The Centennial of Herman Melville

By RAYMOND M. WEAVER

"If ever, my dear Hawthorne," wrote Melville from Pittsfield in the summer of 1851, "we shall sit down in Paradise in some lily-laden corner by ourselves; and if we shall by any means be able to smuggle a basket of champagne there (I won't believe in a Temperance Heaven); and if we shall then cross our celestial legs in the celestial grass that is forever tropical, and strike our glasses and our heads together till both ring musically in concert: then, O my dear fellow mortal, how shall we pleasantly discourse of all the things mankind which now so much distress us. This serene and laughing desolation of Herman Melville's—a mood that steadily deepened into a less tranquil despair—is a spectacle to inspire with sardonic optimism those who gloat over the vanity of human wishes. At this time Melville was thirty-two years old: happily married, living in the lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, widely distinguished as a novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, and at the very pinnacle of his creative genius; yet did he luxuriate in tribulation. "Dollars damn me," he wrote to Hawthorne; "and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. The lovely quiet of the Berkshires, surrounded by an admiring group of literati, wide..."
Richard Henry Dana’s “Two Years Before the Mast” (1840), and worthy successors of their very noble original.

In 1850 the Melville family moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and soon developed the closest intimacy with Hawthorne, then living in Lenox. On June 29, 1851, Melville sent Hawthorne this piquant revelation of diabolism: “Shall I send you a fin of the ‘Whale’ by way of a specimen mouthful? The tail is not yet cooked, though the hell-fire in which the whole book is boiled might not unreasonably have cooked it ere this. This is the book’s motto (the secret one): *Ego non baptizo te in nomine — make out the rest for yourself.*

Born in hell-fire, and baptized in an unspeakable name, “Moby-Dick, or the Whale” (1851), reads like a great opium dream. The organizing theme of the book is the hunting of Moby-Dick, the abhorred white whale, by the monomaniac Captain Ahab. To Ahab, this ancient and vindictive monster is the incarnation of all the vast moral evil of the world; he piles on the whale’s white hump the sum of all the rage and hate of mankind from the days of Eden down. There are in “Moby-Dick,” long digressions, natural, historical, and philosophical on the person, habits, manner, and ideas of whales; there are long dialogues and soliloquies, such as were never spoken by mortal man in his waking senses, conversations that for sweetness, strength, and courage remind one of passages from Dekker, Webster, Massinger, Fletcher, and the other old dramatists loved by Charles Lamb; perhaps a fifth of the book is made up of Melville’s independent moralizings, half essay, half rhapsody; withal, the book contains some of the most finished comedy in the language. If one logically analyzes “Moby-Dick,” he will be disgusted, just as Dr. Johnson, who had no analysis but the logical, was disgusted with “Lycidas.” And so with Melville’s novel. If one will forget logic and common sense, and “abandon himself”—as Dr. Johnson would contemptuously have said—to this work of Melville’s, he will acknowledge the presence of an amazing masterpiece. But neither “Lycidas” nor “Moby-Dick” should be read by philistines or pragmatists.

Melville’s later novels mark a deepening of despair. “Pierre, or the Ambiguities” (1852), while worthily comparable to Meredith’s “Egoist” in elaborate subtlety and mercilessness of psychological analysis, is a prophetic parody of Hardy’s most poisonous pessimism. 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. “Pierre” is a book to send a Freundian into ravishment. “Israel Potter” is a story of the days of Franklin and John Paul Jones, both of whom appear in the novel. The unnecessary degradation of the hero with which the book closes is utterly inexcusable both in art and in probability; it is a cruel practical joke. “Piazza Tales” (1855) gives proof that Melville had not yet, with Coleridge, buried his wand in a grave of metaphysical speculations, to conjure no more, as witness the story “Benito Cereno.” Melville’s last novel, “The Confidence Man” (1857), is a very melancholy performance, and is not, even by transcendent charity, a novel at all. It is a series of episodes on a Mississippi river-boat among people of superhuman conversational endurance. The book seems to have been written by one who believed in the saying of Thraseas: “He who hates vice, hates humanity.”

In 1857, in ill health, Melville went abroad. He visited Hawthorne in Southport, indulged in an orgy of “ontological heroics,” and moved on to the Mediterranean, to Constantinople, and the Holy Land. What his reflections were in the Holy Land he has recorded in the poem “Clarel” (1876).

In 1863 Melville with his wife and four children moved to New York. Here he spent the remaining twenty-eight years of his life in most sedulous obscurity. Invited in 1882 to be one of the charter members of the Authors’ Club, he declined, preferring the company of his family, of his grandchildren, of his books, of his prints, of his thoughts. He published five volumes of verse during these years, but as a poet Melville is not distinguished. To turn from his great novels to his poetry is to be reminded of a star that drops a line of streaming fire down the vault of the sky—and then the heavy shapeless thing that sinks into the earth.

It was Melville’s abiding craving to achieve some total and undivided possession of the very heart of reality; his was the quest for the lost Atlantis, the ancient eternal desire of man for the unknown. In the promiscuous exuberance of youth Melville venturesomely sought his El Dorado on the world’s rim. But his beckoning Hesperides ever retreated before him. After his final disillusionment in the Holy Land, he broke faith with geography, and retreated completely into metaphysics—metaphysics, which is but misery dissolved in thought. Dr. Titus Munson Coan has left a record of a visit to Melville in 1859: “In vain I sought to hear of Typee and those Paradise Islands; he preferred to pour forth instead his philosophy and his theories of life. The shade of Aristotle arose like a cold mist between myself and Fayaway. He seems to put away the objective side of life and to shut himself up as a cloistered thinker and poet.” Superficially it would seem that whale-hunting, sea-roving, and mutiny are incompatible with monasticism and metaphysics. But, more closely considered, they are but two gestures for the same emotion; both are ventures into mystery, into uncertainty, into “strange surmise.” Dante pilgrimaged farther than did Ulysses, but the wanderings of Melville outstripped them both.

“Like a friar,” Melville once wrote of himself, “I am full with a thousand souls; and as on, on, on, I scud before the wind, many mariners rush up from the orlop below, like miners from caves; running shouting across my decks; opposite braces are pulled and boisterous speaking trumpets are heard, and contending orders, to save the good ship from the shoals. In my tropical calms, when my ship lies tranced on Eternity’s main, the many, many souls in me speak one at a time, then all with one voice, rising and falling and swaying in golden calls and responses.” Because of this multiplicity of personality, Melville eludes summary classification. In his composite achievement he is severally a Smollett, a glorified Whitman, an athletic Coleridge, a dandified Rabelais, a cynical Meredith, a doubting Sir Thomas Browne. Essentially was he a mystic, a treasure-seeker, a mystery-monger, a deliver after hidden things spiritual and material. The world to him was a darkly figured hieroglyph; and if he ever deciphered the cabalistic sign, the meaning he found was too terrible, or else too wonderful, to tell. Whenever he sat down to write, at his elbow stood ever the chosen emissary of Satan, the Comic Spirit—a demoniac familiar that saved him in many a trying pass. The versatility and power of his genius was extraordinary. If he does not eventually rank as a writer of overshadowing accomplishment, it will be owing not to any lack of genius, but to the perversity of his rare and lofty gifts.
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