

HERMAN MELVILLE
IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY

KEVIN J. HAYES

Emeritus Professor, University of Central Oklahoma



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the Real, eds. Paweł Jędrzejko, Milton M. Reigelman, and Zuzanna Szatanik (Zabrze: M-Studio, 2011), 143–56.

²² For an intriguing study of Delano and the Pacific contexts of *New World* slavery, see Greg Grandin, *The Empire of Necessity* (London: OneWorld, 2015).

²³ *Writings*, vol. vi, 482–3.

CHAPTER 5

London

Jonathan A. Cook

Herman Melville is often identified as a literary nationalist, as his 1850 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse* attests. In this review, he hailed the New England writer's neglected genius and confidently predicted the appearance of future Shakespeares in America. But like many of his literary peers, Melville was in fact heavily indebted to the literature and culture of England for the creation of much of his fiction and poetry. His five-week visit to London in November and December 1849 thus provided a major stimulus for his continuing self-education in English literature and culture, giving him material for a sizable portion of his writing in the 1850s and helping to inspire him to begin composing *Moby-Dick* almost immediately after returning to New York. If Melville's reading of Shakespeare and Hawthorne was the well-recognized literary catalyst to his great whaling novel, his trip to London provided its intellectual and cultural threshold, shaping its emergence in many important respects.¹

In chapter 46 of *Redburn*, the novel he composed in May and June 1849, Melville had recounted the young protagonist's mysterious overnight trip to London with his charismatic new friend Harry Bolton and the latter's disastrous experience trying to make some quick money at an exclusive gentleman's club modeled on the legendary gambling "hell" Crockford's. Never likely having visited the British metropolis, Melville relied on contemporary journalism and Disraeli's "silver-fork" fiction for his melodramatic account of *Redburn's* exposure to a decadent British aristocracy.²

The composition of *Redburn* no doubt contributed to Melville's desire to experience London for himself, beyond the legendary world of its clubs and mansions. So, in the autumn of 1849 he decided that the steady growth of his literary reputation allowed him the opportunity to visit the British capital in order to negotiate the English publication of *White-Jacket*, the novel he had written after *Redburn* that summer. Saying goodbye to his family and friends, Melville boarded a transatlantic packet ship, with the

Harper Brothers page proofs of *White-Jacket* in hand, to sail to England on October 11. He would record summaries of his daily activities in a journal for documentary and possible literary use, employing a telegraphic style to amass noteworthy details.³

Melville's three-week passage on the *Southampton* across the Atlantic put him back in the nautical world that had provided the basis for much of his fiction. Melville was also intellectually and socially stimulated by two new acquaintances on board, George J. Adler, a young émigré professor of German literature and language at New York University and the author of a *Dictionary of the German and English Languages* (1849), and Dr. Franklin ("Frank") Taylor, a cousin of the more famous Bayard Taylor, a popular travel writer Melville knew in New York. Their arrival in London on November 6, following disembarkation at Deal and a quick visit to Canterbury, put them in the midst of the bustling, socially stratified and storied civilization that still exerted a dominant influence on American culture.

Coming to Britain a year after the failure of the Chartist movement, which avoided the widespread revolutionary disturbances on the Continent in 1848, Melville would discover a "monster" metropolis experiencing meteoric growth and transformation. With a population of almost two and a half million, about four times the population of New York, London displayed a vast social spectrum extending from a fabulously rich aristocracy to a laboring, impoverished or criminal underclass currently being chronicled by the journalist Henry Mayhew; it also offered the landmarks, institutions and historical associations that impressed transatlantic visitors. Melville made no mention of it in his journal, but London was also just recovering from an outbreak of cholera that had ravaged New York that summer and recently killed almost 13,000 Londoners in July, August and September.⁴

By the time of Melville's visit, Victorian literature had already attained a substantial level of achievement only a dozen years into the reign of the new queen.⁵ As the most famous novelist of the era, Charles Dickens had produced a string of bestsellers beginning with *The Pickwick Papers*, which Melville had been reading on the voyage. Dickens published *Dombey and Son* in 1848 and was now serializing *David Copperfield*. His chief literary rival, William Makepeace Thackeray, published *Vanity Fair* in 1848 and was currently serializing *Pendennis*. As the era's leading social critic and literary gadfly, Thomas Carlyle had written *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* and *Past and Present* in the early 1840s, but was now engaged in penning the reactionary social criticism that would comprise his *Letter-Day Pamphlets* (1850).

By mid-century John Ruskin had produced two volumes of *Modern Painters* and, most recently, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849). Alfred Tennyson, the leading poet of the age, would soon publish his iconic elegy on the death of his beloved friend Arthur Hallam, *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, and become poet laureate after the death of William Wordsworth, whose *Prelude* finally appeared in 1850. In 1847 the society novelist and Tory politician Benjamin Disraeli had published *Tancred, or The New Crusade*, his last novel for the next twenty-three years as his political career blossomed; while Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Disraeli's political friend, offered *The Caxtons: A Family Picture* in 1849. Melville would not meet any of these literary notables, many of whose works he had read, but he was still able to encounter a wide sampling of other lesser-known writers and artists by means of formal letters of introduction, publishers' contacts and social interactions.

Taking a room at 25 Craven Street near Charing Cross, Melville was centrally located for many of the excursions he would make throughout the metropolis. After a few days of preliminary sightseeing and theater-going with Taylor and Adler, Melville's first order of business in London was to find a publisher for *White-Jacket*. On 12 November he went to the offices of his current publisher Richard Bentley, who had issued *Mardi* the previous year and *Redburn* that fall. Bentley paid Melville the £100 he owed him for *Redburn* and offered £200 for *White-Jacket*, payable on publication, not in advance. This was a disappointment to Melville because an advance would have enabled him to accompany Frank Taylor on an extended tour of Vienna, Constantinople, Athens, Jerusalem and Egypt according to an itinerary proposed by the peripatetic Taylor during their Atlantic crossing.

Hoping to match or improve upon Bentley's offer, Melville proceeded to the offices of his first publisher, John Murray III, who had issued *Typee* and *Omoo*. Murray declined publication but offered Melville some of his signature guidebooks to France and the Continent. Not ready to give up, Melville spent the next week visiting the offices of some of England's leading publishers – David Bogue, A. H. Bohn, Chapman and Hall, Henry Colburn, William Longman, Edward Moxon – all of whom complained about the lack of an international copyright to protect them from pirating and consequently declined *White-Jacket*. Following his two-week excursion to Paris, Belgium and the Rhine in late November and early December, Melville was pleased when on December 15 Bentley confirmed his original offer of £200 for the first thousand copies of *White-Jacket*, paying him a note which Melville discounted a week later for £180 – now, too

late to fulfill Melville's earlier dream of extending his tour to the Eastern Mediterranean.⁶

Despite the rejections, Melville's visits to a wide range of London publishers allowed him to learn more about the English literary world, receive a few free books and enjoy the social opportunities these publishers presented. Thus, Moxon talked to Melville about Charles Lamb and Richard Henry Dana, while Murray took him upstairs to view portraits of Lord Byron, Tom Moore, Thomas Campbell and George Borrow; Bentley, in turn, could tell Melville about his earlier close association with Charles Dickens. Both Bentley and Murray would give Melville formal dinners during his visit, Murray on November 23 and Bentley on December 18. The dinner with Murray was an uncomfortably formal affair, with the most noteworthy literary lion being John Gibson Lockhart, son-in-law and biographer of Sir Walter Scott and editor of the Tory *Quarterly Review*. As Melville noted, expressing skepticism of the great man's pretensions: "I sat next to Lockhart, and seeing that he was a customer, who was full of himself & expected great homage; & knowing him to be a thorough going Tory & fish-blooded Churchman & conservative, & withall, Editor of the Quarterly – I refrained from playing the snob to him, like the rest – & the consequence was he grinned at me his ghastly smiles."⁷

Murray's dinner also enabled Melville to meet Robert F. Cooke, Murray's partner and cousin, and a close friend of George Borrow; Cooke would later introduce Melville to the world of the Temple, a center of London's legal practice famously commemorated by Charles Lamb in "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," and Melville's memorable visits there on December 19 and 20 would eventually inspire the first half of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." More congenial than Murray's formal dinner was that given by Bentley a week before Melville's departure, where he would meet the writers Alfred Henry Forrester ("Arthur Crowquill") and Robert Bell, who had reviewed *Redburn* for *Bentley's Miscellany*.⁸ Melville similarly enjoyed a fair sampling of London's many cozy pubs and taverns during his visit, some of which were patronized for their literary associations, as when he communed with the spirit of Samuel Johnson during a visit with George Adler to the Mitre Tavern on Fleet Street and then patronized two taverns associated with Tennyson, the Cock and the Rainbow.

Melville met a number of other writers, journalists and bookmen during his peregrinations around the city. On November 19, for example, by means of a New York literary contact he introduced himself to Joseph M. Langford, drama critic for the *Observer* and head of the London

branch of the Scottish publisher Blackwood and Sons, who invited him to see Macready perform that night. Two days later Langford arranged a bibulous supper for Melville where he would meet the comic writer and lecturer Albert Smith and the playwright and journalist for *Punch*, Tom Taylor. Earlier that day Melville had dined and gone bowling with David Davidson, London agent of the New York publisher Wiley and Putnam and a friend of Melville's close friends Evert and George Duyckinck; Davidson arranged to cash Bentley's £100 note and encouraged Melville to make the rounds for other possible publishers for *White-Jacket* besides Murray and Bentley.

Another useful American contact in the London literary world was the book dealer Henry Stevens, who was acquainted with Melville's wife Elizabeth and had known his older brother Gansevoort, having attended the latter's funeral following his premature death in London in May 1846. After they dined together on November 25, Stevens took Melville on a private tour of the British Museum, where they entered a realm of fabulous literary treasures: "Endless galleries & three-deckers of books. Saw many rarities. – Maps of London (before & after the Great Fire), Magna Charta – Charlemagne's bible – Shakesper's autograph (in Montaigne) &c &c &c."⁹

Thanks to his New York journalist friend N. P. Willis, Melville received two letters of introduction from Lord John Manners, a friend of Disraeli's and son of the Duke of Rutland: one to Richard Monckton Milnes, member of parliament, poet and early biographer of Keats; the other to Lady Elizabeth Drummond, Manners's sister. Unfortunately, Melville was unable to meet either individual. On the other hand, using a letter of introduction he had received from Edward Everett, former U.S. ambassador to England, Melville was successful in meeting Samuel Rogers, a celebrated upper-class man of letters and octogenarian banker-poet, known for hosting a series of legendary literary breakfasts. Melville breakfasted alone with Rogers on December 20 and viewed his famed art collection, which included Old Masters, eighteenth-century English masterpieces and several Turners.¹⁰ Three days later he enjoyed another breakfast with Rogers, now meeting the Near Eastern travel writer Alexander W. Kinglake and the barrister and popular poet Bryan Waller Procter ("Barry Cornwall"), who had been a schoolmate of Byron and Peel and friend of Leigh Hunt.

Some of the most congenial London socializing took place in the city's exclusive men's clubs. Melville's new friend Robert F. Cooke invited him to dine at the Erechtheum on St. James's Square on December 20, to which he returned two evenings later. The latter gathering included the publishers

Charles Knight and John Murray, the writer on Spain Richard Ford, the Anglo-American artist Charles Leslie and Peter Cunningham, author of Murray's detailed guidebook to London.

Melville's visits to London's many art galleries, churches, royal residences and historical sites also constituted a key phase in his education in the visual arts. One day Melville and Adler made a trip up the Thames to the royal palace at Hampton Court where they saw paintings by Van Dyck, Peter Lely's series of "Court Beauties" (from the court of Charles II), portraits of Ignatius Loyola by Guido Reni and of Venus by Titian (both likely copies), seven of Raphael's cartoons of the Acts of the Apostles and the head of a Jew by Rembrandt. During the second week of November Melville twice visited the National Gallery. He and Adler subsequently went to the Dulwich Gallery in a southern suburb of London where he admired "Titians, Claudes, Salvators, Murillos. – The Peasant Boys – The Venus – The Peasant Girl – Cardinal Beaufort – The mottled horse of Wouvermans – St. John – The Assumption – The old man & pipe – Mrs. Siddons as Tragic Muse."¹¹ Though the Italian paintings were likely misattributed, the gallery had a significant number of genuine Dutch and Flemish genre paintings, and the memory of Murillo's pictures of peasants would later appear in chapter 45 of *The Confidence-Man*.

On November 21 Melville visited Greenwich Hospital for naval pensioners, where he observed sea pieces, portraits of naval heroes and coats Nelson had worn in battle, gathering impressions he would eventually use in *Billy Budd*. The next day he visited Windsor Castle, where he saw a bust of Nelson mounted on a pedestal from the mast of his ship *Victory*, Gobelins tapestries and a shield (inaccurately) attributed to Benvenuto Cellini. On his last visit to the National Gallery on December 17, Melville saw "Rembrandt's Jew & the Saints of Taddeo Gaddi, & Guido's Murder of the Innocents" and then went to look at the British art in the new Vernon Gallery.¹² Finally, on December 20 Melville toured the House of Lords with the artist John Tenniel – later famous for his illustrations to Lewis Carroll's *Alice books* – to see the new frescoes of scenes from British poets.

At mid-century, London had twenty-seven licensed theaters, the productions of which typically involved a mix of popular melodramas and farces in the same evening. Melville saw the famed Mime. Vestris (Lucia Elizabeth Mathews) and her husband Charles Mathews in *Not a Bad Judge*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *A Practical Man* at the Royal Lyceum Theater on November 7 and the next night spent an evening at the Princess's Theatre, where he saw *Don Pasquale*, *The First Night* and the ballet *Les Patineurs*, which featured roller skaters on stage. He was at the Adelphi Theatre on

November 9 to see *The Sons of Mars* followed by three farces and then at a rowdy lower-class "Penny Theatre" production the next night. A week later Melville visited Sadler's Wells Theatre in Islington to see Colley Cibber's *She Would and She Would Not*, followed by the farces *The First of May* and *Tobias's Dog*, and on November 19 he saw the most famous British actor of the day, William Macready, in *Othello* at the Haymarket Theatre, with a farcical afterpiece, *Alarming Sacrifices*. Following his trip to the Continent, Melville resumed his theater-going on December 14, when he returned to the Haymarket Theatre to see Charles Kean in Douglas Jerrold's *The Housekeeper* and, on December 20, went behind the scenes at the Surrey Theatre with Henry Forrester to inspect the set of the latter's new Christmas pantomime. A blend of some of these theater experiences would help inspire the second sketch in "The Two Temples."

In addition to visual arts and theater, Melville also enjoyed the manifold spectacles of London, including famous landmarks such as London Bridge, Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, the British Museum and the new Houses of Parliament, while he also explored the shabby or dangerous districts where the masses of London's poor lived.¹³ Melville indicated his awareness of this darker side of London life when he recorded the remarks of John Chandler Bancroft Davis, secretary of legation at the American embassy, after the two had visited the new American ambassador on November 25: "Coming home with Davis I was struck with his expressions concerning the poverty & misery of so large a portion of the London population. He revealed a heart." Melville himself had commented on the "bloated pomp" of the Lord Mayor's Show in Cheapside on November 9 and the next day witnessed the pathetic sight of the "crowd of beggars who were going to receive the broken meats & pies from yesterday's grand banquet (Lord Mayor's Day)" – experiences that would later inspire the second sketch of "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs."¹⁴

A well-known and pervasive sign of London's coal-fueled economy was evident in Melville's experience one morning of an "old-fashioned pea-soup London fog – of a gamboge color." Looking out at the city from one of its bridges another day, Melville imagined how he might adapt the smoky, hellish-looking scene in some future work of fiction: "a city of Dis (Dante's) clouds of smoke – the damned &c – coal barges – coaly waters, cast iron Duke [the City of London's equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington] &c its marks are left up you." He would use this Dantesque description five years later in chapter 24 of *Israel Potter*. Yet the most authentically hellish and morally tainted atmosphere he experienced in London was the public execution of convicted murderers George and Marie de Roux

Manning on November 12 while surrounded by a "brutish" mob ("All in all, a most wonderful, horrible, & unspeakable scene").¹⁵

If Melville was acquainted with the poverty and misery of Victorian London, he was also able to enjoy its highly civilized living. Indeed, in keeping with his own distinguished family descent and growing transatlantic reputation, Melville was received into some of the best English and American society during his visit. Having been honored with an unexpected invitation to stay with the Duke of Rutland at his Leicestershire castle, Belvoir, in January, Melville reluctantly declined, despite the literary material it might provide.¹⁶ But he socialized with a number of other titled and upper-class personages, as well as several notable wealthy Americans. On Tuesday, November 20, for example, Melville met Boston textile magnate and newly appointed U.S. ambassador Abbott Lawrence and his wife at their temporary residence at the Clarendon Hotel, returning there again the following Sunday.

Perhaps the most distinguished social event Melville attended was a November 24 dinner, complete with footmen in knee breeches, at the Richmond-area home of the American banker and Baring Brothers partner Joshua Bates. There Melville apparently met (among others) Henry Bingham Mildmay, nephew to Baron Ashburton; Bates's daughter Elizabeth, who was married to Baron Jean-Sylvain van de Weyer, Belgian ambassador to England; the American banker and Baring Brothers partner Russell Sturgis; and the expatriate American businessman, banker and philanthropist George Peabody, another acquaintance of his brother Gansevoort. If Melville was well acquainted with the Dickensian aspects of London, from both his reading and observation, here he was given a hint of its Jamesian potentialities for the study of transatlantic mores.

Melville also had his brush with royalty, for when he and an unnamed English companion were leaving Windsor Castle after observing its art and artifacts, they bowed to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert as the pair returned home in their carriage, the queen alone acknowledging their salute. Melville commented in his journal on the queen's bad complexion, unaware she was pregnant with her seventh child and had just recovered from the chicken pox: "I would commend to the [queen] Rowland's Kalydore [a popular skin cream] for clarifying the complexion. She is an amiable domestic woman tho' I doubt not & God bless her, say I, & long live the 'prince of whales.'" ¹⁷ Both facetious and sentimental here, Melville mirrored the ambivalence of his republican countrymen.

Toward the end of his stay in London Melville read Stern's *Tristram Shandy* and De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, both of

which left a distinct imprint on *Moby-Dick* (Sterne on chapter 85, "The Fountain"; De Quincey on chapter 50, "The Spirit-Spout"). Melville's extensive book purchases in London appear almost designed to provide formal or thematic inspiration for his whaling novel.¹⁸ Thus, he assembled a small library of Gothic fiction – Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, Beckford's *Vathek* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – all anticipating Ahab's role as Gothic hero-villain on a vengeful, self-destructive quest for the elusive White Whale. Melville's purchase of works of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama – Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare and Marlowe – would similarly help him frame the dramatic contents or thematic focus of several chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Still other works, such as the essays of Sir Thomas Browne and Charles Lamb, Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*, Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*, Rousseau's *Confessions* and Goethe's *Autobiography* would provide hints for various philosophical, psychological and humorous aspects of his semi-autobiographical persona Ishmael.

When Melville left London on Christmas Eve with a trunkful of books, and then sailed out of Portsmouth for New York on Christmas Day (the same day as the *Pequod's* departure), he could reflect on a remarkably full array of social and intellectual encounters during the previous two months. He had succeeded in placing *White-Jacket* with his English publisher for a respectable advance; he had absorbed a host of new experiences, impressions and acquaintances that included many outstanding figures in the London literary and cultural worlds; and he could take satisfaction in knowing he had a growing transatlantic audience for his writing. All in all, Melville's 1849 trip to London (and the Continent) was instrumental in launching him onto the greatest phase of his career as a writer, enriching his mind and catalyzing his imagination to create some of his greatest works of fiction, beginning with *Moby-Dick*.

Notes

- 1 Philip Hoare, "White Whale in the Big Smoke: How *Moby-Dick* Began in London," *New Statesman*, November 27, 2015, 54–6.
- 2 See Jonathan A. Cook, "The Historical and Literary Sources of *Redburn's* 'Mysterious Night in London,'" *Leviathan* 6 (2004), 9–33.
- 3 For biographical background, see Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996–2002), vol. 1, 661–87.
- 4 See John W. Dodds, *The Age of Paradox: A Biography of England 1841–1851* (New York: Rinehart, 1952), chapter 10; Lisa Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840–1870* (New York: St. Martin's-Griffin, 2005); Henry Mayhew,

London Labour and the London Poor, ed. Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5 See Dodds, *Age of Paradox*, chapter 9; Carl Dawson, *Victorian Noon: English Literature in 1850* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

6 On publishers and questions of copyright, see Howard C. Horsford, "Melville and the London Literary Scene," *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 13 (1984), 23–42; *Writings*, vol. xv, 166–78.

7 *Writings*, vol. xv, 26.

8 Kevin J. Hayes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

9 *Writings*, vol. xv, 30.

10 Robert K. Wallace, *Melville and Turner: Spheres of Love and Fright* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 284–96.

11 *Writings*, vol. xv, 20.

12 *Ibid.*, 42.

13 See Howard C. Horsford, "Melville and the London Street Scene," *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 16 (1987), 23–35.

14 *Writings*, vol. xv, 29, 14, 15.

15 *Ibid.*, 26, 14, 17.

16 *Ibid.*, 42.

17 *Ibid.*, 24.

18 *Ibid.*, 144.

CHAPTER 6

Europe

David Watson

The Hôtel de Cluny in Paris impressed Herman Melville as "just the house I should like to live in." Built over the ruins of the Roman Palais de Thermes, and combining Gothic and Renaissance styles, the former city residence of the Cluny abbots housed 1,400 works of medieval art, when Melville visited it in December 1849. The Hôtel de Cluny resurfaces in chapter 41 of *Moby-Dick*, a chapter sharing a title with the book itself, as an allegorical emblem for "Ahab's darker, deeper part." Attempting to plumb the depths of Ahab's monomania, Ishmael suggests that discovering Ahab's "root of grandeur" is akin to taking the winding staircase of the Hôtel de Cluny deep into the bowels of "those vast Roman halls of Thermes" where the "great gods mock that captive king."¹

This crucial passage from the "Moby-Dick" chapter echoes Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and its claim that "in even the wisest Soul lies a whole world of internal Madness, an authentic Demon-Empire; out of which, indeed, his whole world of Wisdom has been creatively built together."² Indeed, during his 1849 European expedition Melville attempted unsuccessfully to meet with Carlyle, just like at first attempt he was unable to gain entry to the Hôtel de Cluny. But in July 1850 he borrowed *Sartor Resartus* from Evert Duyckinck's library. Carlyle's satirical account of the thoughts and early life of a German philosopher gave Melville a prototype for his playful style in *Moby-Dick*.³ Melville's customary allusiveness surfaces in Ishmael's rendering of Ahab to transform it into a partial itinerary of his European travels.

Unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller, or James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving for that matter, Melville did not spend much time in Europe, but Europe – as an idea and a place – left its mark on his work and career. Melville made three journeys to Europe. He visited Liverpool in June 1839. In October 1849, he left New York for London, from which he traveled to Paris. From Paris, Melville embarked on a train trip taking him through Brussels to the valley of the Rhine, before he