

An Interpretation of Herman Melville's *Redburn*¹⁾

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0 . Really "trash" ?

It is very interesting and important as well for a Melville student like me to know the fact that Herman Melville's fourth work, *Redburn* was completed in less than only ten weeks, mainly because he was under financial pressure and therefore needed to hurry to complete it. Generally speaking, how long it takes an author to complete his or her literary work is not always very important in terms of the value of the work concerned. But here in the case of *Redburn*, the very fact I pointed out above has a great significance in many ways and on many levels.

Melville himself was considerably conscious of the short period and the financial condition in which he finished the composition. According to Hershel Parker²⁾ Melville mentioned in one of his letters that *Redburn* was "trash" and a "thing" and that he wrote it "to buy some tobacco with." He also said that his only desire for their success sprang from his pocket and not from his heart. This "their" means *Redburn* and *White Jacket*, because he regarded the two voyage stories as a 'set.'

Was Melville right or wrong in saying the above? That is the question.

I believe that Melville thought so and that is why he said so. However, is the work really "trash" or a "thing" for his readers? This is a very significant question. As far as I am concerned, the answer is negative to a great extent. To what extent and why? I am going to discuss it in this paper.

I . Ishmael and Redburn

With Melville some critics believe that *Redburn* is not a good work. One of the most important reasons for such belief seems to be some 'inconsistencies' seen in the novel in terms of literary aspects; especially the aspect of 'point of view.' Even a pro-Melville critic such as F. O. Matthiessen, who is so favorable to Melville as to regard *Redburn* as "the most moving"³⁾ of the novelist's books before *Moby-Dick*, criticized the 'inconsistency' and remarked that Melville had neglected "to keep his center of consciousness in Redburn's inexperience" and had added "reflections that could only have occurred to someone much older."

This story is narrated by the "I", the first person singular, and the "I" should be a single mind. Actually, however, we can see 'inconsistency' in the author's use of "I", and this kind of inconsistency should be avoided as much as possible. But here I have to point out the fact that any careful reader of *Moby-Dick* should be aware of the same kind of 'inconsistency' in that book. In addition, the question of 'point of view' is one of the most important questions in order to understand a novel.

In these terms, it could be fairly safe to say that *Redburn*, or the work which the author

regarded as merely "trash", has something in common with *Moby-Dick*, or the best work of Herman Melville in a crucial point.

Just as *Moby-Dick* begins with the famous words, "Call me Ishmael", so begins *Redburn* with Wellingborough Redburn's self-introduction. Just as Ishmael is not only a narrator but also a hero in the story, Redburn is the most important character in the book, because it is in the form of an 'autobiography', although Redburn is not 100% Melville. Both stories are narrated by using "I" (the first person, singular). However, both stories gradually begin to have 'another "I"' as the plot develops. That tends to be Melville himself rather than the narrator: that is, sometimes "I" is the narrator, sometimes "I" is the hero or a narrator/hero, and sometimes "I" is Mr. Melville himself. The way the "I" shifts is interesting. The correlation between the "I" shift and the place where the shift functions is more interesting. In other words, this question of the "I" shift has something to do with general structure of the two novels concerned.

Just as *Moby-Dick* is merely a voyage of whale-quest, *Redburn* is a voyage to and from Liverpool, as far as the technical *raison d'être* of each work is concerned. Therefore, when what happens aboard is more important than what "I" thinks, the "I" here is more concerned with the narrator's duty. When the latter is as important as or more important than the former, however, other aspects of the "I" appear. There the voice of both the narrator and the author can be heard. Sometimes we hear only the voice of Mr. Melville. In *Moby-Dick* there are a number of chapters which have very little to do with the plot as such. Many chapters about whales and whaling in general are typical examples of the parts where the voice of Mr. Melville, not of Ishmael exists. As I mentioned above, this sort of bold shift of "I" should be avoided, as a rule, in order not to make the reader bored. Most of such chapters do seem to be boring for most of the reader. But, for some readers, some chapters like "Chapter 42, The Whiteness of the Whale" are not very boring, even though Mr. Melville himself appears there. I (the writer of this paper) personally enjoyed reading such beautiful essays. But I know that some people hate such 'essay-chapters.' Which chapters or what kind of chapters one likes to read depends very much on the person, especially the person's intellectuality.

I believe with Prof. Lawrance Thompson (the author of *Melville's Quarrel with God*⁴¹) that there exist three different categories of readers depending upon how they want to read the book. To those who belong to the first category, that is, those who want to read *Moby-Dick* only as a whale-chasing-story, most of the parts where Melville's own voice can be well heard should be more or less boring. Those readers who belong to the higher categories can enjoy Melville's own voice, not Ishmael's. In this way the shift of the "I", or how "I" functions has much to do with how loud the voice of Melville is, or how high the interest of the reader is.

Unlike *Moby-Dick*, *Redburn* has no chapters or sections completely apart from the development of the story. However, like *Moby-Dick*, in some parts of *Redburn* more of the voice of Melville himself could be heard than "the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service" (this is the subtitle of *Redburn*). Analyzing more precisely this question of "I", Prof. Lawrance Thompson argued, again in *Melville's Quarrel with God*, that there are three points of view: that is, (1) that of young

Redburn (naïve, idealistic, and pious) who underwent the experiences described ; (2) that of *Redburn* as an older man "who looks back on his former self and established contrasts between the 'then' of the action and the 'now' of the telling" (but who, though more sophisticated, is still smugly optimistic and orthodox) ; and (3) that of the real Melville of 1849 (who was embittered and unorthodox and who satirized both the younger and older Redburn.)

I can agree with him to some extent, but I do not think that such clear-cut distinction is always possible. I think that the voice of the older Redburn can be quite near to that of the real Melville. In comparing *Moby-Dick* and *Redburn*, I believe, the two distinctions I have used are proper enough : narrator/hero and Melville. According to Hershel Parker, some critics "put Melville per se out of the book altogether"⁵; because they think that Melville's own voice is intrusive. I cannot agree with those critics, but it is interesting to know that even they acknowledge the fact that Melville's own voice exists in the book. I personally do not like such an interpretation, though I have to realize that there should be various interpretations. Such an interpretation can be possible only after overlooking the fact that Melville's way of describing the city of Liverpool in *Redburn* and his anti-Civilizational points of view in *Moby-Dick* have, in fact, much to do with each other. Since I think that Melville's philosophy is very much connected with his anti-Civilizational point of view, the fact that Melville spends much time to describe various experiences of young Redburn in Liverpool seems to me of great significance in a sort of 'double sense' : first, in the sense that even those critics (who are against what they call "Melville's own intrusive voice") see the existence of Melville's own voice to the extent in which it sounds rather intrusive ; secondly, in the sense that Melville's own voice is comparatively 'loud' in the Liverpool-chapters. To put it more explicitly, the first aspect of the similarity between the two books that I have discussed so far is deeply connected with the second aspect that I am going to discuss in the next part of this paper, which is entitled, "Liverpool and the sharks."

II . Liverpool and the sharks

By "the sharks" here I mean the sharks used in *Moby-Dick* as the symbol of something 'bloody' and 'iniquitous', or as the symbol of the image alien to the image of 'Ishmael-Queequeg relationship' which I believe Melville considered to be 'an ideal human world.' (I do not discuss this further because I wrote another paper concerning it), but I have to confess, (as Redburn does in the story) that I could not help feeling a sense of discovery and excitement in opening up the unknown, when I read the Liverpool-chapters of *Redburn* for the first time and knew the fact that the description of the English city by Melville was quite overwhelming. And now I feel deeply that more attention should be paid to those chapters and the way the city is written by the pen of Melville, at least by more students of Melville. In this sense, I would welcome a scholar like Newton Arvin, who agrees with me in this point, saying, "Jackson is easily first among the personal embodiments of evil in this book, but in addition to him and to all the personages, and more overpowering than any of them, there is the infernal city of Liverpool, a neighbor of the City of Destruction itself."⁶

After arriving in Liverpool, where every conceivable human vice flourishes, Redburn is

shocked by a number of 'iniquitous' things. He is most shocked by what he sees in Launcelott's -Hey. In the cellar of an old warehouse, some fifteen feet below the walk, Redburn finds "the figure of what had been a woman" which is "crouching in nameless squalor, with her head bowed." The description follows: "Her blue arms folded to her livid bosom two shrunken things like children, that leaned toward her, one on each side."⁷ Redburn is not only shocked by the sight but also by the indifference of the people he tries to bring to the very scene. Later his naïve heart is torn when he discovers the family gone and in their place a glistening "heap of quicklime." With utter helplessness Redburn finally cries:

Ah! What are our creeds, and how do we hope to be saved? Tell me, oh Bible, that story of Lazarus again, that I may find comfort for the poor and forlorn. Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellow-men, and yet given to follow our own pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse and making merry in the house of the dead?⁸

This voice of Redburn, the sailor boy is nothing but that of the real Melville. For words of a young sailor, what he says might be a little bit too mature. In other words, here we have the shift of "I" set up by Melville, and therefore we can easily feel that the voice is not really the boy's but the author's.

Here I would like to emphasize an interesting fact; that is, the fact that we (the readers) know 'that' (Melville's own voice) and yet we are not confused very much by 'that', just as we do not mind listening to Melville's 'lectures' in *Moby-Dick* even though we know well that Ishmael disappears and Melville himself appears.

As we have seen so far, the second aspect of the similarity between *Redburn* and *Moby-Dick* is very interesting and worth discussing. More evidences for this kind of similarity can be seen not only in those chapters about the iniquitous city of Liverpool but also in other chapters. And in the sense that 'Liverpool' is such a typical image of 'evilness', it could be compared with 'the sharks' in *Moby-Dick*.

III. Symbolization

The third aspect of the similarity between *Moby-Dick* and *Redburn* can be seen in Melville's successful use of symbols. Alfred Kazin pointed out Melville's "habit of moralizing" and "the transcendental passion for symbolizing all things as examples of higher-laws."⁹ According to this critic, "everything in *Moby-Dick* is saturated in a mental atmosphere," and "nothing happens for its own sake in this book."

In the case of *Redburn* we cannot see so many symbols as in *Moby-Dick*. The number of symbols used in the former is smaller than that in the latter. However, it is the quality of symbols that is important. How a symbol functions is more important than how many symbols there are. Take *Mardi* for example, it is much more voluminous than *Redburn* and has more symbols. But if we look at the way those symbols are used, we can easily find out that *Redburn* is closer to *Moby-Dick* in many ways. Compared with the books written before *Redburn*, this book has less things that "happen for its own sake." Redburn's jacket is one of the typical examples. This story begins with his brother's words:

Wellingborough, as you are going to sea, suppose you take this shooting-jacket of

mine along ; it's just the thing—take it, it will save the expense of another!¹⁰

This hunting jacket with too many buttons for a sailor began to look so conspicuous that he was called "Button" aboard the High-lander. It does not matter whether this is based upon the author's experience or not, but how this jacket functions as a symbol in this book. As far as my understanding is concerned, the jacket has something to do with this innocent boy's isolation from the people around him. It functions to make the boy uncomfortable since he goes to sea. And it is only after he meets Harry Bolton and takes off the jacket that he begins to enjoy friendships. Just as the sharks with padlocks in the "Epilogue" of *Moby-Dick* symbolize 'harmony', Redburn without the jacket symbolizes his 'harmony' with the people around him.

It is possible to take some other symbols for example, and it is also possible to emphasize the fact that *Redburn* and *Moby-Dick* have much in common in terms of both the existence of symbols and the usefulness of symbols.

IV. A 'Voyage' to *Moby-Dick*

In conclusion, I have to emphasize the following two facts that have been made clear so far :

- (1) As we have seen in this paper, *Redburn* is far from "trash" or a "thing" as Melville himself thought ; on the contrary, it is a very interesting book for those who are very interested in Herman Melville and his literary works.
- (2) The above mentioned is important all the more because the work was completed in such haste that the author could not do his best as a novelist.

In a word, it could be safely said, *Redburn* is a voyage to Liverpool, England geographically speaking, but symbolically speaking the work is a 'voyage' to the work named "Moby-Dick."

NOTES

- (1) This paper is based on the manuscript of my paper reported at the 25th Kyushu Seminar in American Literature. (May 12, 1979/Fukuoka American Center in Fukuoka City)
- (2) Hershel Parker, Historical Note of *Redburn* (Evanston and Chicago, Northwestern University press, 1969), p.316
- (3) F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1941)
- (4) Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1952)
- (5) Hershel Parker, Historical Note, p.349
- (6) Richard Chase (ed.), *Melville* (Eaglewood Cliffs, Prince-Hall, 1962) p.28
- (7) Herman Melville, *Redburn* (Evanston and Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 1969) p.180
- (8) Ibid., p.184
- (9) Richard Chase (ed.), *Melville*, p.41
- (10) Herman Melville, *Redburn*, p. 3