

# THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY REVIEW

*A Journal of Regional Studies*

**MARIST**

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*The Hudson River Valley Review*  
(ISSN 1546-3486) is published twice  
a year by the Hudson River Valley  
Institute at Marist College.

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Post: The Hudson River Valley Review  
c/o Hudson River Valley Institute  
Marist College, 3399 North Road,  
Poughkeepsie, NY 12601-1387

Subscription: The annual subscription rate is \$20 a year (2 issues), \$35 for two years (4 issues). A one-year institutional subscription is \$30. Subscribers are urged to inform us promptly of a change of address.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Hudson River Valley Institute, Marist College, 3399 North Road, Poughkeepsie, NY 12601-1387

## From the Editors

Central Park turns 150 this year, and while it is south of our usual territory, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux each has roots and legacies in the Hudson Valley, and their work together in New York City is tied to that. Just as Olmsted and Vaux influenced generations of artists and landscape architects that followed, Washington Irving created a “school” of contemporaries and continues to influence writers today. Our article about America’s first internationally successful author explores the Gothic inspiration—in architecture and literature—he gleaned from Sir Walter Scott. From the 1800s, we jump to twentieth-century architecture and parking lots, in an examination of urban life and renewal in the Village of Catskill. We continue up the river, but back in time and again toward the Gothic, ending with a discussion of an early and unattributed work by Herman Melville. (We also publish this short work in its entirety.)

Our regional forums bookend the valley as well—stretching from Boscobel to the historic sites of Troy. But before we end with our usual book reviews and exploration of new and noteworthy books, we feature a new section, titled “Regional Writing,” which will be dedicated each issue to the publication of one poem from and/or about our region. Our spring selection is entitled “Winter: New York State.”

*Reed Sparling*  
*Christopher Pryslopski*

### Correction:

The image that appeared on page 5 of our Autumn 2007 issue of the *Review* was incorrectly credited. It is from the collections of The New Jersey Historical Society, Newark, New Jersey, a statewide, private, non-profit historical museum, library, and archives dedicated to collecting, preserving, and interpreting the rich and intricate political, social, cultural, and economic history of New Jersey to the broadest possible audiences. Learn more at [www.jerseyhistory.org](http://www.jerseyhistory.org).



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## Call for Essays

*The Hudson River Valley Review* is anxious to consider essays on all aspects of the Hudson Valley—its intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural history, its prehistory, architecture, literature, art, and music—as well as essays on the ideas and ideologies of regionalism itself. All articles in *The Hudson River Valley Review* undergo peer analysis.

## Submission of Essays and Other Materials

HRVR prefers that essays and other written materials be submitted as two double-spaced typescripts, generally no more than thirty pages long with endnotes, along with a computer disk with a clear indication of the operating system, the name and version of the word-processing program, and the names of documents on the disk. Illustrations or photographs that are germane to the writing should accompany the hard copy. Otherwise, the submission of visual materials should be cleared with the editors beforehand. Illustrations and photographs are the responsibility of the authors. No materials will be returned unless a stamped, self-addressed envelope is provided. No responsibility is assumed for their loss. An e-mail address should be included whenever possible.

HRVR will accept materials submitted as an e-mail attachment (*hrvi@marist.edu*) once they have been announced and cleared beforehand.

Since HRVR is interdisciplinary in its approach to the region and to regionalism, it will honor the forms of citation appropriate to a particular discipline, provided these are applied consistently and supply full information. Endnotes rather than footnotes are preferred. In matters of style and form, HRVR follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

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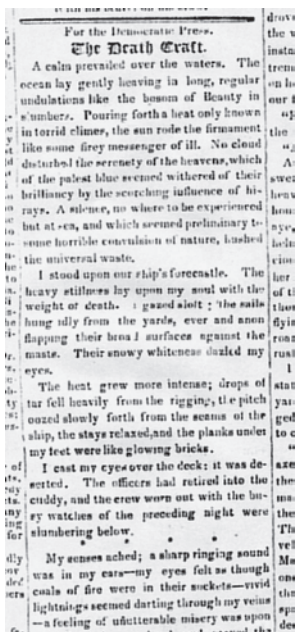
A portrait of Melville as a young man by Asa Twitchell.  
Courtesy of the Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield, Mass.

# "Its Snowy Whiteness Dazzled My Eyes" Melville's Early Attempt at Gothic Horror

Warren F. Broderick

On November 16, 1839, a story entitled "The Death Craft" appeared on the first page of the weekly newspaper, the *Democratic Press (and Lansingburgh Advertiser)*. This somewhat amateurish attempt at achieving Gothic horror would be of little 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 moved to the Village of Lansingburgh, where this newspaper was published, in the spring of 1838. Maria Melville, Herman's mother, left Albany with her eight children to reduce her living expenses. Lansingburgh, a village of some 3,000 inhabitants, is situated ten miles north along the east side of the Hudson River in Rensselaer County, opposite the mouth of the Mohawk River. (Today it is part of the City of Troy.) 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 114<sup>th</sup> Street and First Avenue, respectively.)<sup>1</sup> Directly adjacent to their home was the Richard Hanford shipyard, one of the remaining elements of an active shipbuilding industry and river commerce that had precipitated Lansingburgh's rapid growth since its founding as a planned community in 1771.

In the autumn of 1838, Herman, at the age of nineteen, entered Lansingburgh Academy, one of the better-regarded upstate private schools, 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 completed the following May. His mentor, Principal Ebenezer D. Maltbie (1799-1858), held a particular interest in zoology, later authoring the textbook *Zoological*

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## 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 the ship's forecastle. The heavy stillness lay on 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 preceding 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 unutterably misery was upon me. I lifted my hands and prayed to 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 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 them 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—he sails unbent—a blood-red flag steaming from her mast-head—at her jib-boom-end dangling suspended by its long, dark hair, a human head covered with congelated 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 upon 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 for 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 crew 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 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 across the bounding deep! The horrors I had witnessed had distracted by 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*



View of the Lansingburgh waterfront by John Barber

*Science, or Nature in Living Forms* (1858).<sup>2</sup> The possibility of Rev. Maltbie's tutoring young Melville on the wonderful variety of 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 some Melville biographers and critics in the past.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Herman's contemporaries who were travelers, writers, or publishers deserve a brief mention. Given Melville's circle of relatives and friends in a busy commercial village along the Hudson River, his burgeoning interest in both travel and authorship is not surprising in the least.

Anthony Augustus Peebles (1822-1905), a second cousin of Melville's, traveled abroad, served 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 with much-needed financial assistance. (Maria Melville had removed her family from Albany to Lansingburgh in part because members of the Peebles and Van Schaick families lived there.) Augustus Platt Van Schaick (1822-1847), also a second cousin of Herman's, was another overseas traveler and "author of many figurative pieces, descriptive, religious and humorous."<sup>4</sup> Two of Melville's 1847 letters to Augustus survive; one had accompanied an autographed copy of the newly released novel *Omoo*.<sup>5</sup>

Herman's friends included Hiram R. Hawkins (1827-1866), a shipbuilder's son, adventurer, and sailor who twice mentioned Melville in an 1849 letter written from Honolulu, defending Herman's caustic criticism of the South Sea missionaries.<sup>6</sup> Hawkins lived a block south of the Melvilles on River Street. Peletiah Bliss (1821-1852) was a local newspaper and book publisher, as well as a world traveler. Peletiah's 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. Parmelee (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.

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 local events as well as the arts and belles lettres. Ironically, Lamb's principal business competitor was the publisher of the *Lansingburgh Gazette*, none other than Peletiah Bliss, Herman's rival for the affections of Mary Eleanor Parmelee. In April 1839, Lamb received a communication from Melville, and after requesting an interview with the young writer (who had previously submitted a sample of his writing) he published Herman's first piece of fiction in the weekly



The Melville House, Lansingburgh

newspaper.<sup>8</sup> Herman may already have submitted five poems to his newspaper; these poems, all signed “H,” appeared in the *Democratic Press* between September 1838 and April 1839.<sup>9</sup> Two of them appear to have been written for Mary Eleanor Parmelee.

The first of two “Fragments from a Writing Desk” of Melville’s appeared in the *Democratic Press* on May 4, 1839, signed “L.A.V.” The first 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, 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 a bizarre romantic adventure in pursuit of a mysterious woman, who upon a passionate confrontation is revealed to the hero as being “dumb and deaf!”<sup>10</sup> This piece, as Gilman astutely noted, reveals how already extensive was Melville’s reading.<sup>11</sup>

The “Fragments” were discovered among Melville’s papers in 1919 by Raymond Weaver.<sup>12</sup> They bear the words “by Herman Melville” in faded ink that was later proven to be from the pen of Herman’s wife. There is no sound reason to doubt Melville’s authorship. “Although the sketches are scarcely immortal literature,” Gilman commented, “the mere fact that they were published was an achievement for Melville.”<sup>13</sup> 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 vivid recollections of the beauty and cruelty of life at sea that ten years later would form the basis for his novel *Redburn*, very likely a highly autobiographical work. The poverty that Herman witnessed in Great Britain as well as the harsh treatment received by sailors no doubt added to his growing sense of cynicism and disillusionment.<sup>14</sup>

Melville apparently soon turned to synthesizing his fresh maritime experiences with his desire to compose Gothic fiction upon his return. “The Death Craft” was discovered by one of the three Melville biographers and critics—Jay Leyda, William Gilman, or Leon Howard. Each conducted extensive research on Melville during the late 1940s. Which of them actually “discovered” it is not known for certain. Once the “Fragments” had been positively documented as being from Melville’s hand, based on the marginal annotation made by his widow, it seems logical that scholars of this stature would search the local newspapers for other possible contributions.

Leyda reproduced the sketch in part in his *Melville Log*, indicating the probability that Melville was the author.<sup>15</sup> Gilman stated that he felt it “possible

but unlikely” that Melville had composed the piece, labeling it “full of Gothic horror, unreal description, and sticky romance.” But Gilman should have seen that “The Death Craft” was no more amateurish and melodramatic than the “Fragments,” which had been composed only a few months earlier.<sup>16</sup> Howard, on the other hand, saw “The Death Craft” as containing “a raw exhibition of the sort of fancies Melville was to introduce so skillfully, many years later, into ‘Benito Cereno.’” Howard, however, saw “The Death Craft” as “less personally revealing than the ‘Fragments.’”<sup>17</sup> Harry Levin called it “a youthful sketch, one of Melville’s first publications” that “conjures up a Poe-like vision of horror which reappears in *Redburn* and is transmuted in ‘Benito Cereno.’”<sup>18</sup>

The next Melville scholar to seriously study “The Death Craft” was Martin L. Pops, who treated the piece in some detail in his 1970 study, *The Melville Archetype*. In his typically Freudian but nevertheless rather lively and intuitive study of Melville, Pops recognized the strong similarities between Melville’s later fiction and “The Death Craft” and stated that the latter was “undoubtedly” from Herman’s pen. Pops astutely noted that “certainly the nautical language is deliberately technical, as if, by use of a terminology too complex for ordinary landlubbers to fathom, the pseudonymous author were parading his own seaworthiness—not to say his newly acquired vocabulary.”<sup>19</sup>

The next treatment of “The Death Craft” appeared as a brief analysis I submitted as part of a graduate school degree requirement for the Spring 1973 issue of *The Idol*, a literary magazine published by Union College.<sup>20</sup> I subsequently expanded on the same subject in “‘Their Snowy Whiteness Dazzled My Eyes’: ‘The Death Craft’—Melville’s First Maritime Story” in the March 1986 issue of *The Hudson Valley Regional Review*.<sup>21</sup> My earlier article, which formed the basis for this one, according to Laurie Robertson-Lorant “argues convincingly in favor of the attribution” to Melville.<sup>22</sup>

In volume 1 of *Herman Melville: A Biography*, Hershel Parker takes the position that “there is no reason [“The Death Craft”] could not have been [by Melville] and no reason to think no one else could have written it.” Parker does quote the short story in part and comments that “the prose is conventionally sensational,” no worse than Herman had written in the spring. Robertson-Lorant in *Melville: A Biography* comments that “as crude as it is, ‘The Death Craft’ has some affinities with ‘Benito Cereno,’ a later Melville masterpiece.” She also notices the similarities between “The Death Craft” and the “Fragments.” Edwin Haviland Miller quotes the story in part and asserts without equivocation that it is Melville’s work. More recently, biographer Andrew Delbanco refers to the story as “another bit of Gothic fluff,” while Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock refer to the

story as “a highly stylized piece of marine Gothic” by Melville.<sup>23</sup>

Some critics fail to mention “The Death Craft” at all. One cannot be certain if these scholars were aware of the story but dismissed it, or whether they ever read it at all. The latter supposition might explain its omission from studies such as Max Putzel’s 1962 article, “The Source and Symbols of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno.’”<sup>24</sup> In my opinion, “The Death Craft” clearly represents Melville’s first attempt at translating his sea adventures into fiction. Parts of the story, especially the brilliant first paragraph, read smoothly, while others are choppy and filled with overblown scenes of horror. 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. They foreshadow both the memorable imagery and declamation that 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, everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed foxed, 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,” chapter 1)<sup>25</sup>

The plot of “Benito Cereno” was taken from the 1817 narrative of Captain Amasa Delano. No such beautiful prose can be found in this terse work; Melville’s source for this paragraph was doubtless the first paragraph of “The Death Craft,” written sixteen years earlier.<sup>26</sup> Here Melville introduced the fascinating concept of the “awful calm,” often associated with horrific qualities of grayness, which is found a number of times in his later works. Again in chapter two of “Benito Cereno,” Melville remarked that the *San Dominick*, after narrowly escaping a ship-

wreck off Cape Horn, “for days together . . . had lain tranced without wind; their provisions were low; their water next to none; their lips . . . were baked.” Later in chapter seven, “at noon . . . the grayness of everything” made it seem to be “getting toward dusk.” “The calm was confirmed . . . the leaded ocean seemed laid out . . . its course finished, soul gone, defunct.”

In the interim before “Benito Cereno” had been composed, Melville had twice described the “awful stillness of the calm” in *Mardi* (1849). In chapter two, the narrator devotes three pages to detailing his “witnessing as a landsman the 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 sixteen, 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.

The writer refers to his ship when being pounded by “showering seas” as our “devoted barque.” In chapter 138 of *Mardi*, King Piko’s empire is said to have been “devoted.” In both cases, Melville may be using a now obsolete meaning of the word “devoted,” as synonymous with “fated” or “cursed.”

In both “The Death Craft” and *Mardi*, the heat grew more “intense” during the calm. The narrator of both reeled in dizziness from the heat, which relaxed the stays of the vessel in Melville’s sketch and warped the upper planks of the ship in his 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 two of *Mardi*, the narrator remarks, “Vain the idea of idling out the calm . . . succor or sympathy there is none. Penitence for embarking avails not.”

The phrase “vain prayer” suggests that Melville had this early in life begun to express some disillusionment with the God he had been taught to worship. In its first paragraph, Herman had noted that the “heavens . . . of the palest blue, seemed withered of their brilliancy . . .” Lawrance Thompson devoted an entire chapter in Melville’s *Quarrel with God* to analyzing the “disillusionment” he expressed in *Redburn*. Thompson conjectured, maybe rightly so, that Herman’s first taste of disillusionment with God came as a result of the experiences of his first sea voyage—expressed not only in the autobiographical *Redburn* but also in his first composition written upon his return home, “The Death Craft.”<sup>27</sup>

In chapter two 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 twenty of *Omoo*, and a calm is twice associated with calamity in *Moby Dick*. In chapter eighty-seven, Ishmael remarks that they were “now in that enchanted calm which they say lurks in the heart of every commotion.” In chapter 114, 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 twenty-six, White Jacket remarks that “especially terrifying” was the “treacherous calm preceding” a storm at night. It was during a calm in chapter seventy-seven 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 unrelenting, 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, tolling through the calm, forecast 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 they are encountered in *Redburn*. First, in chapter nineteen, 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 twenty-two, 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. In fact, Jackson referred to this vessel as “a sailor’s coffin.” “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 belogged;  
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,  
Tools 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 horrors 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 that accompanied the gale following 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:  
Shrieking up in mad crescendo—

In Chapter four of *Typee*, Tommo remarks he has heard of a whaler, named ironically, *The Perseverance*, “which after many years’ absence was given up as lost,” and resembled a ghost ship even though it was manned by “some twenty . . . old salts, who managed just 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 twenty of *Mardi* possesses numerous qualities of a ghost ship; that there were spirits on board “seemed a dead certainty.” The sinking *Pequod* in chapter 125 of *Moby Dick* is declared by Ahab to be a “hearse.”

The image of the ghost ship appears in Melville’s later short fiction. In chapter one of “Benito Cereno,” the *San Dominick*’s “hearse-like roll of her hull” caught the narrator’s attention upon the still, gray sea. She appears ghost-like when Don Alexandro Aranda’s skeleton becomes visible, lashed to the bow. And 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.” (“Benito Cereno,” chapter 12)

Even in “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” which has nothing to do with the sea, Bartleby himself is once described as “a bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic.”

In chapter fifty-one 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 that carries it along to potential collisions, which in turn may bring death to manned vessels.

A short story by William Leete Stone, “The Spectre Fire-Ship,” appeared in *The Knickerbocker* in 1834.<sup>28</sup> Melville may have been familiar with this story, seeing that it was published in the same popular periodical where J.N. Reynolds’ “Mocha Dick” story appeared in 1839. In Stone’s story, “the sea was soon lashed to a foam, and ran literally mountains high” just before the ghost ship appeared. The fire ship beckoned the mariners on the *El Dorado* to “come on board” and the ship’s captain, Captain Warner, plunged into the sea issuing “a shrill piercing cry of distress.”

Still other stories of ghost ships had been published in American periodicals that Melville might have read. These include two anonymous pieces; “Skeleton of the Wreck” and “The Demon Ship”, and “The Haunted Brig” by John W. Gould. Better-known ghost ships in literature were Edgar Allan Poe’s “MS Found in a Bottle” and British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. A shipmate of Melville’s, E. Curtiss Hine, composed a poem, “The Haunted Barque,” which was published in 1848.<sup>29</sup> The same year saw the publication of a novel by Hine entitled *Orlando Melville or Victims of the Press Gang*. Interestingly enough, Hine may have been the prototype for Melville’s character, Lensford, the poet in *White Jacket*.<sup>30</sup>

“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.” John M.J. Gretchko noted that the “ship or boat as horse is a common sailor image in Melville’s writings...” Gretchko noted the image had been used in “The Death Craft,” and states that he believes as well that this story was “probably an early Melville tale.”<sup>31</sup> Some examples of this metaphor include the following:

“[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.” (*Moby Dick*, chapter 114)

“...and in a moment the prancing Julia, suddenly arrested in her course, bridled her head like a steed reined in, while the foam flaked under her bows.” (*Omoo*, chapter 23)

“And along they swept; till the three prows neighed to the blast; and pranced on their path, like steeds of Crusaders.” (*Mardi*, chapter 558)

“At last we hoisted the stun’sails up to the top-sail yards; and as soon as the vessel felt them, she gave a sort of bound like a horse, and the breeze blowing more and more, she went plunging along, shaking off the foam from her bows, like foam from a bridle-bit.” (*Redburn*, chapter 66)

Melville’s use of exclamation and hyperbole 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 rhetoric found in later works. Melville scholar Brian Short, in *Cast by Means of Figures* treats Melville’s rhetoric in his second “Fragment,” but does not mention “The Death Craft.”<sup>32</sup> Similar figures of speech used by Melville include the following:

"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*)

Melville's writings clearly show his fascination with the sometimes enchanting, often horrific stare of the human eye. The mesmeric glance of the "ghastly appendage on the jib-boom" and the "glazed eye" of the dead helmsman in "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 forty-eight were "open and fixed," and in chapter twenty-two 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 fifty-five 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 fifty-nine, the "blue hollows" of Jackson's eyes "were like vaults full of snakes... he looked like a man raised from the dead."

In chapter 130 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 forty-two of *The Confidence Man*. In chapter nineteen 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 124 of *Moby Dick*, the "distended eye" of the dead Parsee "turned full on old Ahab." In chapter eighty-nine 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."

In Book III (ii) of *Pierre*, the title character, entranced by the look on a woman's face, first thinks of a Gorgon, but "not by repelling hideousness did it spite him so; but bewilderingly allured him..." Her "face haunted him as some imploring, and beauteous, impassioned ideal Madonna's haunts the... ever-baffled artist." In chapter thirty-eight of *Moby Dick*, Melville again evokes this image by comparing the white whale to a "demigorgon." "Hark! the infernal orgies!" in the

same passage immediately reminds one of the gorgon-head in “The Death Craft” beginning its “infernal orgies” that terrified the narrator.

The Mate’s wild leap into the sea in “The Death Craft” brings to mind not only the memorable plunges of Pip (in *Moby Dick*) and White Jacket but also the “shaking man who jumped over the bows” in chapter ten of *Redburn*. Despite the fact that a fall overboard was not an uncommon occurrence, for Melville these plunges took on a far deeper, metaphysical significance. 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 introduced the concept of “ghastly whiteness” in three metaphors in “The Death Craft,” all which would appear in later works. Melville’s use of “ghastly whiteness” in *Moby Dick* to symbolize fear, corruption, inscrutability and death is universally known; all of chapter sixty-two is devoted to explaining “The Whiteness of the Whale.” The importance of the concept of ghastly whiteness cannot be overemphasized. Paul Brodtkorp, Jr., in *Ishmael’s White World*, concludes after in-depth analysis that whiteness is not merely a portent of other horrors, but it possesses a “dread” and “a ghastly horror” in itself.<sup>33</sup>

Five references to such ghastly whiteness are found in “The Death Craft,” written a decade earlier. Melville may have seized upon this metaphor from the published legend that formed the basis for *Moby Dick*—the story “Mocha Dick: or the White Whale of the Pacific”:

“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!”<sup>34</sup>

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 thirteen 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 seventy-four of *White Jacket*, the “immense area of snow-white canvas sliding along the sea was indeed a magnificent spectacle.” And John Gretchko notes still other places in *Redburn* and *White Jacket* where

Melville likens the dazzling appearance of a flapping sail aloft to the wings of a great white bird.<sup>35</sup>

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 chapter seven of “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 (chapter one), 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. The skeleton of the murdered Don Alexandro Aranda gives the *San Dominick’s* prow, to which it is lashed, a likewise ghastly appearance:

“suddenly revealing, as the bleached hull swung round toward the open ocean, death for the figure-head, in a human skeleton; chalky comment on the chalked words below, ‘Follow your Leader.’” (“Benito Cereno,” chapter 11)

In chapter fifty-two of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael notices the “spectral appearance” of the ship *Goney* (a name synonymous with albatross): “The craft was bleached like the skeleton of a stranded walrus... all her spars and her rigging were like the thick branches of trees furred over with hoar-frost.” In chapter seventy of *White Jacket* the frigate is said to have “laid her broken bones upon the Antarctic shores...” In chapter 102, 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” that 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 133 of *Moby Dick*, and the description by 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 thirteen, the deadly sharks (“Killers and Thrashers”) are “the most spirited and spunky of the finny tribes,” and in chapter thirty-eight 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 thirty-six 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 mentioned also “foam white, breaking billows” (chapter 168) and the sea’s “margin frothy white with foam” (chapter 170). In chapter fifty-four of *Moby Dick*, Radney of the *Town Ho* was swept “through a blinding foam that blent two whiteness together” before being swallowed by Moby Dick.

In the first Chapter of “Benito Cereno,” the *San Dominick*, suddenly in view on top of the swells, “appeared like a white-washed monastery after a thunder-storm, seen perched among some dun cliff of the Pyrenees.” Given Melville’s intense disdain for religious orders and missionaries, and more specifically his various negative references to monks and other clerics in “Benito Cereno,” the image of the bleached monastery is clearly one of ghastly whiteness.

Two Melville prototype characters appear first in “The Death Craft.” The narrator of “The Death Craft” fits into the Melville character of the “Young Seeker” whose prototypes include Tommo, Redburn, White Jacket, Taji, and Ishmael. James E. Miller, Jr., identifies this important persona in *A Reader’s Guide to Herman Melville*.<sup>36</sup> The “Young Seeker” becomes disillusioned when he finds evil lurking, covered by a thin veneer of monetary generosity and piety by “merchants of death and missionaries of sin.” The “Young Seeker” is discussed at some length by Richard Chase: “the young man who enters upon life proudly but forlornly, who suffers much and learns much among the brutal realities” of ship-board life, the teeming city like London, and even strange cultures in a supposed South Sea paradise.<sup>37</sup> Harry Bolton in *Redburn* is another innocent seeker; in fact the name “Harry the Reefer” may have been inspired by Melville’s seamate, who he later named “Harry Bolton.”

The narrator in “The Death Craft,” as Leonard Pops properly notes, “is a standard figure in the Melville oeuvre,” namely “the rover.”<sup>38</sup> “The Death Craft” is signed “Harry the Reefer,” a name suggesting a rover or beachcomber, as Herman’s friend and neighbor, 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. . .”<sup>39</sup>

Melville was clearly drawn to this character in fiction. Dr. Long Ghost in *Omoo* and the roving narrator of *Typee* also are 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 “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.

Newspapers of the day, particularly the large city dailies, featured little news on other pieces of local significance, and even less original literature. William Lamb, however, 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.”<sup>40</sup> 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?

Other anonymous prose pieces attributed to Herman Melville exist. Six of them, less important than “The Death Craft” but nonetheless interesting, are also included in the Northwestern-Newberry definitive edition of *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*.<sup>41</sup> The five poems signed “H” that I discovered published in the *Democratic Press* in 1838 and 1839 will be mentioned in the forthcoming Northwestern-Newberry edition of Melville’s poetry.<sup>42</sup> Laurie Robertson-Lorant noted that “a number of scholars believe that there are still newspaper sketches by Melville waiting to be discovered and identified.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the long, undistinguished narrative poem, *Redburn: or the Schoolmaster of a Morning* (1845), attributed to Melville by Jeanne C. Howes, was identified as the work of a John Carroll. The poem was merely the source of the name Melville chose for the title of his autobiographical novel, in spite of some interesting coincidences, such as Herman having worked briefly as a country schoolmaster.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, other manuscripts or anonymous published works by Melville may be “out there,” waiting to be discovered.

## Endnotes

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27. Lawrance Thompson, *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton, 1952), pp. 73-89.
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# The Hudson River Valley Institute

The Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College is the academic arm of the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area. Its mission is to study and to promote the Hudson River Valley and to provide educational resources for heritage tourists, scholars, elementary school educators, environmental organizations, the business community, and the general public. Its many projects include publication of the *Hudson River Valley Review* and the management of a dynamic digital library and leading regional portal site.

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