know. The only extended account of Melville's time among the cannibals is his own, published in 1846 in *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*—a book he presented to the public as a factual memoir, but that was soon challenged as a hoax.

Fortunately for his reputation as a credible writer, a shipmate who deserted with him, Richard Tobias Greene (called Toby in *Typee*), now a Buffalo sign painter, stepped forward in the summer of 1846 to confirm Melville's main claims—that they had trekked through the mountains into the Typee valley, that a painfully swollen leg had made Melville the object of ministrations by the tribal medicine man, and that Greene had left his injured friend behind, to seek rescue. Beyond this bare outline, most of *Typee* can be neither confirmed nor disproved, and the book has come to be regarded as a work in which experience is embellished as fiction—just as its first skeptical readers suspected.

A fledgling writer looking for a publisher, Melville hoped to attract an audience with the scent of scandal (he praised the "labial melody" of Fayaway, his favorite among the Polynesian girls) but without violating rules of propriety ("there is an abandoned voluptuousness in their character which I dare not attempt to describe"). "Here is a writer," as one reviewer put it, "who spices his books with the most incredible accounts and dark hints of innumerable amours with the half-naked and half-civilized or savage damsels of Nukuheva and Tahiti—who gets up voluptuous pictures, and with cool, deliberate art breaks off always at the right point, so as without offending decency, he may stimulate curiosity and excite unchaste desire." Others reacted with less indignation: "Enviable Herman!," wrote the reviewer in the London *Times*. "A happier dog it is impossible to imagine than Herman in the Typee Valley." This Englishman seems to have gotten it about right. On the Pacific isles, according to Melville, the winds blow "like a woman roused,…fiercely, but still warmly, in our face," and the very landscape is tumescent—the orange trees "spreading overhead a dark, rustling vault, groined with boughs, and studded here and there with the ripened spheres, like gilded balls."

Precisely what experiences lie behind these evocations of a sex-drenched world it is impossible to know. But Parker hates the void—so after quoting Melville's account in *Typee* of the Marquesan girls paddling out to the *Acushnet* intent on providing "unlimited gratification" of the crew's "unholy passions," he speculates that "if Herman heeded the monitor of his conscience during the ceremonies of welcome, it may have been because he was thinking about his chances of getting inland, where the sexual welcome would be as enthusiastic and where the brown girls, if Providence were kind, would never have been touched by men from whaleships."

Later, when the story reaches Melville's return to Boston harbor, Parker's engine of invention remains at full throttle. Finding no contemporary record of what Melville did during his first days in town, he presumes that "the only reasonable thing for Herman to do" was to visit Judge Lemuel Shaw. Shaw, a family friend who had once been engaged to Melville's aunt (she had died during their betrothal) and was executor of the estate of Melville's grandfather, lived in a mansion on Beacon Hill. Among his children was Melville's future wife, Elizabeth, who had struck up a friendship with his sister Helen while he was at sea. Herman, Parker guesses, "may have been invited to stay at the Shaws'." But the guess turns quickly into an assertion:

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In exchange for her stories of his family, Herman told [Elizabeth] some of his wondrous adventures…among a cannibal tribe in the Marquesas…about great whales and others beasts of the sea and about peoples and places she could never hope to know.

Perhaps Herman Melville did speak with Elizabeth Shaw on this occasion, and perhaps she thrilled to the stories that fell, in Parker's words, from the "bearded lips of a brilliant, dark, muscular, handsome young man." Possibly this handsome sailor had been shy in front of his shipmates. On the other hand, he might have joined eagerly in the orgies. Later, savoring Elizabeth's blush, he might have hinted at such things. Or perhaps he never visited her at all. The only thing certain is that we do not know.

2.

The fact is that Herman Melville is a singularly unyielding subject for literary biography. "One portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another," as he says of the whale, "but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness…[because] there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like." The dim record of Melville's life simply disappears into the glare of his work, and the best one can hope for is to glimpse a few moments of convergence between them. Parker is a ferocious researcher, and, beginning with the virtually inaccessible childhood, he delivers an amazing number of such moments. We learn that "Pop" Emmons, to whom Melville refers in an essay on Hawthorne, was a soapbox orator whom he may have seen as a child while visiting the Boston Common, and who got his name because he sold drinks known as "egg pops" after he had finished his oration. We learn that little Herman may also have watched workmen roll wheelbarrows piled high with earth down Beacon Hill to the Charles River, where they were dumped as landfill—a memory that surfaces in *Moby-Dick* when Ishmael remarks that the hills around Boston are sold "by the cartload."

Parker's big book (unfortunately, without annotation) is full of such footnote-sized discoveries. In sum, they add considerably to our knowledge of the stored memories that congregate in Melville's art. But as Melville put it in *Moby-Dick*, "to produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme," and there is no grand theme here—only a reductive and overdetermining one: at the root of every mood and motivation Parker finds sexual craving. It does not take long before the ubiquity of the theme discredits it even when it is apt. When Allan Melvill, having sent his wife and children out of town while trying to save his business, writes to his father that "living as I do alone, you cannot imagine the sacrifice I make to their welfare," Parker is sure (despite the large population of prostitutes in antebellum New York) that he was "complaining of the discomfort he experienced from sexual deprivation." When Allan died, leaving Maria at the age of forty-one with eight children, Parker stresses her bitterness at not being "thought of [any longer] as a sexual being"—though he cannot possibly know anything about the physical vitality of her marriage, and has declared that "she lived every day with

secret shame, fear, and unrevealable, unadmittable resentment toward her husband."

These are hints of what is to come. When Herman reaches adulthood, the sex theme takes charge, and we get a portrait of a randy young man strutting through what Frederick Crews has called "the age of the draped piano leg." Nicknamed "Typee" by friends, Melville, according to Parker, attracted the nineteenth-century equivalent of a rock star's groupies, and was "the first American author to become a sex symbol." He was "a man whose experiences fueled diverse sexual fantasies of many men and some women" (a fact Parker infers chiefly from a phrase in one woman's fan letter—"Typee, you dear creature, I want to see you so amazingly"); and so when Sophia Hawthorne, wife of Melville's great contemporary, remarked upon first meeting him in 1850, that "she saw Fayaway in his face," Parker decides that what she chiefly saw was "a man unlike her husband, a man with a history of sexual conquests."

These certainties are alarming. When Herman returns by train from Washington after a failed attempt in 1847 to land a government job, Parker almost scolds him for being slow to feel "the burden any intelligent male celebrity feels when he is perceived only in terms of his past sexual adventures and his present physicality." When, during Melville's engagement, *Omoo* was ridiculed in the press as a dubious sexual boast ("We have always doubted," wrote one reviewer, "when we hear a man…pluming himself on his virility"), Parker decides that the public insult to Melville's potency must have "disastrously disrupted the prenuptial mood" in which he and Elizabeth were planning their wedding. How does he know this? Despite the enormous scholarship on which this book is based, he supports none of these claims with a footnoted reference, and we are left without a basis on which to trust or doubt him.

Parker is not wrong about the centrality of sex to Melville, yet one feels in this book a certain degree of what Melville called "waggish leering." He barely begins to suggest how Melville transformed a young man's ordinary preoccupation into an extraordinary meditation. One can navigate easily through Melville's books via their sexual jokes—from the aside in *Typee* about a ghostly vessel "tacking…somewhere off Buggerry Island" (a phrase Elizabeth listed after his death among those he had wanted deleted from future editions), to the celebration of the whale's penis in *Moby-Dick* as "grandissimus," and beyond. But to travel this route is to meet only the irreverent writer who loves to undercut the pretension of readers, when, detecting vulgar meanings beneath the nautical ("tacking") or Latin-sounding ("grandissimus") terms, they hide their private delight behind public indignation. Jokes and puns, after all, implicate the audience that "gets" them. "Book!," as Stubb puts it in *Moby-Dick*, "…you'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts."

Melville knew the thoughts are there—possibly always and for everyone, as Parker seems to believe. But what makes Melville's early work remarkable is its frank account of a world where sex has not been relegated from public practice to private thoughts and dreams. *Typee* (and to a lesser degree, *Omoo*) describes a world whose inhabitants have literally no self-consciousness, and no sense of past or future. How much value these books have as anthropological descriptions is as much beside the point as the debate over how accurately they match Melville's actual experiences; they are excursions into an imagined place—a prelapsarian world where pleasure goes unchecked by guilt or shame.

This putative paradise, however, turns out to be a kind of spa where the only item on the menu is lotus—a place where there is no sense of origins or posterity, conformity or dissent. Entirely without curiosity about alien tribes or even about their own history, the Typees are marooned in a perpetual present, where "life is little else than an often interrupted and luxurious nap." Melville does not rest easy in this mindless slumber; even as he is pampered by the compliant Fayaway, he fears he has been exiled forever from his native world of strife and striving, and feels himself losing the orienting idea of time itself.

Typee and *Omoo* have their crudities and conventions, but they were written by a prodigy. Without much formal study or systematic reading, the twenty-six-year-old Melville looked forward to Freud's idea of repression as both the curse and glory of civilization, and back to the paradox that Christian writers sometimes called the fortunate fall. His raid into another world opened his eyes to the contingent character of his own, and prepared him intellectually for a series of astonishing works in which he would explore the nature of Western consciousness itself in its local, American form.

In Melville's mature work, sex remains a central concern, and the memory of the "pliant…dark-eyed nymphs" with whom he once frolicked becomes a counterpoint to an emerging theme of sexual cruelty—one of the deformations of a culture in which desire has been channeled into work and war. In what is perhaps the most terrifying chapter of *Moby-Dick*, "Stubb kills a Whale," we witness the murderous act, which Melville describes with rape imagery, and watch as the killer enjoys a post-coital smoke:

"Haul in—haul in!" cried Stubb to the bowsman; and, facing round towards the whale, all hands began pulling the boat up to him, while yet the boat was being towed on. Soon ranging up by his flank, Stubb, firmly planting his knee in the clumsy cleat, darted dart after dart into the flying fish; at the word of command, the boat alternately sterning out of the way of the whale's horrible wallow, and then ranging up for another fling….

"Pull up—pull up!" he now cried to the bowsman, as the waning whale relaxed in his wrath. "Pull up!—close to!" and the boat ranged along the fish's flank. When

reaching far over the bow, Stubb slowly churned his long sharp lance into the fish, and kept it there, carefully churning and churning, as if cautiously seeking to feel after some gold watch that the whale might have swallowed, and which he was fearful of breaking ere he could hook it out. But that gold watch he sought was the innermost life of the fish. And now it is struck; for, starting from his trance into that unspeakable thing called his "flurry," the monster horribly wallowed in his blood, overwrapped himself in impenetrable, mad, boiling spray, so that the imperilled craft, instantly dropping astern, had much ado blindly to struggle out from that phrensied twilight into the clear air of the day.

And now abating in his flurry, the whale once more rolled out into view; surging from side to side; spasmodically dilating and contracting his spout-hole, with sharp, cracking, agonized respirations. At last, gush after gush of clotted red gore, as if it had been the purple lees of red wine, shot into the frighted air; and falling back again, ran dripping down his motionless flanks into the sea. His heart had burst!

"He's dead, Mr. Stubb," said Tashtego.

"Yes; both pipes smoked out!" and withdrawing his own from his mouth, Stubb scattered the dead ashes over the water; and, for a moment, stood thoughtfully eyeing the vast corpse he had made.

Some readers, especially recent critics who detect in Melville a current of homosexual desire, have seen in this passage an exemplary repudiation of what is sometimes called "penetrative" sexuality, as if the act—whether performed by men upon women, or men upon men, or, at the symbolic level of Stubb's savagery, by rapacious Man upon virgin Nature—is always a form of violence and violation. The gay critic Robert K. Martin goes so far as to claim that "every positive depiction of sexuality in Melville is a depiction of male masturbation, frequently mutual"

—a practice (distinguished in Melville's day from sodomy, a term generally reserved for anal or oral penetration) to which Melville seems to allude in the ecstatic "Squeeze of the Hand" chapter in *Moby-Dick*. Melville was, as Parker puts it, "a connoisseur of manly beauty," yet he was hardly unaffected by female charms; there is surely something "positive" in his account of how a circle of Marquesan girls, putatively dancing, "pant hard and fast, a moment or two; and then, just as the deep flush is dying away from their faces, slowly recede, all round; thus enlarging the ring."

The scope of Melville's tastes in bed and bunk will never be known, and guesses about them are just that—guesses. Moreover, the unanswerable question of what were his personal preferences is trivial compared to the responsibilities he thought were entailed in managing the human sex drive, whatever form it takes. All Melville's villains—from the clerk who lurks below decks in *White-Jacket* (1850), "immured all day in…a bottomless hole" while sending out "goggling glances" at

young sailors, to "dismasted" Ahab raging against the agent of his wound, to the hideous Claggart of *Billy Budd*, who checks himself just as he is "about to ejaculate something hasty" at Billy—are men whose obstructed desire is perverted into hatred, and who seek solace by inflicting pain.

When Melville wrote about sex in these terms, he was really writing about sin—about how all human beings can be seized, not just in their sexual frenzy, by a desire in which the instinctual self takes command and reduces the world to a means for achieving self-satisfaction. He never fell into prudery or confused the norms of his day—sexual or otherwise—with laws of nature or God, but he did share the Christian suspicion toward the body's unruly independence from the will. This is among the reasons why, when he discovered the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne in the summer of 1850, he felt "a shock of recognition" and remarked that "this great power of blackness in [Hawthorne] derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free."

3.

It is one of the signal failures of Parker's book that with all its talk about sex, it takes small account of how much Melville was haunted by the "visitations" of sin. From *Redburn* (1849), through *The Confidence Man* (1857), the last sustained prose work to appear during his lifetime, through his long pilgrimage poem, *Clarel* (1876), to his late-life masterpiece, *Billy Budd* (1924), written in the 1880s, but not published until long after his death, Melville was increasingly drawn to what he called "elemental evil"—a preoccupation that grew in proportion to his quest for transcendence, because he understood God and sin to be mutually dependent ideas, each inconceivable without the other.

Yet belief was a respite denied him. His books are filled with paired moments in which the will to believe stirs and arises, then slackens and fails. At one instant he tries to hold in focus the thought that nature itself may be a breathing, sensate unity, and evil a kind of insouciance ("utterly lost was he to all sense of reverence," he says of Stubb's junior mate, Flask, who regards "the wondrous whale [as] but a species of magnified mouse, or at least water-rat…to kill and boil"), as in this beautiful passage in *Redburn*:

Every happy little wave seemed gamboling about like a thoughtless little kid in a pasture; and seemed to look up in your face as it passed, as if it wanted to be patted and caressed. They seemed all live things with hearts in them that could feel; and I almost felt grieved, as we sailed in among them, that could feel; scattering them under our broad bows in sun-flakes, and riding over them like a great elephant among lambs.

But at the next instant this luminous world suffused by divine consciousness fades away, and the enchanted young sailor is left in darkness:

I could not see [from high in the rigging] far out upon the ocean, owing to the darkness of the night; and from my lofty perch, the sea looked like a great, black gulf, hemmed in, all round, by beetling black cliffs. I seemed all alone; treading the midnight clouds; and every second, expected to find myself falling—falling—falling, as I have felt when the nightmare has been upon me.

These dualities are a rehearsal for the great chapter in *Moby-Dick*, "The Mast-Head," in which Ishmael, high aloft, "takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature," only to be shocked out of his reverie by the thought that if he moves his "foot or hand an inch," he will "drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever."

Melville struggled to hold onto these glimpses of transcendence because they calmed and consoled him. Without them, he feared, the vein of bitterness within him might burst and bleed into his soul, leaving him, like Ahab, to experience the world as a wasteland in which "the permanent constitutional condition of the manufactured man…is sordidness." This is what happens in *Redburn* to the bitter, jeering Jackson, a "Cain afloat," a proto-Ahab who is "spontaneously an atheist and an infidel; and during the long night watches, would enter into arguments, to prove that there was nothing to be believed; nothing to be loved, and nothing worth living for; but every thing to be hated, in the wide world." Drawn to Jackson by pity and self-recognition, Melville is haunted by his "rankling and festering" spirit, and, in the voice of young Redburn, "pray[s] against it, that it might not master my heart completely, and so make a fiend of me."

These fluctuations between hope and despair in "the tornadoed Atlantic" of Melville's mind were noticed and recorded by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Reviewing *Typee* in 1846, Hawthorne found its "young and adventurous" author (whom he had not yet met) a cheerful relativist, affably "tolerant of codes of morals that may be little in accordance with our own"; but a decade later, he found him (now his friend) exhausted by a fruitless search for transcendence in a world of inscrutable flux. In November 1856, while serving as American Consul in Liverpool, Hawthorne reported in his journal on Melville's visit:

He stayed with us from Tuesday till Thursday; and, on the intervening day, we took a pretty long walk together, and sat down in a hollow among the sand hills (sheltering ourselves from the high, cool wind) and smoked a cigar. Melville, as he always does, 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. 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.

These words convey the oscillation between bravado and depletion that gives Melville's novels their tidal rhythm, and makes his chapters, paragraphs, and even extended sentences move typically from a brash opening to a ruminative close. In the exuberant books of his late youth, *Mardi* (1849) and *Moby-Dick* (1851), Melville darts back and forth among apparently unrelated phenomena as if trying to beat back the specter of a world without coherence. His enormous associative powers produce similitudes at an almost manic pace: "inclement, howling" Ahab is like a grizzly bear in winter, huddled in a tree hollow, "sucking his own paws"; the splinters of the Pequod's wrecked whaleboats spiral to the ocean bottom "like the grated nutmeg in a swiftly stirred bowl of punch." But with *Moby-Dick*'s bitter sequel, *Pierre* (1852), whose style has been aptly described by John Updike as "abrasive and latently aggressive," the pace of invention starts to slow, and, throughout the 1850s, the few remaining prose works grow shorter and shorter, until, near the end of his life, the sentences of *Billy Budd* arrive at a terrible stringency.

Parker catches this entropic quality when he remarks on Melville's ability, evident as early as *Typee*, to build to crescendo by "capping one phrasing by another passage that restates it," and when he notes that already in letters written during his teens, one can hear in Melville's voice "the dying fall, the fading away into understatement, [which] was a stylistic mannerism [he] would later perfect." But Parker's book is no match for what Hawthorne captures in a few words—the poignancy of the fallen aristocrat as ragged pilgrim:

He certainly is much overshadowed since I saw him last; but I hope he will brighten as he goes onward. He sailed from Liverpool in a steamer on Tuesday, leaving his trunk behind him at my consulate, and taking only a carpet-bag to hold all his travelling-gear. This is the next best thing to going naked; and as he wears his beard and moustache, and so needs no dressing-case—nothing but a tooth-brush—I do not know a more independent personage. He learned his travelling habits by drifting about, all over the South Sea, with no other clothes or equipage than a red flannel shirt and a pair of duck trowsers. Yet we seldom see men of less criticizable manners than he.

In Parker's book, this "isolato" (Melville's word for the solitary seeker) who felt, as he put it in *Moby-Dick*, stabbed "from behind with the thought of annihilation" is almost invisible.

4.

In fact, the most vivid pages in this book are not about Herman Melville, but about his father, Allan. The early chapters, in which Allan slides into bankruptcy, are a model of scholarly reconstruction, and are written with a striking combination of pity and contempt. Parker tracks down the dunning letters and masterfully documents the pleading and ploys. We watch as Allan borrows recklessly from his own father, and, by appealing to the sympathy of his wife's mother and brother, from the estate of his father-in-law. Deceived by his own bragging about this or that "confidential connexion," he is always waiting for a windfall, or for the big deal to close. He was, in Parker's merciless phrase, a "cannibal father" who "systematically had eaten up his children's futures."

This story is well documented and well told. But coupling it to the son's life and work is another matter. There is warrant in Melville's writing for the judgment that Allan's early death had scarred his son, and Parker seems sure that the father's main bequest to Herman was a memory of paternal weakness and tattered dignity. Doubtless, he is thinking of such moments in the fiction as when Pierre reflects, "Mince the matter how his family would, had not his father died a raver?" or when Redburn muses on "those delightful days, before my father became a bankrupt." But Parker is equally sure that Melville's mother "instill[ed] in her children a sense of unshakable confidence in their worth and in her love for them." What, then, are we to make of Pierre's revulsion at his mother's "scaly, glittering folds of pride"? The fact is that verifiable points of connection between Melville's life and work are so scarce and random that the patterns into which the biographer assembles them seem largely arbitrary, and the ways in which Melville retrieved and transformed his dormant memories remain almost completely mysterious. The story of Allan's worldly impotence is available for the telling, and Parker tells it well. But the unrecorded intimacies between Allan and Maria, or between them and their children, are beyond the reach of even the most fervent researcher. As with the sexual theme, there is little sense in Parker's treatment of Allan's money woes of how Melville turned such chronic and common problems into deep meditations—how he overcame his bitterness as a cheated scion by learning the skills of a seaman, or how, in *Moby-Dick*, he both exposed the sordid business of butchering whales and, at the same time, sang "the dignity of whaling." In the end, we get a tale in which the brute problem of money looms large (as was earlier the case with sex), overwhelming the small, irretrievable gestures that make up a family's true history. We are left with the sense that the real story of the growth of Melville's mind has slipped away.

The man himself never comes into focus. We get tantalizing glimpses of a harried figure whose teeming imaginative life is hinted at but never shown—the newlywed Melville pacing the deck of a canal boat all night, refusing to sleep in the fetid

men's cabin while his bride makes the best of her berth below; or the writer of enormous ambition walking out after dark in New York during the nervous first year of his marriage, "perhaps still rolling in his gait a little" as he heads for a tavern on the wharves. But we close the book finally uninformed about which among its innumerable incidents, among the scenes he saw or the people he met, ignited Melville's imagination—and which left it cold.

By what alchemy did an apparently unremarkable boy become the genius who broke open the conventional form of the novel and pushed the American language far beyond where any previous practitioner had taken it? Where did he acquire his knowledge of evil that made him seem mad to his contemporaries, but prescient of our own blasted century? By what route did the frightful fact of American slavery first enter, then settle in his mind, only to rise to the surface when he stared, in faraway Liverpool, at the statue of Lord Nelson with four figures of captives "emblematic of [his] principal victories" kneeling at his feet—in whom Melville could see only "four African slaves in the market-place"? How did he transform this vision into the portrait in *Moby-Dick* of the black cabin boy Pip, who is abandoned in the open ocean, where "the sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul"?

There are no answers in this book to such questions, and few clues. Parker devotes some informative pages to recounting how, in 1851, Melville "vicariously experienced" the crisis in Boston when his father-in-law, Judge Shaw, ruled in favor of the Fugitive Slave Law and outraged abolitionists attacked the US marshall who was attempting to arrest a runaway slave and return him south to his master. But what did Melville think and feel on this occasion? Parker tells us that "at some point" he wrote in his copy of Milton's *Lycidas*, beside a passage in which the poet digresses to attack the bishops, "Mark the deforming effect of the intrusion of partizan topics & feelings of the day, however serious in import, into a poem otherwise of the first order of merit." But this fastidious artist was also the writer who, a few years after the Boston incident, wrote what is arguably the most searching work on slavery and race ever composed in America—the novella *Benito Cereno* (1855), in which a smug New Englander is held to account for his obtuseness in the face of slavery's horror.

So far, the paradoxes of Melville's genius have proven impervious to the biographical method, whether deployed by the indefatigable Parker or by his worthy predecessors.

Perhaps when Parker renews his attempt in the second volume, he will somehow illuminate the relation between the searing losses of Melville's later life—the deaths of his sons Malcolm (by suicide) and Stanwix—and the tragedy of *Billy Budd*, in which Melville tells, with exquisite tact, the story of a man who knowingly condemns an innocent boy to die.

More likely, the older Melville, who lived out his days as an anonymous bureaucrat checking bales and bills of lading at the New York custom house, will continue to prove even more elusive than in his youth and maturity. He received only the occasional visitor who sought him out as a superannuated literary curiosity, and disappeared almost entirely from the view of his contemporaries. "Probably, if the truth were known," according to one of the obituaries that appeared upon his death in the fall of 1891, "even his own generation has long thought him dead, so quiet have been the later years of his life."

Parker's biography is written with love and devotion. There is virtually nothing known about Melville (if by knowledge we mean such matters of factual history as his travels, reading, relations with patrons and publishers, practices of composition and revision, and the like) that this formidable book does not contain. But as we await more of the same, it is worth keeping in mind an apposite comment by Melville's contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Geniuses," Emerson remarked in 1850, "have the shortest biographies" because their inner lives are led out of sight and earshot; and, in the end, "their cousins can tell you nothing about them." Writing the next year about the great beast on which he was expending his own limitless imagination, Melville put it this way: "For all these reasons, then, any way you may look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last."

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