Chapter 1

Life

Traveling from Pittsfield, Massachusetts to Albany, New York one November to spend Thanksgiving with his family, Herman Melville, at eighteen, had time to reflect on his personal situation. Born in New York City on 1 August 1819, he had enjoyed a comfortable boyhood, but reverses in his father's business during Herman's adolescence had forced the family to relocate to Albany, where his father fared no better. Overambitious schemes and overextended credit took their toll. He died a broken man, leaving his wife Maria and their seven children to fend for themselves. Herman was twelve. His teenage brother Ganesvoort went into business upon their father's death and proved successful until the Depression of 1837 drove him into bankruptcy. To help the family, Herman had left Albany a few months before Thanksgiving this year to teach school in rural Massachusetts.

During the holiday, an uncle gave Herman a copy of John Preston's incongruously titled teachers' manual, *Every Man His Own Teacher*, which supplied the mathematics exercises his students sorely needed. Melville observed that some of them had traveled through their arithmetic "with so great swiftness that they can not recognize objects in the road on a second journey: and are about as ignorant of them as though they had never passed that way before" (*W*, XIV, p. 8). Preston emphasized the nobility of teaching, an endeavor the literary genius typically disdained. The comparison between teaching and writing had the opposite of its intended effect on Melville. Preston's comments are enough to make any teacher with serious literary pretensions wonder what he is doing before a classroom full of unruly students.

Melville had yet to display anything approaching literary genius, but the letter thanking his uncle reveals his predisposition toward the literary life and contains flashes of brilliance. Describing where he lived, Melville indulged his Romantic fancy, situating himself atop "the summit of as savage and lonely a mountain as ever I ascended. The scenery however is most splendid and unusual, – embracing an extent of country in the form of an Ampitheatre sweeping around for many miles and encircling a portion of your state in its compass" (*W*, XIV, p. 8). Portraying the individual within a natural

landscape extending to the horizon, Melville offered an image characteristic of the Romantic era and anticipated the figure of Captain Ahab sailing through the vast expanse of the Pacific.

He also said that he was reading and writing to improve himself. J. Orville Taylor's *District School* he studied "to the same advantage, – which a scholar traveling in a country – peruses its hystory, – being surrounded by the scenes it describes." Melville's portrayal of his studying process forms the second figurative use of traveling in this letter. His position as schoolmaster stationed him at the lectern, but his language shows him already "tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote" (*W*, XIV, p. 9; VI, p. 7).

Contemporary writings fostered Melville's curiosity about foreign lands. Never a methodical man, he kept no record of what he read, but his ever-methodical brother Ganesvoort recorded reading much literature, including several articles from *Waldie's Select Circulating Library*, a weekly magazine offering readers selections from the latest literature. Ganesvoort recorded reading John Carne's "Letters from the East," Thomas De Quincey's "Revolt of the Tartars," and Basil Hall's "Schloss Hainfield." *Waldie's* gave the Melville boys a window to an exciting world of foreign adventure.

Herman soon quit teaching and entered Lansingburgh Academy to study surveying and engineering in hopes of qualifying for a position on the Erie Canal. He also flexed his literary muscles. In May 1839, he published two newspaper sketches entitled "Fragments from a writing desk." The tone of these sketches echoes the classic essays of the Augustan age, yet their themes belong to the Romantic era. In "Fragments" Melville created a persona close to yet distinct from himself, a subtle narrative technique he would continue to develop.

Unable to find work on the canal, he signed aboard the *St. Lawrence*, a merchant ship that took him to Liverpool. This early experience influenced his decision to turn whaler. Home from Liverpool, he again taught school briefly before venturing inland to Illinois. Though he left no account of this excursion, numerous references scattered throughout his writings testify to the importance of his journey to "the land-locked heart of our America" (*W*, VI, p. 244). Throughout the trip – down the Erie Canal, through the Great Lakes to Chicago, and overland to Galena – Melville's ever-expansive mind stockpiled images he would use in his writings.

He stayed long enough to see the corn ripen, as "Trophies of Peace: Illinois in 1840" suggests. Despite the subtitle, there is no telling where or when Melville wrote this poem. Even if he wrote it years later, its setting shows he was seeing the Western landscape with a poetic eye. The rows of cornstalks resembled ranks of spear-wielding soldiers. Whereas the battlefield leads to death, the

cornfield yields life-giving trophies, heaps of golden grain. The speaker ends by apostrophizing the prairie, urging it to continue its bountiful yield "Though trooper Mars disdainful flout / Nor Annals fame the field" (*Works*, XVI, p. 313).

After leaving Galena, Melville took a riverboat down the Mississippi to Cairo. He recorded his impressions in "The River," a lyrical fragment whose imagery parallels "Trophies of Peace." The first paragraph ends with a question: "In this granary of a continent, this basin of the Mississippi, must not the nations be greatly multiplied and blest?" Once the Missouri River enters the Mississippi, war imagery predominates. The "yellow-painted Missouri" foams "like a Pawnee from ambush." Unlike the Mississippi, the Missouri more nearly resembles "a hostile element than a filial flood" (*W*, X, pp. 497–499). In Melville's hands, the river became a powerful symbol of the violence endemic to America.

The whaling voyage Melville soon undertook would be the most important journey of his life; his inland excursion may be the second most important. Delving into the heart of America before seeing the South Pacific, he created the opportunity to compare locales and recognize what his national geography represented. In Melville's work, the Great Lakes stand for the greatness of America; the prairie represents the nation's natural fecundity; and the Mississippi symbolizes the political, social, and moral complexities facing the nation. The American West embodies the true spirit of the United States. As Melville would say of the Revolutionary patriot Ethan Allan, "His spirit was essentially western; and herein is his peculiar Americanism; for the western spirit is, or will yet be (for no other is, or can be) the true American one" (*W*, VIII, p. 149).

A few months after returning east, Melville signed aboard the *Acushnet*, a whaling vessel which sailed from Massachusetts the first week of January 1841. A year and a half later the *Acushnet* touched at Nukuheva in the Marquesas, where Melville jumped ship with Richard Tobias Greene, whom he immortalized as Toby in *Typee*, the book loosely based on their experiences. After escaping into Nukuheva's lush undergrowth, they traveled overland and ended up among the supposedly cannibalistic Typee natives. Lameness incapacitated Melville; Greene left for help but never returned. Melville remained a few more weeks but eventually signed aboard a passing Australian whaler that brought him to Tahiti, an experience that inspired his second book, *Omoo*. Another whaler brought him to Maui in April 1843.

At Honolulu Melville found work as a pinsetter in a bowling alley. The little known experience may have shaped his personal development significantly. Edgar Allan Poe found philosophy in furniture; Melville, who shared Poe's capacity for seeing ultimate truths in the merest trifles, could have found wisdom in a bowling ball. Like a Mississippi riverboat, the bowling alley is a microcosm of the world where sensitive souls mingle with ne'er-do-wells, a

paradoxical place where the raucous sound of tumbling pins induces a mood of quiet contemplation. Melville was not the only important American writer to spend a part of his formative years in a bowling alley.

Hawaii exposed him to a recreational pursuit of a different nature, surfing. There is no indication he attempted to surf himself, but he spent time at Waikiki watching some young Hawaiians surf, which he vividly described in *Mardi*, the earliest instance of surfing in American literature. Melville apparently liked Honolulu well enough to consider settling here, but a bout of homesickness coincided with the arrival of a United States Navy frigate. He impulsively signed on as an ordinary seaman. The frigate cruised the South Pacific and skirted the coastlines of Central and South America but finally reached Boston in October 1844, when Melville was discharged from the navy.

Imagine how he appeared upon returning home. It had been nearly four years since his family had seen him. He was naturally quite handsome. Now twenty-five, physically fit and tanned nut brown, he must have been absolutely striking. During his time away, his older brother had gone through a metamorphosis no less surprising. Ganesvoort Melville had become a famous orator. With the presidential election looming large, he was busy criss-crossing the nation stumping for James K. Polk.

Herman now faced the same problem as when he had left: once more he found himself unemployed. As he awed friends and family members with stories of fantastic adventure in the South Seas, they encouraged him to write up his experiences for publication. To be a professional writer: the thought may not have occurred to him before, but now he found the possibility intriguing. Melville never took long to make a decision. He rapidly made up his mind: he would become a writer.

To get an idea of what to write, he obtained some books describing South Seas adventure that he could use as sources and went to work. When driven, he could write very quickly, an ability he seems to have already possessed as he sat down to write his first book. Having rehearsed the story of *Typee* orally on long, dark nights in the forecastle, he knew his material well. He finished the manuscript within a few months, and Ganesvoort devised a scheme for publishing it.

After his inauguration, President Polk rewarded Ganesvoort for his service on the campaign trail with the secretaryship of the American legation in London. He took Herman's manuscript to England and offered it to John Murray, who thought it too well written to be a sailor's true adventures but accepted it once Ganesvoort assured him of its veracity. Washington Irving read the London edition in proofs and enjoyed it immensely. Upon Irving's recommendation, the American publisher, George P. Putnam accepted the work. Murray issued

the work as *Narrative of a Four Months' Residence Among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; or, A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846). Wiley and Putnam published it as *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, the title Melville preferred. *Typee* appeared as part of the firm's prestigious new series, Wiley and Putnam's Library of American Books. Sadly, Ganesvoort would not live to enjoy his brother's success. He passed away in London the second week of May 1846.

The American edition brought Herman in contact with series editor Evert Duyckinck, who recruited some of the nation's finest authors as contributors: Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Gilmore Simms. When *Typee* appeared, Duyckinck put copies into the hands of Fuller, Hawthorne, and Simms, all sensitive readers who would be likely to review the book positively. He did not give a copy to Poe, whose caustic reviews had earned him the moniker, "Tomahawk Man."

Many British critics reacted to *Typee* as Murray had. They loved the book's exciting adventure, delightful humor, and fine writing, but they could scarcely believe it was the work of a sailor. Christian Johnstone's reaction is typical. Reviewing the work for an Edinburgh magazine, she observed, "The adventures are very entertaining; so much so, indeed, as to beget a flitting notion that they may sometimes be a little embellished. The style is evidently touched up, or, as masons say, 'pointed' by some literary artist, which also confirms the notion that the story may have been a little coloured." Some questioned whether a person named Herman Melville really existed. Writing a column for a London magazine in July 1847, New York journalist Parke Godwin reassured British readers of Melville's existence: "I saw him in Albany the other day as large as life."[1]

Despite such critical skepticism, *Typee* captured the popular imagination. Not only did it provide informative detail nestled within a suspenseful, yet humorous narrative, it also titillated readers. In an early scene, sailors are greeted by several native women who swim toward them in the nude. The story's love interest, an exotic beauty named Fayaway, thrilled male readers. The recurrence of her name in the popular culture shows how much her character captured the Anglo-American imagination. A steamboat owner in St. Louis christened his vessel *Fayaway*. Multiple British shipowners christened ocean-crossing vessels similarly. And Lord Chesterfield had a horse named Fayaway, which was a favorite at race meets in the 1860s.[2]

Typee was not for male eyes only. The book's exotic quality attracted female readers, too. With tongue partly in cheek, Margaret Fuller said that "sewing societies of the country villages will find this the very book they wish to have read while assembled at their work" (*CR*, p. 38). Lydia Maria Child also enjoyed the book, if her fond reference to Fayaway in "The Hindoo anchorite" is any

indication. The details of everyday life among the Typee natives especially interested female readers. Composing a section on personal hygiene for *The Ladies Medical Guide*, Seth Pancoast found *Typee* a useful reference: "We are told by *Melville*, that the Typee girls devote much of their time in arranging their fair and redundant tresses. They bathe several times a day, and anoint their hair with cocoa-nut oil, after each ablution. Melville observes that this oil is fit for the toilet of a queen." Mary Hughs, the creator of Aunt Mary's Library, a popular series of children's books, adapted *Typee* for boys and girls as *May Morning: or, A Visit to the Country*.[3]

The surprising reappearance of Richard Tobias Greene hushed some of the most outspoken critics. Having escaped from Typee valley, he had returned home and settled in Buffalo, New York. Identifying himself as Toby of *Typee*, Greene testified to the book's veracity. He was reunited with Melville, who wrote up the tale of his friend's adventures. Murray published "The Story of Toby" as a pamphlet. The work was appended to subsequent reprintings of *Typee*. There was no convincing some readers. T. K. Hervey complained about the fortuitous reappearance of Toby and the publication of this pamphlet. He observed, "There is a kind of 'handy-dandy' in this mode of presenting the matter – a sort of illogical evidence – a species of affirming in a circle – which increases the puzzle."[4] Hervey had little room to talk. His own modest literary reputation rested on *Australia*, a long poem of South Seas adventure he had written as a student without leaving the safety of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Dedicated to Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, *Typee* provides a public hint of what was happening privately in Melville's life. During his absence, his older sister Helen had become friends with Judge Shaw's daughter Elizabeth. Upon his return, Melville entered the Shaw family circle. He and Elizabeth fell in love, got engaged, and, after the publication of Melville's second book, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847), got married. They settled in New York City, where Melville resumed work on *Mardi*, the work he had started upon completing *Omoo*.

Typically, Melville would write a short version of a book and then expand it by inserting additional details and reflections derived from his reading. He had used this method with great effectiveness while writing *Typee* and *Omoo*, but his sources for these two books were primarily other narratives of South Seas adventure. During the composition of *Mardi*, he began reading contemplative prose from centuries past, classic texts which influenced *Mardi* profoundly. What started as an adventure story in the manner of *Typee* became a romantic quest, an intellectual odyssey, and a biting political allegory.

Reviews were mixed. Some readers could make no sense of *Mardi*. Its most enthusiastic supporter, Evert Duyckinck reviewed *Mardi: And a Voyage Thither*

(1849) at length. *Mardi* sold poorly, however. Its commercial failure was all the more disappointing because Melville had a growing family to support. The month before *Mardi* appeared Elizabeth had given birth to Malcolm, the first of four children. Her husband could scarcely afford to write books that did not turn a profit.

Melville's situation was not unique. Popularity and literary quality are inversely related. Then as now, the reading public prefers books that meet their expectations. True artists, alternatively, challenge prevailing tastes to advance their art. Having established his reputation with *Typee*, Melville created a set of expectations for his readers, which *Omoo* reaffirmed. When the deliberately difficult *Mardi* challenged contemporary readers, they balked.

Melville wanted to take his art beyond the experimental *Mardi*, to say in print what other authors were afraid to say, but he dashed off two more books based on his personal experiences to be a good provider. His voyage to Liverpool inspired Wellingborough Redburn's adventures in *Redburn, His First Voyage: Being the Sailor-Boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service* (1849), and his naval service inspired *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850). In terms of his creative development, Melville saw their composition as a retrograde movement and referred to both with contempt. *Redburn*, for example, he called "trash" he wrote "to buy some tobacco" (*W*, XV, p. 13). Melville was too hard on himself. Both possess a literary sophistication beyond what he had achieved in either *Typee* or *Omoo*.

Traveling to London to arrange the British publication of *White-Jacket*, Melville immersed himself in the city's literary culture. Soon after arriving, he visited a local reading room, where he saw the latest issue of *Bentley's Miscellany*, which contained an anonymous review of *Redburn*. Robert Bell, who wrote the review, liked *Redburn* better than Melville's earlier works, preferring "a story of living experience" over "dreams of fancy and the excursions of a vivid imagination." Bell apparently kept his authorship secret. He met Melville at a dinner party, but Melville's journal makes no reference to the review's authorship. Bell later read *White-Jacket* and liked it even better than *Redburn*.[5]

Richard Bentley accepted *White-Jacket* and gave its author a substantial advance, but not before Melville had slogged the manuscript through the streets of London searching for a publisher. Otherwise, Melville's London sojourn was delightful. He attended numerous plays and concerts. He visited all the standard tourist destinations – St Paul's, the British Museum, Greenwich Hospital. He dined at the Erechtheum Club and visited the Reform Club. Given his fondness for dark, cozy places, he enjoyed London's pubs the best. One evening he visited the Mitre Tavern in Fleet Street, one of Samuel Johnson's old haunts according to local legend. The Edinburgh Castle – "the beau ideal of a tavern" – was

Melville's favorite. Stopping by one evening with a well-read American friend, he enjoyed "a glorious chop and a pancake, a pint and a half of ale, a cigar and a pipe, and talked high German metaphysics meanwhile" (*W*, XV, p. 19). Why, the Edinburgh Castle served the best Scottish ale he had ever tasted.

Hard by the Edinburgh Castle was Stibbs's Bookshop. What first lured Melville inside was a prominently displayed seventeenth-century folio of *Fifty Comedies and Tragedies* by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher – "the magnificent, mellow old Beaumont and Fletcher, who have sent the long shadow of their reputation, side by side with Shakspeare's, far down the endless vale of posterity." He bought the book and a Ben Jonson folio, too. He returned for a folio edition of Sir William Davenant's *Works* and a "fine old copy" of Sir Thomas Browne's *Works*. He also managed to coax some complimentary books from Bentley: William Beckford's *Vathek*, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In addition, he purchased copies of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*. Reading De Quincey's *Confessions* the day after buying it, Melville remained indoors by the fire, refusing to see visitors and staying put until he finished this "marvellous book" (*W*, V, p. 168; XV, pp. 44, 47). Looking at what books he acquired in London, one can almost see *Moby-Dick* taking shape.

The time he spent here had a profound impact on Melville. On the city's streets and in its dark, smokey taverns the literature of the past lived. London was a place where seventeenth-century folios could still be had, where the shades of Boswell and Johnson haunted the side streets branching from the Strand, where the writings of Ben Jonson and William Davenant seemed a part of the warp and woof of everyday life. London reminded Melville of a truth his distasteful experiences in the American literary marketplace had obscured: Great writing is something that lasts.

No one can walk away from London unchanged. Its influence on Melville is obvious from the direction his work took. While in London, he scouted locations as he researched *Israel Potter*. Leaving the city, he set aside his plans for this modest historical romance and recovered the literary ambitions he had felt during the composition of *Mardi*. His new book would be an epic of whaling, a *King Lear* of the watery world. For months after returning home in February 1850, he worked intensely on *The Whale*, as he first called the book.

Melville's personal experiences this year reinforced his literary ambitions. On a picnic in the Berkshires, he met Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived in nearby Lenox. Melville found in Hawthorne a literary soulmate, and the two became fast friends. Always impulsive, Melville borrowed money to buy a farm just north of Pittsfield, which he named Arrowhead after the native artifacts he

found there. The numerous farm chores distracted him, but he took inspiration from the nearness of Hawthorne and dedicated *Moby-Dick* to him.

Reviews of *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale* (1851) were disappointing, nay, hurtful. The small-mindedness of the critics stung him. Even Duyckinck, a devout Episcopalian, severely critiqued the book and, in so doing, antagonized Melville, soured their friendship, and adversely affected his next book. Melville avenged the reviewers of *Moby-Dick* within the pages of *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852). His capacity to write quickly, together with his characteristic impulsiveness, proved a dangerous combination. He added over a hundred more pages to his *Pierre* manuscript, turning his hero into an author midway through the book and making Pierre's frustrations in the literary marketplace a thinly-veiled retelling of his own. But it was the incest plot more than its attack on the literary establishment that antagonized contemporary readers. *Pierre* turned its author into a literary pariah.

Melville could not find a publisher for the next project he completed, a tale of patience and endurance set on an island off the Massachusetts coast entitled *The Isle of the Cross*. He apparently destroyed the manuscript. The recently-discovered fact that Melville completed this work alters the traditional understanding of Melville's life. Typically, biographers have seen *Pierre* as a turning point. Jean-Jacques Mayoux asserted that after writing *Pierre* Melville was "finished, consumed, like Rimbaud after *A Season in Hell*."[6] No, he was not. He kept working as hard as ever. Unable to find a publisher for *The Isle of the Cross*, Melville changed direction but kept working.

With a resilience that defies easy explanation, he shifted focus and began writing for the magazines. He also completed his long-planned historical novel, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855). Melville's magazine fiction – "prose, as mild and easy as an Indian summer in the woods," Henry James called it – pleased contemporary readers but did little to advance Melville's literary career.[7] He collected several short stories as *The Piazza Tales* (1856). *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), the last novel Melville published in his lifetime, is his most disappointing book, disappointing because it is so good one regrets it is not better. The early chapters recall the Melville of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, an ambitious author unafraid to slay the dragons of a corrupt society, unafraid to offer readers a deliberately difficult book. Having the devil come down to a Mississippi riverboat and assume different guises in the book's early chapters, he forced readers to readjust their focus as each chapter gives way to the next. The first third of the book is an absolute tour de force. Before completing the book, he lost his energy and his direction. Hurriedly completing the manuscript, he did not even stick around to see it through the press. It was

after *The Confidence-Man*, not *Pierre*, that Melville was consumed like Rimbaud after *A Season in Hell*.

By the time he brought *The Confidence-Man* to a close, Melville had lost the will, the urge, the energy to write a sequel to the book or, for that matter, to write anything. Since borrowing money to purchase Arrowhead, he had been teetering on the brink of financial disaster, often unable to make the interest payments on the loan and sometimes unable to pay the mortgage. He felt like a failure. His grand dreams of becoming a great writer seemed all but over.

Considering how quickly he could write and realizing that the magazines still welcomed his work, one cannot help but wonder why Melville did not simply dash off a half dozen articles to stave off the wolves. To ask such a question is to ignore his personality and mental state. Melville was one of those rare people, sensitive souls who could penetrate surface reality to see how the world really worked. He looked at his fellow man and saw him with his skin flayed. He could see all the muscles and tendons and sinews that held this frail little thing called man together. But he could penetrate even deeper. His gaze could pierce the darkness of the heart and the depths of the soul. With such insight, Melville recoiled in terror to recognize that such darkness masked moral vacuity. Beneath the surface of man, Melville saw little else beyond duplicity and hypocrisy. How trivial bill collectors and creditors and process servers seem to one who views his fellow man with psychic horror.

Judge Shaw, Melville's practically-minded father-in-law could not understand his son-in-law's horror, but he did know what kind of havoc a creditor could wreak. Shaw rescued him from financial ruin and bankrolled a long recuperative holiday to Europe and the Holy Land. This trip would form the basis for the last great work he published in his lifetime, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy-Land* (1876).

Coming in contact with ancient history and culture during the trip, Melville got a better perspective on the world in which he lived and partly recovered his equanimity. Returning home, however, he faced much the same situation that he had faced upon returning home from the South Pacific as a young man thirteen years earlier: he had to find work. From 1857 through 1859, he earned a modest living on the lecture circuit, but the podium made him uneasy. Unlike Mark Twain, Melville could not transfer his natural tall-tale telling ability to the podium. In his lectures, he assumed a scholarly pose and staunchly refused to caricature himself as the man who had lived among cannibals. He gradually realized that he had neither the talent nor the inclination for public speaking.

During the late 1850s, he began writing verse in a desultory fashion. The Civil War gave his verse renewed focus. He started seeing himself as a modern-day Ossian, a chronicler of the heroes and heroics of the battlefield, but also of the