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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi - 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

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the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education,
learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108471442

DOI: 10.1017/9781108610520

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Press.

First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sanborn, Geoffrey, author.

Title: The value of Herman Melville / Geoffrey Sanborn.

Description: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2018. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018012843 | ISBN 9781108471442 (hardback) | ISBN
9781108452915 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Melville, Herman, 1819-1891—Criticism and interpretation. |
Melville, Herman, 1819-1891—Appreciation. | Melville, Herman,
1819-1891—Influence. | BISAC: LITERARY CRITICISM / American / General.

Classification: LCC PS2387 .S196 2018 | DDC 813/.3—dc23 LC record available
at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018012843>

ISBN 978-1-108-47144-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-45291-5 Paperback

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The Value of Herman Melville

Geoffrey Sanborn
Amherst College



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Introduction

Look, whether we're young, or we're all grown up and just starting out, or we're older and getting so old there's not much time left, we're human beings – we're looking for company, and we're looking for understanding: someone who reminds us that we're not alone, and someone who wonders out loud about things that happen in this life, the way we do when we're walking or sitting or driving, and thinking things over.

—William Carlos Williams

It is impossible to talk or to write without apparently throwing oneself helplessly open; the Invulnerable Knight wears his visor down.

—Melville, *Pierre*

Sometime in the early 1870s, an English woman came aboard a trading schooner anchored off the Samoan island of Apia. "I have brought you some books," she said to the captain, "and among them are three volumes by an American writer – Herman Melville. It is called 'The Whale,' and it is the strangest, wildest, and saddest story I have ever read." According to Louis Becke, a sailor on the schooner, the captain read it to the ship's company "from beginning to end," and "although he would stop now and again, and enter into metaphysical matters, we forgave him, for we knew that he too, like us, was fascinated with mad Captain Ahab and brave mate Starbuck and the rest of the ill-fated crew of the 'Pequod.'"¹

I like Becke's anecdote for a lot of reasons, but the main one is that it returns us, imaginatively, to a time when Melville had almost no visibility and absolutely no prestige, when it was possible to open *Moby-Dick* (or, in its British edition, *The Whale*) with no expectations – or, even better, to open it knowing only that the person who read it before you had thought it the strangest, wildest, and saddest story she had ever read. These days, most readers approach Melville

with an overpowering awareness of his monumental cultural status. They view him, accordingly, with a mixture of deference and resentment, as if he were a commodore of world literature, standing in full dress on the quarter-deck of the canon. Because they take his value for granted, as something to be either propped up or torn down, they do not experience it on the fly, moment to moment, in the act of reading and its dream-like aftermath. They never get into him; he never gets into them.²

But what if we did not take his value for granted? What if we were to open the books that bear his name in something like the anticipatory state of the captain on the schooner anchored off Samoa? What value, or values, might those books have for us? What kinds of thoughts might they stimulate? What kinds of feelings might they evoke? What might we say, upon handing those books to someone else, as an initial, initiating description of them?

These are the kinds of questions that have motivated the writing of this book. They have been on my mind for much longer than the period of this book's composition, however, because they have accompanied me into every one of the classes in which I have taught Melville's works over the last twenty-five years. What I have tried to create in those classrooms is an atmosphere that makes it possible for students to approach *Moby-Dick*, in particular, with the kind of idle, flexible interest that they bring to most of the other things they read. *Moby-Dick* wasn't meant, I tell them, to be a rigorous, depleting experience, a triathlon for the housebound. It was meant to be a stimulant to thought and feeling; it was meant to make your mind a more interesting and enjoyable place. If the prospect of reading it makes you feel even a little bit daunted, I say to them, you should try to clear your mind of expectations, open it up, and listen with nothing more than ordinary human curiosity to the voice that begins speaking to you. That voice asks to be called Ishmael, but it doesn't limit itself to the consciousness of that character; it roams at will around and beyond the *Pequod*. What it wants above all else is to be in a meaningful relationship with you, and it will do almost anything – tell jokes, coin words, switch genres, change moods, share dreams,

kill characters, hint at blasphemies, fly into rhapsodies, go spinning off into the ether of philosophical speculation – in order to make that happen. *Moby-Dick* isn't about the Problem of the Universe, as one of its reviewers derisively suggested; it's about the effort to think about the Problem of the Universe in the company of another mind, the effort to feel, in the deepest recesses of your consciousness, at least temporarily unalone. Nothing is solved when the *Pequod* goes down, but you and Ishmael are still miraculously afloat.³

When I made the above argument in a magazine article over a decade ago, a newspaper columnist thought I was saying that *Moby-Dick* was "overrated."⁴ After quoting passages from my article in which I had written that the point of reading the book was not "to seek out [its] cleverly hidden meanings," that "the secret ... is that there *is* no secret," he declared that "most of us 'un-academics' who have read and savored *Moby-Dick* would argue that Melville's message is far deeper and, in fact, more ominous, than Sanborn would have us believe."⁵ Literary value resided, for this columnist, in the message, and the message of *Moby-Dick* was rated on the basis of its depth – size, weight, inaccessibility – and ominousness.

The columnist imagined that academics thought differently, but in fact a great many of them did, and still do, share his perspective.⁶ This book has been written in the hope that it is possible to get both first-time readers of Melville and multiple-time readers of Melville, inside and outside the academy, to occupy, provisionally, a different perspective, one in which an unominous earnestness ("It is called 'The Whale,' and it is the strangest, wildest, and saddest story I have ever read") invites a seriously playful engagement with a strange, wild, sad writer.

Who was this writer? He was born in New York City on August 1, 1819, the third child of Allan Melvill, an importer of luxury French goods, and Maria Gansevoort, the grandchild – like her husband – of a distinguished Revolutionary War officer.⁷ Herman's first eleven years were spent in relative ease and privilege. Then, in the fall of 1830, his father went bankrupt and moved the family to Albany, New York. The following winter, his father fell ill after a trip on a cold night

from New York City to Albany, overworked himself, grew more and more sick, and finally lost his sanity. In January 1832, when Herman was twelve, he died.

Herman, who had been removed from school for financial reasons in October 1831, spent the next few years working a variety of jobs in and around Albany and Pittsfield, Massachusetts.⁸ He turned eighteen in the midst of the nation's first major economic collapse, the Panic of 1837, and struggled, from that point on, to find work. In June 1839, after having tried and failed to find work on the Erie Canal, he signed on for a merchant voyage from New York City to Liverpool and back. In December 1840, after having tried and failed to find work in the frontier town of Galena, Illinois, he signed on to a whaler for a four-year voyage to the Pacific.

A year and a half into his whaling voyage, he decided to jump ship. In July 1842, while on shore leave on the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva, he and a shipmate disappeared into the interior. A month later, he was picked up by an Australian whaler in a bay controlled by the supposedly cannibalistic Taipi and embarked on a very loosely captained whaling cruise, which resulted in a mutiny. In Tahiti, which had just come under French control, he and the other mutineers were placed in a very loosely guarded jail, from which he soon escaped. He then signed on for another whaling voyage, which took him to Hawaii, where, for a while, he clerked in a store and set up pins in a bowling alley. In August 1843, he enlisted in the navy. His voyage on the USS *United States* took him around Cape Horn, with stops at various harbors in South America, and ended with his discharge, in Boston, in October 1844. He still had no discernible economic future.

So he started writing. In his first book, *Typee* (1846), he recounted, in an exaggerated form, his sojourn among the Taipi on Nuku Hiva. The book's success led to the writing of a sequel, *Omoo* (1847), which covered, in a similarly exaggerated form, his experiences in Tahiti. Irritated by the limitations of the travel-narrative genre and by the unwillingness of some reviewers to believe that any of this had ever happened, he flung himself into the composition of *Mardi* (1849), in which a voyage in search of a lost maiden in an imaginary

Pacific archipelago becomes a vehicle for various literary experiments, philosophical discourses, and political commentaries. Chastened by the negative reviews and in need of money – he had married Elizabeth Shaw in 1847 and their first child, Malcolm, was born in early 1849 – he wrote, in the space of four months, a pair of fictionalized travel narratives, *Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850), based, respectively, on his Liverpool trip and his year in the navy.

He began his next book, a narrative of a whaling voyage, in early 1850. At a picnic that summer in Stockbridge, Massachusetts – near Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he had recently bought a home – he met Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was about to become famous, later that year, as the author of *The Scarlet Letter*. At least in part as a result of that meeting and the subsequent development of what would become, on Melville's end, a highly ardent friendship, Melville ramped up his ambitions for the book that he was then writing. In October 1851, he published *Moby-Dick*.

It was all downhill from there. The many negative reviews of *Moby-Dick* added bitterness and disgust to the reservoir of intense thoughts and feelings out of which he was composing *Pierre* (1852), a manic, soothsaying tale of virtuously intended incest. The reviews were horrific; one was entitled – capitals in original – “HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY.”⁹ He turned to writing stories that he could sell to magazines, some of which he later published in *The Piazza Tales* (1856). Just before that collection appeared, he published the willfully commonplace *Israel Potter* (1855); just afterwards, he published the willfully esoteric *The Confidence-Man* (1857). He would never publish a work of prose fiction again. He took a job at the custom house in New York City and devoted himself to poetry, a devotion that yielded *Battle-Pieces* (1866), a collection of Civil War poems; *Clarel* (1876), a nearly 18,000-line poem on modern pilgrims in the Holy Land; and two privately printed volumes: *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon* (1891). He died in September 1891, almost entirely forgotten by the reading public.

In the 1920s, a surge of interest in him led to the publication of *Billy Budd*, which had been found in his desk after his death, as well as the republication of the ten works that had appeared between

1846 and 1857. That interest-surge, which goes by the name of the Melville Revival, grew in strength in the 1930s, and by the 1940s, he was fully installed in the American literary canon. That is, as I have said, the cultural context in which most readers encounter him now, a context that suffuses his works with an already-assigned and mystified value, a context that I would very much like to move beyond.

I offer, in the twelve brief chapters that follow, a necessarily subjective account of where I imagine that it is most possible for readers of all kinds to find value in Melville. I have not felt the need to do justice, in this account, to everything that Melville wrote; I have, for example, quoted only one word from *Clarel*, the most madly earnest and singular of all of his madly earnest and singular works. I have felt the need, instead, to suggest to people who are about to read or reread one of Melville's major works – *Moby-Dick*, “Bartleby,” “Benito Cereno,” and *Billy Budd* – what that experience might be like, how it might be informed by everything else that Melville wrote, and where they might go next if something in one of those works strikes home.

The methodology of this book is best captured by the following passage from Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, in which the narrator describes the relationship between a “magisterial woman” in Fingerbone, Idaho, and her two fatherless daughters. “She was constant as daylight,” the narrator writes,

and she would be unremarked as daylight, just to watch the calm inwardness of their faces. What was it like. One evening one summer she went out to the garden. The earth in the rows was light and soft as cinders, pale clay yellow, and the trees and plants were ripe, ordinary green and full of comfortable rustlings. And above the pale earth and bright trees the sky was the dark blue of ashes. As she knelt in the rows she heard the hollyhocks thump against the shed wall. She felt the hair lifted from her neck by a swift, watery wind, and she saw the trees fill with wind and heard their trunks creak like masts. She burrowed her hand under a potato plant and felt gingerly for the new potatoes in their dry net

of roots, smooth as eggs. She put them in her apron and walked back to the house thinking, what have I seen, what have I seen. The earth and the sky and the garden, not as they always are. And she saw her daughters' faces not as they always were, or as other people's were, and she was quiet and aloof and watchful, not to startle the strangeness away.¹⁰

So as not to startle the strangeness away, I have presented many passages from Melville's works at length, gathering them in a metaphorical apron, and thinking, in doing so, “what have I seen, what have I seen.” So as not to startle the strangeness away, I have kept to a minimum my references to Melville scholarship. So as not to startle the strangeness away, I have written the book in a way that is at least a little strange in its own right, in a way that is highly responsive – maybe even, as Melville puts it, “helplessly open” – to the ongoing movement of thoughts and feelings.

In Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic *The Road*, the father stands

in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come.... He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light.¹¹

Value is, McCarthy reminds us, a fragile thing. The value of a book is an especially fragile thing, because the future on which its value is predicated is not only the planetary future but, more immediately, the future that each of its readers provides for it. One of the vital functions of criticism is to help to make matches between readers and books, to give those books a future that will allow their value to evolve and to give those readers a past from which a sense of value can be drawn.¹² The crucial context for that match-making activity is a recognition of, in the words of the psychoanalytic theorist Adam

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Phillips, "how precarious our love of life is."¹³ Why read? Why write? Always, primarily, because one wants to be able to care more about this life – about, in David Foster Wallace's words, this "tragic adventure" that "none of [us] signed up for."¹⁴ No one knows what is coming next or how to bear it. Everyone needs a sense of the value of what has come before.