
“Their Snowy Whiteness Dazzled My Eyes”: “The Death Craft”— Melville’s First Maritime Story

by *Warren F. Broderick*

On November 16th 1839, a story entitled “The Death Craft” appeared on the first page of the weekly newspaper, the *Democratic Press (and Lansingburg Advertiser)*. This somewhat amateurish attempt at achieving Gothic horror would be of no interest to the modern reader, were there not conclusive evidence that “The Death Craft” was the first maritime story, the first Gothic fiction, of Herman Melville.

The Melville family had removed to the Village of Lansingburgh, where this newspaper was published, in the spring of 1838. Maria Melville, Herman’s mother, left Albany to reduce her living expenses and removed with her eight children ten miles to the north, to Lansingburgh, a village of some three thousand inhabitants, situated along the east side of the Hudson River in Rensselaer County, opposite the mouth of the Mohawk. Maria rented a home from

gunmaker John M. Caswell, a residence "very pleasantly situated" near the river bank and the corner of North and River Streets (presently named 114th Street and First Avenue, respectively.)¹ Directly adjacent to their home was the Richard Hanford shipyard, one of the remaining elements of an active ship-building industry and river commerce which had precipitated Lansingburgh's rapid growth since its founding as a planned community in 1771.

In the autumn of 1838 Herman entered the Lansingburgh Academy, one of the better-regarded private upstate academies, located three blocks east of his home. Hoping to secure a position with the State-operated Erie Canal, he took a course in Surveying and Engineering, which he would complete the following May. His mentor, Principal Rev. Ebenezer D. Maltbie (1799–1858), held a particular interest in zoology, later authoring a textbook *Zoological Science, or Nature in Living Forms* (1858).² The possibility of Rev. Maltbie's tutoring young Melville on the wonderful variety in the animal kingdom tantalizes the Melville biographer, considering Herman's passionate interest in natural science, manifested in many of his works, including the early chapters of *Moby Dick*.

Melville's social circle in Lansingburgh was comprised of some friends and relatives of considerable education, refinement and diverse interests. The community was neither the "quiet country village" nor totally "Philistine in spirit" and of a "strictly business character" as it has been characterized by many Melville biographers and critics.³

Anthony Augustus Peebles (1822–1905), a cousin, travelled abroad, serving in the diplomatic corps, and read extensively; he was once engaged to Herman's sister, Augusta Melville. Anthony's wife, Mary Louisa [Parmelee] Peebles (1834–1915) authored a number of popular children's books under the pseudonym "Lynde Palmer." Anthony's mother, Maria [Van Schaick] Peebles (1782–1865) was one of the relatives who provided Maria Melville much needed financial assistance. Augustus Platt Van Schaick (1822–1847), Herman's second cousin, a grain merchant in Lansingburgh, was an overseas traveller and "author of many figurative pieces, descriptive, religious and humorous."⁴ Two of Melville's 1847 letters to Augustus survive; one had accompanied an autographed copy of the newly released novel *Omoo*.⁵

Herman's friends included Hiram R. Hawkins (1827–1866), a ship-builder's son, adventurer and sailor, who twice mentioned Melville in an 1849 letter written from Honolulu, defending Herman's



Lansingburgh Academy (built 1820) where Melville was a student in 1838–39. Photo by Henry Foy, c.1900. From the collection of Frances D. Broderick, Lansingburgh, New York.

caustic criticism of the South Sea missionaries.⁶ Peletiah Bliss (1821–1852) was a local newspaper and book publisher, as well as a world traveller. His wife, Mary Eleanor [Parmelee] Bliss (1822–1896), was courted by Melville, being the recipient of a volume of Tennyson's poems and some since destroyed love letters. Her older brother, Elias R. Parmalee (1799–1849) was an avid disciple of universal public education, contributing extensively to newspapers and magazines on that subject; he was the father of Mary Louisa [Parmelee] Peebles, mentioned above. Asa Weston Twitchell (1820–1904) began his career as a portrait painter in Lansingburgh, and as a return for some yet unknown favor, painted Melville's famous 1846–7 portrait "gratis."⁷

Another friend of Melville's was William J. Lamb (1818–1859), progressive editor of the *Democratic Press (and Lansingburgh Advertiser)*, later known as the *Lansingburgh Democrat*, who devoted greater coverage in his paper than most contemporary editors, to the arts and belles lettres. In April of 1839 Lamb received a communication from Melville, and after requesting an interview with the young writer who had submitted a sample of his writing, published Herman's first pieces of fiction in his weekly newspaper.⁸

The first of these two "Fragments from a Writing Desk" of Melville's appeared in the *Democratic Press* on May 4, 1839, signed "L.A.V." The first "Fragment" was written in the form of a confessional letter to his mentor by a cocky young disciple of Lord Chesterfield. Much of the piece is devoted to a glowing description of Lansingburgh's young women, and the remainder to the details of the methods by which the narrator planned to court them. Far more interesting is the second "Fragment," published two weeks later, which recalls the bizarre romantic adventure in pursuit of a mysterious woman, who upon a passionate confrontation is revealed to the hero as being "dumb and deaf!"⁹ This piece, as Gilman pointed out, reveals how already extensive was Melville's reading.¹⁰

The "Fragments" were discovered among Melville's papers in 1919 by Raymond Weaver.¹¹ They bear the words "by Herman Melville" in a faded ink which was later proven to be from the pen of Herman's wife, and there is no sound reason to doubt Herman's authorship. "Although the sketches are scarcely immortal literature, the mere fact that they were published was an achievement for Melville."¹² A month after their publication, the nineteen-year-old author embarked for Liverpool on his first sea voyage on the ship *St. Lawrence*, bound from the Port of New York; he returned home on the *United States* that October. Nursing the vivid recollections of

the beauty and cruelty of life at sea, that ten years later would form the basis for his novel *Redburn*, Melville soon turned to synthesizing his fresh maritime experiences with his desire to compose Gothic fiction.

“**T**he Death Craft” was discovered by one of the three Melville biographers and critics, Jay Leyda, William Gilman or Leon Howard, as each conducted extensive research on Melville during the late 1940’s. Leyda reproduced the sketch in part in his *Melville Log*, indicating the probability that Melville was its author.¹³ Gilman stated that he felt it “possible but unlikely” that Melville had composed the piece, labelling it “full of Gothic horror, unreal description, and sticky romance.”¹⁴ Howard, on the other hand, saw “The Death Craft” as containing “a raw exhibition of the sort of fancies he was to introduce so skillfully, many years later, into ‘Benito Cereno.’” Howard saw “The Death Craft” as “less personally revealing than the ‘Fragments.’”¹⁵

“The Death Craft” clearly represents Melville’s first attempt at translating his sea adventures into fiction. Parts of the story read smoothly, while others are choppy and filled with overblown scenes of horror, and the conclusion, like that of the second “Fragment,” is highly melodramatic. Nonetheless, Melville’s command of metaphor and apostrophe in the sketch are strikingly powerful for a twenty-year-old inexperienced author, and foreshadow both memorable imagery and declamation which are found in his later works.

The opening paragraph of “The Death Craft” bears a remarkable resemblance to the third paragraph in “Benito Cereno”:

A calm prevailed over the waters. The ocean lay gently heaving in long, regular undulations like the bosom of beauty in slumber. Pouring forth a heat only known in torrid climes, the sun rode the firmament like some fiery messenger of ill. No cloud disturbed the serenity of the heavens, which, of the palest blue, seemed withered of their brilliancy by the scorching influence of his rays. A silence, nowhere to be experienced but at sea, and which seemed preliminary to some horrible convulsion of nature, hushed the universal waste. (“The Death Craft”)

Everything was mute and calm, everthing gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that had cooled and set in the smelter’s mold. The sky seemed like a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadow deeper shadows to come. (“Benito Cereno”)

While the plot of "Benito Cereno" was taken from the 1817 *Narrative* of Captain Amasa Delano, no such beautiful prose can be found in the terse original *Narrative*, and Melville's source for this paragraph was doubtless the first paragraph of "The Death Craft," written sixteen years earlier.¹⁶ In the interim, Melville had twice described "the awful stillness of the calm" in *Mardi* (1849). In Chapter II, the narrator devotes three pages to detailing his "witnessing as a landsman this phenomenon of the sea." The calm "unsettles his mind . . . thoughts of eternity thicken . . . his voice grows strange and portentous . . . he begins to feel anxious concerning his soul." In Chapter XVI, the ship is again becalmed:

. . . the Ocean upon its surface hardly presents a sea of existence. The deep blue is gone, and the glassy element lies tranced, almost viewless as the air. . . . Everything was fused into the calm, sky, air, water and all . . . this inert blending and brooding of all things seemed gray chaos in conception.

In both "The Death Craft" and *Mardi* the heat grew more "intense" during the calm, and the narrator of both reeled in dizziness from the heat, which relaxed the stays of the vessel in the sketch, and warped the upper planks in the novel. In "The Death Craft" the narrator "prayed the God of the winds to send them over the bosom of the deep" to relieve the frightening calm, but this was a "vain prayer!" In Chapter II of *Mardi*, the narrator remarks, "Vain the idea of idling out the calm . . . succor or sympathy there is none. Penitence for embarking avails not."

In Chapter II of *Typee*, Tommo "tried to shake off the spell" of the "general languor" of a calm. "The dirge-like swell of the Pacific came rolling along . . . a shapeless monster of the deep, floating on the surface . . . [and] the most impressive feature of the scene was the almost unbroken silence that reigned over the sky and water."

"Toward noon a dead calm" arrived in Chapter XX of *Omoo*, and a calm is twice associated with a calamity in *Moby Dick*. In Chapter LXXXVII Ishmael remarks that they were "now in that enchanted calm which they say lurks in the heart of every commotion." In Chapter CXIV he remarks:

Would to God that these blessed calms would last. But the mingled, mingling threads of life are woven by warp and woof: calms crossed by storms, a storm for every calm.

The threatening and evil connotations of a calm at sea are mentioned at least five times in *White Jacket*. In Chapter XXVI White Jacket remarks that "especially terrifying" was the "treacherous calm preceeding" a storm at night. It was during a calm in Chapter

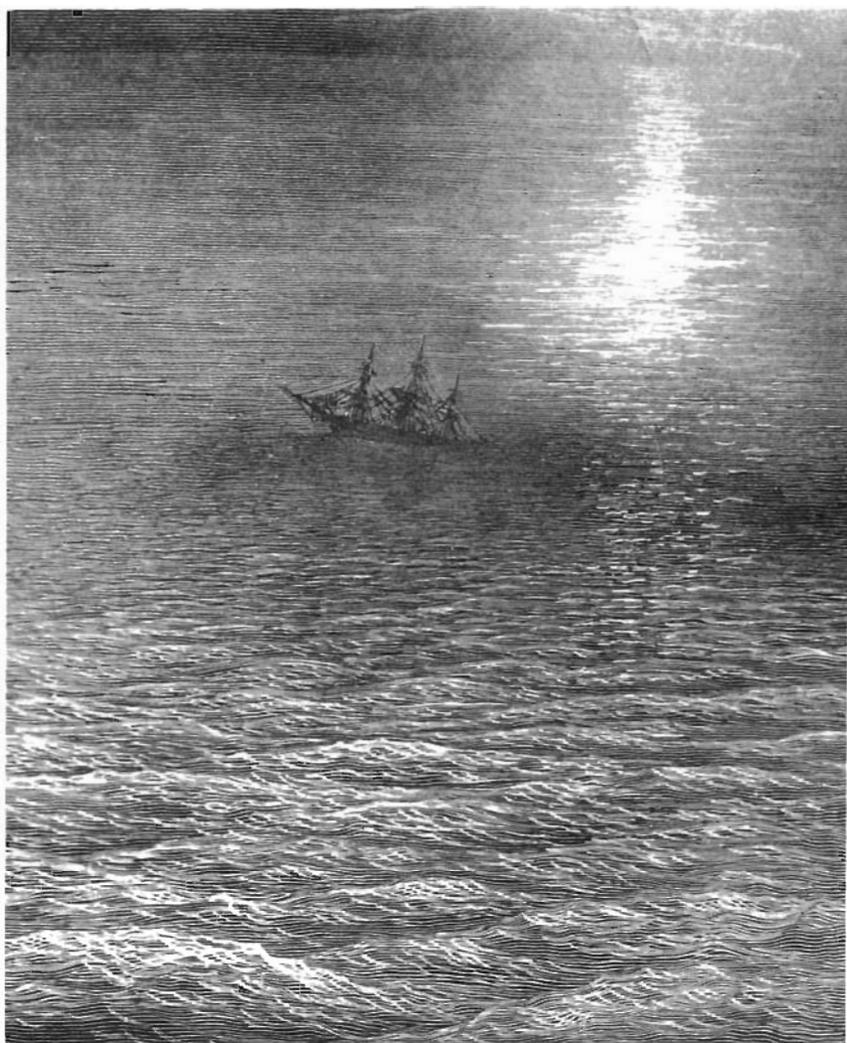


Illustration by Gustave Dore, 1880s, from S. T. Coleridge, Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

LXXVII that a man dies in “sick-bay,” his death hastened by the “intense” heat: “Had it only been a gale instead of a calm . . . a serene, passive foe—unresisting and irresistible . . . unconquered to the last.” Three chapters later, the sailor, Shenley, finally dies when “the heat of the night calm was intense.” The ship’s bell tolled through the calm the man’s moment of death:

Poor Shenley! thought I, that sounds like your knell! and here you lie becalmed, in the last calm of all!”

In the final chapter, White Jacket recalls all the trials and suffering the sailors had endured during the now concluded voyage, one of them being “tranced in the last calm.” During that terrifying calm, “the heat was excessive; the sun drew the tar from the seams of the ship.” During the calm in “The Death Craft,” similarly “the heat grew more intense; drops of tar fell heavily from the rigging, the pitch oozed slowly forth from the seams of the ship.”

The ghost ship, the central image of the sketch, is a staple of marine legend, of which Melville seems to have been particularly fond. Twice in *Redburn* (1849), a novel based to a great degree on Melville’s experiences during his first sea voyage, which ended only a few weeks before “The Death Craft” appeared in print, are ghost ships encountered. First, in Chapter XIX, the *Highlander* is brushed by a “strange ship,” which “shot off into the darkness” after the near collision. “No doubt many ships,” *Redburn* remarks, “that are never heard of . . . mutually destroy each other; and like fighting elks, sink down into the ocean, with their antlers locked in death.” In Chapter XXII, the *Highlander* passes the floating wreck of a “dismantled water-logged schooner, a most dismal sight, that must have been drifting about for several weeks.” Bodies of three sailors, “dead a long time,” were found lashed to the taffrail. “Full of the awful interest of the scene” (much like the narrator, “faint with terror and despair” upon a close look at the “Death Craft”) Wellingborough *Redburn* was “amazed and shocked” at his Captain and fellow sailors’ indifference to the dead. The *Highlander* sailed away, leaving the schooner, “a garden spot for barnacles, and a playhouse for the sharks.” The schooner had apparently been a “New Brunswick lumberman,” one of its most striking features being “the foremast . . . snapt off [near] its base, the shattered and splintered remnant looking like the stump of a pine tree in the woods.” To save the narrator’s vessel from sinking from its collision with the “Death Craft,” an aged seaman took an axe to the “lofty mast, yielding like some lofty hemlock to the woodsman . . .”

A deadly ghost ship is likewise described in Melville's poem "The Aeolian Harp":

It has drifted, waterlogged
Till by trailing weeds beclugged;
Drifted, drifted, day by day
Pilotless on pathless way.
It has drifted till each plank
Is oozy as the oyster bank;
Drifted, drifted, night by night
Craft that never shows a light:
Nor ever, to prevent worse knell,
Tolls in fog the warning bell.
For collision never shrinking,
Drive what may through darksome smother;
Saturate, but never sinking,
Fatal only to the *other!*

The unspeakable horror of confronting a ghost ship at sea ("Well the harp of Ariel wails/ thoughts that tongue can tell no word of!") brings to mind the narrator's inability to speak when asked the whereabouts of the Mate in "The Death Craft." The "angry howl" of the wind which accompanied the gale which followed the appearance of the "Death Craft" is not unlike the wail of the wind passing through the "Aeolian Harp":

Stirred by fitful gales from sea:
Skrieking up in mad crescendo—

In Chapter 4 of *Typee*, Tommo remarks he had heard of a whaler named ironically, *The Perseverance*, "which after many years' absence was given up for lost," and resembled a ghost ship even though it was manned by "some twenty . . . old salts, who just managed to hobble about deck." "Her hull was encrusted with barnacles" like the "Death Craft" ("covered with barnacles, the formation of years"), and "remembrance of this vessel always haunted" the seeker-narrator, Tommo.

The brigantine boarded in Chapter XX of *Mardi* possesses numerous qualities of a ghost ship; that there were spirits on board seemed "a dead certainty." The sinking *Pequod* in Chapter CXXV of *Moby Dick* is declared by Ahab to be a "hearse," while in "Benito Cereno" the *San Dominick's* "hearse-like roll of the hull" caught the narrator's attention upon the still, gray sea. Later, when she is taken over by the Blacks, who are unable to steer her, the *San Dominick* gains a ghost-like appearance:

With creaking masts she came heaving round to the wind; the prow slowly swinging into view of the boats, its skeleton gleaming in the horizontal moonlight, and casting a gigantic ribbed skeleton upon the water. One arm of the ghost seemed beckoning the whites to avenge it.

In Chapter LI of *Moby Dick*, the sea ravens “deemed our ship some drifting, uninhabited craft; a thing appointed to desolation.” The ghost ship provided Melville with a complex and interesting metaphor; it became more than a mere device to incite feelings of horror. While the ship is technically “dead,” it is given life by the sea which carries it along to potential collisions, which may in turn bring death to manned vessels.

“The Death Craft” contains the image of the ship as a horse: “As docile as the managed steed she swerved aside, and once more sent the spray heaving from her bows.” A similar image is found in Chapter CXIV of *Moby Dick*, a “distant ship, revealing only the tops of her masts, seems struggling forward . . . through the tall grass of a rolling prairie: as when the western emigrants’ horses only show their erected ears, while their hidden bodies widely wade through the amazing verdure.”

Melville’s use of exclamation in “The Death Craft” (“Great God! There she lay . . . See! See! THE DEATH CRAFT!. . . Blast my vision, Oh God! Blast it ere I rave.”) typifies the powerful ejaculations of speech found in later works:

“Six months at sea!” (*Typee*)

“We are off!” (*Mardi*)

“Call me Ishmael!” “Blast the boat! Let it go!” “Great God! but for one single instant, show thyself!” (*Moby Dick*)

“Confusion seize the Greek!” “Great God, she was dumb! DUMB AND DEAF!” (“Fragments from a Writing Desk,” No. 1.)

“Harry Bolton! it was even he!” (*Redburn*)

The mesmeric glance of the “ghastly appendage on the jib-boom” and the “glazed eye” of the dead helmsman of the “Death Craft” remind one immediately of the fiery glance of the “Andalusian eyes” of the enchantress in the second “Fragment from a Writing Desk.” The image is repeated four times in *Redburn*. The eyes of the “living corpse” in Chapter XLVIII were “open and fixed,” and in Chapter XXII the eyes of Jackson “seemed to kindle more and more, as if he were going to die out at last, and leave them burning like tapers before a corpse.” Later, in Chapter LV the “snaky eyes” of the dying Jackson “rolled in red sockets,” reminiscent of how the narrator’s eyes in the “Death Craft” “felt as though coals of fire were in their sockets.” In Chapter LIX, the “blue hollows” of Jackson’s eyes “were like vaults full of snakes . . . he looked like a man raised from the dead.”

In Chapter CXXX of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael remarks “there lurked a something in . . . [Ahab’s] eyes, which it was hardly sufferable for

feeble souls to see." The eyes of the Cosmopolitan held a strange "power of persuasive fascination" in Chapter XLII of *The Confidence Man*. In Chapter XIX of *Billy Budd*, Claggart's eyes had a "look such as might have been seen that of the spokesman of the envious children of Jacob deceptively imposing upon the troubled patriarch of the blood-dyed coat of young Joseph." In Chapter CXXIV of *Moby Dick*, the "distended eye" of the dead Parsee "turned full on old Ahab." In Chapter LXXXIX of *White Jacket*, the narrator enters the "Hospital" to visit the sick, "and as I advanced, some of them rolled upon me their, sleepless, silent, tormented eyes."

The Mate's wild leap into the sea in "The Death Craft" brings to mind not only Pip's memorable leap into the sea in *Moby Dick*, but also *White Jacket's* equally memorable plunge, and finally "the shaking man who jumped over the bows" in Chapter X of *Redburn*. All three plunges into the sea become more than important symbolic events for Melville, despite the fact that a fall overboard was not an uncommon occurrence. In "The Death Craft," the Mate's wild leap leaves such a vivid impression on the narrator's mind (much like young Wellingborough *Redburn's*) that it "even now haunts" him as he recalls the episode.

Melville's use of "ghastly whiteness" in *Moby Dick* to symbolize fear, corruption, inscrutability and death is universally known; the entire Chapter XLII of that work is devoted, in fact, to explaining "The Whiteness of the Whale." Five references to such ghastly whiteness are found in "The Death Craft," written a decade earlier. Herman may have seized upon this metaphor from the published legend which formed the basis for *Moby Dick*, the story "Mocha Dick: or the White Whale of the Pacific," which appeared in *The Knickerbocker* magazine in May of 1839, when Melville was still at home in Lansingburgh:

As he drew near, with his long curved back looming occasionally above the surface of the billows, we perceived that it was *white as the surf around him*; and the men stared aghast at each other, as they uttered in a suppressed tone, the terrible name of MOCHA DICK!¹⁷

We first notice the horrific connotation of whiteness in "The Death Craft" in the flapping sails, whose "snowy whiteness dazzled [the] eyes" of the narrator. The light canvas "stun'-sails" in Chapter XIII of *Redburn* present a similar appearance when young *Redburn* looks aloft:

spread . . . away out beyond the ends of the yards, where they overhang the wide water, like the wings of a great bird.

This image brings to mind the ghost-like function of the white-winged albatross in *Moby Dick*. In Chapter LXXIV of *White Jacket*, the “immense area of snow-white canvas sliding along the sea was indeed a magnificent spectacle.”

The image of the skeleton hanging from the yard-arm of the “Death Craft” is equally horrific, “whiter than polished ivory and glistening in the fierce rays of the sun.” Each “chalky” portion of the skeleton seemed “beckoning” the narrator toward it, to be then held in the clutches of its “wild embrace.” In “Benito Cereno” the old wreck of the *San Dominick’s* long boat is described as “warped as a camel’s skeleton in the desert, and almost as bleached.” When the derelict *San Dominick* first appears in that work, it looks as if it were “launched . . . from Ezekiel’s Valley of Dry Bones”; the Biblical reference recalls a desert full of skeletons lying in the hot sun.

In Chapter LII of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael notices the “spectral appearance” of the ship *Goney* (a name synonymous with albatross): “This craft was bleached like the skeleton of a stranded walrus.” In Chapter LXX of *White Jacket* the frigate is said to “have laid her broken bones upon the Antarctic shores. . . .” In Chapter CII, amid the green verdant foliage, the “great, white . . . skeleton” of a beached sperm whale stands out against the darker background.

The “milk white crest tossed high in the air” which devoured some of the crew of the “Death Craft” brings to mind the terrifying appearance of the white whale, “a hump like a snow hill” rising from the sea, in Chapter CXXXIII of *Moby Dick*, and the description by J.R. Reynolds of “Mocha Dick” quoted beforehand. The narrator’s vessel in “The Death Craft” would “have gone to fill the rapacious maw of the deep,” much like being swallowed by the Leviathan white whale, if it had not been instantly righted from a precarious vertical position. In “The Death Craft” the “dying wretches” who were engulfed by the wave with the “milk white crest . . . fed the finny tribes.” Twice in *Mardi*, Melville repeats this phrase. In Chapter XIII, the deadly sharks (“Killers and Thrashers”) are “the most spirited and spunky of the finny tribes,” and in Chapter XXXVIII he again mentions “the larger varieties of the finny tribes.”

When asked the fate of the drowned Mate in “The Death Craft,” the narrator, “with preternatural effort” pointed to the “foaming surface of the deep.” Foam is clearly associated with the horrific connotations of whiteness in Melville’s writing. In Chapter XXXVI of *Mardi*, when a storm “seemed about to overtake” the ship

... the noiseless cloud stole on; its advancing shadow lowering over a distinct and prominent milk-white crest upon the surface of the ocean. But now this line of surging foam came rolling down upon us like a white charge of cavalry . . .

In the same work, Melville mentions also "foam white, breaking billows" (Chapter CLXVIII) and the sea's "margin frothy white with foam." (Chapter CLXX) In Chapter LIV of *Moby Dick*, Radney of the *Town Ho* was swept "through a blinding foam that blent two whitenesses together" before being swallowed by Moby Dick.

The narrator of "The Death Craft" fits into the Melville character, the "young seeker," whose prototypes include Tommo, Redburn, White Jacket, Taji and Ishmael.¹⁸ "The Death Craft" is signed "Harry the Reefer," a name suggesting a rover or beachcomber, as Herman's friend Hiram Hawkins had styled himself in one of his letters to home:

Now, I being one of that class of individuals who are said always to be open for "freight or charter," which . . . means lacking steadiness of purpose, and possessing a roving disposition, ready to take up every "chimera" where chances bid fair to win . . .¹⁹

Melville was clearly drawn to this character in his fiction, in fact "Harry the Reefer" may be synonymous with Harry Bolton in *Redburn*. Dr. Long Ghost in *Omoo* and the roving narrator of *Typee* are also manifestations of this type. How much more appropriate a *nom de plume* for an adventuresome young sailor and author than "L.A.V.," the bloodless pseudonym Melville had chosen for his two "Fragments" a few months earlier. "The Death Craft" clearly demonstrates how Herman Melville's first sea voyage had left an indelible mark on his literary career.

William Lamb, commenting in 1840 on the two years since he first "hoisted the sail of the *Democratic Press*," thanked the "few literary friends who have favored us with the pencillings of their thoughts." "Original pieces," he added, "add much interest to the pages of a weekly periodical. They are indeed, portraits of the times in which we live, and should be encouraged. They are beneficial to the writer, the present and future reader . . . and [it is] gratifying to see one's own thoughts in print."²⁰ Was William Lamb thinking of Herman Melville, who had "tendered a willing pen" for the local editor, to "ramble in the fields of imagination" and enter the world of Gothic fiction?□

The Death Craft

A calm prevailed over the waters. The ocean lay gently heaving in long, regular undulations like the bosom of Beauty in slumber. Pouring forth a heat only known in torrid climes, the sun rode the firmament like some fiery messenger of ill. No cloud disturbed the serenity of the heavens, which, of the palest blue, seemed withered of their brilliancy by the scorching influence of his rays. A silence, nowhere to be experienced but at sea, and which seemed preliminary to some horrible convulsion of nature, hushed the universal waste.

I stood upon our ship's forecandle. The heavy stillness lay upon my soul with the weight of death. I gazed aloft; the sails hung idly from the yards, ever and anon flapping their broad surfaces against the masts. Their snowy whiteness dazzled my eyes.

The heat grew more intense; drops of tar fell heavily from the rigging; the pitch oozed slowly forth from the seams of the ship, the stays relaxed; and the planks under my feet were like glowing bricks.

I cast my eyes over the deck, it was deserted. The officers had retired into the cuddy, and the crew, worn out with the busy watches of the preceeding night, were slumbering below.

My senses ached; a sharp ringing sound was in my ears—my eyes felt as though coals of fire were in their sockets—vivid lightnings seemed darting through my veins—a feeling of unutterable misery was upon me. I lifted up my hands and prayed the God of the Winds to send them over the bosom of the deep; Vain prayer! The sound of my voice pierced my brain, and reeling for a moment in agony, I sunk upon the deck.

I recovered and, rising with difficulty, tottered towards the cabin; as I passed under the helm, my eyes fell upon the helmsman lying athwart-ships abaft the wheel.—The glazed eye, the distended

jaw, the clammy hand were not enough to assure my stupified senses. I stooped over the body—Oh God! It exhaled the odour of the dead—and there, banqueting on the putrifying corpse, were the crawling denizens of the tomb! I watched their loathsome motions; the spell was upon me—I could not shut out the horrid vision: I saw then devour, Oh God! how greedily, their human meal!

A heavy hand was laid upon my shoulder—a loud laugh rung in my ear, it was the Mate. "See, see!"—"THE DEATH CRAFT!" He sprang away from me with one giant bound, and with a long long shriek, that even now haunts me, wildly flung himself into the sea.

Great God! there she lay, covered with barnacles, the formation of years—her sails unbent—a blood-red flag streaming from her mast-head—at her jib-boom-end dangling suspended by its long, dark hair, a human head covered with conulated gore and firmly gripping, between its teeth a rusty cutlass! Her yards were painted black, and at each of her arms hung dangling a human skeleton, whiter than polished ivory and glistening in the fierce rays of the sun!

I shrieked aloud: "Blast—blast my vision, Oh God! Blast it ere I rave;"—I buried my face in my hands—I pressed them wildly against my eyes;—for a moment I was calm—I had been wandering—it was some awful dream. I looked—the ghastly appendage at the jib-boom seemed fixing its ghastly eyeballs on me—each chalky remnant of mortality seemed beckoning me toward it! I fancied them clutching me in their wild embrace—I saw them begin their infernal orgies;—the flesh crisped upon my fingers, my heart grew icy cold, and faint with terror and despair, I lay prostrate on the deck.

How long that trance endured, I know not; but at length I revived. The wind howled angry around me; the thunder

boomed over the surface of the deep; the rain fell in torrents, and the lightning, as it flashed along the sky, showed the full horrors of the storm. Wave after wave came, thundering against the ship's counter over which I lay, and flung themselves in showering seas over our devoted barque. Sailors were continually hurrying by me; in vain I implored them not to carry me below, they heard me not. Some were aloft taking in sail—four were on the main-top-gallant-yard-arm—a squall quick as lightning struck the vessel, took her all aback, whipping the canvass into ribbands, and with a loud crash sending overboard the main-mast. I heard the shrieks of those dying wretches, saw them clinging for a moment to the spar, then struggling for an instant with the waters, when an enormous wave bounding towards them, with its milk-white crest tossed high in the air, obscured them from my view. They were seen no more; they fed the finny tribes.

The ship with her hull high out of the water, her bowsprit almost perpendicular, and her taffrail wholly immersed in the sea, drove for a moment stern-foremost through the waters, when the wind shifting in an instant to the starboard quarter she made a tremendous lurch to port and lay trembling on her beam-ends. That moment decided our fate.

"Keep her before the wind," thundered the Captain.

"Aye, aye, Sir!"

And docile as the managed steed she swerved aside, and once more sent the spray heaving from her bows! 'Twas an awful hour. Had the ship hesitated a second—aye, the fraction of one, in obeying her helm she would have gone to fill the rapacious maw of the deep. As it was, with her larboard side encumbered with the wreck of the mainmast, her coursers rent into a thousand tatters, her sheers and clew lines flying in the wind which ran whistling and roaring through

her rigging, she seemed rushing forward to swift destruction.

I looked forward; in the chains were stationed men standing by to part the landyards; while with axe uplifted stood an aged seaman prepared at an instant's warning to cut away the foremast.

"Cut away!" vociferated the skipper. The axe descended with the speed of thought—and shroud sprang violently up, till the lofty mast, yielding like some lofty hemlock to the woodsman, fell heavily by the board.—The ship eased still driving with fearful velocity before the wind." Where's the Mate?" hoarsely inquired the Captain. No one answered, no one knew, but *me*. At that moment I lay clinging to one of the spare yards that were lashed around the deck. With a preternatural effort, I raised myself, and pointing to the foaming surface of the deep, I shrieked—"There—there!" The frightful apparition I had witnessed now flashed across my mind, and once more with the laugh of wild delirium I rolled upon the deck.

A gentle breeze lifted the locks from my brow; a delicious sensation thrilled through my veins; my eyes opened—the glorious main lay expanding before me, bright and beautiful and blue! I strove to speak: a rosy finger was laid upon my lips—a form as of an angel hovered over me. I yielded to the sweet injunction; a delightful languor stole over my senses; visions of heavenly beauty danced around me, and I peacefully slumbered.

Again I awoke; my God! did I dream? Was this my own fair room? Were these the scenes of my youth? No, no! They were far away across the bounding deep! The horrors I had witnessed had distracted my brain; I closed my eyes; I tried to regain my thoughts, to recollect myself. Once more the same sweet objects were before me; two lovely eyes were upon me, and the fond young girl whom twelve months ago, I had left a disconsolate bride, lay weeping in my arms!

—Harry The Reefer

Notes

- ¹ Allan Melville's Journal, 1838, cited in Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log* (NY:1951), vol. 1, p. 79.
- ² This work is usually listed under the name of its co-author, Anna M. Redfield.
- ³ William H. Gilman, *Melville's Early Life and Redburn* (NY: 1951), pp. 99–100.
- ⁴ Henry B. Nason, Ed., *Biographical Records of the Officers and Graduates of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute* (Troy: 1887), pp. 236–7.
- ⁵ William H. Gilman and Merrell R. Davis, *The Letters of Herman Melville* (New Haven: 1960), pp. 61–3.
- ⁶ *Lansingburgh Gazette*, March 14, 1850.
- ⁷ Melville's Journal, Oct. 14, 1849, cited in Leyda, vol. 1, p. 321. This portrait now hangs in the Berkshire Atheneum, Pittsfield, Mass.
- ⁸ *Democratic Press (and Lansingburgh Advertiser)*, April 20, 1839.
- ⁹ *Democratic Press*, May 18, 1839.
- ¹⁰ Gilman, pp. 111–120.
- ¹¹ Gilman, p. 264.
- ¹² Gilman, p. 108.
- ¹³ Leyda, vol. 1, pp. 97–8.
- ¹⁴ Gilman, p. 327.
- ¹⁵ Leon Howard, *Herman Melville, a Biography* (Berkeley: 1951), p. 29.
- ¹⁶ Harold Scudder, "Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Captain Delano's Voyages," *PMLA*, 1928, pp. 530–2.
- ¹⁷ J.N. Reynolds, "MOCHA DICK: or the White Whale of the Pacific: a Leaf from a Manuscript Journal," *Knickerbocker*, May 1839, p. 383.
- ¹⁸ James E. Miller Jr., *A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville* (NY: 1962), pp. 6–9.
- ¹⁹ Letter to his brother, Henry Hawkins, April 11, 1851, reprinted in *Lansingburgh Gazette*, June 17, 1851.
- ²⁰ *Democratic Press*, Jan. 4, 1840.