Herman Melville
Blackwell Introductions to Literature

This series sets out to provide concise and stimulating introductions to literary subjects. It offers books on major authors (from John Milton to James Joyce), as well as key periods and movements (from Old English literature to the contemporary). Coverage is also afforded to such specific topics as ‘Arthurian Romance’. All are written by outstanding scholars as texts to inspire newcomers and others: non-specialists wishing to revisit a topic, or general readers. The prospective overall aim is to ground and prepare students and readers of whatever kind in their pursuit of wider reading.

Published
1. John Milton Roy Flannagan
2. Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales John Hirsh
3. Arthurian Romance Derek Pearsall
4. James Joyce Michael Seidel
5. Mark Twain Stephen Railton
6. The Modern Novel Jesse Matz
7. Old Norse-Icelandic Literature Heather O’Donoghue
8. Old English Literature Daniel Donoghue
9. Modernism David Ayers
10. Latin American Fiction Philip Swanson
11. Re-Scripting Walt Whitman Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price
12. Renaissance and Reformations Michael Hattaway
13. The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry Charles Altieri
15. Reading Middle English Literature Thorlac Turville-Petre
16. American Literature and Culture 1900–1960 Gail McDonald
17. Shakespeare’s Sonnets Dympna Callaghan
18. Tragedy Rebecca Bushnell
19. Herman Melville Wyn Kelley
Desk and writing implements used by Herman Melville. Photo courtesy of staff, Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Massachusetts.
To
Britt Kelley Peterson
and
Bayne William Peterson
with love
Contents

Texts and Abbreviations ix
List of Illustrations x
Acknowledgments xi
Preface xiii

Part I  Introduction 1
  1 Melville’s Life 3
  2 “Agatha” and the Invention of Narrative 12

Part II  Melville’s Early Yarns 25
  3 “Making Literary Use of the Story”: Typee and Omoo 27
  4 “A Regular Story Founded on Striking Incidents”: Mardi, Redburn, and White-Jacket 42

Part III  Writing New Gospel in Moby-Dick and Pierre 55
  5 “So Much of Pathos & So Much of Depth”: Moby-Dick 57
  6 “All Tender Obligations”: Pierre 83
## Contents

### Part IV  Turning a New Leaf: Short Fiction, *Israel Potter*, and *The Confidence-Man*

7  “A Leaf from Professional Experience”: Short Fiction of the 1850s 97

8  “Peculiarly Latitudinarian Notions”: *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man* 123

### Part V  Melville’s Later Career

9  “Fulness & Veins & Beauty”: *Battle-Pieces* and *Clarel* 137

10  “Different Considerations”: Late Poetry 160

11  “Instinct with Significance”: *Billy Budd* 175

Afterword: “Restoring To You Your Own Property”: Owning Melville 188

Appendix: The “Agatha” Correspondence 191

Notes 200

Bibliography 206

Index 217
Texts and Abbreviations

Unless otherwise noted, references to Melville’s works come from Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, eds., *The Writings of Herman Melville*, 14 vols. (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and the Newberry Library, 1968–).

The exceptions are:

Douglas Robillard, ed., *The Poems of Herman Melville* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000) for all published poems (*Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War, John Marr and Other Sailors*, and *Timoleon, Etc*).

Howard P. Vincent, ed., *Collected Poems of Herman Melville* (Chicago: Hendricks House, 1947) for unpublished poems (“Weeds and Wildings, Chiefly; With a Rose or Two”).


The “Agatha” correspondence, reprinted in the appendix to this book, comes from volume 14 in *The Writings of Herman Melville*.

Abbreviations for Melville’s works are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB</td>
<td><em>Billy Budd</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td><em>Clarel</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP</td>
<td><em>Israel Potter</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td><em>Journals</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td><em>Correspondence</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT</td>
<td><em>Piazza Tales and Uncollected Prose</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td><em>Redburn</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

Frontispiece  Desk and writing implements used by Herman Melville. Photo courtesy of staff, Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, Massachusetts

Figure 1  Page from Melville’s letter of August 13, 1852 to Nathaniel Hawthorne, the first in the so-called “Agatha” correspondence. Courtesy of the Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Acknowledgments

When Ahab grasps Pip’s hand in Chapter 125 (“The Log and Line”) of *Moby-Dick*, he wonders at the cabin-boy’s bottomless capacity for “the sweet things of love and gratitude.” Although I cannot claim to resemble Pip in his wisdom (or his reverence for Ahab), I share his feelings for those who have extended their hands so generously.

Deepest gratitude goes to Andrew McNeillie, Emma Bennett, Karen Wilson, and Janet Moth at Blackwell Publishing, who initiated, steered, and shaped this book; to my superb readers Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, John Bryant, Anthony Lioi, Dale Peterson, and Ellen Weinauer; and to Dennis Marnon and Kathleen Reilly for special help with the illustrations.

I have had the very best teachers: George Dekker, Jay Fliegelman, and Albert Gelpi – mentors for life. The Melville Society Cultural Project team have nurtured everything I do; warmest thanks to Jennifer Baker, Jill Barnum, Mary K. Bercaw Edwards, Elizabeth Schultz, Christopher Sten, and Robert K. Wallace.

To the many people who encouraged and inspired me at critical points I owe an immense and unending debt: Jana Argersinger, Charlene Avallone, Dennis Berthold, Walter Bezanson, Hester Blum, Alex Calder, Christopher Castiglia, Gail Coffler, Carol Colatrella, Wai Chee Dimock, Edgar A. Dryden, Marvin Fisher, Peter Gibian, Robin Grey, Bruce Harvey, Diana Henderson, Henry Hughes, Pawel Jedrzejko, Henry Jenkins, Carolyn Karcher, A. Robert Lee, Maurice S. Lee, Caroline Levander, Robert S. Levine, Tia Lombardi, Paul Lyons, Robert D. Madison, Sanford E. Marovitz, Timothy Marr, Robert Milder, Lea Newman, Hilton Obenzinger, Samuel Otter, Rachela Permenter, Leland

The people who supported me throughout the decades I have been thinking about Melville know, I hope, how deeply I rely on them. Bayne Kelley and Millicent Kelley have sustained me lovingly. Britt Peterson and Bayne Peterson, to whom I dedicate this book, give me reasons to keep on writing. Dale Peterson holds the other end of the monkey-rope and keeps the sharks away.
In his 1849 novel Redburn, Herman Melville writes of the dockmasters’ lively calls to ships as they jostle together within the confines of Prince’s Dock in Liverpool: “‘Highlander ahoy! Cast off your bow-line, and shear alongside the Neptune!’ – ‘Neptune ahoy! get out a stern-line, and shear alongside the Trident!’ – ‘Trident ahoy! Get out a bow-line, and drop astern of the Undaunted!’ And so it runs round like a shock of electricity; touch one, and you touch all” (p. 164). Melville’s picture of a busy, noisy port crowded with ships from all parts of the globe, yet brought into electric contact with one another, evokes the current state of Melville studies. Globalizing economies and digital technology have transported Melville’s works into a wider world than ever before, opening up to expanding audiences a broad range of issues: from the diverse literary influences on his texts to the politics of a burgeoning nation spreading its colonial power into the Pacific, from the impact of American slavery and capitalism to the emergence of new science, changing gender roles and sexual identities, and a growing literary market. As these themes jostle for readers’ attention, and as his works compete with those of other authors in ever-enlarging anthologies and websites, readers may feel themselves in the midst of an almost intolerable din. On the one hand, they have the freedom of almost unlimited access to Melville’s wide-ranging ideas: “touch one, and you touch all.” On the other hand, they may seek the “shock” – and pleasure – of more intimate contact with the texts and their writer.

Herman Melville: An Introduction addresses the first generation of readers who might have grown up reading his works in online rather than print editions, readers for whom the “shock of electricity” might
serve as a literal medium of communication rather than a dynamic metaphor. Reading Melville in a digital environment evokes certain assumptions about texts. Most significantly, for anyone with access to the internet, they are there for the taking. In Melville’s day, depending on questions of wealth, education, or class, readers could find his books in a more limited variety of venues: in a library, a club reading room, perhaps, or a private collection. (Melville borrowed many books from his friend Evert Duyckinck, checking them out as if from a public library and returning them.) They could buy or subscribe to a journal and find long sections of a book quoted in reviews; they might buy the book as part of a subscription program organized by the publisher; or they could purchase it in a shop. If so, they might spend as much as a working person’s weekly salary.

The fact that texts are now “there for the taking” has created a reading environment of tremendous opportunity. Readers can not only find a book but they can also search it, import text into their own writing, and remix what they read into “albums” of their own. Copyright law has struggled to maintain the protections of literary property it used to ensure. Nevertheless, in a digital universe, literary and artistic production has come to seem less the property of the maker and more raw material for future users. While the academic world levies harsh penalties for plagiarism, in a fluid online market of information, ideas, images, and stories the appropriation of other people’s work seems as natural as breathing.

In spite of his very different historical context, Melville might have felt very much at home in a digital age. He was a voracious reader of all kinds of texts, from revered literary works to popular encyclopedias. And he was a tireless sampler of his culture, borrowing freely from a wide range of sources to produce new combinations of his own. The opening section of Moby-Dick, “Extracts,” with its pastiche of quotations from all the known authorities, ancient and modern, on whaling, shows him mixing cultural materials in very contemporary ways. Like Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and many other authors he admired, Melville often exhibits a proprietary attitude to the books and ideas of the past. They become his, he seems to say, and then, in a fluid interchange, they become ours.

Melville’s fluid habits of literary appropriation show him being inventive, in a peculiarly late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century way. In his period the US was in the process of creating a national
identity rooted in ideas of self-making and self-marketing in a rapidly expanding environment. The word “invention” at that time included an older sense of a discovery of or coming upon knowledge (OED); it meant not only the making of something wholly new but also the ingenious recombining of previously existing elements. So too, Melville in many of his books seems to invent a literature, a voice, and an identity, by taking up the literary materials of his culture. In a period of extraordinary inventiveness – Benjamin Franklin’s lightning rod, Robert Fulton’s steam engine, Eli Whitney’s cotton gin come to mind – Melville combined classical literary traditions with fresh items from his sensational travels to capture a vividly recognizable American spirit. His concern with invention itself – of a text, a narrative, a character or self – seems emblematic of the larger project with which the American nation and its people were centrally engaged in the nineteenth century.

In this book we will study some of the characteristic methods and tools of Melville’s invention, beginning with a series of letters, the so-called “Agatha” correspondence, in which he described to his friend and fellow-author Nathaniel Hawthorne how he might construct a story from raw materials Melville had collected during a trip to Nantucket in 1852. As we will see, these letters reveal an author fascinated by the processes of literary invention, and by the literary inventors – many of them knaves, tricksters, and confidence men – who populate the worlds of fiction and poetry. We will find that in his distinctive habits of invention, Melville is a writer very much of his time – but also, strikingly, of our own.
PART I

Introduction
Melville’s life and career, which spanned nearly three-quarters of the nineteenth century, display many of the patterns of self-making and literary invention he explored in his writing. The son of a man who reinvented himself a number of times as he launched one unsuccessful business venture after another, Melville similarly made himself up as he went along: as sailor, novelist, civil servant, poet. He may seem to readers today the man who represents one nation, one novel, one thematic obsession – whaling – but it might be safer to take him at his word in *Billy Budd* when he ruefully called himself “a writer whom few know” (p. 114).

Born in Manhattan, New York on August 1, 1819, in the same year as Queen Victoria and Walt Whitman, Melville was reared in the Dutch Reform Church and middle-class propriety of his mother, Maria Gansevoort, and her Albany Dutch forebears. His father, Allan Melvill (the family added the final “e” after Allan’s death in 1832), also came from an established family; Allan’s father, Thomas Melvill, participated in the Boston Tea Party and reminisced about the American Revolution for the rest of his life. Committed to upholding the status of two such respectable clans, Maria and Allan Melvill nevertheless suffered serious reversals in their generation. Allan, an importer of dress goods and fashionable accessories from Europe, managed to ride out a period of tremendous financial volatility in US markets after the War of 1812, long enough for Maria to bear eight children with clockwork regularity: Gansevoort (1815), Helen (1817), Herman (1819), Augusta (1821), Allan (1823), Catherine (1825), Frances (1827), and Thomas (1830). But in numerous dubious financial schemes, Allan Melvill borrowed
until he could borrow no more. The family was forced to leave New York in 1830 and move to Albany, closer to Maria’s relatives. In 1832, massively indebted and raving with a fever, Allan died, leaving his family dependent on the powerful Gansevoorts.

Herman had probably been educated for a career in business or commerce, since the family could not have afforded to send its sons to college. He and his brother Gansevoort attended the Albany Classical School and later the Albany Academy. Although his father had early considered him a bit slow, even backward compared to the glib and polished Gansevoort, Melville proved an apt pupil.1 As a teenager in the village of Lansingburgh (now incorporated into Troy, New York, near Albany), where the family moved in 1838, he also joined a debating society, wrote scathing letters to the local newspaper deriding his rivals, and penned various love poems. Two early sketches, called “Fragments from a Writing-Desk” and published in the Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser in 1839, suggest that he saw himself potentially as an author, although they imitated styles that he would eventually renovate: the anecdotal pose of the urban spectator, and the Gothic mode of Poe’s tales of mystery.

Although he experimented with literary pursuits in his late teens, Melville needed more secure employment. Having worked in 1835 in Gansevoort’s fur store, in 1837 he began teaching in the Sikes District School in the Berkshires, near his Uncle Thomas Melvill’s farm. The following year he studied surveying at Lansingburgh Academy, hoping to get work on the Erie Canal, but with his chances for engineering jobs looking dim, he shipped out in the summer of 1839 on the St. Lawrence, a packet, to Liverpool. Melville’s first voyage lasted only four months but gave him a taste of adventure that he would never forget. When he returned he taught at the Greenbush and Schodack Academy in Greenbush, New York, and then in Brunswick, New York. In 1840, with his friend E. J. M. Fly, he journeyed to Galena, Illinois, where Uncle Thomas had moved his family. The trip exposed him to the rough and adventuresome waterways of the Great Lakes region and the Mississippi and Ohio rivers; but the two men returned to Manhattan without prospects.

In New York City Melville took some time to ponder his next move: he decided on whaling. Factory work, farming, or mining would have been no less monotonous, brutish, or poorly paid, and the fact that he chose whaling, one of the most dangerous of the maritime trades,
Melville’s Life

speaks as much to his economic desperation as to his spirit of adventure. It may have been with a free heart, however, that in late 1840 he packed a small bag, betook himself to New Bedford, Massachusetts, and shipped on the whaler *Acushnet*, which sailed from nearby Fairhaven on January 3, 1841, bound via Cape Horn for the Pacific whaling grounds. Most of his nautical novels record the joy of setting sail, even when that joy proves to be short-lived.

For Melville scholars and biographers, the significant events of Melville’s voyages are the ones that ended up in his books. Most sensational was his desertion in the Marquesas. In July 1842, while anchored in Nuku Hiva Bay, he and a friend, Richard Tobias Greene, jumped ship and fled inland to escape discovery. From this point on, the primary evidence we have of his movements appears in *Typee*, a fictional account. Most scholars have assumed that Melville made his way to the Taipi Valley and stayed several weeks.² According to what he wrote in *Typee*, because of a leg injury, or perhaps because the Taipis saw the two white sailors as valuable hostages, or even, as he may have imagined, because they intended to eat him, Melville was held in an extended but pleasant captivity. Toby journeyed back to the coast to get help for his friend, who waited anxiously, and vainly, for news of his return. Thinking himself abandoned, Melville plotted his escape, but not before sampling the island’s many delights. Although the Taipis treated him hospitably, he eventually made his way to the beach and signed on another whaler, the *Lucy Ann*, beating a hasty retreat from this island Eden. His experiences shaped his first book, *Typee* (1846). When news of its publication reached Toby Greene, who had returned to the US having been frustrated in his efforts to retrieve Melville, Toby wrote to his friend, who added “The Story of Toby” to his next edition.

From the Marquesas, Melville’s journey took him to Tahiti. On the *Lucy Ann* he encountered a crew dissatisfied with its ailing captain and drunken first mate; eventually they mutinied, and were jailed in Papeete. Melville may have supported the revolt reluctantly, for the crew were, he said in his second book *Omoo* (1847), “villains of all nations and dyes; picked up in the lawless ports of the Spanish Main, and among the savages of the islands” (p. 14). But he seized the opportunity to abandon an unlucky vessel and, with the implicit permission of his lenient Tahitian jailers, wandered the islands with a friend from the ship, John Troy. After a period of beachcombing, Melville and Troy
made their way to a neighboring island, Moorea (or Eimeo), where in November 1842 Melville shipped on the *Charles and Henry* for further whaling. The early sections of his third novel, *Mardi* (1849), take place on a ship much like this one.

His whaling came to an end in May 1843 in the Sandwich Islands (Hawai‘i), where Melville was discharged in Lahaina, Maui, and worked in Honolulu at various jobs, including setting pins in a bowling alley. After three months, he tired of onshore labor, and shipped out once again, this time on the US naval frigate, the *United States*. Melville may have had little taste for naval life, but he knew that he could be seized and prosecuted for desertion if he signed on a whaler. The navy, as he would make clear much later in *Billy Budd* (published posthumously in 1924), gladly accepted even the “promiscuous lame ducks of morality” (p. 65).

Life aboard the *United States*, where numerous public floggings schooled the men to perform their tasks unquestioningly, was hard. The experiences chronicled in his fifth book, *White-Jacket* (1850), published shortly after *Redburn*, appear a grueling round of duties that nevertheless exposed him to a new class of men. Jack Chase in particular, the captain of the foretop, struck Melville as a romantic figure of revolt and leadership. Not only did he picture him in *White-Jacket* as a charismatic hero, but he also dedicated one of his last works, *Billy Budd*, to his memory.

Melville returned to Boston in October 1844 an experienced seaman, though by no means a wealthy one. He was encouraged to write, however, by family and friends who relished his stirring tales, and urged on as well by necessity to make a living, as he contemplated marriage with Elizabeth Shaw. She was the daughter of his father’s old friend Lemuel Shaw, chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Hoping to succeed as other educated maritime authors like Richard Henry Dana had done in his *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), Melville turned to writing to make his name. His first effort, *Typee*, dedicated to Lemuel Shaw, won him remarkable success, and on the strength of that public acclaim and the equally enthusiastic reception of his second novel, *Omoo*, he and Lizzie married in the summer of 1847 and moved to the city of New York, where Melville took up authorship in earnest.

The rapid succession of his first novels – *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850) – bespeaks
Melville’s creative energy, the quick flowering of his reputation, and his considerable professional anxiety as well. For he soon found the demands of writing for an aggressively expanding commercial literary market more onerous than he might have expected. The births of four children – Malcolm (1849), Stanwix (1851), Elizabeth (1853), and Frances (1855) – during the years of his most intense literary output strained his financial and emotional resources.

At the same time, he undertook a furious process of self-education, reading avidly in a range of authors, from writers of travel and maritime literature to the great poets and playwrights of the past: Dante, Rabelais, Montaigne, Browne, Milton, Shakespeare, Jonson, to name just a few. Traveling to Europe in 1849, ostensibly to negotiate contracts for his books in London, Melville soaked up literary and artistic culture with the wonderment of the self-taught provincial he may still have considered himself to be. The persona of sailor-author or democratic naïf at first served him well as proponent of the Young America literary movement, among whose members Melville found a kindred interest in carving out a new literary world, apart from the superannuated models of Europe. In time, as he implied in his essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), he came to consider himself an American Shakespeare and began to feel confined by the genres and limited expectations of maritime adventure.

Yet those early books, which he later thought of as apprentice or experimental work, prepared him well for a period of concentrated literary experimentation and achievement that began with his metaphysical novel *Moby-Dick* (1851). Drawn to the Berkshires region of western Massachusetts by family connections, Melville decided to settle in 1850 on the farm he called Arrowhead, hoping to enjoy a growing literary community that included Nathaniel Hawthorne, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others. Meeting Hawthorne at a point well along in the writing of *Moby-Dick*, Melville recast his novel along more ambitious lines, inspired by Hawthorne’s example to believe that he could reach the full potential of literary genius. Their extraordinary friendship encouraged Melville to explore new latitudes of thought and invention, as he had done in his earlier philosophical novel, *Mardi*, and to pour his febrile excitement into long letters to Hawthorne. Although their period of proximity did not last long – Hawthorne moved his family back to the Boston area in 1852 and to England in 1853 – Melville’s tide of enthusiasm carried...