Herman Melville
(1 August 1819-28 September 1891)

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See also the Melville entry in DLB 3: Antebellum Writers in New York and the South.

BOOKS: Narrative of a Four Months’ Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; Or, A Peep at Polynesian Life (London: Murray, 1846); republished as Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life. During a Four Months’ Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas, With Notices of the French Occupation of Tahiti and the Provisional Cession of the Sandwich Islands to Lord Paulet, 2 volumes (New York: Wiley & Putnam/London: Murray, 1846); revised edition, with “The Story of Toby,” 2 volumes (New York: Wiley & Putnam/London: Murray, 1846);

The Story of Toby, A Sequel to “Typee” (London: Murray, 1846);

Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas, 2 volumes (London: Murray, 1847; New York: Harper/London: Murray, 1847);

Mardi: And a Voyage Thither (3 volumes, London: Bentley, 1849; 2 volumes, New York: Harper, 1849);


White Jacket; Or, The World in a Man-of-War, 2 volumes (London: Bentley, 1850); republished as White-Jacket; Or The World in a Man-of-War, 1 volume (New York: Harper/London: Bentley, 1850);

The Whale, 3 volumes (London: Bentley, 1851); republished as Moby-Dick; Or, The Whale, 1 volume (New York: Harper/London: Bentley, 1851);

Pierre; Or, The Ambiguities (New York: Harper, 1852; London: Sampson Low, 1852);

Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile (New York: Putnam, 1855; London: Routledge, 1855);

The Piazza Tales (New York: Dix & Edwards/London: Sampson Low, 1856);

The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade (New York: Dix, Edwards, 1857; London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1857);

Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (New York: Harper, 1866);

Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, 2 volumes (New York: Putnam’s, 1876);

John Marr and Other Sailors, With Some Sea-Pieces (New York: De Vinne, 1888);

Timoleon Etc. (New York: Caxton, 1891);
The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches, edited by Henry Chapin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1922);

Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces, edited by Raymond Weaver, volume 13 of The Works of Herman Melville, Standard Edition (London, Bombay & Sydney: Constable, 1924); “Billy Budd, Foretopman,” republished in Shorter Novels of Herman Melville, edited by Weaver (New York: Liveright, 1928);


Billy Budd Sailor (An Inside Narrative) . . . Reading Text and Genetic Text, edited by Harrison Hayford and Merton Seals, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962);


OTHER: Merton M. Seals, Melville as Lecturer, includes the texts of three lectures by Melville, “based on contemporary newspaper accounts” (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 127-185.

“You must have plenty of sea-room to tell the truth in,” wrote Herman Melville in “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” the pseudonymous, two-part review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Mosses from an Old Manse (1846) that he published in the Literary World for 17 and 24 August 1850. Melville had made his bow as an author with an outpouring of sea and adventure fiction whose centerpiece would shortly be Moby-Dick (1851), as capacious a narrative as nearly any in Western fiction. He had been obliged in his early twenties to escape the genteel poverty of his New York family by signing on as a seaman aboard a whaling ship, which sailed from New Bedford on 3 January 1841. He was not to return to the United States until October 1844, after having seen the great Atlantic and Pacific whale fisheries, and having been, at different times, a common sailor before the mast, a harpooner, a deserter from the crew of a whaling ship, a freebooter in the Marquesas, Tahiti, and Honolulu, and eventually an enlisted man of-war. If any one hallmark has come to be associated with his work, it has to be its oceanlike scale, nothing less than the restless “diving” for “vital truth” as well as the “real originality” he also invokes in the course of “Hawthorne and His Mosses.”

The tendency to see Melville as a writer who required “sea-room” and to view Moby-Dick as its most dramatic apotheosis has been understandable, but over time readers have discerned in Melville’s life and work a greater variety, other quite unexpected facets and claims. “Mighty” as Moby-Dick may be (“To produce a mighty book, you must have a mighty theme,” says Ishmael), it takes its place within the yet larger body of his writing, his nonfiction and poetry as well as his other fiction, an output which began with Typee (1846) and concluded with the posthumously published novella Billy Budd (1924). This output, of necessity, embraces his short stories, the best of them—“Bartleby, The Scrivener,” “The Encantadas,” and “Benito Cereno”—included with two others—“The Lightning-Rod Man” and “The Bell-Tower”—and the story-sketch “The Piazza” in The Piazza Tales (1856), the only collection of his short stories published during his lifetime.

Set in the context of both his writing and life, the stories occupy a strikingly compact and convenient niche, three busy years at mid career, 1853-1856, during which he wrote sixteen stories and published fourteen of them in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine or Putnam’s Monthly Magazine. His other short fiction comprises only early and late miscellaneous pieces and “The Town Ho’s Story,” published in Harper’s New Monthly in October 1851 and included in Moby-Dick as chapter 54. But, despite the acclaim that “Bartleby” and the best of Melville’s other stories have come to enjoy, none was well regarded in his lifetime.
Rather, they gave their few readers the impression of minor exercises de style. They seemed odd, knotty stories, full of offbeat disgruntlement and jokery, and to some they appeared to be evidence of a career in decline, or one which had dissolved into obscurity and too private a manner. Melville's stories, particular and distinct as they may be, are recognizable the products of the same vital imagination that created Moby-Dick.

"Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life," Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne in June 1851. His twenty-fifth year was the year he began writing Typee, his first work of fiction. A key "development" the book may have been, but it was not entirely out of keeping with a life already marked by a whole run of changes and reversals. Born on 1 August 1819, the third of eight children, he spent his boyhood in New York City, where his father Allan Melville (Melville himself added the final e) did business as an "importer of French Goods and Commission Merchant." His mother, Maria Gansevoort Melville, descended from a leading New York Dutch-American, or Knickerbocker, family. Much to their mutual satisfaction both sides could lay claim to kin prominent in the Revolutionary War: Maj. Thomas Melville, who took a leading part in the Boston Tea Party, and Gen. Peter Gansevoort, who held his commission under George Washington. This stock was also to be of considerable pride to Melville, the basis of high personal expectations. "Somewhat slow in comprehension" as his father called him at seven, he entered the New York Male High School in 1827, took occasional family holidays in Boston and Albany, ingested a fair dose of Calvinism from one of his grandmothers, and appears to have grown up a plant, convivial, if at times somber, youngster.

The first shock to this cushioned environment came with the bankruptcy—closely followed by the delirium and death—of his revered father in the trade recession of 1832. (Allan Melville had moved the family to Albany in 1830.) Melville was to reconfront these events in Pierre (1852), and the effect on the family at large was also profound. Money became tighter than ever, and Maria Melville found herself and the children edging toward genteel poverty if not outright indigence. For, Melville it began a series of false starts. In 1833 and 1834 he worked at an uncle's farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts (where he would buy his own farm, Arrowhead, in 1850). During 1834-1836 he clerked in his brother Gansevoort's store in Albany. In 1837 he tried teaching in a Pittsfield country school, an experience which no doubt lies behind Ishmael's allusion to schoolmastering in Moby-Dick. In 1838 he made his authorial debut, writing in a debating club controversy for the Albany Microscope, and studied surveying and engineering at the Lansingburgh Academy, most probably in the hope of working on the Lake Erie Canal system. No permanent job presented itself. In June 1839 he sailed down the Hudson to New York and secured a place to Liverpool and back as a deckhand aboard the packet ship St. Lawrence. He portrayed his encounters with the brute equations of Victorian sailor and city life, with some irony, in Redburn (1849). Once back in New York and again jobless he tried another spell of teaching, and in 1840 he took off to Illinois, where he traveled the Mississippi, an experience reworked in his canny "metaphysical" satire, The Confidence-Man (1857).

In near desperation, in January 1841 he sailed out of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, as a whaler and harpooner aboard the Acushnet, the beginning of four years of Polynesian and whaling adventure. His outward journey took him to Rio de Janeiro, round Cape Horn, through the Galápagos Islands, and eventually to the Marquesas, where, with his friend Toby Greene, he jumped ship at Nukuhiva in July 1842. His escape into an inland valley would become the basis of Typee. By signing on with two further whalers, the Lucy Ann out of Australia and the Charles & Henry out of Nantucket, he island-hopped through Tahiti and the Hawaiian islands before disembarking at Honolulu in May 1843. These travels would provide him with the material for Typee's sequel, Omoo (1847). In August 1843 he signed on as an enlisted seaman aboard the frigate United States, returning to Boston in October 1844 after stopovers once again in the Marquesas and Tahiti, then Valparaíso, Callao, and Rio. From this journey he had the basis for White Jacket (1850). Back one more time in Lansingburgh and as much as anything to amuse his mother and sister, he started to write up his Marquesan experiences. The upshot was Typee.

Ostensibly a "narrative" of a young sailor's desertion and escape into a tropical Marquesan valley, this first full-length venture was neither quite fiction nor fact. Its adventure-filled story blends suspense with romance, a daring mix of sailors' high jinks, amateur anthropology, and reportings of cannibalism and other hidden tribal rit-
uals and rites. To his more staid contemporaries Melville was shocking, a sailor-turned-teller whose book bordered on the lewd and called into question "civilized" standards. To admirers, however, he became the find of the season, full of derring-do in his unveiling of an alternative, primitive other world. His tongue-in-cheek reportage and general mischief merely added to the flavor. In retrospect *Typee* has come to be seen as even subtler, unexpectedly well designed, a tale whose different skeins play into an unfolding whole. Certainly the book points forward to the stories with its use of paradox and ambiguity in the confusion over which tribe—the *Typees* or the Happars—is cannibalistic or friendly, over the contrast of Polynesian totem and taboo with their equivalents in Western life: Pacific, tropical ways of being against Yankee uptightness, and over the stain of cannibalism in the one domain against the stain of colonialism and disease in the other. Anything but a book of "unvarnished truth," as the narrator Tommo alleges, *Typee* shows Melville's instinctual adeptness at the essential elements of storytelling.

In 1847 not only was *Omoo* published, but a number of new turns in his domestic life took place. In February Evert Duyckinck, editor of the newly created *Literary World*, asked him to contribute book reviews—a sign that he amounted to something more than a mariner home from the seas with a passing literary flair. In July 1847 he produced a run of satirical sketches on "Old Zack," President Zachary Taylor, for the journal *Yankee Doodle*. On 4 August 1847 he married Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of the Chief Justice of Massachusetts, a widely applauded match. Their first son, Malcolm, was born in February 1849, their second, Stanwix, in October 1851; two daughters followed, Elizabeth in 1853 and Frances in 1855.

*Omoo*, however much it may be regarded as an appendix to *Typee*, shows the same flair. Again one encounters episodes and short dramatic events made over into a single line of narrative, each glossed and given life by the energy of Melville's storytelling voice. This energy emerges in accounts of island-hopping; the portrait of the gargoyle Dr. Long Ghost; attacks on the baleful influence of the colonizers, missionaries, and sailors who have brought malaria (and worse) to the islanders; and in the evidence of declining self-esteem among the different peoples, especially those of Honolulu. Melville's play never eclipses his underlying seriousness; his narrative is at once an entertainment and an act of witness, even instruction.

With *Mardi* (1849) the ability to weave each episode and digression into a convincing whole failed him. Subtitled *And a Voyage Thither*, this "Book of Dreams"—as Melville chose to call it—takes its narrator and companions across an archipelago of island kingdoms, most of them mythicized and fantastical, others versions of Europe and America. The book is an endeavor to create nothing less than a world allegory, but its too-evident symbolism and literariness fail to come off; it is a "romance" which simply runs afoul of its own contrivance. For all its flaws, however, one cannot fail to sense an inveterate storyteller at work, Melville always and everywhere willing himself to more and more fabulation.

Not surprisingly, *Mardi* brought stinging dismissals down upon Melville's head. Reviewers asked why had he not stuck to the sunshine, the apparent simplicity, of his first two ventures. He saw himself, as a consequence, obliged to return to journeyman writing, a fiction of *facts*, as he observed with regret. The results, "two jobs, which I have done for money," were *Redburn* and *White Jacket*. Neither, in truth, deserve Melville's low estimate. Both are lively, dramatic shipboard stories, which in all of their documentation and "fact" reveal deeply inward rites of passage. Melville cast *Redburn* as a journey to Liverpool and back, aboard a merchant ship. For the wellborn, ingenious, awkward Well Borough *Redburn*, it is a passage out of innocence into experience as the boy faces the shock of loneliness, of depravity aboard ship and in the city, and of the different sights and sounds of death. Again one senses Melville experimenting in the tactics of first-person narration, the way a storyteller "creates" his audience, playing to its expectations and needs, pacing each element in the narration.

*White Jacket* is another chronicle, this time narrated by a more mature, more seasoned sailor, an older and less put-upon witness who tells of life aboard a U.S. frigate returning from Peru to Boston. Depicting a "man-of-war" world with its fixed hierarchies of command and behavior, *White Jacket* is notable for Melville's ability to create an organizing symbol, in this case a cauliike badge of innocence—the white jacket worn by the narrator. In ripping himself free of it, the narrator rips free of past illusion and vulnerability. In this work, too, Melville shows that he knows how to people a narrative, creating the noble captain Jack Chase, or the poet-companion Lemsford,
and a company of officers and men. However best read, as "novels," or "confession," or "fictions of fact," both Redburn and White Jacket confirm Melville's growing powers as a maker of fiction, at once instinctual yet equally canny and inventive at every turn.

On completion of Redburn, and with the American proofs of White Jacket in hand to persuade the London publisher Richard Bentley of the need for a British edition (which he did successfully), Melville made a two-month trip to Europe, visiting London, Paris, Brussels, Cologne, and the Rhineland. Back in New York in February 1850, he borrowed money from his father-in-law to buy a farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he worked furiously to complete his "hell-fired" whale book, published in England as The Whale and in America as Moby-Dick. Meanwhile he had taken to reading Shakespeare like a man possessed, and the impact is clear to all who read Moby-Dick. He also published "Hawthorne and His Mosses," his profoundly admiring account of Hawthorne's Mosses From An Old Manse. By the time the article was published he had discovered that Hawthorne was living in nearby Lenox. There began a friendship, a short-lived but momentous encounter between two of America's major authors, albeit stronger on the part of Melville who dedicated Moby-Dick to Hawthorne, "In token of my admiration for his genius."

Distinctive as all five of his first books are, they all point forward to Moby-Dick. A "story," or "drama done," stunning in its own right, the book also functions as a compound of other stories—the nine "gams" for instance, or the different "lowerings" after the whale, or the apocalyptic final confrontation with Moby-Dick. Other kinds of "story" also play into the whole. One has only to think of Ishmael as a would-be embarkee, whether suffering fits of depression in Manhattan, or seeking a room at the Spouter Inn, or in a marriage bed with Queequeg, or—even more tellingly—as the "teller" of his own thoughts and speculations. There is also "story" in the book's omnipresent "ballast," the bedrock of authenticating fact which secures its every flight into metaphysics and myth. This double play of meaning can take the form of a pastiche classification of whales; or the mat woven by Queequeg and Ishmael, which Melville artfully turns into a metaphor for the interaction of Free Will, Chance, and Necessity in the shaping of human affairs; or the gold doubloon from Equador nailed to the masthead by Ahab and used to expose human-kind's competing solipsisms in defining the world; or the "voyage" of the Pequod itself, which despite the destruction of its captain and crew never actually ends but continues always as mankind's "devious cruising" after "truth." In all of these aspects and others Moby-Dick serves as Melville's landmark fable of Man against Other, a historic tale of the New England oil industry transformed magnificently into a quest for metaphysical "light." A would-be Book of Revelation, a narrative of First and Last meanings, Moby-Dick represents Melville's storytelling brought to epic pitch.

Pierre, Melville's "kraken" book according to his letters, shows his thematic interest turning inland— as in Bartleby and some of his other city stories—a weblike, convoluted story of its titular hero's pursuit of absolutes only to come up against relativity and so to be led on to stasis and ultimately self-destruction. So stylized, and, as is now acknowledged, so self-reflexive, a fiction could hardly have done less to court approval, and it received a drubbing from the reviewers.

In part it was this disaster and the need to secure a dependable income to support his wife and family that caused Melville to turn to writing short stories for publication in magazines. The Piazza Tales and other stories were the result, a new kind of storytelling for him. In the same period he also wrote the novella Israel Potter, first serialized in nine installments in Putnam's Monthly from July 1854 to March 1855 and then published in book form later in March 1855. A half-factual, cryptic story of the life, decline, and final prairie exile of a onetime American mariner, it offers at the same time an unflattering perspective on both the national credo of optimism and all unduly self-persuading and patriotic versions of history.

The same temper, or distemper, runs through The Confidence-Man, the last of Melville's prose fiction to be published in his lifetime. Generally ignored, the novel, when reviewed at all, prompted the same dismaying response as Mardi and Pierre. Structured around a twenty-four-hour All Fools' Day journey down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans, it depicts a frontier citizenry as deluded by its own foibles and naive wishes to believe the best of the "metaphysical scamp" whom Melville puts through successive incarnations aboard the riverboat Fidèle. Melville's fast-moving fables and dissolves, his agile, equivocal prose, and his ringing of the changes on words such as "confidence," "trust," "charity,"
and "charm," show him to be a consummate master of satiric skills. The central story of a river journey in which a standard of "confidence" is set against that of "No Trust" also includes five key interfoliated subplots, involving the supposedly abused wife Goneril, the alms-seeking cripple, the Indian-hater John Moredock, the Prodigal Son Charlemont, and the candle maker and light bringer China Aster—all in their separate ways commentaries upon the larger narrative. Including in chapters 14, 39, and 44—story-essays on the ways narrative relates to reality and takes on its characteristic shape, The Confidence-Man has now rightly been assigned a higher place in the Melville canon than at any time previously. The book has also, perhaps understandably, been seen as something of a defiant last act of storytelling on Melville's part, his final Swiftian vision of the human "masquerade."

The fiction written after Pierre—the stories, Israel Potter, and The Confidence-Man—would be the last published in his lifetime. Sales continued to be poor. Moby-Dick, like Mardi before it, was considered too much taken up with metaphysics and skepticism ever to be popular. The stories neither sold nor won admirers, and The Confidence-Man was judged simply impenetrable. In 1853 the family tried unsuccessfully to secure a consular post for Melville. Domestic strains began to show between him and his wife, and by 1856 Melville was close to nervous collapse. In October 1856, with money borrowed from his father-in-law, he left for an extensive tour of Europe and the Levant in hopes of restoring his health. He had a brief reunion with Hawthorne in Liverpool, after which Hawthorne, the American consul there, wrote of Melville in his diary, "He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbe-
lief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.” Melville’s journey took him on to the Holy Land—which in time would yield the material for his epic poem of doubt and faith, *Clarel* (1876)—and to Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. He shipped back to New York from Liverpool in May 1857, seemingly much recuperated.

But for a one-time best-selling author he had become a commercial failure. In 1858, 1859, and 1860 he gave lectures on the lyceum circuit on topics such as the South Seas and Italian statuary; in 1860 he took a trip aboard his brother Tom’s ship *The Meteor* to San Francisco, returning to New York by himself; in 1861 at the outbreak of the Civil War he tried for a naval appointment without success; and in 1863 he reluctantly sold his Pittsfield farm to return with the family to New York City, where he would have his residence until his death in 1891. In December 1866, all other avenues appearing closed to him, he took an oath as a minor customs inspector for the New York harbor authority, a post he discharged with resigned diligence until 1885, when a slightly earlier bequest to his wife eased his way into retirement. Despite the publication of his poetry (principally *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* in 1866 and *Clarel* a decade later), his times saw little improvement. His work continued largely unread. In 1867 he came upon his son Malcolm dead at home of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Malcolm’s brother Stanwix was to die of fever in San Francisco in 1886. Despite occasional expressions of interest—from Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s son, and various British admirers and correspondents—Melville’s later years were marked by anonymity and eclipse. The papers found at his death, however, did yield one last triumph.

Though *Billy Budd*, written during 1888-1891, did not appear in print until 1924 and then in an erroneous text, it would show itself as honed and concentrated an effort as anything Melville wrote. An “inside narrative,” as Melville called it, this valedictory work once again confronts the puzzle of innocence and is a parabolic drama of sacrificial innocence and murderous legality. Set against the immediate background of British naval insurrection at the Nore and Spithead, it discloses the fateful encounter of three “phenomenal” men, Captain Edward Vere of the *Bellipotent*, the master-at-arms John Claggart, and the impressed foretopman Billy Budd. A truly Orphic “welkin-eyed,” “Handsome Sailor,” Billy also suffers the blight of being a stutterer. When wrongfully accused of mutiny by Claggart, he cannot speak his innocence. He kills his accuser with a blow of the fist, finds himself sentenced to hang by Vere’s drumhead court, and to his fellow shipmates becomes a messiah, their foundling Christ who has suffered a new crucifixion. Even without “plenty of sea-room,” Melville could “tell the truth,” keeping his canvasses small and his writing precise. As in Melville’s short stories, *Billy Budd* relies upon a voice held discreetly at a distance, unwilling to spell out meanings or instruct the reader in how to reach any one mastering interpretation of the narrative’s events.

Melville has been recognized as more than a writer of fiction. His poetry, for instance, has increasingly won higher regard, whether the “strife as memory” and “moods variable” of his Civil War verse in *Battle-Pieces*, or *Clarel*, the daunting verse-epic (longer than *Paradise Lost*) that he wrote as a modern “pilgrimage” of the loss of and search for faith, or the retrospective sailor and travel pieces which make up *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon Etc.* (1891). He has also won recognition as a letter writer of unexpected versatility. His letters in general show his playful side, even when they speak of business and publishing. But it is his correspondence with Hawthorne during 1852, in the wake of “Hawthorne and His Mosses” and his first meeting with the older writer, which amounts to the high point, at once companionable yet serious and singular in its insights into the creative process. Melville as diarist also invites attention, especially for his logs of his visits to London and Europe in 1849-1850 and to the Holy Land in 1856-1857. Both again emphasize Melville’s talent for the telling observation, his sensitivity to human difference and variety, and the contrasting textures of place and culture. Nor—as not only “Hawthorne and His Mosses” but his several early book reviews and the reports of the lectures he gave in 1860 on the South Seas and other travel topics bear witness—can Melville as essayist be passed over lightly. As much as his longer fiction, these compositions belong in the general context of his writing, and in a number of cases they have direct implications for the short stories.

Given the general rebirth of interest in Melville that began in the 1920s, the neglect of Melville’s short fiction in particular can be seen as a radical disservice. For quite as much as *Moby-Dick* and the other longer fiction, his stories show his imagination at full strength. Each is a unique
further communication of truth, told in a small and often oblique way. In this respect, two of the departure points for Melville’s short-story writing take on added relevance, first “The Town-Ho’s Story” and then the “Agatha” letters, as they have come to be known, which Melville wrote to Hawthorne in 1852. “The Town-Ho’s Story” can be read as one of Moby-Dick’s nine “gams,” a story-within-a-story and an augury of the whale’s later role in meeting and punishing Ahab’s monomania. But despite its integral part in that larger whole, “The Town-Ho’s Story” is as freestanding as any of the stories in The Piazza Tales. In large measure this has to do with its appeal as a single, unfolding dramatic event aboard the Town Ho, where the Mate Radney’s insult to the Lakeman Steelkilt results in a skirmish in which the Mate’s jaw is broken and an abortive mutiny is led by Steelkilt, who is flogged by Radney and plans to kill him. Before Steelkilt can carry out this deed, however, Radney goes after Moby-Dick, and the whale bears off the hate-consumed Mate, a fate which haunts Radney’s widow as if in a nightmare. Steelkilt escapes to Tahiti.

Much of the story’s appeal has to do with the virtuosity of Melville’s storytelling, his meticulous, lively staging of the narrative. Ishmael, his narrator, pretends first of all to resume “the style in which I once narrated it at Lima,” in the Golden Inn. His storytelling is interrupted by questions about American terms and usages from his highborn Peruvian drinking cronies, and finally, mock solemnly “sworn to” on “a copy of the Holy Evangelists.” This Golden Inn retelling, in fact, makes its very artifice an integral part of the drama, from the story’s alleged genesis as a statement made under oath to the harpooner Tashatego, his then equally alleged mumbling aloud of it while asleep on the Pequod, and on to the ensuing insistence of Ahab’s crew that the whole account be put before them. As Ishmael tells it one more time, it becomes a bar story, a fable to hold the attention of recently met drinking companions. The locale of a South American port, the hot sun, the pauses and clarifications, all form elements in Ishmael’s “styling” of the story, his wish to entertain but also astound his listeners. His is the perfect simulation of spontaneous and oral storytelling, the live voice. So exemplary a match of tale and telling, furthermore, lays down the pattern for a near perfect match of the stories to follow.

The “Agatha” correspondence, in essence one extended letter of 13 August 1852 and two short notes of 25 October and 25 November, might be construed as a story left in embryonic and untransposed note form. In offering Hawthorne the outline of an episode originally told to him by a New Bedford lawyer, Melville clearly intended an act of homage and friendship in the same vein as he had shown in “Hawthorne and His Mosses.” But he intended, too, a professional gift of story material for Hawthorne to act on “with your great power in these things.” Melville made his offer at a turning point in their respective careers. Hawthorne, as The Scarlet Letter had given notice in 1850, was moving away from the short story to the longer “romance.” Melville, on the other hand, was turning precisely the opposite way, into short-story writing. As Melville’s letter of 25 November indicates, Hawthorne had tactfully “urged” Melville to work up the material himself. That the evidence suggests he did not—or at least did not in the manner he proposed to Hawthorne—can truly be thought a loss.

The “Agatha” material concerns the sad, enduring loyalty of a Nantucket woman abandoned by her weak and bigamist sailor-husband. Her life becomes a monument to stoicism, and in his letters, as if thinking of how he himself might have written the story, Melville counsels Hawthorne to build each “tributeary” item into a whole—Agatha’s patience and resignation, the rotting of her wooden post box as she waits across the years for word from her husband, her cliff-side habitat, the husband’s subsequent duplicities and betrayals, the ancillary family skins of the story, and the general contextual New England bleakness of the sea and weather. He speaks of “a skeleton of actual reality” to be “built about with fulness & veins & beauty”, as to produce a transcending and quite other imaginative reality. In effect he was indicating his own compositional procedures, storytelling thoroughly grounded in “fact” but remade or “built about” into art. As a type Agatha anticipates the gallery of figures in Melville’s short fiction, characters whose human spirit has undergone ravage, most notably the eviscerated Bartleby and the lost Hunilla in “The Encantadas.”

“Bartleby,” first published in the November and December 1853 issues of Putnam’s Monthly as “Bartleby, The Scrivener” and the first story proper in The Piazza Tales, is a haunting, prophetically modern tale of exile and self-loss. Its story of a “forlorn,” anorexic law copyist who comes to work in a Wall Street domain of “rich men’s bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds” at once un-
settles and compels. In part it offers a mystery. Who is Bartleby? What is the significance of his repeated statement "I would prefer not to," his sheer aloneness, his odd, unexplained withdrawal of labor, his eventual removal to The Tombs, his "pallor" and "emaciation" and eventual death "huddled at the base of the wall" with his "dim eyes" nonetheless still open? The role of the lawyer-narrator similarly poses problems. It can by no means be taken for granted that his self-estimate as "unambitious" and "eminently safe" applies. Readers might be tempted to think him, for instance, ironic at his own expense, aware of his own past shortcomings and complacencies in confronting the copyist. Nor can we be certain of his own attitude to the revelation that Bartleby previously held a position in the "Dead Letter Office at Washington," the custodian of "errands of life" put bureaucratically to "death." Most especially can we not be sure of how the lawyer himself understands his concluding equation, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

"Bartleby" has been seen first as a "parable of walls," a depiction of "self" as irrecoverably immured and unfree, and thereby a companion piece to Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* (1952). Other interpreters look at "Bartleby" more as a quasi-religious fable, Bartleby himself as the spurned Christ or Buddha, and his eventual muteness as the token of God's inscrutable withdrawal from, or irrelevance to, the world. Less cosmicmically, it has been argued that "Bartleby" offers a classic portrait of catatonia or schizophrenia, in which copyist and lawyer constitute divided facets of a single personality, a doppelgänger story in the manner of Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" (1839) or Henry James's "The Jolly Corner" (1908). Or, "Bartleby" is a story of Wall Street, in which this business epicenter of nineteenth-century America is seen as murderous to the human creative spirit, a site only of commodification and of the fetish of property and profit. A much favored recent interpretation sees the story as deeply autobiographical. Bartleby functions as a surrogate for Melville himself, that is, Melville as a scrivener who "would prefer not" to "check his copy" and write to the required norm. His books, too, at least *Mardi* and *Pierre*, had quickly enough become "dead letters," left to dust and obscurity in out-of-the-way libraries.

As always in Melville's storytelling, the organizing tactics of the tale need close examination. Not only does the narrator play an equivocal part in the tale, shifting in register from apparent self-satisfaction, to irritation, to panic, to would-be divestment of all responsibility for Bartleby, and to a final, uncertain glimpse of the total significance of his copyist's life and death; but around Bartleby gather other kinds of witness, other guesses at his strange purposes. There is the testimony of Turkey and Nippers, his fellow clerks, one of whom can work properly only in the morning and the other only in the afternoon. Halfmen, robotic, having lost full humanity, they each give a half-version of Bartleby, full of hostility or accommodation, according to their mood swings. Then there is the testimony of Ginger Nut, the dollar-a-week office boy, anxious always to emulate and placate his elders. The story also puts before the reader a body of other testimony, that of the lawyer who rents the offices after the narrator has vacated the premises in the vain hope of freeing himself of his clerk and of the narrator's former landlord, both of whom complain that he has left behind his office stock in the person of Bartleby who refuses to leave. The landlord speaks of clients leaving and a possible mob, to be brought on by Bartleby's "stationary" and unspeaking sentinelship. Once Bartleby is imprisoned in the Tombs and visited there by the lawyer, still other testimony makes itself heard. One of the turnkeys calls him "the silent man." The grumman, anxious to make a quick dollar, thinks Bartleby "odd" and "a gentleman forger," a term which gives support to the interpretation of the story as indicative of Melville's own experience in the literary trade. The story also makes reference to the lawyer's baffled resort to yet another pair of voices, those of "philosophic" authority, "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestly on Necessity."

But against all these voices, the lawyer's above all, we are confronted with Bartleby's, minimalist in speech, stating his preference not to copy, not to check, not to do anything which will affirm or validate the Wall Street domain in which he finds himself. In this negation he has been seen by many as a figure of almost absurd Thoreauvian resistance, a true anachron and disserter. When visited by the lawyer at the Tombs he says accusingly: "I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you." Having receded into wordlessness, silence, an accusing absence of all speech, he incarnates the dead letters which once he destroyed, a figure of absence, nonbeing, otherness. However we react to the lawyer's self-
posturings ("unambitious," unprone to "dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages," the self-vaulting friend of John Jacob Astor), there can be little doubt that Melville intends the reader to be drawn into his difficulties and confusion. "Eminently safe" he may believe himself, but in reality his "safeness" counts for little. The encounter with Bartleby has turned his world—its values, idiom, assurance, ethics—upside down; it is neither eminent nor safe. Such are the subversive implications of "Bartleby," as sure and consequential a story as any Melville wrote.

Melville’s second triumph in The Piazza Tales is “The Encantadas”—first published in Putnam’s Monthly (March-May 1854)—his ten allegorized sketches of the Galápagos Islands. He makes over this South Pacific island chain, which he had visited in the 1840s, into a portrait of Hell, a barren, alien, seemingly arrested, or misrevolved world. Paradoxically, Charles Darwin’s The Origin of Species, the canonical text of evolution published a mere five years later in 1859, takes its data from the same Galápagos Islands. Melville heads each of his sketches with an extract from Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queen, as if to give notice that his is not the role of simple geographer or explorer. Rather, “The Encantadas” sketches are indeed to be regarded as “built about,” seamed and layered with fantasy, speculation, a whole overlay of commentary, and yet other storytelling.

Initially, the islands are set forth as a domain of “cinders,” “extinct volcanoes,” “a vacant lot,” which Melville also glosses as “uninhabitable and woe-begone” and in all a “plutonian sight.” What life is to be encountered exists at ground level, whether the “mosses” and “wiry shrubs” which cling at the volcanic soil, or the crawling insect and reptile life, which Melville lists cryptically as “tortoises, lizards, immense spiders, snakes, and that strangest anomaly of outlandish nature, the iguana.” Calling on long-stored memories, he transforms the actual Galápagos into an imagined nether place, infernal, elemental islands forged out of the earth’s larval upheavals, and the perfect backdrops for human calamity.

Yet Melville does not give way to solemnity in “The Encantadas.” His antic Yankee wit and sar-
donicism put in frequent appearances. “Sketch Second,” for instance, invokes “wondrous tortoises,” stately, time-burdened “mystic creatures” with shells “grim as blacksmiths.” But affecting as they are, bearers of history as they seem, they can also be put to other purposes, such as supper for the crews of visiting whalers.

“Sketch Third” turns to Rock Rodondo, a natural promontory which has long served as a lookout post and bird sanctuary. Standing high above a chain of “fish-caves,” it seems to Melville to resemble in turn “a tall light-house” and “the lofty sails of a cruiser.” Unlike other parts of the islands, Rodondo is not bathed in silence. Around it wheel birds of every variety, their piercing and cacophonous cries creating a “demonic din.”

“Sketch Fourth” is “A Pisgah View from the Rock,” a wry, mock-panoramic sweep of “yonder Burnt District of the Enchanted Isles.” Melville even includes a splendid mock census, a set of “the most reliable estimates made upon the spot.” In the fifth, sixth, and seventh sketches, Melville plays the chronicler of the whale ship Essex (whose story is a source for Moby-Dick), nearly wrecked at Rodondo, of the past sojourns of Elizabethan buccaneers, and of a Creole adventurer made ruler of Charles Island by the Peruvians for his part in their war of liberation against Spain. This adventurer runs afool of his own motley subjects and leaves behind only a “permanent Riotocracy.”

“Sketch Eighth” tells the tragic, painful story of Hunilla, “the dark-damasked Chola widow” who has been abandoned at Norfolk Isle by a treacherous captain. Witness to the deaths of her husband and brother and implied to have been the victim of rape, she has also had to suffer the affliction of having been seen but ignored by passing vessels. Melville attributes to her “nameless misery” and calls her a “lone shipwrecked soul.” In almost every respect Hunilla resembles Agatha in Melville’s letters to Hawthorne, a figure whose grief, endurance, and last return to her native town of Payta in Peru, mark her as one of Melville’s true sacrificial beings. Her life has indeed made her into a “silent passenger,” a lone survivor.

“Sketch Ninth” gives the history of “the hermit Oberlus,” another Creole outlander and isolato who rules Hood’s Island. A Caliban in appearance—“beast-like,” “heavy,” “earthy,” and “unshorn”—he, too, eventually makes his way to Payta. But there, as the leader of “a mongrel and assassin band,” he finds himself in a Peruvian jail, his island exile exchanged for another sort of isolation on the mainland. “Sketch Tenth,” “Runaways, Castaways, Solitaries, Grave-Stones, Etc.,” gives a summary of the Galápagos as “cindery solitude,” Nature’s own hellish topography. Melville thinks of the castaways, the escapees, the hermits, and the outcasts who have ended up on the islands, either by chance or choice, as life’s refugees. He also recalls “a stake and a bottle” found near the shore and imagines it to be a type of South Seas “post-office.” Over time, the stake rots, and the bottle falls, “no very exhilarating object,” one more emblem of isolation and broken communication in line with the details he had enumerated for Hawthorne in the “Agatha” letters. But in typical spirit Melville refuses to close on a note of simple bleakness. He cites an “epithet” allegedly found on a grave marker “in a bleak gorge of Chatham Isle,” a piece of “gim-crack” doggerel about being buried under Galápagos “cinders,” evidence that none of Melville’s antic turn of wit had left him. But despite the wit, the close observation of nature, and the historical recall of “The Encantadas,” the dominant impression of these sketches is somber. If they point to any encompassing view of life, it is that failure and isolation yield the most revealing measure of the human condition.

Just as Pierre shifts imaginative location to inland after the ocean space of Moby-Dick, so in several of his lesser stories after “The Encantadas” Melville turns to domestic and family scenarios. Behind each of them one discerns an unease, a chafing at being housebound and hemmed in, or so at least their touchy, easily rattled narrators seem to imply. In “The Lightning-Rod Man” (first published in the August 1854 issue of Putnam’s Monthly and collected in The Piazza Tales) Melville mocks the idea of buying protection against the “grand irregular thunder” of things. The story no doubt reflects his experience of being huckstered at his Arrowhead farmhouse by actual lightning-rod salesmen, but he makes it into a smack at all “transcendental” salesmen of false religions, bromides, panaceas, and salutations. Narrated in the first-person, crusty voice of a country householder, it portrays the salesman as a modern devil, a doorstep Mephistopheles, whose true identity breaks through when he throws his “tri-forked thing” at the narrator’s heart.

A similar disposition can be discerned in “I and My Chimney”—first published in the March 1856 issue of Putnam’s Monthly and posthumously
collected in *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches* (1922)—the story of an edgy, defensive attachment to a “corpulent old Harry VIII of a chimney,” an image of the narrator’s own besieged selfhood. Pressed by his wife and daughters to change, or even dismantle, both his house and its chimney centerpiece, the narrator dodges and weaves, retreats into convenient absences, sidesteps the architect, and at all times makes clear his unshakable affinity with the chimney (“I and my chimney, two gray-headed old smokers”). The story’s play of effects might be that of virtual domestic black comedy, the writer-self under duress to the point of suspected breakdown and madness—but, in reality, sure of his own values and style.

In “The Apple-Tree Table” (first published in the May 1856 issue of *Putnam’s Monthly* and collected in *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches*) Melville again affects the voice of the put-upon paterfamilias narrator. Ostensibly the tale is the history of a bug which has long lain dormant inside a piece of domestic furniture, but which “ticks” and eventually achieves its release. To the narrator’s womenfolk the event arouses fright and superstition, creating a great deal of bother, before the truth gains ground. A slight piece, it again shows Melville in the persona of the husband or father as victim of the domestic round.

A second grouping of his stories might be thought of as parables, narrative as a form of warning against the hold of illusion and misplaced confidence. First published in *Harper’s New Monthly* (December 1853) and collected in *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches*, “Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!” is the account of a “noble,” “lusty,” “glorious” cockerel, “Signor Beneventano,” whose crowing thrills and exhilarates the narrator. Compelled to search it out, he finds it, after most diligent inquiry, to be the property of the Merrymusk family, whose pauperism, emaciation, and eventual deaths lie at quite the opposite end of the spectrum from the bird’s “exultant” acts of crowing. The crowing has been parodic, false, a spurious call to self-resolution and sexual and existential well-being. Its work done, the cockerel after sounding “one supernormal note,” falls dead, ever to go on crowing in the mind and senses of the narrator. Also a cautionary tale, “The Happy Failure”—first published in *Harper’s New Monthly* (July 1854) and collected in *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches*—extols the virtue of abandoning the incapacitating “invention,” the dream of the perfectly created thing. The narrator’s uncle, a cranky “inventor” of the “Great Hydraulic-Hydrostatic Apparatus for draining swamps and marshes” in an upper stretch of the Hudson River, finally comes to see the futility of his efforts, and his invention’s anacondalike grip on his life and energies. In front of his nephew and his black manservant Yorpy, he finally abandons his “huge, shabby, oblong box, hermetically sealed.” Unburdened, he advises only the “invention” of happiness. Melville doubtless intended a satire of rampant Franklinism, his age’s obsession with get-rich-quick gadgetry and machines, but, as in “Bartleby,” he could well have been thinking of his own past literary “inventions” and the imagined relief at giving up his similarly unwanted and unappreciated creative labor.

“The Fiddler” (*Harper’s New Monthly*, September 1854; collected in *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches*) also addresses itself to the nature of “failure” and “success.” The poet Helstone has just suffered a disaster from the critics for his latest literary effort. Through his friend Standard he meets Hautboy, once a musical prodigy and the darling of the concert circuit, who has settled for playing entertainer and “fiddler” to his friends. In him Helstone at last sees the very figure of contentment, the instance of the man—the
artist—who has settled for less, a man “happier than a king” because he acknowledges only “facts” and eschews all dream, fantasy, or false and debilitating ambition. In consequence Helmstone tears up his manuscripts, buys himself a fiddle, and goes “to take regular lessons of Hautboy.” Yet, despite the poet’s conversion to Hautboy’s perspective, Melville leaves a sting in the story’s ending, suggesting that Hautboy’s approach may not be the only or the best way forward for the “failed” creative temperament and that Hautboy and Helmstone’s “happiness,” despite its celebrated levelheadedness, signifies a betraying loss of desire. Melville leaves no doubt that “fiddling” carries its pejorative as well as benign implication.

The “failure” in “Jimmy Rose”—first published in *Harper’s New Monthly* (November 1855) and collected in *The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches*—is that of a one-time New York merchant, whose ships have sunk just outside port and brought him to bankruptcy and ruin. At first abandoned by the friends he once so lavishly entertained, he gradually works his way back into their good graces. He settles for a lesser role—that of avoiding being a “man-hater” and of offering himself as a model of good taste, informedness, and general goodness of heart, which the narrator associates with the continuing “rosiness” of his cheeks. Despite penury and adversity, he has managed to keep faith of a sort, a moral redemption transcending his material ruin. Like “Cock-A-Doodle-Do!” and “The Fiddler,” however, “Jimmy Rose” offers a paradoxical conclusion. Its narrator, William Ford, may well acknowledge that Jimmy Rose has made his failure into success, a life of good-natured stoicism and manners. But his “roses” bloom on a “ruined” cheek, suggesting that he has attained his equilibrium at a high price. And at his death, though he is nursed by the “only daughter of an opulent alderman” and still proud of his genteel beggarmdom, the esteem in which he is held by his fellow citizenry and humankind seems in question.

The last story in *The Piazza Tales*, “The Bell-Tower” (first published in the August 1855 issue of *Putnam’s Monthly*), involves a shift in time and place, from Melville’s nineteenth-century America to Renaissance Italy. Written in a suitably baroque style, at times almost deliberately stilted, the story warns against monstrous technology and the rule of the head over the heart. Bannadonna, a “great mechanician” but an “unblest foundling,” constructs for his Italian patrons an exquisite, “titanic” bell and clock tower, a supreme feat of engineering. Its cogs, pulleys, springs, and allegorical figures personifying time seem harmonized into the perfect contrivance, the ultimate machine. But during the preparation, the inspired, exhilarated Bannadonna, in his furious impatience to get his project completed, strikes a workman. A “splitter” of the workman’s bone gets into the main molten “domino,” imperceptibly altering the necessary fine balance and tuning of the bell tower’s workings. As the machinery is put through its paces in preparation for its presentation to the republic, an “absorbed” Bannadonna fails to observe his own creation, the “domino,” and is struck fatally upon his “intervening brain” by a falling figure. Another Frankenstein thus falls a foul of his creation, the master destroyed by the servant. At his state funeral in the very cathedral for which the bell tower was initially designed, the “groined belfry” crashes down like some “lone Alpine landside.” Unlike Hawthorne’s “Ethan Brand” (1851), however, to whose treatment of the theme of the unpardonable sin it bears considerable resemblance, “The Bell-Tower” rather overinsists upon its moral: “So the creator was killed by the creature . . . and so pride went before the fall.” More telling and more subtle is Melville’s preface to the story. Taken, as he pretends, “from a private MS,” its essential two lines read: “Seeking to conquer a larger liberty, man but extends the empire of necessity.”

Equally gnomic in purpose but more adroit in style are Melville’s three diptychs or paired tales, each told through a single narrative voice and exploring two counter or alternative versions of life. In “The Two Temples,” which was written in 1854 but remained unpublished until it appeared in *Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces*, Melville addresses himself to “charity,” in the first charity unexpectedly denied and in the second charity unexpectedly given. In “Temple First”—controversial in its time when Charles F. Briggs rejected the story for publication in *Putnam’s Monthly* because he believed that it mocked the monied fashionability of New York’s Grace Church—the narrator is denied entry to worship. He sneaks in undetected, however, by an unwatched door, hears the service from high within a vertiginous, stained-glass gallery, and finally brings attention to himself by touching a bell rope and causing an astounding reverberation. The same “beadle-faced” church warden who re-
fused him a place in the church takes him to court for trespassing, and there he receives a reprimand, a fine, and, to his added chagrin, a "pardon" for having "humbly indulged myself in the luxury of public worship." By contrast, in "Temple Second," as a "stranger in London," the narrator is given by "some sort of a working-man," a free ticket to hear the actor Macready perform, an act of "sterling charity" that contrasts with his expulsion from a snobbish church in his own New York City. Melville casts both parts of the story as "drama," the one a tale of arbitrary exclusion and the other—set literally in a theater—of arbitrary inclusion.

First published in the June 1854 issue of Harper's New Monthly and collected in The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches, "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" also juxtaposes two versions of "charity," though in both cases it is spurious. In "Picture First," set in rural America, the narrator is taken by the "Poet Blandmour" to observe Nature as some imagined "blessed almoner," a tirelessly beneficent and ingenuous provisioner. Under Blandmour's dispensation "soft March snow" becomes "Poor Man's Manure," melted snow "Poor Man's Eye-Water," a "cup of cold rain-water" "Poor Man's Egg." Set against this "poetry," however, are the poverty and starvation of the Coulter family, whom the narrator recognizes as victims of an actual, inhospitable Nature that contrasts with the falsifying, literary version given out by Blandmour and his fellow nature writers. The "damp," demeaning life of the Coulters causes the narrator to eschew all future temptations to "poeticize" the lives of the poor, especially as he nearly chokes on "Poor Man's Pudding," an indigestible, dried-out dessert served up by Dame Coulter in the wake of equally indigestible plates of old salt pork. "Picture Second" moves from the American countryside to London, to describe another foray into just as unreal and upside-down a case of "charity." The narrator meets "a very friendly man" in Cheapside and allows himself to be taken to the scene of a "grand Guildhall Banquet." There, on the day after the banquet, he sees "charity" dispensed: leftovers are given to London's beggars and starving. This demeaning ritual, for which the "mass of lean, famished, ferocious creatures" have had to acquire tickets, points up the lavishness of the surroundings and the huge cost of the original banquet. Melville lists the "remnants" of this sumptuous, stately banquet in Dickensian fashion: "disembowelled pasties, plundered pheas-

ants, and half-sacked jellies." The upshot is a fray from which the narrator and his guide barely escape. "Bruised and battered," the narrator pleads to be "saved equally" from the mockery of both kinds of "charity."

A single narrator also speaks through the two parts of "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," first published in the April 1855 issue of Harper's New Monthly and collected in The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches. In "The Paradise of Bachelors" Melville's narrator describes a "bachelor" London evening at the Temple, formerly a cloister for the Knights Templars and later the site of two Inns of Court where "benchers" studied law, but now a men's club for lawyers given to "good living, good drinking, good feeling, and good talk." Claiming descent from the original Knights Templars and benchers, these are men without women who have put work, family, and eros in abeyance. To the admiring narrator, the evening in a well-appointed dining room, with mutton, turkey, chicken pie, claret, and port, becomes the very instance of sociality, male fraternity. "The Tartarus of Maids," however, tells a quite opposite story, one of grim impregnation and the human reproductive system, disguised as the account of a trau-
matizing visit to a paper mill in “Woedolor Mountains in New England.” A “bachelor” story, also, it gives a bachelor’s view of women and sex, with a sense of the terrors of sexual life. It is a story of some daring on Melville’s part, one of his many oblique narratives. The landscape itself reads two ways: it is literally a “bleak” Massachusetts, Maine, or Vermont, but its crevices, gorges, place names, points of entry and exit also patently symbolize a sexual or bodily terrain. The paper mill, overseen by a diabolized, “dark-complexioned, well-wrapped personage” and his boy assistant Cupid, and worked by blank, pale, compliant “virgins,” produces the paper in “nine minutes to the second.” A “bachelor” story which subverts “bachelor” innocence and evasion, it equally offers a sympathetic picture of women as the victims of men’s sexual needs and domination. One can also discern Melville’s critique of New England factory and work practices and the general exploitation of female labor. That its extraordinary treatment of sex, covert and explicit, escaped general notice, not to say disapprobation and censorship, pays tribute to Melville’s storytelling adeptness. Among other features, it anticipates a later current of debate about sexual role and gender.

First published in the October and November 1855 issues of Putnam’s Monthly and collected in The Piazza Tales, “Benito Cereno” represents Melville again at his greatest strength. A chill, tense, and exhilarating novella-length story of slave insurrection off the Chilean coast, it probes brilliantly and disconcertingly the whole complex “knot” of race and the historic ascendancy of white over black. Told through another bachelor viewpoint, that of Amasa Delano, sealer-captain of Duxbury, Massachusetts, a “person of a singularly undistrustful good nature,” it involves the reader in deciphering what has occurred aboard the San Dominick, a slave ship under the ostensibly command of Benito Cereno, his few white crewmen, and a company of Africans whose spokesman is Babo, Cereno’s Senegalese body servant. In fact, the San Dominick masquerades as a slave ship, and Delano accepts that appearance as reality. Yet, the ship is actually a world turned inside out and made to emulate itself. For Babo and his fellow slaves have revolted, killed all but a token number of the crew as well as Cereno’s kinsman and the co-owner of the ship, replacing the ship’s figurehead with his skeleton, which is kept covered. Through a whole ritual of visits and would-be “gaming,” Delano and his Bache-
lor’s Delight shipmates are made witness to a stunning charade: black slave insurrectionists “acting out” the intolerable historic role into which they have been cast by slavery. Only after the charade has been played through, the skeleton-figurehead uncovered, and Cereno and his remaining crew dramatically rescued, does Delano experience a “flash of revelation,” a full understanding of the spectacle in which he has been implicated.

The story puts before the reader a complex weaving of language and metaphor, the interplay of references to black, white, and gray. Then, too, the story relies upon two seeming “versions” of the events under narration: the story as reported from Delano’s viewpoint and the story as “sworn to” in a lengthy legal deposition and taken down by Doctor Rozas from the depleted Cereno, who dies from the shock of his experience not long after Babo’s execution in Lima. In Delano’s version Melville might again be said to have written a “fiction of fact,” and in Cereno’s deposition, a “non-fiction of fact.” Neither version, actually, gives the entire, elusive truth of the matter. For if any one truth can be said to make itself available, it has to do with the very dynamics of the situation, the charade aboard the San Dominick, the signals which pass among Cereno, Babo, and Delano, and the past circles of history which have locked Africa, Europe, and the Americas into a disastrous slave equation.

In turn Melville develops a collocation of keys and clues to the story, as in the story’s opening, where half-colors, shadow, and the intermediary play of mist and vapor set the tone for the drama to follow: “The morning was one peculiar to the coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mold. The sky seemed a gray surout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skinned low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.” Shadow operates everywhere in “Benito Cereno,” a story of compound half-perceptions and misperceptions. “Truths” become warped and distorted according to the vision of those to whom history has given the power of definition.

The story first of all likens the San Dominick to a Pyrenean “white-washed monastery after a thunder-storm” patrolled by inquisitional “Black
Friars”—as if a reenactment of the abdication of Charles IV and the vengeful upsurge of “purification” he caused to be visited upon Spain will be seen here, amid Chilean coastal waters. In turn Melville releases his other “keys”: the “shield-like stern-piece” depicting “a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure likewise masked”; Aranda’s body serving as the ship’s figurehead; the striking of the white boy by the black; the parodic imperial dumbshow of padlock and key as the giant, former ruler Atufal makes his ritual appearances and bows before Cerenzo; the “hubbub of voices” of the Ashanti women and the sound of the elders clashing knives echoing through the ship at the slightest hint of danger; and Babo’s supreme, obsequious, parodic double role through which he at once fawns over and rules the helpless Cerenzo, the “master” to whom he gives his “devoted service.” The San Dominick thus becomes Melville’s version of a “Heart of Darkness” in which darkness inside as well as outside in the form of skin color becomes the modus vivendi. Whatever Cerenzo embodies as a fading scion of ancient “Castile and Leon,” whatever Babo’s rights or wrongs in seizing the ship, even the “white noddy” Delano is drawn into the ritual of enslavement when he offers to buy Cerenzo’s manservant. Melville centers these masquerades, rites, powers, and confusions in the metaphor of a Gordian knot, described as “a combination of double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed-well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming-knot.” Enjoined to “UNDO it, cut it, quiet,” Delano might himself be a surrogate for the reader put upon to decipher the “knotted” text before him.

Cerenzo may think that the “negro” has “cast such a shadow” upon him. But for Babo and his fellow mutineers, slavery has cast its shadow equally upon them. When, after Cerenzo’s rescue, the blacks have been tried and executed, Babo’s decapitated head is left on view, “fixed on a pole in the Plaza.” Gazing “unabashed” at the whites who come to see this “hive of sublety,” Babo is imagined by Melville’s narrator to be saying: “since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words.” Cereno dies, ghostly, white, the “dead” presence of an imperial dynasty. But Babo’s is the “live” enduring silence, the unwillingness to say anything in or to a world which has stolen from him and his fellow slaves the right to speak and act in their own names. Of all Melville’s stories “Benito Cereno” contains his most challenging drama; it is narrative as an inquiry into freedom and revolt, blackness and whiteness, and the denial and liberation of self.

There remain a few other contenders for inclusion in Melville’s story canon. His two-part “Fragments from a Writing Desk” (published in the Democratic Press & Lansburgh Advertiser for 4 and 18 May 1839 and collected in Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces), a piece of juvenilia, is a near-parodic Gothic fantasy of a beautiful deaf-and-dumb woman. His “Authentic Anecdotes of Old Zack,” “seven minor satiric pieces” on President Zachary Taylor, were published in Yankee Doodle (24 July–11 September 1847), “The ’Gees” is “a general sketchy view” of tough Cape Verde “Portuguese” sailors, a “singular people” even by the standards of the oceangoing community, which appeared in Harper’s in March 1856 (collected in The Apple-Tree Table and Other Sketches). “Daniel Orme” (published in Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces) and “John Marr” (published in John Marr and Other Sailors), two sailor sketches written to accompany Melville’s later sea poetry, depict “solitary” veterans of shipboard life. “The Marquis of Grandvin” and “Three ’Jack Gentian’ Sketches,” both posthumously published in Billy Budd and Other Prose Pieces, present visions of the cavalier good life and character. Two other efforts have an even stronger claim to be classified as short fiction.

In “The Piazza” Melville ostensibly wrote no more than a frontispiece for The Piazza Tales, a piece of scene-setting to create a context for other stories. In fact “The Piazza” amounts to infinitely more. Narrated as if in the voice of yet another landlocked former sailor who has taken to “poesie,” it plays off the oppositions of “fact” and “fantasy,” or as Hawthorne’s analogous “The Custom-House” in The Scarlet Letter expresses it, “the Actual and the Imaginary.” The story of the narrator’s construction of his north-facing piazza, his withstanding of his neighbors’ derision, and his “inland voyage to fairy-land” in search of a mountainside cottage whose glowing window he sees from his piazza, it also tells of disillusionment, his discovery that the cottage is inhabited not by fairies but by Marianna, a lonely orphan who daydreams about the inhabitants of his house below. His discovery suggests that to confuse life with art is to run the risk of shock and pain. So rebuked, the narrator—a devotee of The Faerie Queen and A Midsummer Night’s Dream—gives up “romance” as a standard in life. Rather, he will create his Mariannas and fairylands in his
art, thereby avoiding the disillusion of discovering mere country poverty, and a put-upon, sad, country girl. He vows to "stick to the piazza," to take joy and inspiration from the "amphitheatre" about him, and to seek truth at night, in darkness, and "when the curtain falls." There, in the wellsprings of the creative imagination, darkly and in private, can he best think of a Marianna or "many as real a story." In each of these respects "The Piazza" offers a gloss on his storytelling in the rest of the book, but it remains a story of itself, typically subtle in theme and execution.

"Hawthorne and His Moses," too, might be read as fiction. As a review of Hawthorne's Mosses From An Old Manse, it is a most telling estimate of the "cadence," "magic," "wondrous effects," and philosophic "NO! in thunder!" of his New England contemporary. But "Hawthorne and His Moses" assumes fictional dress as well. Narrated pseudonymously by a "Virginian Spending July in Vermont," it offers a setting ("A papered chamber in a fine old farm-house...surrounded by mountains, old woods, and Indian ponds"), a plot dealing with the narrator's "ravishment" by Hawthorne's stories, a discernible storylike rhythm (an overnight pause, the rising excitement as one revelation follows another), and a pervasive imagery of "shock," "diving," "seduction," and "implementation." For all that "Hawthorne and His Moses" has rightly been lauded as a clarion cry for a national literature, as well as an analysis of both Hawthorne and Shakespeare, it displays throughout Melville's best resources as a short-storyteller. It at once belongs to, and gives further luster to, his overall story repertoire.

Melville's place in the history of American literature is no longer in doubt. Nor, central though it is, can Moby-Dick be called the sole reason for assigning him that place. For just as his other novels, his poetry, his logs and correspondence contribute to the achievement, so, too, do his short stories. Inevitably they differ in weight, some of them taken up with profoundest human tragedy, others with domestic life or literary setbacks and disgruntlements. But the best of them dazzle and challenge, at once serious yet able to call upon both Melville's longstanding Yankee wit and his unmistakable virtuosity as a storyteller.

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The Houghton Library at Harvard University has letters, travel journals, and manuscripts for Billy Budd, short stories—including notes and a partial rough draft for “The Confidence Man,” poems, and other shorter writings. The Duyckinck Collection and the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library include letters from Melville and his family. The University of Virginia Library also has letters and manuscripts.