

## Melville's Mail · Frederick Busch

WHEN HE WAS 33 he felt finished. The book he knew to be special—it “is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ships’ cables & hausers,” he wrote. “A Polar wind blows through it, & birds of prey hover over it”—had failed. American and English reviewers had roasted *Moby-Dick* (1851) and in 18 months the American edition sold 2300 copies. *Pierre* (1852) sold 2030 copies over 35 years. It earned Melville the scorn of reviewers—they questioned his sanity as well as his skill—and, by the end of his life, a total of \$157.

He had to worry about money, for he farmed a little, but counted on the harvest of his writing, and his wife’s small trust fund, for the support of their family. This support was threatened, and since money is a letter from the world to an author about his work, Melville had to face up to the prospect of not getting across his doubting dark vision; for he received too little of the mail that would have assured him that he was heard. As he had complained, in a letter to Hawthorne, in 1851: “Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. . . . I shall be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.”

The well-received author of travel and adventure stories such as *Typee* (1846) and *Mardi* (1849) had become the student of Shakespeare’s and Carlyle’s works, the hard questioner of heavenly works, and the man whose soul had resonated in response to the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne—“there is the blackness of darkness beyond,” he wrote of Hawthorne’s tales, and he praised “those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality” which had “dropped germinous seeds into my soul.” Melville had lost what ease he’d possessed, and now his work would lose its. Into *Moby-Dick*, which he was writing as he wrote to Hawthorne, he put “the sane madness of vital truth,” and the world didn’t want to hear it.

And so we come to the exhausted Melville of 1852. He begins to speak—it is nearly impossible, still, for him to be silent—of what obsesses him: the failure of crucial messages to get through, and the condemna-

tions to (or attractions of) silence. Such matters become central; they are the mail of which I speak.

It is likely that Melville had come to love Hawthorne: the handsome older writer, Melville wrote in "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in 1850 "shoots his strong . . . roots into the hot soil of my . . . soul." They were neighbors and saw one another, though less than Melville wished, and then Hawthorne moved away; they corresponded, exchanging books (*Pierre* for *The Blithedale Romance*) and ideas. The case of Agatha Hatch Robertson was relayed by Melville. It involved a young wife who waited 17 years for word—literally, for mail—from her husband, who had left to seek work. Melville here postulates to Hawthorne how the story of Agatha and her mailbox might be told: "As her hopes gradually decay in her, so does the post itself & the little box decay. The post rots in the ground *at last*. Owing to its being little used—hardly used at all—grass grows rankly about it. *At last* a little bird nests in it. *At last* the post falls." [My italics.]

It seems clear that this synopsis speaks for Melville. The story of abandonment and apprehensive waiting for messages is relevant to a writer in Melville's situation—he laments the undelivered incoming mail (the world's attention) and the outgoing mail (his writing) that does not get through. The nesting bird underscores not only the pathos of the disuse of the mailbox, but Melville's sense of his ridiculousness: is he merely a white-stained post? And listen to the rhythm of the repetition of "at last" and "At last" and "At last": it is incantatory, funereal, and about Herman Melville's fatigue.

Melville had steeped himself in Shakespeare's tragedies as he prepared to write *Moby-Dick*. In "Mosses," he had said, "Through the mouths of the dark characters of Hamlet, Timon, Lear, and Iago, he [Shakespeare] craftily says, or sometimes insinuates, the things which we feel to be so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter or even hint of them." Whenever he wrote of literature, Melville tended to write about the process of writing in general, and his own in particular; he does so above, homing in on his own relationship to Ahab, who—like Pierre—served as Melville's dark mask. Now he ventriloquized from within his notion of Agatha, and later he would use Claggert and Captain Vere.

It is Hamlet who speaks in the outline of the Agatha story. Grass grows

“rankly” around the rotting post; it is Hamlet who, lamenting religious injunctions against suicide, describing life as weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, bemoaning the need for silence (“I must hold my tongue”)—it is Hamlet who calls the world “an unweeded garden” taken over by things “rank and gross.” [My italics.] Melville was low enough in spirit to place himself in Hamlet’s garden, and in Agatha’s dooryard.

In October, 1852, *Putman’s Monthly Magazine* invited him to contribute work. In December, he began to write the Agatha story. Unsurprisingly, he didn’t complete it, for he had said its essential elements to Hawthorne; and it was Agatha’s situation, not self, that was dark and alive to Melville. She was his emblem more than his story. But he did work at silence and undelivered messages that year, and did give *Putman’s* the tale of “Bartleby,” published in 1853.

The mask through which Melville speaks in the story is that of a decent, pragmatic, elderly Wall Street lawyer (who practices not far from Melville’s boyhood neighborhood, and the Custom-House from which he retired in 1885). He is proud to work for robber-barons, he tells us; he is as different from the copyist, or scrivener, Bartleby, as seems possible. And yet, like Bartleby, he is a victim of politics: as he has lost work as Master of Chancery because administrations changed, so Bartleby has lost a position, we learn, for similar reasons. Bartleby comes to haunt the lawyer and his chambers; Turkey and Nippers, matching opposites—one law clerk is torpid when the other is drunkenly inflamed, and *vice versa*—strike the motif of doubleness for the story, and it soon becomes clear that something in these opposites, the narrator and his scrivener, is also matched.

For against all wisdom, not to mention sound business practices, Bartleby is kept on, in spite of his refusal to work (“I would prefer not to”), as if the narrator required his presence. It seems that just as Melville finds his mask in the narrator—it is at this time that a campaign of family and friends fails to yield Melville a diplomatic appointment by officials in the new administration of President Franklin Pierce—so the narrator finds *his* darker self in Bartleby. Quite like Bartleby, who ends up dead, “his face towards a high wall,” the narrator has chambers (on *Wall Street*) that “looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft” at one end, and, at the other, upon “a lofty brick wall.” Like Bartleby (who is described, once, as “my fate”), he is in a blind alley of his life, and he looks upon “dead” walls.

In some ways, then, Melville writes not only of the existential traps, but of the need to cope with or create or accede to the presence of metaphors of one's interior being. He is speaking of aspects of the consciousness that makes fiction—the creation of alternate, mirroring selves—and it is selfish, needful, cunning, self-pitying, and sometimes even generous.

Bartleby, who starved away from an intolerable world—perhaps on behalf of the narrator who had digested too much of it—had been a clerk “in the Dead Letter Office in Washington.” His narrator, lamenting Bartleby and humanity, but probably also Herman Melville, speculates on “Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?” He considers what dead letters might carry—pardon, hope, good tidings—and concludes that “On errands of life, these letters speed to death.” For *life*, also read *fiction*.

Published by Harper Brothers into the mid-1850s, Melville also read *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, renewing his subscription in 1852. And it was in *Harper's* that Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* was published serially in America, from April, 1852, to October, 1853. There's little reason to doubt that Melville saw those issues, including the issues of June and July, 1852, containing chapters (X and XI) called “The Law-Writer” and “Our Dear Brother.” In them, a man is portrayed so that, for the plot's sake, he might die. He is very much about paper and pen and, like Bartleby (at one point described as “folded up like a huge folio”), is a parody of Melville's profession; I suggest that Melville was moved by him indeed.

Dickens' law copyist, or scrivener, lives in Cook's Court, near Chancery Lane. (Remember that Bartleby's employer was Master of Chancery and that, well into the mid-twentieth century, America's Wall Street was the equivalent of England's legal Inns.) The man who copies legal documents, in *Bleak House*, Melville would have read, calls himself “Nemo, Latin for no one.” An advantage cited about Nemo is “that he never wants to sleep;” he is a haunted man. His landlady says, “They say he has sold himself to the Enemy,” the Devil; he is “black-humored and gloomy” and lives in a tiny room “nearly black with soot, and grease, and dirt;” his desk is “a wilderness marked with a rain of ink.” “No curtain veils the darkness of the night,” but Nemo's shutters are drawn; “through the two gaunt holes pierced in them, famine might be staring in. . . .” The filthy ragged copyist, a figure of total despair, lies dead in his squalid room, the victim of an overdose of opium.

Melville, I suggest, read about Nemo before he wrote his story of Wall

Street. He made Nemo his own, though he was drawn to him, I think, because the combination of despair, cruel laws, alienation, copying-out, and that “rain of ink” were irresistible. Bartleby turns his face to a dead wall because he cannot tolerate his life. In the Dickens, it is a broken heart, a lost history, a condition in life that is denied by the scrivener. In the Melville, the man who copies dispositions according to common law, the law of human precedent, it is human life itself that is denied. Dickens, when he drew his copyist in *Bleak House*, was angry at conditions in English life; Melville, under Dickens’ influence, saw his soul as “grated to pieces” by the great chore of living.

*The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles*, published in *Putnam’s* in 1854, appeals to the contemporary sensibility as much as “Bartleby” or “Benito Cereno.” Although these are long stories, or novellas, they are written for magazine publication and are necessarily concise. The energy that comes of such compression, coupled with Melville’s darkening vision and sexual and economic desperation—a third child was born in 1853, a fourth in 1855—results in a fiction that is grim (or effortfully funny, like “The Happy Failure” or “I and My Chimney,” also published in 1854), a fiction that appropriates wild symbology from the romance (for example, a tortoise on the back of which is emblazoned a *memento mori*), and the mythic, fable-like qualities one associates with certain contemporary writers.

The Encantadas are the Galapagos Islands, “cinders dumped here and there in an outside city lot,” Melville calls them. They are described as a waste land in the seas, where natural life is cruel and the human life that drifts in even crueller. Instead of chapters, we have ten sketches; there is no central character, and no single story. The islands become a matrix for authorial consciousness, a repository for attitude and mood. They are metaphors that link Melville’s somber music, which describes an island as “tumbled masses of blackish or greenish stuff like the dross of an iron-furnace,” yielding “a most Plutonian sight.” This is a suite about hell, the outer physical hell that is analogue to a sad man’s interior hell—that, say, of the man who had, in discussing *Moby-Dick*, mentioned “the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled.” These sketches, from the former travel- and adventure-writer, offer a Swiftian scolding song about men who are more like dogs, and about islands that are more like ideas. If there is any one heroic or admirable, it is Hunilla, of Sketch Eighth, who, abandoned on an island, endures her husband’s and brother’s death, and years of tor-

ture, to be seen, at the story's end, riding "upon a small gray ass . . ." and . . . eying "the jointed workings of the beast's armorial cross." When Melville, the unbeliever, finds a character heroic, he finds him Christ-like and crucified with rapidity.

It is noteworthy that in describing an apocalyptically ugly wilderness like the Encantadas, Melville called them "cinders" and described them as a waste product of industry. Like all sensitive men and women of his time, and as a former sailor and a farmer, he was aware of the cruel encroachments of industrial process upon the countryside. His *Harper's* story of 1855, "The Tartarus of Maids," is often read as an attack upon nineteenth-century industrial despoliations. It is that, surely. But it is equally concerned with sexuality, and with fiction, and is as much about isolation and long silence as *The Encantadas*.

The stories of this period, when examined in their collection, *The Piazza Tales* (1856), abound in vertical images, phallic shapes—lightning rods, masts, chimneys, and the high building that houses "The Paradise of Bachelors" in the story that was published along with "The Tartarus of Maids." As characters in "Bartleby" were paired, the two stories here are paired, the Pickwickian "Bachelors," the Dantean "Maids." The number *nine*—does Melville think of the Ninth Circle of Hell?—is echoed in each: nine carefree bachelors dine, and paper production in "Maids" takes nine minutes. We might remember that the nine months of gestation were significant to Melville at around this time.

So, in "Bachelors," the men dine at the top of a high building in London. They eat and drink in great quantity, are courtly to one another, and are "a band of brothers," with "no wives or children to give an anxious thought." Melville is stating his dream of freedom from the domestic responsibilities that stalk him (and which he cannot easily meet); he also expresses his desire to be free of the sexuality that, his fiction demonstrates, he copes with uneasily: it is Apollonian youth, or bachelor brothers, who most please his personae. Here, the men take snuff together from a silver goat's horn; they remove the snuff, which they will stuff into themselves, by "inserting . . . thumb and forefinger into its mouth." Melville goes to some length to create images that have to do with orifices and infantile pleasure. The bachelors are boys, and their aim is self-gratification, which exists in opposition to the cycles of biology represented in "The Tartarus of Maids," a story that's a matching opposite to "The Paradise of

Bachelors,” and another Melville tale of the Underworld.

To enter that story’s world, one enters a woman’s body at her loins—the “Dantean gateway” at “the Black Notch” in a “Plutonian” hollow called “the Devil’s Dungeon” that leads to “Blood River.” Melville employs gothic images of ruined and decaying structures past which we are led to a paper mill. So we are dealing with female biology, male fear of it, hell, gothic terror, and paper.

Our narrator tells us that he is a “seedsman,” that when the seeds he mails out are in paper folded into envelopes—he has come to buy more paper—the packets of seeds “assume not a little the appearance of business-letters ready for the mail.” And we are back to letters, dead-letters, the fiction that constitutes Melville’s correspondence with the world.

The story starts out in whiteness, the menacing whiteness of Moby-Dick, for all is white vapor, the snow of January, the white walls of the mill, the paper itself. In a factory scene that Kafka might have envied and that Dickens could have written, the narrator confronts this sight: “At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper.” It is an industrial nightmare, and a writer’s nightmare—especially if he is compelled to write because of inner need, or economics, or both.

If the writer thinks of the mailing-out of seeds as, at once, an artistic need, an economic coercion, an expense of spirit, and an invitation to the production of babies who whip the cycle of responsibility round again, he might at this point tie the paper and seed images to the sexual toils he escaped in “Paradise” and slunk through at the opening of “Tartarus.” Melville does. In the very next paragraph we get “some huge frame of ponderous iron, with a vertical thing like a piston periodically rising and falling upon a heavy wooden block. Before it—its tame minister—stood a tall girl, feeding the iron animal with half-quires of rose-hued note-paper. . . .”

Thus, animal or biological pistoning—the act of sex itself—and the ceaseless sexual cycle our narrator (and Melville) cower before, becomes an “iron animal,” a force that cannot be resisted—and it is a product of nature and of thinking man. The paper it prints bears a wreath of roses, stamped like the frightening birthmark on the pale cheek in Hawthorne’s story. Cruel scythes cut paper (as cruel saws have made stumps of the trees in the valley), paper pulp is a white river suspiciously sperm- and egg-like as it

flows into a room “stifling with a strange, blood-like abdominal heat.”

In the confusion of biology and writer’s imagination, writer’s need and domestic requirements, in the final room of the production process (it is presided over, as if a delivery room, by a woman who was a nurse), the narrator speculates about what could come to be written on all the blank paper he sees. These ruminations evoke those of the narrator of “Bartleby,” for he considers “love-letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death-warrants”: much, in other words, that might have been on Melville’s mind; these documents are the skeleton of what he works at. And then the narrator cites Locke and his comparison of the human mind at birth to a blank sheet of paper — at which point the writer is not only harassed bread-winner, but a mother as well, since his writings are babies as much as babies become the world’s blank paper to be scribbled upon.

“Time presses me,” the seedsman puns as he leaves: it makes him jump to its bony tune, but it also writes his history upon his own soul. He speaks as all men — the “Ah, humanity!” of “Bartleby” — and as the writer, printed upon even as he imprints his inventions on paper, wraps his seeds (both art and life) and mails them out, hoping for mail in response.

If these are stories of the interior Melville, perhaps the triumph of this period is “Benito Cereno” (1855), a story that is very much about externalities — or seems to be. Like “Bartleby,” “Benito Cereno” excites great writing by Melville, and, like “Bartleby,” it suggests that the obvious is really enigma.

It is 1799, and an American merchantman, commanded by Captain Delano, lies near an island off Chile. The sea is “gray,” the swells “lead,” the sky “gray”; the “Gray” fowl fly through “troubled gray vapors,” and the scene is summarized by “Shadows present, foreshadowing shadows to come.” So the reader is alerted that he will have to read this world and interpret the grays. He is further warned that what he sees are shadows; what casts them is hidden, and the reader must peer: the story is an exercise in, and an essay about, dramatic irony. As much as the subject is slavery and revolution, it is also perception and invention; it is about fiction, the successes and failures and tactics of which are very much on Melville’s mind.

Delano is described from the start as having a “singularly undistrustful good-nature,” and is virtually incapable of “the imputation of malign evil

in man.” From the start, Melville wants us to know that Delano misreads the world. So he resorts to the language of gothic romance. The slave ship looks like a “monastery after a thunder storm”; figures aboard her resemble “Black Friars pacing the cloisters”; the vessel is reminiscent of “superannuated Italian palaces” and her galleries evoke “tenantless balconies hung over the sea as if it were the grand Venetian canal.” Delano is placed among the settings in which virgins are pursued by fright-figures, and he should be at home—for he is, in terms of the evil and cruelty that Melville wishes to note, quite virginal.

Gothic conventions not only easily signal fright—we may perceive them; Delano cannot—but can serve to remind us at every turn that dying Europe, the worst of it, encounters the most naïve and imperceptive rawness of the New World. Apocalyptic thoughts bring out the best in Melville, who swims in them as in the sea. So we have such poetry about a ship as “while, like mourning weeds, dark festoons of sea-grass slimily swept to and fro . . . with every hearse-like roll of the hull.”

Messages do not get through. And so Delano, maddeningly, scarily, cannot overcome his racism and innocence and see past the virtual *tableaux-vivants* arranged for his benefit by the rebel slaves under Babo. The clues that strike us at once are misinterpreted in multiples by Delano. And then the awful symbol, in a story rife with symbols—puzzling rope knots, razors-at-throat—is uncovered. The ship’s figurehead is revealed to be a human skeleton, that of a partner in the slave ship. And we are warned by Melville that what seem to be *only* symbols may be representations of what’s actual, that language carries a cargo of the real, and that fiction is a matter of life and death.

The story slips without faltering into another convention, the “true” document that creates verisimilitude (as in the case of Captain Gulliver’s deposition or, closer to home, Poe’s “MS. Found in a Bottle,” or Hawthorne’s “discovery” of *The Scarlet Letter* manuscript). The statement by Benito Cereno, a seeming transcript, gives the European account of the slave rebellion, suggests to us how complicated and multifold any actuality is—how difficult to comprehend or relate—and serves to supply small, shuddery details. So we see, for example, that the original figurehead had been a wooden Christopher Columbus; the discoverer (as he was then thought to be, of course) of the New World is replaced by the Old World’s grinning corpse: slavery becomes the emblem of an inescapable

fact—that we are haunted by our past, that the New Eden is not free of the old evils, that, as Melville complained to Hawthorne, “the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me.”

A brief third section follows Cereno’s testimony. It contains warnings inferred by Melville (and so many others) concerning the social conditions that will ignite the Civil War. It also offers another, a larger and historical, way of examining the events of the story. And it reminds us how, throughout the first part, we saw menace between the slave Babo and his master (then prisoner) Cereno, while Delano saw affection. Delano saw mastery, and we saw captivity. When Benito Cereno’s “symbol of despotic command” is examined, it is seen not to be a sword, “but ghost of one,” its scabbard “artificially stiffened.” Melville does not, I think, speak here only of command, but of men seen as joined by affection who are later revealed to be acting in reversal of their customary relationships (the more powerful obeys, the slave commands). Melville joins notions of political power and emotional liaison, and not only to warn us that slaves rise up. The metaphor works in reverse as well, I think, and we are instructed that lovers are slaves and masters, that men can be unmanned by love (the limp scabbard), and can, as in the case of wan Don Cereno, even die of it.

The warning note is sounded again as Delano points to a sky he names as “blue,” but which Cereno cannot acknowledge; to him, it is the gray, perhaps, of the story’s opening. The shadows of that early passage are pointed at again as Delano says, “You are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?” Cereno answers, “The negro,” and so warns a society of its sin and then its price—only then are we told of the empty scabbard—and points as well to Babo, who took Cereno’s soul in partial payment for his freedom. The shadow is national, cultural, and also particular: Cereno dies, as did his partner.

Babo is the genius of the story—compare his invention, his gift for creating a ship-wide fiction, to Delano’s good dullness—and his head, “that hive of subtlety,” is taken from his body. It is his brain the white men fear. He is further reduced by this barbarism, and yet he becomes more of a threat. He stares at the white man from the post on which his head is impaled. He stares at the Old World and the New Eden, at unmanned Cereno, at church and monastery, storyteller and reader. And he stares them down. He began as a man and became a curse. And *his* message, for some, gets through.

And now we need to move ahead, through Melville's writing and non-writing lifetime. Hawthorne, whom Melville loved and lost, has risen. He is America's second most powerful diplomat, the Consul to Liverpool. (He was also Franklin Pierce's Bowdoin friend, and the author of his campaign biography.) Melville, failing at his novels and his efforts to achieve diplomatic appointment, suffering physically, his novel *Israel Potter* (1855) having been launched to sink, contracts for *The Confidence Man* having been signed, was sent in 1856, with his father-in-law's money, on a sea voyage that might bring him back to health and ease. He went to Liverpool, where he visited Hawthorne, who noted that Melville said he had "pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated." It is possible that Melville meant that he was faithless and was reconciled to a death with no afterlife. It is also possible to read the statement as a premonition of death. And it is not difficult, given Melville's state of mind, and his choked-off relationship with Hawthorne, to read the statement as a threat of suicide.

We might keep the possibility in mind as we move ahead to Melville's acceptance, in 1866, of a post at the Port of New York Custom-House at Gansevoort Street, not far from his birthplace. In Boston and Salem, Hawthorne had begun his career at such a place; Melville would conclude his here. But he wrote his Civil War poems, and he went on to write the long poem *Clarel*, and, probably between the time of his retirement as a customs inspector in 1885 and his death in 1891, he worked on a poem that became the ballad "Billy in the Darbies" ("Billy in Irons") that sparked a short novel—it concludes with the ballad and began as a headnote to it—that we know as *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*.

We know a good deal about the composition of the novel because of the heroic work of Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. They show us, for example, that Melville worked through stages of imagining. First, there was the poem, about a sailor who was to be hanged for plotting a mutiny. Then came Melville's further interest in Billy in the context of the eighteenth-century British navy's concern with mutiny as a threat to fleet-wide order. Claggert, Billy's nemesis, was born in further reworkings and then was made more complex, as is true of Captain Vere. The more Melville worked at this (apparent) first fiction in years, the more he thought about the nature of fiction, and the more he sought to deepen (and darken) his characters.

Surely, he did mean much of the allegorizing that readers in the

classroom parade before one another. Billy, impressed from the merchant, *Rights-of-Man*, does, after all, cry out “good-bye to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*.” Vere does, after all, stand for verity. Billy, as he is hanged, does die as sun shoots through clouds to create “a soft glory as of the fleece of the Lamb of God seen in mystical vision.” Melville does liken Claggert to Satan (“the scorpion for which the creator alone is responsible”). And he does liken Billy much to Adam as well as to Christ. Vere, who we are told cannot help but enforce the laws, must hang Billy for killing Claggert, even if the punishment is not fair—for it is just. Billy blesses Vere, we are reminded, as we are told that *Billy Budd* is Melville’s fiction of reconciliation: left unfinished at his death, it is there to tell us that Melville has accepted fate’s cruelty and his own cruel fate.

I would suggest, however, that the novel sustains Melville’s preoccupation with fiction, that it creates dark characters for his sane madness, and that he is equally concerned with the mail getting through, and with his participation, to whatever degree, in a suicide.

Melville was a stern and difficult father and, when he wrote, he was removed, cranky, impatient and selfish. We know little of his particular relationship with his son Malcolm, who in 1867 was 18 years old. We do know that Malcolm was his first-born, and that he owned a pistol. Roistering one night after work at an insurance office run by his uncle’s brother-in-law, he returned home very late, and didn’t emerge from his room the next day. That evening, Melville forced the door to find that his son was dead. He had shot himself in the temple—an accident, the Melvilles insisted. What part the troubled father and husband played, or thought he played, in the suicide we cannot know.

But if we read *Billy Budd* with suicide and parental guilt in mind, and in just proportion, interesting considerations arise. Dansker, the voice of insight among the characters in the novel, calls him *Baby Budd*. The Mutiny Act, which necessitates Billy’s death, is described as “War’s child,” which “takes after the father.” In the next chapter, Captain Vere is described as “old enough to have been Billy’s father.” And so, when Billy goes to his death crying, “God Bless Captain Vere!”, it is as if a father is exculpated by a son who, because of man’s laws and God’s dispositions, he is required to sentence to death. It is possible that some of the electricity of the Vere-Budd relationship is the result of the father-son analogy that subconsciously galvanized Melville into writing the novel.

In this, another tale of shipboard levels of, and kinds of, perception, Melville is again obsessed with silence, as well as with ways of telling the truth. Billy, “under sudden provocation of strong heart-feeling,” stutters “or even worse.” The even-worse is his choked agony of silence when, falsely accused by Claggert, he cannot speak and, lashing out, kills his accuser. It is silence that leads to Billy’s death, and it is silence—the failure of mail to get through—that still haunts Melville. I see little reconciliation here. He still quarrels with silence, and—remember the serpent “for which the creator alone is responsible”—he still quarrels with God.

But Melville too is a creator. He thinks hard of that for which he’s responsible. So in Chapter 2 he worries about the form and function of his art, discussing Billy—“he is not presented as a conventional hero”—and his story, which “is no romance.” He is speaking of what’s actual, I think he says here, not of the symbolic. His subject, he tells us, really is death and silence and inexorable laws. In Chapter 11, making Claggert an Iago, he worries that he errs in the direction of the gothic, or that his reader will, and he discusses “realism” and “Radcliffian romance.” Chapter 13 reminds us that profound passion can be enacted “among the beggars and rakers of the garbage”; he is worrying about the effectiveness of his writing tactics, the ways of fiction are very much on his mind. In Chapter 28, toward the novel’s end (and his), he all but declaims or apologizes: “Truth uncompromisingly told will have its ragged edges; hence the conclusion of such a narration is apt to be less finished than an architectural finial.” As he writes about Billy and Captain Vere and Claggert and Dansker, he writes about how he writes.

In 1851, Melville wrote to Hawthorne that “I have come to regard this matter of Fame as the most transparent of all vanities.” Now, thirty years and more later, writing of Vere’s end, he may speak of his deepest self: “The spirit that . . . may yet have indulged in the most secret of all passions, ambition, never attained to the fulness of fame.” But I do not think he meant wide-spread notice to be his primary aim, any more than he meant riches when he complained about the earnings from his work. He was speaking, I would submit, about the ways in which the world could demonstrate to Melville—to any writer—that his work had been read and that it had made some difference. He was speaking of most earnest correspondence.

And there is Melville, who wants the mail to go out and to be delivered

as much as he wants to receive it. He is riding in the stagecoach that carries the mail. At way-station after way-station, horses are changed, coaches are changed, the freight and mail and passengers roll on toward the end of the day. Melville writes to Hawthorne: "Lord, when shall we be done changing?" He sighs, in the corner of the stagecoach, in the corner of his life, "Ah, it's a long stage, and no inn in sight, and night coming, and the body cold."