White Jacket: A Study of Herman Melville's Literary Technique in Nautical Fiction

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WHITE JACKET: A STUDY OF HERMAN MELVILLE'S
LITERARY TECHNIQUE IN
NAUTICAL FICTION

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
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Henry Alphonso Robertson, Jr. was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, December 29, 1919.

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PREFACE

The writer, a career officer in the United States Navy, has an implied duty and an innate devotion to the Navy, coupled with a love of that era in American literature epitomized in the writings of Herman Melville.

Some of the ideas expressed and some critical analyses are original. The writer perhaps subconsciously equated Herman Melville and White Jacket with his own experiences, observations, and opinions, formulated after sixteen years of active duty in the Navy, both afloat and ashore.

Very special thanks and a deep obligation are due to Mr. William S. Akin, Chicago, Illinois, for his invaluable assistance and kindness in placing his library on Melville at the writer's disposal. The writer also thanks the Library Committee of the Union League Club of Chicago, and its librarian, Miss Marian K. Jones, who have unselfishly made many books and pertinent papers available. The deepest obligation is to the writer's wife who typed this thesis, assisted in the proofreading and editing, and
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The manuscript of *White Jacket* was completed in August, 1849, when Herman Melville was only thirty years of age. In the closing chapter of this chronicle of his cruise in the USS United States, he compared his voyage in a man-of-war to the voyage of life:

We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, never-sinking, world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright; and she is but one craft in a Milky-Way fleet, of which God is the Lord High Admiral. The port we sail from is forever astern. And though far out of sight of land, for ages and ages we continue to sail with sealed orders, and our last destination remains a secret to ourselves and our officers; yet our final haven was predestinated ere we slipped from the stocks at Creation.  

Approaching the noon meridian of his career as a literary artist, with the idea of a saga about a mysterious white whale even then churning the hidden currents of his creative genius,

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Herman Melville was keenly aware of the disturbing patterns of deep frustration and developing disillusionment. For this reason, Melville's personal life, experiences, and observations are inextricably interwoven into the fabric of White Jacket, its subject matter and its deep emotional qualities.

The essence of his personality and the philosophy of his life lay rooted in an illustrious inheritance. He was born August 1, 1819, at No. 6 Pearl Street, New York City, the third child and second son of Maria Gansevoort and Allan Melville. On his mother's side he was a descendant of General Peter Gansevoort, staunch defender of Fort Stanwix during the Revolution, and one of the wealthiest men in Albany, New York. Maria Gansevoort imparted to her son her Yankee reserve and a love for the arts, as well as her compassion for the sufferings of others. She was a gregarious woman, delighting in fashionable social gatherings, and devoted to her children and numerous relatives, with whom she exchanged frequent visits. Young Herman accompanied her on the many trips to Albany and Boston, acquiring early in life a wanderlust that was to take him to almost every part of the globe.

William H. Gilman takes important notice of the spelling of Melville without an s in Melville's Early Life and "Redburn" (New York, 1951), p. 293, and offers the explanation that Herman Melville, his mother, and brothers and sisters added an s at a later date. Wherever mention is made of other members of the family, the name is spelled without an s.
The Melville family also boasted a prominent figure in Herman's grandfather, Major Thomas Melvill. He had participated as one of the "Indians" in the "Boston Tea Party," and was later immortalized in a poem, "The Last Leaf," by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Affectionately known to the citizenry of Boston as "the last of the cocked hats," he held the position of Naval Officer for the port of Boston until 1829, when he was removed as a result of the "Spoils System" during the Jackson administration.

Herman's father, Allan Melvill, a prosperous importer and commission merchant, had a deep-rooted sense of pride in his heritage, and an almost puritanical zest for integrity in public and private affairs. This asceticism, however, was relieved of austerity by his sensibility and passion, which often led him to inconsistencies in his moral precepts. He warned young men against the evils of tobacco and strong drink, but never denied himself these indulgences. He also counselled youth to avoid the perils of borrowing money, yet was continually in debt to family and business associates. In his youth he expressed his concept of the struggle for existence in a letter to Lemuel Shaw, later Herman's father-in-law. He prophetically revealed the wellspring of his son's rebelling spirit when he remarked:

... whatever is enforced upon us by necessity if not perfectly consonant with our feelings, stirs up the rebellious passions, & engenders discontent ...; as we advance from the Cradle to the Tomb our wants & wishes increase, while the
power of gratifying them diminishes, we toil through life in quest of airy phantoms . . . we frequently . . . pursue Variety throughout her sinuous course, but in the latter example we simply follow the dictate of Nature, as she has implanted the love of it in the human breast . . . you may have discovered . . . that my own disposition is highly seasoned with this ingredient. . . .

From his father, Herman Melville inherited a veneration for his forebears, a desire to regenerate mankind, and a love of scholarship. The same spirit was epitomized in this son, who was to devote an entire book to the quest of an "airy phantom," when he wrote Moby Dick.

Allan Melville, writing to his brother-in-law, Peter Gansevoort, on Herman's birth, informed him that "the little Stranger has good lungs, sleeps well & feeds kindily, he is in truth a chopping Boy." The next eleven years were to be the only care-free ones of the young boy's life. He attended the New York Male High School, to which his father was a subscriber; and, at the end of the school term in August, 1826, his father wrote again to Peter Gansevoort, in anticipation of Herman's visit: "I now consign to your especial care & patronage, my beloved Son Herman, an honest hearted double rooted Knickerbocker of the true Albany

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3 Allan Melville to Lemuel Shaw, April 28, 1804, Melville Collection (in the Harvard College Library), quoted in Gilman, p. 9.

stamp, who I trust will do equal honour in due time to his an-
cestry parentage & Kindred—he is very backward in speech & some-
what slow in comprehension, but you will find him as far as he
 understands men & things both solid & profound, & of a docile &
amiable disposition...."5

Two years later Herman had overcome any backwardness of
speech by being acclaimed the best speaker in his class; and in
1830 his father commented: "Herman I think is making more pro-
gress than formerly, & without being a bright Scholar, he main-
tains a respectable standing, & would proceed farther, if he
could be induced to study more—being a most amiable [sic] &
innocent child, I cannot find it in my heart to coerce him,
especially as he seems to have chosen Commerce as a favorite pur-
suit, whose practical activity can well dispense with much book
knowledge."6

Shortly thereafter the serenity of Herman's boyhood was
broken by the bankruptcy of his father's importing firm. Allan
Melvill, of delicate sentiment toward his family and business
associates, lacked the tenacity, acumen, and practicality to

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5Allan Melvill to Peter Gansevoort (New York), August 10,
1826, Melville Collection (in the Harvard College Library),
quoted in Leyda, I, 25.

6Allan Melvill to Thomas Melvill (New York), May 20, 1830,
quoted in Victor Hugo Palsits, ed., Family Correspondence of
Herman Melville, 1830-1904, in the Gansevoort-Lansing Collection
succeed in the ruthless and competitive commercial world of New York. Encumbered with staggering debts, he removed his family to Albany and the beneficence of Peter Gansevoort until he could re-establish himself and support his growing family. He joined a fur company and began to prosper, but his health had been broken by the strain of his New York failure. He died in the winter of 1832, leaving his widow and eight children in a still somewhat precarious financial state.

The uprooting of the family and the move to Albany made Herman Melville conscious early of the uncertainties of life. This was his first readjustment to changing circumstances, in this case an exchange of schools and boyhood chums; but, nevertheless, the lad could not escape the impact of his family's altered financial position. After Allan's death, Gansevoort, the eldest son, and Herman interrupted their education at the Albany Academy, Gansevoort assuming his father's place in the fur factory, and Herman obtaining a position in the New York State Bank. After two years, Herman abruptly left the bank to join his uncle, Thomas Melville, Jr., on his farm at Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

Thomas Melville, at one time a prominent banker in Paris, had lost his fortune and was now eking out a bare existence from the land. Working beside his uncle in the fields engraved on Herman's mind this ironic picture. Later in life he wrote in a memoir of his uncle: "His manners were mild and kindly, with a
faded brocade of old French breeding which—contrasted with the surroundings at the time—impressed me as not a little interesting, nor wholly without a touch of pathos."7 He described him sitting before a late October fire, "gazing into the embers, his face plainly expressing to a sympathetic observer, that his heart . . . carried him far away over the ocean to the gay Boulevards."8 In just such a way, Herman Melville probably sat in his New York home in his later years, musing over a life that was indeed different from that he had planned in his youthful dreams.

The following winter Melville returned to Albany and clerked in Gansevoort's store, resuming his education at the Albany Classical Academy. In spite of the destruction by fire of the factory, the business was flourishing, but the financial panic of 1837 was too widespread, and Gansevoort, like his father, found himself unable to meet the demands of his creditors. Once again Herman had to look elsewhere for employment. He could not return to the farm, for his uncle had decided to move to Galena, Illinois. The only possible alternative was a teaching position at Pittsfield. For one term only he endured the rigors of a country schoolteacher's life, quickly becoming disillusioned with the educational methods of the day, and the confining atmosphere

7Melville MS., NYPL, Gansevoort-Lansing Collection, quoted in Leyda, I, 63.
8Ibid., I, 64.
of his environs. Returning to Albany, he attempted to revive the Philo Logos Debating Society, of which he had formerly been a member. His election to the presidency of the society incurred the enmity of its former president, Charles Van Loon, who accused Melville of calling a meeting and holding an election without his knowledge or consent. A bitter debate ensued through a series of exchanges in The Albany Microscope. Broadside after broadside, challenging the verbosity of both Melville and Van Loon, appeared in the paper, ultimately lapsing into lethargy after both sides had justified their cause.

His mother, facing extreme poverty and angry creditors, moved her growing family to the village of Lansingburgh, New York, where Herman soon joined her and enrolled at the Lansingburgh Academy in a course in surveying and engineering. In spite of the influence of his uncle, Peter Gansevoort, he failed to obtain a position in the Engineering Department of the Erie Canal upon the completion of his studies, and found himself no further advanced in becoming financially independent than before. During this period he occupied himself in various scribblings, one of which, Fragments from a Writing Desk, was published in The Democratic Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser, under the initials, "L.A.V." The satisfaction of seeing his articles in print no doubt helped his self-esteem, but did nothing for his purse. He realized that it was imperative that he lessen the burden of his very existence
on his mother and the younger children. Gansevoort, who had suffered a collapse soon after the fur company failed, was beginning to recover but was still unable to provide for them. Now Allan, a younger brother, had quarreled with his uncle, in whose law firm he was employed, and had been summarily dismissed.

Revealing the situation in a letter to her brother, Mrs. Melville wrote: "Herman has gone out for a few days on foot to see what he can find to do—Gansevoort feels well enough to go about, & will leave for New York in a few days." The next day Gansevoort wrote to his brother, Allan: "Herman has returned from his expedition, without success." 9

On the thirty-first of May, 1839, Gansevoort, now in New York, obtained a berth for Herman aboard the St. Lawrence. As Melville wrote in Redburn: "Sad disappointments in several plans which I had sketched for my future life; the necessity of doing something for myself, united to a naturally roving disposition, had now conspired within me, to send me to sea as a sailor." 10

It was June 5, 1839, when the packet ship, outward bound from New York to Liverpool, slipped her moorings at Pier 14 in

9 Maria Melville to Peter Gansevoort (Lansingburgh, New York), May 23, 1839, NYPL, Gansevoort-Lansing Collection, quoted in Leyda, I, 85.

10 Gansevoort Melville to Allan Melville (Lansingburgh, New York), May 24, 1839, Morewood Archive (Pittsfield, Massachusetts) quoted in Leyda, I, 85.

the East River, and slowly moved past the Battery and Governor's Island into the Narrows. Signed on board as a member of the crew was Herman Melville, who sailed before the mast for the first time. The tide of Melville's life was turned toward open water and endless seas, even as a tug turned the bow of the St. Lawrence toward the broad Atlantic.

What thoughts flashed through Melville's consciousness as the ship stood out to sea can only be surmised. If his description of the youth in Redburn can be applied to his own reaction to the impact of a receding homeland that held so little promise, he turned his back on the harbor and "resolved not to look at the land any more."12

Necessity alone had charted a new course in life for Herman Melville. His first nineteen years had been as the ebb and flow of the tide, governed by alternate prosperity and adversity. He had now reached an impasse in his search for financial independence. The United States was struggling to recover from the financial crisis of 1837, and his brother, Gansevoort, with the responsibility of the family, saw no alternative for Herman but to seek his fortune at sea.

He was not the first of his family to leave the land. His cousins had served aboard whalers and men-of-war, and returned to relate their adventures to the boy. It would have indeed been a

12 Ibid., p. 46.
great occasion, if this voyage were the beginning of the "Grand Tour," which his father had been privileged to enjoy, or even the dangerous life of a whale fisherman or a midshipman in his country's service, but unhappily he was being thrown into the maelstrom of a life at sea on board a merchantman for a cruise of approximately four months. His youth had been permeated with the intensity of the struggle to maintain even a precarious existence. He was overwhelmed by the impenetrable barrier of pride and prestige, and suffocated in an atmosphere where appearances must be observed, even to the embarrassment of a parasitic dependency.

In writing *Redburn*, Melville expressed the feeling of *malaise* that swept over him when he first left the shores of his native land. It was difficult for him to divorce fact from fiction when he wrote of a lad putting out to sea in a strange craft, but these words were apropos of his own life: "I had learned to think much and bitterly before my time; all my young mounting dreams of glory had left me; and at that early age, I was as unambitious as a man of sixty."13

When he arrived in Liverpool, any elation he experienced from a life at sea was soon dispelled by the scenes of misery and horror that he witnessed. Impressionable, he carried those pictures of the seamer side of life long in his memory, and

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13 Ibid., p. 10.
incorporated them into some of the most vivid passages in *Redburn*.

Back in New York, he returned to the teaching profession, this time in a Greenbush, New York, school; but, not paid for his services, he decided to go west to Illinois. Finding no employment there compatible with his background and desires, in December, 1840, he turned back to the sea and the voyage that was to change his life.

The whaler *Acushnet*, of Fairhaven, Massachusetts, was signing on men for a cruise in Pacific waters. Herman Melville signed his Seaman's Protection Paper on December 26, 1840. The crew list of the *Acushnet* gave his age as twenty-one, of dark complexion and brown hair, five feet, nine and one-half inches in height.  

"At last the anchor was up, the sails were set, and off we glided . . . as the short northern day merged into night, we found ourselves almost broad upon the wintry ocean, whose freezing spray casd us in ice, as in polished armor. . . ."  

Thus, as Herman Melville sailed out of Fairhaven harbor on January 3, 1841, he molded his life into an inescapable pattern. As his life was shaped by the sea into a career as author of those adventures he encountered during his long cruise, so his life was the sea itself, with its waves of success, mountainous, then

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rolling, to be followed by a dead calm.

When the *Acushnet* arrived at the Marquesas Islands, Melville and a fellow seaman deserted, making their way into the interior of the island of Nukahiva. After a sojourn of several months among the natives, Melville joined the crew of an Australian whaler, the *Lucy Ann*, that had put into the harbor. He remained on board this ship until it reached Tahiti. A disagreement arose among the crew, and Melville, with other shipmates, was imprisoned there by the British Consul. Escaping to another island, he caught the *Charles & Henry*, a whaler out of Nantucket, and rode her to the Hawaiian Islands. He was discharged there and obtained a job as clerk in Isaac Montgomery's store in Honolulu. In August, 1843, the *USS United States* was riding at anchor in Honolulu harbor, and Melville shipped as an ordinary seaman aboard this man-of-war.

Once on board the *United States*, he revisited the Marquesas and Tahiti; then the ship headed east for Valparaiso, thence to Callao, around the Horn to Rio de Janeiro, and home to Boston. This fourteen-month cruise proved to be his longest and last cruise as a member of a ship's company.

Arriving in Boston the middle of August, 1844, he was discharged on October 14, 1844 and returned to Lansingburgh with no definite plans as to his future employment. Joseph Edward Adams Smith, in his sketch of Melville's life, stated:
He was now 25 years old and, with little disposition to return to the sea, was considering what pursuit in life he should choose. . . . One could not well see to what profession he was adapted. A chance word decided it.

The family had given their interesting wanderer a warm welcome home, and one day one of them, or one of their intimate friends said to him: "Why don't you put in book form that story of your South Sea adventures which we all enjoy so much?" He at once accepted the suggestion. . . .

Melville, himself, considered this the turning point of his life; for in a letter to Hawthorne in 1851, he said: "Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life." 17

The result of this encouragement was Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life. Doubt was cast on the credibility of the tale of his adventures among the natives of Nukahiva, which only served to heighten interest in his work. When Tobias Greene, the shipmate who had deserted the Acushnet along with Melville, came forward with an affidavit as to the book's authenticity, it provoked renewed enthusiasm.

Retaining the same theme, he wrote Omoo, published as a sequel to Typee, which was also well received. Accompanying the proof sheets of Omoo to his London publisher was an explanation

16. Joseph Edward Adams Smith, Herman Melville (Pittsfield, Massachusetts, 1891), quoted in Leyda, I, 188.

17. Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne (Pittsfield), June 1851, Transcript by Julian Hawthorne in Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife, quoted in Leyda, I, 413.
of his purpose in writing two accounts of adventures in the South Seas. "I think you will find it a fitting successor to 'Typee'; inasmuch as the latter book delineates Polynesian [sic] Life in its primitive state—while the new work, represents it, as affected by intercourse with the whites. It also describes the 'man about town' sort of life, led, at the present day, by roving sailors in the Pacific—a kind of thing, which I have never seen described anywhere." 18

With this new work off to his publisher, Melville applied for a post in the Treasury Department at Washington, but when the position was not forthcoming, he returned to Lansingburgh. In August, 1847, he married Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of his father's old friend, Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the State of Massachusetts, to whom Melville had dedicated Typee.

After his marriage he established his home in the city of his birth at 104 Fourth Avenue. Here he began work on another book, Mardi, which was his first attempt at the use of symbolism. In a letter to John Murray in London, he outlined his hopes and ideas for Mardi, saying that although it was another book of the South Seas, "the plan I have pursued in the composition of the book now in hand, clothes the whole subject in new attractions & contains in one cluster all that is romantic, whimsical & poetic

in Polynusia [sic]. It is yet a continuous narrative. I doubt not that—if it makes the hit I mean it to—it will be counted a rather bold aim. . . ."19

He used the voyage symbol for the first time in Mardi. A novice at the art of combining the real with the unreal, or Polynesia as he knew it personally with his conception of the poetical and fanciful in these islands, he was unable to achieve a symmetry of plot and content. The result was an obscure and detached work that evoked little praise.

His "bold aim" at a true romance in Mardi, a refutation to his many critics who had accused him of writing romances under the guise of true adventures, had not met with the response he anticipated; so he was forced to write what the public would read in order to support his family. He now returned to those experiences he knew well in his next two books of the sea.

During the spring and summer of 1849 he devoted himself assiduously to the writing of Redburn and White Jacket. In spite of his admission that "[t]hey are two jobs, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood . . . my only desire for their 'success' (as it is called) springs from my pocket, & not from my heart,"20 they both revealed that

19Herman Melville to John Murray (New York), January 1, 1848, ibid., I, 269.

20Herman Melville to Lemuel Shaw (New York), October 6, 1849, Shaw Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society), quoted in Layda, I, 316.
clarity, compassion, and complexity in his delineation of the
characters that was to reach its apex in Moby Dick. In these two
books, as well as the three that preceded them, Lawrance Thompson
feels that they were elaborate experiments with style, structure,
and form, as Melville sought to discover his own idiom.21

Redburn, Melville described as "a plain, straightforward,
amusing narrative of personal experience—the son of a gentleman
on his first voyage to sea as a sailor—no metaphysics, no conic-
sections, nothing but cakes & ale."22 As Redburn was the story of
his first sea voyage, so White Jacket was that of his last voyage
as a member of the crew. Or, as Geoffrey Stone expresses it: "He
was rather diving into the pork barrel of his nautical experiences
and coming up with the last that was there in point of time."23

Rather than negotiate the sale of his new book by long-
distance, Melville sailed for England with the manuscript of
White Jacket, where he finally succeeded in having it accepted by
Richard Bentley. Its appearance was hailed with a torrent of
praise by reviews in the Knickerbocker Magazine, Southern Literary
Messenger, and the Athenaeum. The Albion commented:

Two extracts from this book, that appeared

21Lawrence Thompson, Melville's Quarrel With God (Princeton, 1952), p. 43.


lately in our columns, will have prepared readers for a work of rare merit; and a perusal of it entire will fully confirm that impression—at least on the minds of those who do not "hate the sea," and have not very dainty nerves. . . .

We entirely agree with Mr. Melville in his condemnation of many of the internal regulations of ships of war. . . . We prefer repeating our unqualified admiration of the touches of humour, pathos, wit, and practical philosophy, with which the lighter portions of White-Jacket are plentifully seasoned. The nautical sketches are unsurpassed, so pleasantly set off as they are, that one almost forgives the writer for taking away so much of the romance of the sea. . . .

White Jacket in its serious portions must draw the attention of serious men. In its lighter pages, it bears those inherent marks of fancy, freshness, and power, which the public has determined to find in every work that bears the name of Herman Melville. 24

Returning home after several months of travel through Europe, Melville began work on his sixth book. When he was half through the writing of Moby Dick, he wrote to Richard Henry Dana:

"[B]ubber is blubber you know; tho' you may get oil out of it, the poetry runs as hard as sap from a frozen maple tree;—& to cook the thing up, one must needs throw in a little fancy, which from the nature of the thing, must be ungainly as the gambols of the whales themselves." 25

Mardi and White Jacket presaged the symbolism in this monu-


25 Herman Melville to Richard Henry Dana (New York), May 1, 1850, Dana Family Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society), quoted in Leyda, I, 374.
mental work of the whaling fleet and the quest of an "airy phantom," in the embodiment of a white whale. His meeting with Nathaniel Hawthorne in the Berkshires during the composition of Moby Dick had a profound influence on Melville, which led him to dedicate the book to the one writer on the American literary scene he most admired.

In a letter to Hawthorne, Melville poured out his frustrations over money matters, as well as his disappointment over the reception of his writings. "Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar," he said. "What 'reputation' H. M. has is horrible. Think of it! To go down to posterity is bad enough, any way; but to go down as a 'man who lived among the cannibals': I . . . I feel that I am now come to the inmost leaf of the bulb, and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould. . . ." The toll exacted by the writing of Moby Dick seemed indeed to have drained him of creative ideas.

Herman Melville's genius, born of repression and disappointment, flowered briefly in the consciousness of a pretentious American literati, but began to fade from indifference of the critics to Moby Dick. Books continued to flow from his pen, but as early as 1856, G. W. Curtis wrote: "I don't think Mel-

26Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne (Pittsfield), June? 1851, Transcript by Julian Hawthorne in Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife, quoted in Leyda, I, 412-413.
Melville's book will sell a great deal, but he is a good name upon your list. He has lost his prestige, -- and I don't believe the Put­nam stories will bring it up. 27 This referred to a request from J. H. Dix on the wisdom of publishing a volume of Melville's stories.

Thwarted by the apathy with which his books were received, Melville sought the consularship of Honolulu or Antwerp, but, in spite of his qualifications, particularly for the former post, and the influence of relatives and friends, both were denied him. He then sailed for Europe, seeking restitution of body as well as spirit. Ill-health had been due as much to his failure to retain his place among the contributors to American literature, as to his years of close application to the career he had chosen. At Liverpool he renewed his friendship with Hawthorne, but the rec­ognition his friend had received from an admiring public, and its subsequent reward of a consulate, must have fostered a resentment in Melville toward that public which had refused him similar re­cognition and obstructed his every attempt to retain his pride and prestige.

On his return to the United States, he began a lecture tour; later he took a sea voyage to San Francisco on his brother's ship Meteor, and tried once more for a government position, finally

accepting the post of Inspector of Customs at the port of New York in 1866.

His life was a struggle for public recognition and acclaim as an author of substance, and a struggle for financial independence as well. "What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot." 28 He had been forced to write for money, yet was never able to live off his writings. When he accepted the position as customs inspector he was compromising with life as he had compromised his art. His inability to sustain the brilliance of his early promise in the literary field propelled his life into the vortex of oblivion. A year before his death he was so little known that Edward Bok wrote: "There are more people to-day who believe Herman Melville dead than there are those who know he is living." 29

If Melville read those words of Bok's, he must have recalled a day in 1870 when he inquired as to the origin of the name of the Gansevoort Hotel in New York. On being told that it was named for a wealthy family who had owned property in the neighborhood, he said: "The dense ignorance of this solemn

28Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne (Pittsfield), June? 1851, Transcript by Julian Hawthorne in Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife, quoted in Leyda, I, 412.

29"Notes on Authors," Publisher's Weekly (November 15, 1890), No. 931, 705.
gentleman,—his knowing nothing of the hero of Fort Stanwix, roused such an indignation in my breast, that disdaining to enlighten his benighted soul, I left the place without further colloquy. Repairing to the philosophic privacy of the District Office, I then moralized upon the instability of human glory and the evanescence of—many other things."  

Herman Melville faced the realities of life bravely, but not without bitterness, yet he remained a romanticist, who still sought the "airy phantom" of a perfect unity and harmony between man and the universe. The log book of his life reveals those tragic tracings of a youth molded by his social background and heritage, fostered by adversity, and nurtured by the seething sea. The sea cast him upon the smooth, bright sands of brilliant achievement, only to sweep him out with the tide into the dark and fathomless depths of obscurity.

In 1849 he wrote Richard Bentley: "[Y]ou know perhaps that there are goodly harvests which ripen late, especially when the grain is remarkably strong."  

The harvest of Melville's genius ripened late and the grain has proved enduring, but his gallant spirit withered into mould from unfulfillment.

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On September 28, 1891, Herman Melville struck soundings at last, and the log book of his life was closed, but he has now reached his final haven as one of the outstanding contributors to American literature.
CHAPTER II

WHITE JACKET: FACT AND FICTION

When Herman Melville wrote White Jacket, it was with a backward glance, for almost five years had elapsed since he stepped ashore from the USS United States, warped to her berth at the Boston Navy Yard. In writing this descriptive narrative of life in a man-of-war, Melville was catering to public taste. The first two books of his adventures in the South Seas, Typoo and Omoo, had been successful, and had established his reputation as a writer of promising dramatic ability, but with the publication of Mardi, his prestige suffered a sharp decline. Melville realized that he could not hope to support his family adequately if he continued to write books that did not have general appeal. Therefore, he abandoned the pedantic, fanciful, affected style which he had developed in Mardi, for a return to his earlier method of writing. The results of this decision were Redburn, which incorporated his experiences on the voyage to Liverpool on board the St. Lawrence, and White Jacket, a stark account of
life on board the United States. "He had combined social protest with fiction and fact in each of his previous books, and in White-Jacket he would help crystallize the national conscience by expressing the general conviction of the dignity of man in his ferocious assault upon flogging in the Navy."  

On his return from Liverpool in 1839, Melville read Richard Henry Dana's Two Years Before the Mast and felt "tied and welded to [its author] by a sort of Siamese link of affectionate sympathy."  

2 He was no doubt recalling the popularity of Dana's work when he searched for a topic which would sustain him from the specter of poverty. Another publication that he found helpful was Life in a Man-of-War, or Scenes in "Old Ironsides" during Her Cruise in the Pacific, by a Fore-Top Man (Henry James Mercier), published in Philadelphia in 1841. In a draft for the preface to White Jacket, Melville wrote: "The writer has to thank the light-hearted author of a book called 'Scenes in old Ironsides,' for recalling to his memory several minute man-of-war technicalities & humorous phrases, that otherwise might have escaped his memory; also, for supplying corroborative, or addi-

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2 Herman Melville to Richard Henry Dana (New York), May 1, 1850, Dana Family Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society), quoted in Jay Leyda, The Melville Log (New York, 1951), I, 374.
tional hints for two or three scenes in the following chap-
ters. . . .”

Melville spent fourteen months on board the United States, but for the purpose of his account of life in the United States Navy from the viewpoint of an ordinary seaman, he chose to shorten the cruise to a period of three months. Into this period, Melville crowded events that not only included actual occurrences during his full fourteen months on board, but events that occurred before he signed on board, events that took place on other ships, and events that were imaginary. Notwithstanding his assertion that he was writing an "impartial account of our man-of-war world; withholding nothing; inventing nothing; nor flattering, nor scandalising any; but meting out to all—commodore and messenger-boy alike—their precise descriptions and deserts," subsequent evidence indicated that Melville intentionally colored and altered his material to give impetus to his narrative. He fused the dramatic elaboration of actual happenings with deliberate invention to give White Jacket its most powerful scenes.

His technique in the art of combining fact and fiction was to adhere closely to authentic and detailed descriptions of the daily routine of the men in the ship, including accurate pictures


of those men with whom he came in daily contact. The verity of his account was highlighted by the interpolation of external events, skillfully linked to the basic framework of his book. The desire to make his man-of-war world live in the eyes of his readers led him to "let nothing slip, however small..." His depiction of the intricacies of life on a man-of-war resulted in one of the most accurate accounts existing today of life in a frigate before the era of steam. In his book Melville posed the questions: "Who knows that this humble narrative may not hereafter prove the history of an obsolete barbarism? Who knows that, when men-of-war shall be no more, White Jacket may not be quoted to show to the people in the Millennium what a man-of-war was?" Through his artistry in portraying general life in the United States Navy, he has bestowed on posterity an unforgettable picture of that life in the eighteen forties.

He evolved White Jacket as autobiographical fiction, not in the strictest sense, but sufficiently so to make it readable without being too didactic in its factual data or too romantic in its fictional episodes. It is "unpretentious reminiscent narrative, vibrating...between the poles of literal autobiography and free fictional improvisation."

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5 Ibid., p. 355.
6 Ibid., p. 355.
Precluding any criticism from former shipmates or his general readers, he shrewdly stated: "The general delineation of naval life has been rendered more true, by allowing some latitude in the mode of treating the particular events falling under the author's personal experience." Later he re-wrote this passage to read: "Nor is it, here at least, laid down, that the slightest occurrence mentioned in the following pages, is, in a matter of fact point of view, true. All that is left to the reader. Let Truth vindicate itself."  

The time span of White Jacket is three months, beginning at Callao, Peru, where the Neversink is riding at anchor in the harbor, until the termination of the cruise at its home port of Norfolk, Virginia. The USS United States becomes the Neversink, its home port is changed from Boston to Norfolk, and the narrator, Melville, becomes "White Jacket."

Writing in retrospect, Melville assumed the role of the all-knowing seaman narrator, whose judgment and analysis of each episode is thereby rendered more definitive. The white canvas jacket, which set him apart from the uniformity of dress worn by the crew of the Neversink, served to accentuate the aloofness of the observer in a community of self-contained individuals exist-

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9 Ibid., I, 317.
ing in the self-sustaining world of the frigate. The incongruity of the jacket accented the incongruity of Ordinary Seaman Melville, born to wealth, but now reduced to the poverty of a communal existence in the crew of a man-of-war.

There is speculation as to the authenticity of the jacket itself. The United States was the flagship of the Pacific Squadron, and it would seem most unlikely that one seaman would be allowed the privilege of nonconformity in dress. Melville explained his lack of the proper clothing as due to the exhaustion of supplies of pea-jackets, but the ship could surely have interchanged supplies, including a much-needed pea-coat, with other ships in the flotilla. Regulations for the Uniform and Dress of the Navy of the United States provided for the proper uniform for officers and men. The Log Book of the United States recorded on December 2, 1843, that two hundred Blue Jackets were received in the Purser’s department at Valparaiso, just six months before leaving for home. However, in a letter to Dana, Melville stated: "You ask me about 'the jacket.' I answer it was a veritable garment—which I suppose is now somewhere at the bottom of the Charles river. I was a great fool, or I should have brought such a remarkable fabric (as it really was, to behold) home with

10 Log Book, USS United States (MS in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.), entry of December 2, 1843.
Rear-Admiral Samuel R. Franklin, who served in the United States as a midshipman, stated in his memoirs: "Occasionally will flash across my memory a maintop-man flitting about the starboard gangway with a white jacket on, but there is not much reality in the picture which it presents to my mind." There is a bare possibility that Rear-Admiral Franklin, writing in 1898, after fifty-five years had elapsed since he and Melville had served in the ship together, did recall the seaman clothed in a white jacket, but the haze of time and the interest White Jacket excited might have provoked his statement.

The device of the white jacket enabled Melville to maintain his own individuality, as well as his feeling of ostracism by the crew and isolation from the mainstream of human associations in the man-of-war. This was tempered with his conscious awareness of the community spirit that prevailed among the crew in this house "turned upside down," as Melville's own pathway through life had been inverted.

11 Herman Melville to Richard Henry Dana (New York), May 1, 1850, Dana Family Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society), quoted in Eleanor Metcalf, Herman Melville: Cycle and Enicyle (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953), p. 69.


13 Melville, White Jacket, p. 95.
Melville refused to divulge the real names of the men he served with on board the United States, saying in a letter to Dana: "I am very loath to do so, because I have never indulged in any ill-will or disrespect for them, personally; & shrink from any thing that approaches to a personal identification of them with characters that were only intended to furnish samples of a tribe--characters, also, which possess some not wholly complimentary traits." Some of the characters, however, are identifiable, notably Jack Chase, the real hero of the book. He was John J. Chase, No. 513 on the Muster Roll of the United States. Melville later made him the central character in Billy Budd, which was unpublished at the time of his death; therefore, Jack Chase never knew of his immortalization in a second book by his fellow shipmate.

The poet Lemsford has been tentatively identified in Jay Leyda's The Melville Log, as Ephraim Curtiss Hine. His poetry composed on board the frigate United States in 1844, and some stanzas written at Callao, Peru, dated July 4, 1843, suggest that

14 Herman Melville to Richard Henry Dana (New York), May 1, 1850, Dana Family Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society), quoted in Leyda, I, 374.
16 Leyda, I, 179-181.
Nine was the shipmate Melville described as "my poor friend the poet."17 Charles Roberts Anderson, however, suggests that George W. Wallace, listed as an ordinary seaman on the ship's Muster Roll,18 was the author of "Songs of the Sirens," which were published dramatically when "Gun No. 20—his literary strong-box—went off with a terrific report."19

In a further effort to disguise the United States, Melville changed her position to the Equator for the Christmas holiday, and to the waters near Cape Horn for the Fourth of July celebration. He deliberately prolonged the ship's stay in Rio harbor to prevent the deterioration of his narrative into a nautical miscellany of routine and discussion of practices common in the naval service. The United States touched briefly at Rio, but the Neversink swung idly at anchor in the "Bay of all Beauties."20 Whenever it was advantageous to change an actual occurrence from its proper place in the cruise to an earlier or later time, Melville had a reason; that reason was to provoke and emphasize conditions among the crew, by connecting the incident with the social evil he wished to pictorialize.

Harrison Robertson, the ship's writer, or, as he was known

17Melville, White Jacket, p. 49.
18Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, p. 367.
19Melville, White Jacket, p. 238.
20Ibid., p. 261.
on board the United States, Captain's Clerk, noted in his copy of White Jacket: "Most of the characters & incidents described are grossly caricatured, or exaggerated." In his capacity he was one of the few men in the ship in a position to know the facts.

An incident of pure invention was the extravagant fable of the hogsheads of port found floating off the port bow of the Navesink. There is no mention in the Log Book of the United States of this jetsam from the deep, nor of Melville's earlier report of the shortage of grog, which was to many of the crew their "prospect in life." The introduction of this scene into the fabric of his narrative enabled Melville to discuss the unquenchable thirst of seamen in general. He stated: "It is hardly to be doubted that the controlling inducement which keeps many men in the Navy is the unbounded confidence they have in the ability of the United States Government to supply them, regularly and unfailingly, with their daily allowance of this beverage." With the discovery of "Some Superior Old 'London Dock' from the Wine-Coolers of Neptune," the drum again sounded the grog call.

The United States was in Callao on the Fourth of July, 1844,

21 Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, p. 395.
22 Melville, White Jacket, p. 66.
23 Ibid., p. 66.
24 Ibid., p. 190.
with no indication from the ship’s records that any theatricals were ever staged on board during this period. Melville, seeking to show the impassable gulf between officers and men, promoted the staging of *The Old Wagon Paid Off* for the celebration of the Fourth at sea. Officers and men alike applauded "Matchless Jack" Chase. Melville commented on his elation at the sight of the officers confessing "a human brotherhood with us, after all, . . ." but noted that it was of fleeting moment, for the officers soon "shipped their quarter-deck faces" again, resuming all the dignity and remoteness of their position.

Rio harbor served as the propitious place for a discussion of shore leave. When the *United States* touched briefly at this port, the crew was not allowed liberty, but for continuity and effect, Melville prolonged the ship’s stay and discussed the method by which different sections of the watch were granted leave. As his main aim was to keep his book "afloat," allowing no divergence from his plan, Melville described only generally the sight of land from the deck of the *Neversink*.

He mentioned that he was one of the shore leave party, but detailed none of the happenings on shore. He hinted that a "few good chapters might be written," but his intention to allow no intrusion from the land remained steadfast. He did succeed in

arousing the sympathy of his readers for a crew, who, after endur-
ing the rigors of rounding Cape Horn, working tirelessly for
days without end, were now to languish within sight of land and
be denied the privilege of setting foot on it. From the deck
the crew watched the officers come and go, and the entertainment
of distinguished guests on board. When Jack Chase approached the
captain for permission to spend twenty-four hours in Rio, Mel-
ville again, as in his description of the holiday theatricals,
lifted Chase from the ranks of the typical seaman to heroic pro-
portions as the daring spokesman for the crew. Thirty-six hours
later his request on behalf of his shipmates was granted, insur-
ing Jack Chase an even nobler spot in the hearts of the men.

Another kind of liberty, that of the wearing of beards, had
been standardized in Regulations for the Uniform and Dress of
the Navy of the United States on February 19, 1841, but Melville
chose to delay this regulation's promulgation until the Neversink
was homeward bound. In changing the date of a regulation in
effect when Melville was on board the United States, he created
the tragi-comic scene of "The Great Massacre of the Beards."
Having little opportunity to show individuality in dress, the
crew cultivated beards and flowing locks of various lengths and
hues, from the hoary whiskers of old Ushant, to the blond tresses
of "Peter the Wild Boy." The enforcement of this regulation
caused consternation among the crew and a near mutiny. Jack
Chase, their acknowledged leader, persuaded the majority of those
who had remained adamant in their refusal to be sheared like sheep, to accede to the razor, but the few stalwarts who still clung to their "homeward-bounders" and "love-curls" were brought before the mast and flogged for their stubbornness. The rest of the crew circumvented the regulation, which provided for a specified length for the hair and beard, by having their faces clean-shaven, a defiance within the regulations, but designed to flaunt the unbending authority of the captain.

Melville's cruise in the United States subjected him to a discipline unknown in his merchantman and whaler days. This standardization of men irritated him, and caused a resentment that he turned into a diatribe against flogging. In relating the arraignment before the mast and the punishment inflicted on the aged seaman Ushant, even though his term of enlistment had expired some months previously, he emphasized the lack of redress for wrongs committed by officers on the crew.

"Nor did Melville forget the traditional method of giving his words authority by the device of Scriptural citation. Here again he sometimes parodied, but often he was in earnest."27 In discussing the order for all sailors to conform to the regulation for the length of hair and beard, he referred to "the theocratical law laid down in the nineteenth chapter and twenty-seventh

verse of Leviticus, where it is expressly ordained, 'Thou shalt not mar the corners of thy beard.'

"With intuitive sympathy," he said, "I feel of my own brown beard while I write, and thank my kind stars that each precious hair is forever beyond the reach of the ruthless barbers of a man-of-war!"

As Melville sat at his desk writing White Jacket, he was not only thankful to be beyond the reach of the barbers, but also beyond the reach of the scourge of the dreaded cat-o'-nine-tails. He devoted several chapters to a polemic against the institution of flogging, vested in the unlimited authority of the ship's captain, who could pass such a sentence on a crewman for even a minor offense. Melville also described his own emotions when he was ordered to the gratings for failing to report to his proper station. His claim that he had never known of this particular station assignment is inconsistent with the routine of the ship and its regulations providing for the utmost in efficiency and operation of each member of a ship's company.

His design in fabricating this episode was merely to give weight to his argument against this degrading practice in the United States Navy. He was saved by the intercession of a marine, Colbrook, and by the corroborations of Jack Chase, from committing a heinous crime. He had sworn never to be disgraced by the lash,

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29 Ibid., p. 446.
and planned to leap overboard, carrying the captain to his death along with him. "The privilege, inborn and inalienable, that every man has, of dying himself, and inflicting death upon another," he said, "was not given to us without a purpose. These are the last resources of an insulted and unendurable existence.

The Log Book of the United States does not carry any notation of Melville ever having been reprimanded or punished during his term of service. Additionally, it is not likely that once he had been brought before the captain, he would have been summarily dismissed without receiving his punishment. It is also inconceivable in the man-of-war world he depicted, that fellow shipmates would have been permitted to speak up in behalf of one of their number. Melville retained his dignity as a seaman and individual here, but produced the desired effect by describing his personal reaction to such ignominy.

Ronald Mason, in a study of White Jacket, says that, although Melville concentrated his universal compassion upon the practice of flogging, the power of the book does not lie wholly in the chapters of reasoned protest. He was preoccupied with these insistent injustices which diverted him from his prime narrative function. Mason also writes:

Granted that the book is not designed as fiction, yet it is sustained patently, even in the heats of

30 Ibid., p. 353.
its special pleading, by the vividness of those scenes in it which are presented in fictional form; Melville's writing assumed its greatest cogency when he gave his poetic and dramatic imagination fullest play. Confined to reason and argument, he was inclined to prose; faced with an incident to symbolise his preoccupation, he transferred his theme instantly into a scene of haunting vitality. This scene would remain in the memory for longer than the admirable introductory thesis, and expressed in a far more valuable and enduring form the profundity of the impact of experience upon the mind and sensibility of this unusual sailor. Of these incidents the scene of White-Jacket's arraignment before the mast on a charge of dereliction of duty and his narrow escape from the lash is perhaps the most important; but others stand out as conspicuously in the memory, and in examining them the chief preoccupations of the book can be traced beneath the apparently complete pervasiveness of the prime sense of injustice. 31

It was the jacket that set him apart from his shipmates, making him an anomalous figure in the eyes of the officers. The scene in which "White Jacket" was summoned to the gratings is the only one in the book where he was singled out by the quarter-deck for individual attention. He mentioned, however, that the singularity of the jacket often caused him to be assigned additional duties.

In order to cut himself loose from the cumbersome, conspicuous jacket, Melville seemed to borrow freely from a similar event recorded by Nathaniel Ames in A Mariner's Sketches, published in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1830. Ames served in the United States from 1824 to 1827, and wrote of his fall from the

top-gallants into the sea. Anderson has pointed out that the similarity of phraseology is too close to be accidental. The differences noted by him between the two accounts are the natural changes that an artist would have made to heighten the dramatic effect. Melville's fall was more thrilling since it began about twice as high up on the mast; his courage in the face of death was more heroic; and his rescue was theatrically delayed while he cut his way out of his White Jacket, which nearly proved to be his shroud. Otherwise the only difference between the two versions is Melville's elaboration of the descriptive passages.

Melville's use of Ames's episode enabled him to divest himself of the jacket, and thus bring his account of the cruise to a close. It was effective writing, for the casting off of the jacket as the ship neared its home port also indicated the ex-coriation of his indignance against the naval service.

His fictional episodes, used primarily to reiterate the abuses and rare privileges which are a part of a man-of-war world, also provide White Jacket with some of its most dramatic and pathetic scenes. He painted a grim picture of surgery in a man-of-war, in a satirical condemnation of the reprehensible treatment given to ill or injured seamen. When a topman was shot attempting to desert, and his wound became infected, Cadwallader Cuticle, Surgeon of the Fleet, summoned his colleagues in the squadron to witness his superb craftsmanship in an

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amputation. While the patient fainted and was revived several
times during Cuticle's dissertation on anatomy, he turned to the
crew, saying: "Don't be alarmed, men, he'll recover presently;
this fainting very generally takes place."\(^{33}\)

At the precise moment when Cuticle was about to apply the
saw, he hesitated and asked the assistant surgeons if they would
like to take over. Then, on seeing the clumsy work of a volun­
teer, he resumed the operation himself. After the patient had
been removed to sick-bay, Cuticle continued his discussion with
the doctors, and invited them to return the next day to receive
further instruction and inspect the severed limb. When he was
informed that the patient had died, with equal suavity he turned
to his associates and said: "The body, also, gentlemen, at ten
precisely. I predicted that the operation might prove fatal;
he was very much run down."\(^{34}\)

Melville detailed this scene in such a graphic and horrifying
manner that it is hard to believe he did not witness a similar
operation, but the records of the United States do not indicate
that of the seamen who died during the voyage, one suffered
such agony before death. This type of surgery was not uncommon
on land as on sea, but the revolting sadism of the ship's doctor
was undoubtedly Melville's way of demonstrating the lack of


\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 333.
qualified doctors in the fleet, and their heartless disregard for human life.

According to Anderson:

Melville certainly owes an inspirational debt, at least, to Smollett's account of his experiences as a surgeon's mate in the British navy, as recorded in Roderick Random (Chapters XXIV-XXXVIII). In the first place, one is struck by the fact that the surgeon's first mate in Smollett's story was named "Cadwallader Morgan." Barring unlikely coincidence, Melville undoubtedly found a suggestion here for the stage name of his chief surgeon "Cadwallader Cuticle." Moreover, the general tone and content of Smollett's complaints against the incompetence, brutality, and negligence of the medical service in the British navy are congenial with Melville's animadversions.

But even though Melville may have taken the cue for his complaints against medical abuses in the navy from Smollett, he had the good sense to tone down his descriptions; for, deplorable as the conditions were in Melville's time, they showed a vast improvement in humaneness of attitude if not in actual skill over the conditions of a century before.

Although Smollett's scene takes a different turn from Melville's, and no actual amputation follows, there is certainly a strong resemblance in the main purport of the two episodes; in both, the arrogance, brutality, and ignorance of the ship's surgeon is held up to ridicule—especially his effort to brow-beat his assistants into submission; in both, there is recognizable the hand of the propagandist, satirizing naval abuses in the hope of bringing about reforms. And Melville's amputation scene, throughout, has a distinct flavor of Smollett's style, with which we know he was acquainted, for he tells us in Omoo that he read his novels with great relish.35

Newton Arvin agrees with Anderson on the similarity of the name and character of the surgeon, and adds that the real feeling in

this scene is one in which "anger at the spectacle of cruelty is
underlain by a still stronger sorrow at the spectacle of evil
generally." 36 Stone reiterates: "Its macabre humor and broad
satire, however, are brought out with an economy of touch and
detail (allowing for the essential grisliness of the thing) that
more than justify the imitation." 37

Melville's technique in combining actual and imaginary events
extended also to those occurrences of which he had first-hand
knowledge. The passage around Cape Horn was lengthened and
elaborated to intensify the seafarer's fear of being broached.
It gave Melville another opportunity to discuss the incompetence
of naval officers in times of peril. When Mad Jack, a junior
lieutenant, countermanded the captain's order to "Hard up the
helm," he was allowed to go unpunished for this act of direct
insubordination. Melville created the scene to invoke the com-
mentary on the number of men serving in the Navy who lacked the
qualifications for command.

Melville used poetic license in his description of the race
between three ships of different nations, by dropping the other
members of the squadron from the race, although they actually
took part in this show of sail. He left the outcome to surmise,
against the ship's log, which showed that the United States did

36 Arvin, Herman Melville, p. 118.
outdistance her competitors. His twisting of the facts in this case served to attack the imperviousness of a ship's captain to the dangers involved in a mere race. The lives of the crew were jeopardized in order to uphold the prestige of the ship.

In an analysis of this episode, Anderson states:

It will be seen that Melville makes three separate transformations of his material, each with a distinctive dramatic appeal. First of all, he endows the race with an international character, reducing the original five contestants—the American squadron plus a French corvette which early dropped out of the race—to three, each representing a different nation. . . . The next change was for the sake of the excitement of the race itself. In reality, the United States sprang into a lead early in the race and maintained it throughout; but Melville heightens the suspense by having darkness and fog close in on the scene just as the "Neversink," though still in the rear, is getting into true form and crowding all sail on her rivals. He seems to be guilty of a breach of dramatic technique when on the next day he sacrifices this gain in suspense by leaving the outcome of the race in disappointing uncertainty. But this was undoubtedly deliberate, for Melville's interest, and the reader's has now shifted from the race itself to anti-naval propaganda.

This third change is pure invention; for the seamen are made to stand out on deck through a drenching night with twenty-four-pound shot in their hands, as ballast to trim the ship scientifically to her most approved bearings, whereas the ship's records show that fair weather prevailed all night and that no call was made for all hands. (Such an important maneuver on board ship would have been noted in the Log Book as a matter of routine, had it actually taken place.)

Another unnecessary expenditure of the crew's energy, and one that often resulted in injuries to the men, was the sail-

38 Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, pp. 379-380.
furling competition among the ships. In Rio harbor, as a result of one such contest, Baldy, one of the captains of the mizen-top, fell to the deck. He survived the ordeal, but was permanently crippled. This accident kindled Melville to write: "Why mince the matter? The death of most of these men-of-war's men lies at the door of the souls of those officers, who, while safely standing on deck themselves, scruple not to sacrifice an immortal man or two, in order to show off the excelling discipline of the ship. And thus do the people of the gun-deck suffer, that the commodore on the poop may be glorified." 39

Melville, in an attempt to exalt Jack Chase and add to his stature as a peer among the crewmen, related the bizarre tale of Chase's desertion from the ship. Chase did desert his ship, but it was the St. Louis, not the United States. 40 He was in the service of the Peruvian Navy during his absence, and when he eventually surrendered to the captain of the United States, with the Peruvian Government's request he be pardoned, this was done. Contrary to Melville's version that Jack Chase was received on board the ship without reprimand, or without the usual punishment, the Log Book of the United States indicates that he was broken in rate from his former position as boatswain's mate in

39 Melville, White Jacket, p. 245.
40 Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, p. 381.
the St. Louis to ordinary seaman in the United States. 41 This demotion was soon remedied when he was promoted to captain of the maintop in the United States. 42

Unable to condone such ignominy for his "noble captain of the top," Melville ignored the actual facts in the case. Although these events occurred before he came on board, they were of sufficient interest to be long debated in the ship's forecastle. Here, no doubt, Melville heard the tale in its many interpretations. When he included it in his book on the naval service, he could not be induced to attribute Jack Chase's desertion to the ordinary reasons for such an act. He asked:

But with what purpose had he deserted? To avoid naval discipline? To riot in some abandoned seaport? For love of some worthless signorita? Not at all. He abandoned the frigate from far higher and nobler, nay, glorious motives. Though bowing to naval discipline afloat, yet ashore he was a stickler for the Rights of Man and the liberties of the world. He went to draw a partisan blade in the civil commotions of Peru, and befriend, heart and soul, what he deemed the cause of the Right. 43

The one incident that Melville did not embroider from idle chatter among the crew was that of the death of Bungs, the ship's cooper. It was Bungs's responsibility to build sound lifebuoys that would support any luckless seaman who happened to fall into

41 Log Book, United States, entry of May 29, 1842.
42 Ibid., July 19, 1842.
the sea. These buoys were held ready at the stern, with men stationed nearby to cut them away at the first cry of "Man Overboard!" One morning the sailors sighted a lifebuoy floating off the bow, and on hauling it aboard, discovered that it had been in the sea for some time.

"'Bad luck! bad luck!' cried the captain of the head; 'we'll number one less before long.'"44 They cautioned Bungs to be certain his buoys were in good order, or he might find himself sinking with a leaky one. "'I never go aloft, and don't intend to fall overboard,' replied Bungs. 'Don't believe it!' cried the sheet-anchor man; 'you lopers that live about the decks here are nearer the bottom of the sea than the light hand that looses the main-royal.'"45

The next day a man was reported lost over the side, but after a search, all hope was abandoned that he had survived in the sea. It wasn't until the muster was taken that it was discovered Bungs was the missing seaman. "'I told him his buoys wouldn't save a drowning man; and now he has proved it,'"46 was the answer from a member of the crew.

Anderson verifies that Melville gave a true account of the

44Ibid., p. 90.
46Ibid., p. 93.
loss of a man overboard, and the efforts to rescue him. Melville showed, in this scene, that a man's life was regarded as worth the efforts of the crew and officers to save him if possible, and the efficient and thorough provisions made for the prevention of such accidents. This is the only instance in which Melville did not show his animus toward the naval service.

Chapter LIX entitled "A Man-of-War Button Divides Two Brothers," in which is described the anguish of a young seaman in the after-guard over the arrival of a stores ship to which his brother was attached as an officer, has basis in fact. The youth had been away for almost three years and had not heard from his family, but rather than face his brother "with this sailor's frock on, and he with the anchor button," he would desert. Coincidentally, Melville's cousin, Stanwix Gansevoort, was a midshipman on the *Erie*, a stores ship which the Log Book of the United States noted "came to our larb'd Quarter." The date was February 13, 1844, when Melville was serving in the man-of-war, and would appear to have provided the interesting chapter of the proximity of two brothers in different strata of shipboard society. It is within the scope of probability that in a closely knit family, whose correspondence occupied much of their time,

Melville knew of Stanwix's position in the Ereé, and wrote this chapter from his own personal desire to avoid contact with a member of his family holding a position of respect and authority, while he was only "a miserable sailor that any moment may be flogged at the gangway, before his very eyes." 50

In the words of Anderson:

A list of the pure inventions in White-Jacket is a roll call of its most powerful and memorable passages. If, then, White-Jacket emerges from this analysis shorn of most of its autobiographical value, it is enhanced as a piece of readable fiction; and, if Melville loses as a veracious travel writer, he gains as a propagandist of high order and as an artist who could portray even his own narrow escape from death so realistically that official records, and the accidental discovery of a literary source, are necessary to prove that it was imaginary. 51

White Jacket was not a sterile, lifeless document of naval life, for Melville "learned very early to fill out his story with a wealth of allusion, literary, historical, and artistic." 52 He succeeded through a succession of events and pictures of naval routine, ceremonies, and regulations, in depicting life on board a man-of-war in a language, style, and tone that billowed and foamed with the full canvas and plunging bow of the ship.

50 Melville, White Jacket, p. 304.
51 Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, pp. 418-419.
52 Gilman, Melville's Early Life and "Redburn," p. 119.
CHAPTER III

SHIP'S COMPANY

Herman Melville displayed a particular sensitivity to character delineation in *White Jacket*. His ability to create a convincing human document of life in a man-of-war world from first-hand knowledge and observation was aided by his interest in and concern with the dignity of man subjected to unjust, autocratic military discipline. With the zeal of a reformer, he strove to shape and create a lasting impression by directing attention to individuals caught in the backwash of obsolete regulations and tyrannical authority.

He did not present *White Jacket* to the American public as his contribution of new lore to the nautical scene, or as a documentary of American seamanship, but of typical manners and morals in the United States Navy, to be viewed alongside one's moral obligation for human justice. The struggle for survival pictured in *White Jacket* is not an ordinary account of man against the elements and his ultimate physical victory, but of man's struggle
for his own basic decency against the handiwork of his own creation. For Melville, man's inhumanity to man could best be portrayed against the backdrop of the sea. He was one of the first to lift the hatch cover and to show the world what lay below the gleaming deck.

More than five hundred men were crowded within the oaken bulkheads of a ship-of-the-line. "White Jacket" knew few of them intimately, but even though his place in the ship's division of labor was in the main-royal, he plumbed the depths of the ship for an insight into each major occupation and its assigned crew members. "[E]very man of a frigate's five-hundred-strong knows his own special place, and is infallibly found there. He sees nothing else, attends to nothing else, and will stay there till grim death or an epaulet orders him away."\(^1\)

The crew, with few exceptions, was a society of vulgarians. Melville described them as "men of all callings and vocations, from a backslidden parson to a broken-down comedian."\(^2\)

During his service in merchantmen and whalers, he associated with as malevolent and corrupt a group of men as were in the United States, but in his vilification of the naval service, he desired to emphasize this heterogeneous fraternity:

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\(^{2}\) Ibid., p. 94.
The Navy is the asylum for the perverse, the home of the unfortunate. Here the sons of adversity meet the children of calamity, and here the children of calamity meet the offspring of sin. Bankrupt brokers, boot-blacks, blacklegs, and blacksmiths here assemble together; and cast-away tinkers, watchmakers, quill-drivers, cobblers, doctors, farmers, and lawyers compare past experiences and talk of old times.3

Melville, for the most part, disguised the true identity of his shipmates by employing clever and amusing japes in the use of names synonymous with their occupations on board, as Bungs, the cooper. He also utilized expressions of physical attributes in designating others, such as Captain Claret, the wine-imbiber, or the sybaritic lieutenant, Salvagee. To inanimate objects such as the ship itself, he gave the sobriquet of Neversink, as a direct opposite of the familiar naval expression Neversail.

As the narrator of his experiences and observations in a frigate, he took the name "White Jacket" after the canvas jacket which was his only uniform. Through the character of "White Jacket," Melville honed and polished his vituperative powers against the injustices perpetrated by those in authority in the naval service. He, alone, gave voice to the degrading lot of seamen.

"White Jacket" was portrayed as a seaman of learning, separated from the commonality of the crew by his distinctive apparel and consciousness of the evil that existed from the

3Ibid., p. 94.
commanding officer down to the newest recruit. Melville's self-portrait revealed his meditative disposition, his desire to remain apart from the crew, and his love for a sea-rover's life. He stated, however, that "when White Jacket speaks of the rover's life, he means not life in a man-of-war, which, with its martial formalities and thousand vices, stabs to the heart the soul of all free-and-easy honourable rovers."4

He could easily express a kinship for and affinity for the sea when high above the billowing waves in his station at the main-top, but, conversely, found it difficult to be congenial with the shipmates who shared this with him. "For I had not been long on board," he said, "ere I found that it would not do to be intimate with everybody... Indeed, I was not at all singular in having but comparatively few acquaintances on board, though certainly carrying my fastidiousness to an unusual extent."5

The jacket played an important role in his exposition of life in a man-of-war. Four different incidents correlated the action and plot with the wearer of the jacket. The first was precipitated by the sight of the jacket aloft. One evening "White Jacket" was stretched on the main-royal-yard, dozing and dreaming, when the halyards were suddenly lowered. He was almost thrown to the deck, but managed to save himself by grabbing the

4Ibid., p. 97.
5Ibid., p. 50.
His first thought was that there had been an attempt on his life, a thought not uncommon among sailors, but later learned that they, sighting a white image in the rigging, had received no answer to their hail. Thinking it the ghost of the drowned cooper, Bungs, they hurriedly lowered the yard. After such a narrow escape, "White Jacket" requested paint to hide the whiteness of his jacket, but old Brush of the paint locker was as adamant then as he had been when "White Jacket" first fashioned the canvas coat. The plausibility of a sailor clad in a non-regulation uniform was firmly established after this significant event.

He then attempted to sell his jacket to the highest bidder. An auction was held to dispose of a dead seaman's clothing, and the irksome jacket was included in the seabag. The crew would have no part of it, recommending that it be used for cleaning rags. "White Jacket" then realized that the only possibility he had of ridding himself of the jacket was to throw it overboard.

"But though, in my desperation, I had once contemplated something of that sort," said "White Jacket," "yet I had now become unaccountably averse to it, from certain involuntary superstitious considerations. If I sink my jacket, thought I, it will be sure to spread itself into a bed at the bottom of the sea, upon which I shall sooner or later recline, a dead man." All his efforts

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6 Ibid., p. 253.
to purposely soil the jacket failed to dim its ghostly whiteness. Only during a snowstorm did "White Jacket" feel he was not the only white jacket aloft.

The final triumph of the jacket and its destruction came when "White Jacket" was sent aloft to reeve the halyards of a main-top-gallant stay-sail. Jack Chase, his captain of the top, warned him that the jacket might be a hindrance, but the night was chilly, so "White Jacket" unheedingly made his way to the top with the rope in his teeth. A pitch of the ship unbalanced him, throwing the jacket over his head. He mistook the jacket for the sail and in reaching for it, felt himself suddenly hurtling through space.

So protracted did my fall seem, that I can even now recall the feeling of wondering how much longer it would be, ere all was over and I struck. Time seemed to stand still, and all the worlds seemed poised on their poles, as I fell, soul-becalmed, through the eddying whirl and swirl of the maelstrom air. 7

The weight of the jacket dragged him under for an interminable time, but finally rising to the surface, he was able to cut his way out of the heavy canvas and float free. The jacket slowly sank before his eyes into the depths of the Atlantic.

Although recent research has indicated this accident never happened to Melville, he included it in his narrative to bring to a dramatic close his picture of a man-of-war's world. This

7Ibid., p. 496.
spectacular scene bears a marked similarity to one related in Nathaniel Ames's *A Mariner's Sketches*, as noted by Charles Roberts Anderson. Melville, himself, contradicted the account of the final resting place of the jacket when he wrote Dana that it was now "somewhere at the bottom of the Charles river," thereby attesting to the existence of the jacket, but denying that it had almost been his shroud.

In later years, Peter Toft, a Danish artist, who painted several water-colors from Melville's descriptions and presented them to the author, found him unwilling to talk about his books. He also seemed "'almost offended' when Toft 'inquired so curiously about his falling from the maintop-gallant yard of the frigate—the experience described in *White Jacket* which Toft shrewdly and correctly suspected of being 'a tour de force of writing' rather than an actual occurrence." "

The tale of the jacket and the cruise climaxed his enlistment in the *Neversink*. The casting off of the jacket indicated the emergence of Seaman "White Jacket," or Melville, as a mature personality. Just so, the casting away of that aura of romanti-

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cism surrounding ships and sailors signified the consummation of his mission in writing the book.

The canvas jacket had served its purpose. The wearer of the jacket had created through telescopic lens the officers and men of the Neversink.

In a prefatory statement to White Jacket, Melville asserted that he had not portrayed real individuals, yet he found himself unable to maintain the anonymity of Jack Chase. He was John J. Chase on the Muster Roll of the United States, and is assumed to be the first captain of the top whom Melville, through his admiration for the man, developed into the main character in his book. Stone believes "Jack Chase is the first of Melville's heroic figures to carry any meat on his bones. . . . The approach to Jack is mainly external; he is there to be observed, an 'incredible' object in the popular sense of something that is seen but not explained."¹¹

Among the crew in the Neversink, "White Jacket's" coterie of friends was limited to a small, select group that were by their demeanor and deportment, education and character, set apart from the ordinary seamen. It was by a happy circumstance that "White Jacket" was initially assigned to the same watch section as Jack Chase. This "noble captain of the top" possessed all those attributes to command the respect of the officers and the

approbation of the crew. His value to the ship, both as a leader
and confidante of the men, outweighed his occasional indis-
cretions. His one recorded serious breach of discipline was
treated lightly by the captain.

Deserting the ship and subsequently surrendering to the
captain, after serving the Peruvian Government, he was reinstated
without punishment. Such a crime might have resulted in Jack
Chase being flogged through the fleet. Melville exonerated his
friend completely, fictionalizing the true account slightly to
avoid any loss of prestige to Jack Chase.

A Briton by birth, he had the education and manners of a
gentleman. He was the symbol, the gonfalon, the model of what
every navy man should be. His seamanship was undisputed. He
ruled the main-top with a firm hand, having that quality of
leadership which enabled him to be a comrade-at-arms, yet, at the
same time, demanded the utmost respect and cooperation from his
men. "White Jacket" thought: "No one could be better company in
forecastle or saloon; no man told such stories, sang such songs,
or with greater alacrity sprung to his duty. Indeed, there was
only one thing wanting about him, and that was a finger of his
left hand. . . ."

To Melville, Jack Chase represented the maturity and freed-
Dom of man's soul. In his portraiture of Chase, he attempted to

embody all those qualities that go into the indices of greatness. He created scenes and incidents to ennoble this sailor, while, at the same time, illustrated the disparity which a naval system had created between officers and men.

When Jack Chase stepped forward and dared to address the captain with a request for permission to go ashore, it was with an obsequiousness that was almost ludicrous. With his hat in his hand he seemed to say: "Magnanimous Captain Claret, we fine fellows, and hearts of oak, throw ourselves upon your unparalleled goodness." Jack continued his oration, with excerpts from Shakespeare and Pope, and attracted even the commodore's attention. Furthering his cause, he repeated his request, this time to the commodore with the wish that his old wound was now less painful. Always injecting the right note of servility, mitigated by an insouciance that disarmed even the sternest of men, Jack succeeded where others failed.

It could only have been testimony of Jack Chase, and Colbrook, corporal of marines, whom Melville called "the foremost man among the seamen, the other the foremost man among the soldiers," that saved "White Jacket" from the scourge of the lash. Colbrook testified to the accusation that "White Jacket" had been absent from his station with the remark: "I know that

13 Ibid., p. 266.
14 Ibid., p. 354.
man, and I know that he would not be found absent from his station, if he knew where it was. Jack Chase then came forward to say that he had never found "White Jacket" wanting in his duties in the top. Although the entire episode was a figment of Melville's imagination, it demonstrated the personal magnetism of Jack Chase in helping to bring about an unprecedented retraction of a naval order.

In the two incidents cited above, a weakness is noted in Melville's characterization. In his effort to avoid even a taint of sin in his characters that personify the good in man, he detracted from their genuineness as people. For example, the virtues of Jack Chase deserted him and his strong and noble bearing grew weak and faint before such a firm protagonist as Captain Claret. His plea for shore leave for the crew was neither manly nor straightforward. It was rather sickeningly subservient.

When "White Jacket" was arraigned before the mast, it was not Jack Chase who first stepped forward to plead his friend's case. He was, in fact, a hesitating second to the corporal of marines. These two instances when Jack Chase could have had his mettle tested did not exhibit the strength of the stalwart captain of the top. He failed the test, or rather Melville failed to depict him in a vein one would expect, after endowing him with all good and virile qualities.

\[15\text{Ibid., p. 553.}\]
Mason states:

Melville adored him so that his prose grows flatulent with hero-worship whenever he mentions his name or chronicles his deeds; with the result that dramatically he fails to bring him to life, and the huge fair-bearded form moves awkwardly, his eloquence and his capacity for quoting the epic poets falling like a flat affectation upon our ears attuned by Melville's happier satire to the harsher accents of the more ordinary characters. Yet although he is an artistic failure, he succeeds in conveying poignantly enough the genuine response that he called out from the aloof and sensitive man who served with him and (perhaps unknown to him) worshipped him for the rest of his life. Melville's imaginative development dated itself from the day he left the sea and said good-bye to Jack Chase. . . . 16

Chase figured prominently again in the influence he exerted over the crew by persuading them to acquiesce to regulations. He was as indignant over the order to trim all beards as the other men, but he refused to flaunt authority by setting an example of obstinacy. Instead, he made a mockery of the ceremony of trimming his beard:

"Ayl, trail your beards in grief and dishonour, oh crew of the Neversink!" sighed Jack. "Barber, come closer--now, tell me, my friend, have you obtained absolution for this deed you are about to commit? You have not? Then, barber, I will absolve you; your hands shall be washed of this sin; it is not you, but another; and though you are about to shear off my manhood, yet, barber, I freely forgive you; kneel, kneel, barber! that I may bless you, in token that I cherish no malice!" 17

The barber removed the beard and held it aloft, crying, "'D'ye

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17 Melville, White Jacket, pp. 454-455.
hear, fore and aft? This is the beard of our matchless Jack Chase, the noble captain of this frigate's main-top!"\(^{18}\)

Jack was not able to bring all the crew around to his way of thinking, but he averted a mutiny which was brewing over the intrusion of naval authority on personal rights. Melville, here, attempted to sustain his idealized picture of Jack Chase, but it was old Ushant, the aged captain of the forecastle, who became the real hero in the "Massacre of the Beards." He was the only one who refused to trim his beard. Even Captain Claret expressed regret that he must flog such an old man, one who had served in the Constitution. Ushant was emphatic in his refusal to obey the captain, and after the lash had been applied to his age-stooped back, he refused aid in donning his shirt, crying, "Do you think, master-at-arms, that I am hurt? I will put on my own garment. I am never the worse for it, man; and 'tis no dishonour when he who would dishonour you only dishonours himself."\(^{19}\) The captain became enraged at this speech by one of his men. He demoted Ushant and put him in the brig until the ship arrived in Norfolk. Ushant, triumphant to the last, left the ship with his beard intact. His display of courage far exceeded that of Jack Chase, whose personality had been too long cast in the mold of submission where naval authority was con-

\(^{18}\)Ibid., p. 453.

\(^{19}\)Ibid., p. 461.
cerned. Without him, however, Melville would have lacked adequate seaways with which to launch some of the more interesting passages in his book.

The Fourth of July celebration that allowed Jack Chase to demonstrate to the utmost his histrionic ability, found him receiving accolades from the crew and bouquets in the form of rope and bunches of oakum. Even the officers "shipped their quarter-deck faces" to join in the applause for the inimitable Jack. He not only entertained the crew on this occasion, but often while his watch section rocked in the main-top, he would recite poetry, or sing the age-old ballads of the sea. These were the pleasant moments, seldom to be taken from the busy routine of the ship, but those moments characterized the comradery of men from all walks of life.

In spite of his virtues, Jack remained one of the crew. They accorded him the deference and loyalty that was often withheld from their officers. The elegance, polish, and grace that he possessed were but an accompaniment to his seamanship. Melville became almost sycophantic in his praise, in his earnestness to single out Jack Chase for adulation. He was as extravagant in his portrayal of the "Matchless Jack" as he was vituperative in his condemnation of social evils existent in the naval service.

His portrayal of Bland, the master-at-arms, who was the personification of evil as Jack Chase was the personification of good, evinced a keener perception of character. Bland held the
onerosous position of master-at-arms, which from the founding of the American Navy has been a cognomen signifying police authority vested in a senior member of the crew. Melville described his relationship to the crew as:

a sort of high constable and schoolmaster, wearing citizen's clothes, and known by his official ratan. He it is whom all sailors hate. His is the universal duty of a universal informer and hunter-up of delinquents. On the berth-deck he reigns supreme; spying out all grease-spots made by the various cooks of the seamen's messes, and driving the laggards up the hatches, when all hands are called. It is indispensable that he should be a very Vidocq in vigilance. But as it is a heartless, so is it a thankless office. Of dark nights, most masters-at-arms keep themselves in readiness to dodge forty-two-pound balls, dropped down the hatchways near them.20

Blund, along with the purser's mate, ship's yeoman, corporals, and marine sergeants, messed apart from the crew. He, uniquely, was *personae non gratae* in the wardroom as well as in the general messes. His shipmates regarded him with distrust, as much for his badge of office as for his personality. He had beady black eyes that darted to and fro in search of miscreants, and when men were called before the gratings, it was he who removed their shirts for the *cat* to be applied. His conciliatory air and suave mannerisms were almost effeminate, yet one glance at his small mouth with its thin, delicate lips, belied his seemingly innocuous facade. He was aptly named, for even in disgrace after being reported as the ringleader of a group of liquor

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smugglers on the Neversink, he retained his imperturbability.

The evil in Bland was not blatant, but a subtle, insidious corruption which thrust out the tentacles of its malignancy to undermine the unwary seaman. In him "vice seemed, but only seemed, to lose half its seeming evil by losing all its apparent grossness . . . he studiously shunned an indelicacy, never swore, and chiefly abounded in passing puns and witticisms. . . . In short—in a merely psychological point of view, at least—he was a charming blackleg."\textsuperscript{21}

Once Bland's part in the plot to smuggle liquor aboard had been revealed, he was broken in rate and forced to mess with the crew. Even this loss of face left him apparently undisturbed. He inveigled his way into one of the messes without fear of retaliation for his former misdeeds, and displayed a fearless non-chalance which dismayed the crew. Such audacity on the part of a man who was aware that his life was constantly in danger from festering hatreds that he had compelled, brought forth the reluctant admiration of the crew. "White Jacket" was no exception when he said: "Save my noble captain, Jack Chase, he proved himself the most entertaining, I had almost said the most companionable man in the mess."\textsuperscript{22}

After Bland's reinstatement by the captain to his former

\textsuperscript{21}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 231-232.

\textsuperscript{22}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 232.
position, he conducted himself in a manner irreproachable to the
officers and men, balancing himself gingerly between the two
strata of naval society to prevent any criticism from either
quarter. Melville suggested that his reinstatement, an irrational
decision by the captain in the crew's eyes, was due as much to the
gifts Bland had formerly presented Captain Claret as to the
opinion that he was superior in the role of "setting a rogue to
catch a rogue." Melville admired and pitied Bland, while despis-
ing his principles. He also recognized the blackness of Bland's
soul, which saw no evil in duplicity. Where others were flogged
for their part in the smuggling plot, the very one responsible
for it escaped with only a brief imprisonment and suspension.

Bland was denominated "in the vivid language of the captain
of the fore-top, as 'the two ends and middle of the thrice-laid
strand of a bloody rascal,' which was intended for a terse, well-
knit, and all-comprehensive assertion, without omission or re-
servation."23

In his portrait of Bland, Mason states that Melville
attempted only a slight sketch, yet

the figure is strangely convincing, the superficial
self sufficiency and competence of the man being
rendered in very striking contrast to the destructive
spirit within him while in no way conflicting with it.
The result is that although we are presented, through
the generous eyes of White-Jacket, with the picture of
a man in some sort heroic, yet we can also firmly echo

23 Ibid., p. 237.
the judgment of the captain of the fore-top. ... 24

The captain, in spite of his leniency with Bland, seldom displayed this side of his character on board the Nevarsink. The most important episode in which his dominion relaxed was when he released "White Jacket" without a flogging, after Colbrook and Jack Chase had defended him. This incident was not consistent with the captain's character, for when he stood at the mainmast and commanded the boatswain to lay on the lash, even while a prisoner writhed in agony, he did not commute the sentence.

Melville stressed the weakness in Claret's nature by his description of this round, portly gentleman with the florid complexion,

whose father had fought at the battle of the Brandywine, and whose brother had commanded the well-known frigate named in honour of that engagement. And his whole appearance evinced that Captain Claret himself had fought many Brandywine battles ashore in honour of his sire's memory, and commanded in many bloodless Brandywine actions at sea. 25

This propensity for fine old Madeira, with which the ship was well-stocked, stimulated Melville's argument as to the competency of officers to command. After ordering a seaman to be flogged for drunkenness, Captain Claret would often appear to witness the execution of punishment fortified with several glasses of his favorite beverage. To see the captain emerge from

24 Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust, p. 91.
his cabin day after day, his eyes dull, his face ruddy, and his body held consciously erect as he measured his steps across the deck, only confirmed the crew's suspicions that their commander was seldom completely sober.

Anderson suggests that Captain James Armstrong, who left the United States at Callao to take command of the Pacific Squadron, was the model for Melville's Captain Claret. He relates an amusing anecdote as evidence:

On the 22d of Feb. [1843], at Mazatlan, Mexico] the Commodore gave a splendid dinner to the Officers of H. B. M. Ship Champion, Sloops of War Cyane & Yorktown, with a number of invited guests from shore.

... Captain A [Armstrong] was in high glee but was lifted to his Cabin, being too fatigued to walk without support. 26

On a night when every man aboard, officers as well as men, needed clear heads and a sound knowledge of seamanship, Captain Claret was found wanting. As the Navesink rounded Cape Horn, the captain rushed from his cabin with a steep roll of the ship, and gave the order to turn the ship away from the gale. If this order had not been countermanded instantly by Mad Jack, a junior lieutenant, who realized the only way to keep the ship from foundering was to head her into the wind, the Navesink, with all hands, would have been lost.

The befuddled captain, as far as anyone knew, never reprimanded Mad Jack for an insubordination that could have resulted

26 Anderson, Melville in the South Seas, p. 362.
in court-martial or even death. To have done so would have been an admission of his own maladroit ness in time of peril, which was the test of a good naval officer. Melville felt that if Captain Claret had not been disposed to drink in his cabin while at sea, he would never have violated a cardinal rule of seamanship, or placed himself in the position of being overridden by a subordinate.

Even the few amusements allowed the crew were at the discretion of the captain. The playing of checkers was forbidden until the captain, narrowly escaping belaying pins flying at him from all sides in the darkness of a night, rescinded the order. This "showed that Captain Claret was a man of a ready understanding, and could understand a hint as well as any other man, even when conveyed by several pounds of iron." 27

Melville painted Captain Claret as an insipid officer, unable to control his craving for wine, and ill-qualified for command. His strength was invested in the Articles of War and not in the weight of his personality. His confidence lay in the peculiarity of his position as a ship's commander, who was the final authority in all things, both temporal and corporeal. "The captain's word is law; he never speaks but in the imperative mood," "White Jacket" related. "When he stands on his quarter-

deck at sea, he absolutely commands as far as the eye can reach.

The seeds of humanity and decency must first be planted in the hearts of all those in command. Once germinated, the result would be what the Navy sorely lacked: self-criticism and self-analysis leading to positive reform. This was Melville’s thesis. Nothing seemed to irritate him more than the sublime assumption that at sea in a man-of-war, there was only one God and that omnipotence was personified in Captain Claret.

Captain Claret was ably supported by one officer in particular—Mad Jack—whose knowledge of the ship and navigation saved his commander many embarrassments. It was Mad Jack who brought the Neversink safely around the Horn, who could drive the men to the last ounce of their strength to put the ship out in front in a race across the sea, and who could issue commands with the authority of a man who knew what he was doing. The crew respected him in spite of his bombast and addiction to brandy. If he sometimes appeared on deck with a staggering gait, it was never when the ship was facing a storm, when every hand was necessary to weather it. It was the consensus of opinion that Mad Jack, drunk or sober, was an abler seaman than Captain Claret.

Mad Jack possessed all those attributes which sailors most admired in their officers. He was tall, well-built, and had a natural propensity for shipboard life. Not so his brother offi-

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28Ibid., p. 27.
cer, Selvagee, a precocious dandy whose only love for the sea was the handsome uniform he wore. At the plotting table or in the chart room he was in his métier, but on deck it was with trembling hand that he issued orders or took command of the wheel. He might bemuse the captain with his spotless uniform and shining lace, but not the crew. Sailors had only to hear the thin, reedy voice of Selvagee soliciting advice from the quartermaster to know that he was ill-equipped for his position. His mincing step and lace-bordered handkerchiefs were more at home in the drawing-room than on the deck of a ship.

Selvagee's nickname came from the rope used to bind the anchor chain and its accompanying rope together. Obviously, Mad Jack was so-called from his manner of shouting above the gale, calling quickly and hoarsely the orders that could be heard the length of the ship, and from his quick rage over a minor infraction of the regulations.

The character Melville delineated with a vehemence he ill-deserved was Cadwallader Cuticle, the ship's surgeon. Melville stated that he was one of the best surgeons in the fleet, but in his profile of the doctor he was less than kind to his reputation. He described Cuticle as being devoted to his profession, taking an unholy delight in the amputation of limbs. His wig, glass eye, and false teeth furthered the impression of diabolism, although in essence he was not a man to inflict pain without a reason. His stoical countenance, marred only by a slight blush
of enthusiasm, conveyed a false conception of pitiless severity when he confronted a hapless seaman.

Sailors quaked at the thought of injuries that might necessitate the surgeon's knife. They could see the cold eye of Cuticle bending over them, knife upraised, ready to descend. If the patient died, it was unfortunate, but Cuticle had done his best.

Melville credited him with saving old Baldy's life after he fell to the deck during a ship's exercise in competition with other ships in the squadron. Cuticle contrived a cradle that kept Baldy's broken bones in place while they knitted. True, Baldy was crippled for life, but he had not died from his injuries, a triumph for Cuticle's ingenious medical skill.

In Melville's disparagement of the medical treatment received by the crew, he went a bit too far in his satirical caricature of Cuticle. He presented him as a brutal, unfeeling charlatan who took a fiendish delight in operating irrespective of the patient's condition. When Cuticle gathered the other surgeons in the fleet for a consultation and their professional opinions, he ignored the advice of a compeer and proceeded to amputate a limb when the patient was in no condition to withstand the operation. Melville made a travesty of naval medicine in showing the avidity of Cuticle for a public display of his medical knowledge and skill, while at the same time showing his callous attitude toward his patient, his lack of proper diagnosis,
and his inexpert surgical technique.

The idea for this scene was no doubt conceived when Melville read Smollett's *Roderick Random*, and Charles Roberts Anderson believes the name of the surgeon and the consultation scene were almost certainly taken from the same book.\(^{29}\) Nathalia Wright, in *Melville's Use of the Bible*, notes that the "unusual and even the bizarre are no small parts of his imagistic effect."\(^{30}\) After witnessing the amputation, "White Jacket" declares that today, "life runs through us like a thousand Niles; but to-morrow we may collapse in death, and all our veins be dry as the brook Kedron [sic] in a drought."\(^{31}\)

The inadequacy of the chaplain was as pointedly discussed as that of the surgeon, in a brief chapter devoted to the church services held on board the *Neversink*. The chaplain never discoursed on the everyday vices, least of all on the subject of temperance, with Captain Claret listening attentively to his words. He was a philosopher who addressed "five hundred salt-sea sinners upon the psychological phenomena of the soul, . . . ."\(^{32}\) with interpolations from the Greeks. All this was above the


\(^{32}\)Ibid., p. 193.
minds and education of the crew, and no doubt of even the commodore, but "not a sailor on board but believed that the commodore, being the greatest man present, must alone comprehend the mystic sentences that fell from our parson's lips."  

Attendance at these services was compulsory, often being announced with oaths when the crew seemed disinclined to be present. Jack Chase and Lemsford were probably among the few that appreciated the chaplain's orations. Lemsford, in particular, was "so thoroughly inspired with the divine afflatus that not even all the tar and tumult of a man-of-war could drive it out of him."  

Melville felt a kinship for Lemsford, who was of the same contemplative mind. He often read his poetry aloud to the men in the main-top, and Jack Chase would act as his mentor. Some of the crew taunted him and would seek out the hiding place of his poetry box, but they never destroyed it. It was published in a rather unusual fashion when No. 20 gun was fired in a salute. Lemsford had used this particular gun for his strong-box. Jack Chase reassured the frantic Lemsford that "no printer could do the business for you better," and even suggested that Melville publish White Jacket in the same fashion. "Fire it right into 'em; every canto a twenty-four-pound shot; hull the blockheads.

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33 Ibid., p. 194.
34 Ibid., p. 49.
whether they will or no."\[35\]

Melville took his advice and made every abuse inflicted upon seamen a burden on the conscience of the American public. He felt that the unfairness of an existing naval caste system, which held the crew in debaseement while admitting no opprobrium to its officer class, was indicative of an archaic and aristocratic organization. Even in the case of midshipmen, who were little more than schoolboys, sailors dared not speak out for fear of the lash. It was well known that in a dispute between a midshipman and a sailor, the captain would invariably punish the sailor and absolve the midshipman. The rule of authority, which extended downward to the lowest midshipman, could never be questioned, no matter how immature and ignorant the midshipman might be. Typifying these childish youths was Midshipman Pert, who was constantly being reprimanded for his lack of dignity. The ship was the schoolroom of the sea for these lads who would eventually command the nation's navy. Melville deplored a system which gave these untried boys the right to command obeisance from a crew many years their senior.

Another paradoxical situation existed in the Navesink in the presence of Guinea, the purser's body-servant. Although a slave, his life was sharply contrasted with that of the ship's company. Subject to no disciplinary action save that of his

\[35\] Ibid., p. 239.
master, he was one of the few who was not compelled to witness a flogging, or share in any shipboard duties. Melville stated he was the envy of many seamen, even himself, for the crew, free men to choose their master, were in effect the slaves of a system. When the Neversink docked in Norfolk, Guinea received his freedom, but even he did not appreciate his freedom as much as "White Jacket," or Melville.

"The gallows and the sea refuse nothing," according to Melville, and the majority of the crewmen with whom he served in the United States were to him the refuse of the wharves of every coastal town of every country in the world. The attitude of the men, for the most part, was that of Happy Jack Landless, who said:

Now take my advice, and steer clear of all trouble. D'ye see, touch your tile whenever a swob (officer) speaks to you. And never mind how much they rope's-end you, keep your red-rag belayed; for you must know as how they don't fancy sea-lawyers; and when the serving out of slops comes round, stand up to it stiffly; it's only an Oh Lord! or two, and a few Oh my God!—that's all. And what then? Why, you sleeps it off in a few nights, and turns out at last all ready for your grog. 37

The officers and men of the Neversink were composites of those men who served in the United States. Melville obviously overplayed the characters of Jack Chase and Dr. Cuticle, while underplaying those of Bland and Captain Claret. Cuticle and

36 Ibid., p. 475.
37 Ibid., p. 485.
Bland emerge as distinct personalities, whereas Jack Chase and Captain Claret remain blurred from an attempt to idealize the one and pillorize the other. Nevertheless, Melville carried forward his denunciation of current practices in the United States Navy through his delineation of the men who served in the United States. The attitudes and emotions of the ship's company, as Melville painted them, filled the *Navesink* from bulkhead to bulkhead, and gave *White Jacket* its pulsating vitality.
CHAPTER IV

PLAN-OF-THE-DAY

From the strident call of the bos' n's pipe at reveille, to the playing of tattoo, Melville captured the intimate details of a seaman's daily life, which do not appear in a ship's log and go unnoticed by the wearers of the epaulets. Although written obliquely from the seaman's point of view, White Jacket is one of the best accounts extant of naval life in the days of sail. Not only is it a recital of a man-of-war's man at sea, but also of the confined world he lived in, his pleasures, his sorrows, his duties, and his desires.

The bulging bulkheads of the Neversink, with its complement of five hundred men, were:

In truth . . . a city afloat, with long avenues set out with guns instead of trees, and numerous shady lanes, courts, and byways. The quarter-deck is a grand square, park, or parade-ground, with a great Pittsfield elm, in the shape of the mainmast, at one end, and fronted at the other by the palace of the commodore's cabin.1

"White Jacket" observed every trade in the ship, from carpentry to fortune-telling, men of all nationalities in her crew, and every facet of human character. In order to give a true picture of life in the forecastle, and its debilitating effect on the crew, Melville likened it to a "basement of indefinite depth, and ugly-looking fellows gazing out at the windows. Or it is like the lodging-houses in Paris, turned upside down; the first floor, or deck, being rented by a lord; the second, by a select club of gentlemen; the third, by crowds of artisans; and the fourth, by a whole rabble of common people."  

Herman Melville, or "White Jacket," was one of the people. He could not accurately depict the commodore, captain, or even the wardroom officers in the seclusion of their cabins. His acute observations of their character had to emanate from their relationships with the crew. His chief criticism, aside from the individual personalities of those on the quarter-deck, evolved around the "shipping of the quarter-deck faces." It was always a puzzle to Melville that officers could reassemble their serious demeanor after a moment's relaxation with the crew. Even a modicum of fraternization between officers and men was rarely tolerated. When the monotonous regularity of the Plan-of-the-Day was broken for the theatricals on the Fourth of July, the officers appeared as one with the crew in their enjoyment of this brief amusement.

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2Ibid., p. 95.
In the event that the word was passed, "All Hands Skylark!" and the crew were free to dance, sing, and carouse in whatever fashion they desired, the officers looked on with indulgence. Or, when the crew engaged in fisticuffs, or Rose-Water and May-Day, the cooks, entertained the captain by "head-bumping," there was an air of harmony between the quarter-deck and forecastle.

These pleasures often ended in brawls, which resulted in the application of the lash. Then the officers "shipped their quarter-deck faces" and became as remote to the crew as they were prior to the revelry. Only when they shared a common emotion with the crew did they appear human to Melville. He struck out at this routine of "shipping the quarter-deck face" as one of the most hateful outward expressions of a system which enslaved the crew for the glorification of its officers:

Oh officers! all round the world, if this quarter-deck face you wear at all, then never unship it for another, to be merely sported for a moment. Of all insults, the temporary condescension of a master to a slave is the most outrageous and galling. That potentate who most condescends, mark him well; for that potentate, if occasion come, will prove your uttermost tyrant.3

Melville could never counterbalance the responsibilities of the quarter-deck with the necessity of maintaining an impassable barrier between officers and men. He gave no quarter there; but, at the same time, admitted that he had himself refrained from too many intimacies with his shipmates, as there was danger in such

3Ibid., p. 347.
friendships ending at the gangway.

It was not his purpose to expose the officers in all their perfidies except to demonstrate the inhuman debasement of a crew subjected to such authority. He professed no knowledge of military strategy or tactics. His station was in the main-top, except during general quarters when he was a rammer-and-sponger of Gun Crew No. 5. He never participated in an actual battle, only in the training that was, of necessity, thorough and frequent. A frigate's mission was to "sink, burn, and destroy" the enemy, and rigid discipline and drills were indispensable to efficient operation when such a contingency arose. Melville had no quarrel with this, but considered the hours selected for the drills detrimental to health and comfort. The crew, at the whim of the captain, would be turned out of their hammocks to man their stations, or required to rush to their battle positions after a heavy meal. Melville accused the quarter-deck of being heedless of the crew's welfare.

Sleeping accommodations in the Hawarsink were also not conducive to the good health of the crew. The berth-deck was overcrowded with the full ship's complement packed into its confines in three tiers. The prohibition of spreaders, sticks used to keep the sides of the hammock apart, was rigidly enforced. Each man was allowed only eighteen inches in width for his hammock, and without the spreaders, it became a steaming, smothering shroud in the tropics.
The regulation providing for the stowing of hammocks in the netting from sunrise to sundown was equally insupportable. No matter how long a seaman had been at his station during a storm, he was not permitted the privilege of a few hours' rest during the day. Officers, on the other hand, could retire to their cabins whenever off duty. Only during the bitter weather off Cape Horn were the crew granted permission to use the berth-deck during these hours. Even then hammocks were forbidden. The crew, sleeping on the wet planking in their damp clothing, were forced to lie close together for warmth.

In limning the conditions existing below the main-deck, Melville castigated a naval code that left the physical well-being of a man-of-war's men to the discretion of the captain. A hammock, properly swung, with its spreaders in place, could be the best of beds. "White Jacket" said:

Give me plenty of room to swing it in; let me swing it between two date-trees on an Arabian plain; or extend it diagonally from Moorish pillar to pillar, in the open marble Court of the Lions in Granada's Alhambra; let me swing it on a high bluff of the Mississippi—one swing in the pure ether for every swing over the green grass; or let me oscillate in it beneath the cool dome of St. Peter's; or drop me in it, as in a balloon, from the zenith, with the whole firmament to rock and expatiate in; and I would not exchange my coarse canvas hammock for the grand state-bed, like a stately coach-and-four, in which they tuck in a king when he passes a night at Blenheim Castle. 4

4Ibid., p. 100.
In spite of the discomfort of his sleeping compartment, with its alternating heat and dampness, Melville remained in good health during the cruise. If his account in *White Jacket* can be taken for a true picture of his physical condition, he seldom required medical attention, and if he were forced to take the prescribed medicine, he was almost always seasick. Most of the men lived in dread of being placed on the sick-list, and confined to the fetid compartment known as the sick-bay, located in the forward part of the ship. At sea the ports were sealed as the deck was close to the waterline, and the only air that filtered down to this level was through the device of a wind-sail. In rough weather the sail could not be rigged, for it would only funnel the salt water into the spaces, and in the heat of the tropics, there was seldom any air stirring. Thus, sick-bay was a dark, airless compartment most of the cruise.

To some sailors admission to the sick-list was a triumph, as they were then exempted from all duties, but this could be a detriment to their well-being; for if their strength permitted them to go above deck for air, they were, at the same time, prohibited from convalescing in a more healthful atmosphere. Melville pointed out the propensity for sickness when going through rough seas, and the record of quick recoveries once fine weather was ahead. He also hinted that the medical supplies, and particularly the poultry carried on board for the preparation of broths, seldom were issued to the ill, but found their way to the wardroom...
or were consumed by the assistant surgeon.

Some of the most effective and moving scenes in the entire narrative are those of the death of "White Jacket's" messmate, Shenly, and his burial at sea. Melville was at his best in the dialogue between Ringrope and Thrummings as they stitched the shroud and discussed the superstitions surrounding the last stitch through the nose of the corpse. When the officers and men gathered on deck for the reading of the burial service, Melville presented this part of a ship's routine in a sympathetic and poignant manner. He could not resist, however, a bit of irony when he asked: "Shenly was dead and gone; and what was Shenly's epitaph?--'D.D.'--opposite his name in the purser's books, in 'Black's best Writing Fluid'—funereal name and funereal hue—meaning 'Discharged, Dead.'"5 Earlier he had remarked: "In a man-of-war, everything, even to a man's funeral and burial, proceeds with the unrelenting promptitude of the martial code. And whether it is, All hands, bury the dead! or, All hands, splice the main-brace, the order is given in the same hoarse tones."6

Geoffrey Stone believes this scene shows that Melville had a firm grip on the more elementary details of his art, that he did not depend on the weaving of great verbal arabesques over subject-matters thrown to him by chance. Possibly the useless fanning in the hot sick-bay, the passage of the corpse under the sleepers, and the call-

5 Ibid., p. 432.
6 Ibid., p. 429.
ing of the watch took place as described, but even the selection of these things from memory is the conscious action of the artist who knows what it is he would make. The exterior world is mastered in *White-Jacket* and marshaled into order on the written page, and on the weight and substance conveyed there the simpler (which are not necessarily the lesser) emotions attend, but the world beyond the senses is riven too deep and we are asked to believe it is brought to port merely because the frigate was.

The regimen of meals on all ships in the United States Navy was also considered to be a cause for rebellion. All meals were served during an eight-hour period. Breakfast at eight and supper at four were the hours Melville found most detestable. He attributed these arbitrary hours to the preservation of a caste system that demanded the officers and captain dine at a later hour than the people. He argued for a change in this arrangement on the premise that sailors could not perform their duties at peak efficiency when weak from hunger during the long night watches.

Although he agreed that the regularity of meals as defined by the naval service was founded on the tenets of cleanliness and efficacy, he failed to take into consideration the impracticability of his complaint. Five hundred men, constantly going on or coming off duty, must be fed at hours compatible with the changing of the watch. The regimentation of the messing hours, as well as the other daily routines in the ship, must always be subordinate to the over-all mission of the ship itself.

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He defended the custom of dining at noon as the "natural centre, keystone, and very heart of the day." Nathalia Wright notes that here, too, he cites Old Testament characters.

Doubtless, Adam and Eve dined at twelve; and the Patriarch Abraham in the midst of his cattle; and old Job with his noon mowers and reapers, in that grand plantation of Uz; and old Noah himself, in the Ark, must have gone to dinner at precisely eight bells (noon), with all his floating families and farmyards.

One of the most important and vital necessities of a frigate at sea was its fresh water supply. It had to be vigorously guarded at all times by an armed sentry to insure that the rules regarding its conservation were carried out. The ship's fountain, or scuttle-butt, was the gathering place for sailors, where they could exchange the news of the ship, and it was the only place where a man could drink except during meals. Melville bitterly condemned the captain's order that limited the amount of water allotted each man, and even expressed wonder "that they station no sentries at the port-holes, to see that no air is breathed, except according to Navy regulations."

It is obvious that in his desire to interject a dissenting

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8 Melville, White Jacket, p. 34.
9 Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham, 1949), p. 39.
10 Melville, White Jacket, p. 35.
11 Ibid., p. 356.
note into almost every regulation on the ship, Melville was guilty of casualty, particularly in the matter of the water supply.

There was no shortage of water when it came to the scrub-hammock-mornings. The Plan-of-the-Day included provisions for the scrubbing of hammocks, personal laundry, and also the hours when the deck should be holy-stoned. These tasks were performed with monotonous regularity, and Melville questioned the necessity of such a schedule. Regardless of the weather, the decks were scrubbed every day. Men stood in icy water for hours until the chore was completed. "Ohi the chills, colds, and agues that are caught! No snug stove, grate, or fireplace to go to; no, your only way to keep warm is to keep in a blazing passion, and anathematise the custom that every morning makes a washhouse of a man-of-war."12

Melville conceded that the United States Navy had a reputation for the neatest ships, but he protested that this was only at the cost of the crew's health. A spotless ship must have a tyrant for a captain, for only through a complete disregard for the men could a ship present such an appearance.

Visiting dignitaries were astounded at the sight of such a shining display of smartness in the polish of the bright-work and the neatness of the crew.

"Ay, ay," growled a grim rammer-and-sponger; "it's all devilish fine for you nobs to look at; but what

12 Ibid., p. 109.
would you say if you had to holy-stone the deck yourself, and wear out your elbows in polishing this cursed old iron, besides getting a dozen at the gangway if you dropped a grease-spot on deck in your mess? Ay, ay, devilish fine for you, but devilish dull for us!"13

Every morning and evening, whether in port or at sea, the crew were mustered for the reports by the officers of their divisions, and for morning and evening prayers. The ceremonies were carried out in all kinds of weather, with the strictest protocol. Melville did not complain about this daily custom, but used the scene to portray the officers as popinjays, strutting up and down the deck in full uniforms, their swords by their sides. He made a mockery of the constant saluting that was exchanged, explaining that this gave the right side of the cap a soiled appearance. He also commented that the "sea air is a sworn foe to metallic glosses; whence it comes that the swords of sea-officers have, of late, so rusted in their scabbards that they are with difficulty drawn."14

From his station in the ship's company, Melville viewed the officers always with a sardonic eye. His sarcasm reached its zenith when he said:

I well knew myself how blessed and soothing it was to mingle twice every day in these peaceful devotions,

13Ibid., p. 298.
14Ibid., p. 292.
and, with the commodore, and captain, and smallest boy, unite in acknowledging Almighty God. There was also a touch of the temporary equality of the Church about it, exceedingly grateful to a man-of-war's man like me.15

How bitter were the memories of his fourteen months in the United States, when five years later Melville could still sense the frustration he experienced during those moments when officers and crew stood with heads bowed in prayer. Out of compulsion he enlisted in the United States Navy, for he wished to return to his home, and out of compulsion he had to commingle with men of lower breeding, and thus be classed with them in all things. The real test of his nature was not in dutifully withstanding the physical and mental abuse daily heaped on him by his superiors, although he found this trying almost to the breaking point. It was the web of artificial and calculated restrictions peculiar to the naval service that morally degraded him, and in which he became ensnared. He was stabilized unknowingly into a society of second-class citizens, out of which, knowingly, there was no escape.

"[T] is a great reproach that such a thing as a common seaman rising to the rank of a commissioned officer in our Navy is nowadays almost unheard of."16

Melville was too proud a man to ship again in a man-of-war. Sailors in a frigate might sneer at whalermen as a low class of

15Ibid., p. 364.
16Ibid., p. 143.
mariner, but he felt a fellowship existed in whalers that navy men could never comprehend. Ironically, since his last cruise was in a man-of-war, that was perhaps the cruise that he remembered most vividly, but records of his life on the Aquahvat and Lucy Ann, and also the Charles & Henry, prove that he was as dissatisfied with whalers and merchantmen as he was with the United States. He deserted the Aquahvat, became embroiled in a mutinous past in the Lucy Ann, and left the Charles & Henry as soon as it reached the Hawaiian Islands. His seafaring years altered his life, but did nothing to change his basic concepts. He looked at everything with a jaundiced eye, from the effects of Christianity on the Polynesians, epitomized in Omo, to the effects of rigid discipline and despotism on a man-of-war's men.

The most offensive practice, supported by naval regulations, virulent in the Neversink was that of flogging. Of all the punishments administered by the captain, from stopping a man's grog to imprisonment in the brig, the most unprincipled crime committed against a human being was the indiscriminate use of the lash. During Melville's service in the United States, the ship's log recorded 163 crewmen were hauled to the gratings for the administration of twelve lashes with the cat-o'-nine-tails, for offenses ranging from obscene language, which Melville said the officers themselves used with impunity, to desertion.17

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Flogging was more prevalent in port, where idleness led to drinking, fighting, and attendant vices. At sea, the men were occupied with their many duties, but even then there were some who inevitably felt the sting of the lash. It became almost routine for the crew to answer the call, "All hands witness punishment, ahoy!" and not a man dared to absent himself. Melville stated: "One of the arguments advanced by officers of the Navy in favour of corporal punishment is this: it can be inflicted in a moment; it consumes no valuable time; and when the prisoner's shirt is put on, that is the last of it." But what of the lasting sores of the sot that a man carries with him to the grave? What of the deep cuts to his manly pride? Melville said:

Irrespective of incidental considerations, we assert that flogging in the Navy is opposed to the essential dignity of man, which no legislator has a right to violate; that it is oppressive, and glaringly unequal in its operations; that it is utterly repugnant to the spirit of our democratic institutions; indeed, that it involves a lingering trait of the worst times of a barbarous feudal aristocracy; in a word, we denounce it as religiously, morally, and immutably wrong.  

He climaxed his polemic against flogging with a discussion of the custom of "flogging through the fleet," where a man would be taken to each ship in the squadron for the administering of

19 Ibid., p. 182.
additional lashes. Fortunately, such punishment was rare, but the authority for its promulgation remained, to be carried out according to the usages of the naval service. It is interesting to note, however, that when flogging took place in port, all visitors were banned, and when a "flogging through the fleet" was ordered, it was never carried out in a United States port.

In his descriptive analysis of naval routine, Melville conveyed his indignation and disapproval of almost every custom, tradition, and regulation in the United States Navy. He resented being regimented to stringent hours for the mess, to the routine embodied in the Plan-of-the-Day for the sanitation of the ship, to his berthing quarters, and even to the heavy canvas hats which induced premature baldness. The only instance in which he acceded to the Navy's Plan-of-the-Day for the crew was in the assignment of men to specific duties. "Were it not for these regulations, a man-of-war's crew would be nothing but a mob. . . ."20 In all other orders of the day he found a flaw, and elaborated this flaw until it became a vice, which he invariably attributed to the quarter-deck.

He was in constant dissent with military regimen from the first day of his enlistment. How one could be a sailor was perhaps understandable, but how one could be a sailor in the United States Navy was debatable. Determined to make the confines of a

20Ibid., p. 7.
man-of-war a better place to live, and reduce the harshness of its routine, Melville used White Jacket as a weapon of disclosure. He hoped, through this patent manifesto, to rouse favorable public opinion, for only then could he consider his efforts a valid contribution to social improvement. Financial necessity might have motivated his pen,\(^{21}\) but his ulterior motive was to focus the attention of the American people on the necessity for a reconsideration of their archaic Articles of War and Naval Regulations.

CHAPTER V

OCEAN ROMANCE

Only a writer with Herman Melville's gift for dramatic, pictorial, and rhetorical eloquence could describe the magnitude and power of the ocean, and the innate frailties and strength of the men whose lives were irresistibly pledged to its caprices. Melville succeeded in developing both aspects of nautical fiction—the animate and inanimate—without losing his pervasiveness. By his clear symbolism, he imparted the force of the inanimate to the animate, and the weakness of the animate to the inanimate, without modifying their sublimity. He expressed what was in man's soul by an analysis of his heart and a study of his actions, without becoming effusive or unduly temporizing.

In the words of Jack Chase, Melville voiced the feeling of all sailors for the sea:

There never was a very great man yet who spent all his life inland. A snuff of the sea, my boy, is inspiration; and having been once out of sight of land, has been the making of many a true poet and the blasting of many pretenders; for, d'ye see, there's no gammon about the ocean; it knocks the false keel right off
a pretender's bow; it tells him just what he is, and makes him feel it, too. A sailor's life, I say, is the thing to bring us mortals out. What does the blessed Bible say? Don't it say that we main-top men alone see the marvellous sights and wonders? Don't deny the blessed Bible, now! don't do it! How it rocks up here, my boy! but it only proves what I've been saying—the sea is the place to cradle genius! Heave and fall, old seal!

In writing White Jacket, Melville was motivated by his passion for truth and a sincere desire to unveil the forecastle to the eyes and conscience of the public. He rejected the arid and lifeless qualities of a diarist's revelations and unimaginative factual reporting for a potpourri of fact and fiction, blended with a subtlety indicative of his rich creative power. Melville reiterated that he wrote White Jacket to sell, but he was unable to prevent it becoming a philippic, as his emotions bore him backward into that Gehenna, the United States.

As a seafarer of almost four years in merchantmen, whalers, and, finally, a man-of-war, Melville, in all his vagabondage and adventuring, never experienced the emotional revulsions that shocked his idealistic spirit until he found himself a seaman in the United States Navy. His short enlistment was relatively unimportant, for no ship's hour-glass could measure the permanent impression made upon his ego.

Five years later, as he sat at his desk in his New York home, his animus flared and seared the surface of the oaken deck

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of a typical American frigate and burned through to the deepest hold in the ship, as he bared the specter of archaic, barbarous, and injurious conditions prevalent in the naval service. Stone suggests:

It is likely, too, that he enjoyed recalling his days as a man-of-war's man, for hardship, danger, and toil are always pleasant objects of contemplation once safely passed. Though Melville's soul might sink as he looked back on what he had written, there is a quality of high spirits in the book and an outward-moving tendency of the mind.2

_White J acket_ was free of epithets and imprecations, but it was not free of bias. A highly opinionated advocacy for more humane treatment of sailors in the United States Navy, it contained more of the reform element than echoes of patriotism. However, "Melville has little to say about the reform movements of the generation, save the one of which he was a part, the movement to abolish flogging and other abuses in the navy."3 His affinity for the sea now bordered on the preternatural, and his soul forever sickened at his memories.

In a letter to Richard Bentley, he said:

_You may think in your own mind that a man is unwise, — indiscreet, to write a work of that kind [Mardi], when he might have written one perhaps, calculated merely to please the general reader, & not provoke attack, however masqued in an affectation of indifferent—_

3Willard Thorp, _Herman Melville_ (New York, 1938), pp. cx—cxi.
ence or contempt. But some of us scribblers, My Dear Sir, always have a certain something unmanageable in us, that bids us do this or that, and be done it must—hit or miss. 4

This was in regard to his conception of Mardi, but could easily have been applicable to his sentiment in writing White Jacket, although he was assuredly not indifferent to the effect his attack on the Navy would produce.

Melville followed the popular trend for books of voyages and travels when he wrote of a man-of-war’s world, but interspersed the more didactic passages with the intrinsic moods of the ocean, and its correspondence with those who sailed before the mast.

In order to present an exact picture of life in a man-of-war and stimulate interest and enjoyment, Melville alternately placed his action and explanations in juxtaposition. He might describe a flogging, then give the authority for corporal punishment, its benefits and evils; interleave a bit of merriment in the story of sighting the hogsheads of port when the crew were thirsty for their tot of grog, then discuss the chaplain’s views as to the proper sermons for a crew at sea. Later he would give an insight into the way the men spent their rare moments of leisure.

Metaphor, simile, and personification are his figures of speech, the catalogue and citation his other favorite devices. These forms are generally brief, loosely connected with the progress of the narrative, allusive

rather than allegorical, pointing out a contrast at least as often as a comparison. Their simplicity insures their principal effect: the effect of the particular and the exalted rather than of the general and the common. 5

It was not surprising that Melville would comment on the ship's library in a delightful chapter entitled "A Man-of-War Library," which proved "with what eagerness he took the heart out of any new lot of books which happened to lie convenient to his hand." 6 While the ship was in Rio harbor, he spent much of his spare time reading everything available from the large cask which served as the ship's library. His

book experiences on board the frigate proved an example of a fact which every book-lover must have experienced before me, namely, that though public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there. . . . 7

The cask contained an odd assortment of sermons, the classics, and books on rhetoric, but little to interest the average sailor. Melville found that his antidote against boredom while in Rio was reading. Stovall points out that his subsequent creative work "owed something to his reading, and what he owed shows up more

5 Nathalia Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible (Durham, 1949), p. 35.
6 Thorp, Herman Melville, p. xxiv.
7 Melville, White Jacket, p. 209.
obviously than it would have done if he had taken the time... to digest his reading and make it a part of his own mind.\(^8\)

*White Jacket* was not devoid of humor. The chapter entitled "A Dish of Dunderfunk" revealed the temperament of the crew to deride their shipmates. Melville cleverly included a few witticisms to relieve the basic solemnity of his narrative. The most amusing scene occurred when an unfortunate Down-Easter, after cooking his dish of "dunderfunk," had only a blackened tin for his pains. He was asked by a topman, "'Where are you going with that tear in your eye, like a travelling rat?'" and another replied, "'Oh! he's going home to Down East; so far eastward, you know, shirny, that they have to pry up the sun with a handspike.'\(^9\)

In these exchanges between shipmates, Melville caught the flavor of the sailors' language, their nautical phrases, and different dialects. He was as adept at displaying Jack Chase's rhetorical elegance, as the colloquialisms of the Down-Eastar.

According to Leon Howard:

The comic episodes... were all derived from James Berclier's *Life in a Man-of-War, or Scenes in Old Iron-sides*—a book which Melville kept at hand while writing *White Jacket* and used not only as a source for entire


scenes but as a means of jogging his memory and stimulating his invention. . . 10

Melville's role as a nautical romancer was two-fold. He subordinated incident and character to a central theme of incrimination, while, at the same time, elaborating incident and character to precipitate his thesis. With this in mind, he allowed no extraneous incidents to creep into the organization of his story. He intentionally kept the Navesink languishing in Rio harbor but made little mention of happenings ashore, except where they had a direct significance to later action in the ship. He wrote:

[1]n this book I have nothing to do with the shore further than to glance at it, now and then, from the water; my man-of-war world alone must supply me with the staple of my matter; I have taken an oath to keep afloat to the last letter of my narrative. 11

The voyage of the Navesink from Callao to Norfolk was a semi-fictional contrivance, as mentioned earlier. By shortening the period of his actual cruise in a man-of-war, Melville achieved a kaleidoscopic effect, and, simultaneously, reproduced every phase of life afloat. "In White-Jacket Melville shows an increased independence of the remembered facts of his own nautical adventures and a firmer reliance on his imagination." 12

10 Leon Howard, Herman Melville (Berkeley, 1951), p. 137.
12 Thorp, Herman Melville, p. 1.
He evolved his narrative through a dexterous manipulation of serenity and excitement, distress and delight, bathos and humor. He used the format of a log book in his short, concise chapters, complete within the boundaries of their titles. As the log book was a daily record of the position, weather, and routine of the ship, so White Jacket was a day-by-day account of the effects of the ship's position, weather, and routine from the point of view of the ordinary seaman. The action had a swelling undulation that propelled the account to its denouement as the ship sailed homeward bound. It is a briny book, filled with nautical verbiage, and the multiform duties of ordinary seamen in the days of sail.

He added the savor of the sea, the salty tang of the air, and the idiosyncrasies of the unknown deep to his shipmates. They were christened with names symbolical of either their station in the ship, or their personality, contributing to anonymity and universality as a class. Such picareseque names and figurative phrases as Tubbs, an ex-whaler, Cylinder, a gunner, Tawney and May-Day, negroes, Brush, captain of the paint locker, Sneak, Priming, and Nipcheese abound, lending a quality of homogeneity to White Jacket.

Cloaked in a white canvas jacket, Melville expatriated himself from true partnership with his shipmates, in order to present a candid picture of the man-of-war world itself. The jacket was a symbol of his nonconformity, his reserve, and his reluct-
ance to become intimately involved in this community of men adrift in an oaken city. Melville rebelled against naval discipline as it was imposed, and shared in the misery and abuse inflicted on the forecastle by unjust laws and regulations. "Oddly enough, in the books in which he presents himself directly to the public view—Typee, Omoo, Redburn, and White Jacket—Melville is the least concerned with his own personality; in these books he appears merely as the observing agent..." 13

The wearer of the jacket was the catalytic agent for an expose of the unhealthy and inhuman conditions existing in the frigate. It was "White Jacket" who voiced general iniquities in the naval service, but, for the most part, he was a passive participant in the activities of the forecastle. He wished to remain inconspicuous and thus avoid punishment, but when he desired to emphasize the sentiments of men subjected to ill-treatment, or the vagaries of the crew, he emerged as a key figure. Once Melville realized that by the very distinctiveness of his clothing he could not always remain a quiescent observer, he pointedly dramatized the jacket and its wearer.

He explained the incongruity of the jacket by placing the responsibility for its whiteness on the lack of paint. He furthered the impression of its oddity by engendering superstition in the hearts of the sailors at the sight of it in the rigging.

13Stone, Melville, p. 65.
It was the jacket which brought him close to death when the crew thought it the ghost of Bungs. Later he was blamed for other deaths in the ship and was an unwelcomed member of every mess section.

White Jacket is subject to the taunts and jeers of his mates, principally on account of his conspicuous jacket. Regarding it as a symbol of misfortune, they lay the accidents of the voyage to its owner's account. True, he is not called an Ishmael, but it is perhaps not accidental that he acquires the name of another Biblical misanthrope when Priming cries: "Damn you, you Jonah! I don't see how you can sleep in your hammock, knowing as you do that by making an odd number in the mess you have been the death of one poor fellow, and ruined Baldy for life, and here's poor Shenly keeled up."

His failure to give the jacket away, or auction it off to the highest bidder, symbolized his failure to become an integral part of the ship's company. He was an experienced seaman and could acquit himself well with the best of the crew, but his innate feeling of superiority, never openly expressed, but intuitively sensed by the crew, built an insurmountable barrier between them. The jacket represented this barrier, and its color served to strengthen and amplify his own conception of his anomalous position. His rejection by the crew because of his jacket was due partially to their primitive tendencies to reject what they could not understand, and disbar what was divergent from their accepted standards.

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14Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible, p. 47.
In *White Jacket* the power of indifference and injustice is represented, according to Mason.

He seems to have made a curious attempt to embody this awareness in a piece of symbolism that fails to communicate a conviction complete enough for his purpose. This is the recurring theme of the Jacket itself, the White Jacket manufactured for himself out of odds and ends by the hero of the narrative. Botched and stitched together in an effort to keep out the wet and the cold, it fails largely of its function and only succeeds in making the wearer conspicuous among his shipmates. The results are embarrassing; he is singled out for dirty jobs, and by very reason of his "difference" from the others he attracts to himself an irrational distrust and suspicion. Thus by his very self-consciousness and attempt at self-protection he acquires nothing but an undeserved ostracism, in-commensurate with what seems due to a character presented modestly enough as a handy and willing sailor with no desire to shirk his duties or advance himself at the expense of his fellows. Indeed it is only the protective sympathy of Jack Chase that keeps him out of permanent Coventry; and the accursed Jacket is more than once apostrophised as the secret of all his discomforts and distresses. In so far as it symbolises (as without doubt it must) the possession by Melville of some rare quality of character . . . it does not offend probability. Moreover its whiteness, allied perhaps sub-consciously with the theme of innocence, is a suggestive attribute which he was later to develop in detail. Nevertheless the extent of his ostracism seems disproportionate with the actual degree of resentment which a mere jacket, unaccompanied by more positive qualities or intentions, would be likely to arouse in a hard-headed ship's company, and it is difficult to feel with Melville in his treatment of the constant jacket theme that he has hit upon a truly convincing symbol or treated it luminously once he has chosen it.15

Another conception of the white jacket was that it repre-

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sent a pure and elevated soul in a contagious human climate, or it might have been the symbol of Melville's struggle to remain undefiled by the evil prevalent in a floating pest-house.

Thompson has called the jacket symbolically a garment of the conscience, 16 while Stovall states:

Melville had his reservations about the goodness of men in the mass. . . . Melville repudiated rank and all artificial distinction, but his attitude was delicately balanced. Consistently one finds in his fiction the hero who is among but not of—Melville among the Typees, . . . Whitejacket on the Neversink. . . .17

Wright, in discussing the imagery in White Jacket, says:

If the meaning of the white objects he mentioned varies from book to book, and within a single book sometimes becomes too uncertain to have consistent symbolic value, there is about them all a suggestion of the infinite. . . . the pockets, crevices, and voluminous folds of the white jacket are inexhaustible. . . . 18

"White Jacket" was physically above the turmoil of collective evil at his station in the main-top, but he was able to look down from his lofty post and objectively analyze it.

And I feel persuaded in my inmost soul that it is to the fact of my having been a main-top man, and especially my particular post being on the loftiest yard of the frigate, the main-royal-yard, that I am now enabled to give such a free, broad, off-hand, bird's

16Lawrence Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton, 1952), p. 43.


18Wright, Melville's Use of the Bible, p. 31.
eye, and, more than all, impartial account of our man-
of-war world. ... 19

His recognition of this floating community of collective evil was not warped and embittered to the extent that he was unable to exercise an objective prerogative. If he had not had his jacket for protection, it is conceivably reasoned, hardened seaman though he was, he could also have been sucked down into the maelstrom of depravity and evil. Thus, any future idealism would have been overthrown, and his endeavors cast into a dustpan of accumulated bitterness, serving no valid purpose or promise of salvation.

To increase the credulity of corporal punishment administered for minor derelictions of duty, Melville used the jacket as the springboard of his attack. The jacket brought him to the notice of the quarter-deck and made him the target for extra duty. Consequently, when a man was missing from his station, it was of dramatic moment that it should be "White Jacket." He narrowly escaped the lash; but his description of the agonies a man endured even before the cat was applied, epitomized the emotions of every man forced to bow down to unreasonable authority. This occasion, when the narrator is about to be unjustly flogged, according to Stone, "adds a personal poignancy to the indictment of corporal punishment, besides stating in terms of dramatic conflict the moral insight which is the book's leitmotif--the

individual's inalienable right to be considered as one."20

Melville displayed a weakness in his exposure of the inequity between crime and punishment, for it does not seem plausible that such dereliction of duty would pass unnoticed for nearly thirteen months. Although he detracted from the scene's authenticity by not making the offense more severe, he did succeed in depicting the helpless passion of man caught in a web not of his own design.

His narrative is brought to a climax with the triumph of man over the evil that surrounded him. The stifling, confining weight of the jacket was at last released in his dramatic fall from the main-top. The force and fidelity of this scene lay in the power of Melville's ability to verbalize the fury of his fall and the rush of the sea as it rose to envelop him in its demanding arms. The sea takes all and returns nothing. In this instance, the sea sought both the man and his jacket, but only the man survived. Man emerged triumphant over the forces of evil which had enslaved him. Melville, or "White Jacket," emerged victor over the sea and his enslavement in a system perpetuated by a coterie of naval officers, solidified in archaic principles.

Melville writes of his fall:

The blow from the sea must have turned me, so that I sank almost feet foremost through a soft, seething, foamy lull. Some current seemed hurrying me away;

20Stone, Melville, p. 133.
in a trance I yielded, and sank deeper down with a glide. Purple and pathless was the deep calm now around me, flecked by summer lightnings in an azure afar. 21

Newton Arvin remarks of this description:

Much of the effect of this extraordinarily hypnotic passage is due to the delicate skill with which Melville avails himself of phonetic color—the color, here, of labials and sibilants especially and the closed sound of long e—but much also to the subtly responsive rhythms (conveying the delicious sense of movement downward through a liquid medium, in such gently protracted phrases as "through a soft, seething, foamy lull"), as well as to the synaesthetic use of a word like "lull" for an experience of the sense of touch, and the sudden shift from the sense of motion to the perception of color in the fine words, "purple" and "azure." 22

Thorp states that this scene is an excellent example of Melville's "ability in transforming mediocre stuff into a work of art," 23 while Stone believes that the jacket is another device for artistic unity, its manufacture given in the first chapter and the penultimate chapter recounting how the jacket caused him to fall into the sea, where he cut himself free of it with his knife. The fall from the weather-top-gallant yardarm is obviously susceptible of symbolic interpretation: the moment of awful peril met with a moral act by which Melville is freed from the garment that had marked him among the crew, hampered his movements, and given him so little protection against the weather, each in its turn understood as the token of a wider meaning. Equally, the significance of the fall may be accepted as wholly aesthetic, with no wider frame of reference than the series of events of which it is one: the dramatic and

21 Melville, White Jacket, p. 497.
23 Thorp, Herman Melville, p. 415.
perilous moment in which the narrator cuts away the identity that has given us his story and takes his leave. 24

Lawrence Thompson, in "Slashing the Jacket," says:

Melville's fondness for Swift suggests the possibility that the image of the white jacket was not entirely unrelated, in Melville's mind, to the coat images in Swift's Tale of a Tub. More important, his allegorical framework permits him to develop the making and wearing and discarding of the white jacket as a symbol of his autobiographical attempt to patch up or find a substitute for his inherited Calvinistic theological beliefs in Platonic philosophical concepts and his final decision to discard all; to strip himself down to the "natural man," in the tradition of Rousseau and Tom Paine. 25

It was not within the scope of his fourteen months on board the United States for Melville to witness or endure all the incidents he crowded into the pages of White Jacket. Recent research has refuted some of the interpretations of Melville's adventures and experiences, the most important one being the scene of the memorable fall from the main-top. It has been previously noted that he owed an indebtedness to A Mariner's Sketches by Nathaniel Ames for this episode, but according to Perry Miller, he was also obviously acquainted with Charles Frederick Briggs's The Adventures of Harry Franco, published in 1839.

Several parallel situations, more than coincidental in their contrivance, exist between the two books. In both White Jacket

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24 Stone, Melville, p. 129.
25 Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God, p. 99.
and Harry Franco, the heroes return home by enlisting in the United States Navy, and there is marked resentment at the institution of corporal punishment, and to naval officers in general. Franco escapes a flogging by climbing the rigging and subsequently falling into the sea, after carbine fire literally cuts the rigging from under him. "White Jacket" escapes a flogging also, but Melville wished to give Jack Chase a prominent role in his liberation. Franco has a confidante in Jack Plasket, whose noble mien and disposition predate "White Jacket's" matchless Jack Chase.26

It was Melville's intention to awaken the public to the necessity of demanding equal justice for all men who sailed before the mast. Rather than catalog the injustices prevalent in the Navy, he used a voyage to depict a man-of-war's man in every situation from a calm to a storm, a race to a sham battle, and every climate from the tropics to the icy reaches of Cape Horn. The voyage, a symbol of the torturous meanderings of disillusioned hopes, augmented with soul-trying frustrations of the ordinary seaman, was the scaffolding for Melville's fertile pen. "A man-of-war's man is only a man-of-war's man at sea; and the sea is the place to learn what he is."27 was his tenet, to whom it was but

27 Melville, White Jacket, p. 493.
this old-fashioned world of ours afloat, full of all manner of characters--full of strange contradictions; and though boasting some fine fellows here and there, yet, upon the whole, charged to the comings of her hatchways with the spirit of Belial and all unrighteousness.28

He also compared the voyage around Cape Horn to the passage of man through life, and sounded its meaning when he said:

But, sailor or landsman, there is some sort of a Cape Horn for all. Boys! beware of it; prepare for it in time. Graybeard! thank God it is passed. And ye lucky livers, to whom, by some rare fatality, your Cape Horns are placid as Lake Lemans, flatter not yourselves that good luck is judgment and discretion; for all the yolk in your eggs, you might have floundered and gone down, had the Spirit of the Cape said the word.29

The symbolism in White Jacket can be conveniently summed up into the development of man's character from adolescence to maturity by the adoption of an obvious physical motif--the jacket of white--and the emotional peaks successively conquered accomplish this evolution into the emergence of a mariner, free of inhibitions and misgivings, by equating the significance of the voyage with the passage of life.

It is Stone's opinion:

Around the trope suggested by its subtitle, The World in a Man-of-War, the book is organized, and the Neversink is taken as a figure of the universe, foreshadowing the concept that was to be worked out with greater consistency and detail in Moby-Dick. White-Jacket is of course much closer

28 Ibid., p. 493.
29 Ibid., p. 137.
to autobiographical fact than the work that followed it—though here, again, the author re-arranged and invented according to his needs and drew on written sources—but its allegorical strain is more patent just to the extent that it is more arbitrary. A ship at sea and the world are both societies; the analogy is immediately to be seen, but the correspondence of the two societies is not necessarily illuminating, and a certain amount of what Melville has to say lacks the quality of inevitability which a good story always has.30

Melville was at war with himself when he enlisted in the United States. Could he succeed where others had failed in steering his life a true and safe course? Indecision and terror racked his heart at the proximity of that beach of wrecked desires. The tremendous magnitude of the external elements buffeted him and blinded him to clear and coherent reasoning. Unlike those of faint spirit and poor physical resources, who failed in this ultimate test of life, Melville pulled against the currents that guided him into white water. He feared the crash of his ship of life on an unknown reef, but found that at the crucial moment he possessed sufficient strength and power to challenge the Lorelei, and turned about for calmer and deeper water. He did not save his ship of life without some scars and damage. Stepping ashore at last, he scraped the barnacles and dross of the sea from his personality and caulked his bitterness, removing the visible injuries to his pride and self-esteem. He wrote White Jacket as a purge to a spirit now free, with the only

30 Stone, Melville, p. 128.
desire to "see wrong things righted, and equal justice administered to all." 31

31 Melville, White Jacket, p. 381.
CHAPTER VI

CROSS CURRENTS

The evil portrayed so relentlessly and graphically in *White Jacket* was a calculated collection of injustices designed to perpetuate a system dedicated to democratic ideals, but its very administration imperiled its existence. Melville, as an eye-witness and active participant in the naval system during his cruise in the *United States*, sought through a series of vignettes to reveal the source of this collective evil and its effect on sailors in the United States Navy. To him it was a two-edged sword. First, was the inability of *the people* to live humanly within the system of naval regimentation, and, second, the inability of the system to operate efficiently without inhuman treatment of *the people*. Obviously, both *the people* and the system needed each other for mutual support and operation, and, since neither could be dispensed with, it was essential that a more equitable means be devised for *the people* to live humanly within the framework of the system without jeopardizing the over-all efficiency of the system. The *Articles of War* and such regulations pertaining to
the operation of vessels in the United States Navy were promul-
gated to insure the fulfillment of the Navy's mission. If these
articles and regulations imposed hardships on the sailors, it was
understood that it was impossible to operate a navy effectively
without them.

Herman Melville attempted to prove that this conception was
obsolete and not in keeping with those democratic principles
upon which the nation was founded. When he served in the United
States, he was forced to keep his sentiments to himself. In later
years, when the idea of describing life in a man-of-war from the
standpoint of his position as an ordinary seaman occurred to him,
he poured forth his bitterness and anger unrestricted. Stone
asserts:

Added to his account of his adventures as a seaman in
the American Navy from August, 1843, to October, 1844,
was a propagandizing intention, directed particularly
against the practice of flogging. Melville's protest
against corporal punishment was neither original nor,
at the time, especially daring, since agitation for
the abolition of flogging had been going on for some
years. Dana's book, as we have noted, was published
the year Melville set out for the Pacific, and it con-
tained an account of flogging—though aboard a mer-
chantman—as eloquent in its own way in condemning
the brutal custom as Melville's treatment of the sub-
ject. 1

The Navy's aberration from Melville's understanding of funda-
mental democratic ideals formed the crux of his broadside. The
perseverid arguments he advanced in White Jacket against auto-

cratic cruelty were predated by the reform movement that already was gaining full momentum in the country. Thus, Melville was not alone in his soul-searching, for a general awareness and natural self-consciousness were evolving, and not necessarily confined to military matters.

Although he stated:

Be it here, once and for all, understood, that no sentimental and theoretic love for the common sailor; no romantic belief in that peculiar noble-heartedness and exaggerated generosity of disposition fictitiously imputed to him in novels; and no prevailing desire to gain the reputation of being his friend, have actuated me in anything I have said, in any part of this work, touching the gross oppression under which I know that the sailor suffers, it was hardly substantiated by his apostrophe. His desire was to see wrongs righted and sailors given the right of equal justice, but, at the same time, he was acting as their friend and romanticist.

The only justification for stratifying human beings into caste systems in violation of all principles of American democracy as he understood it, was that it best suited the exigencies of the service. Only under such inflexible rules, at times intolerable, could a community of five hundred men be kept in a state of military preparedness. Stringent measures had to be adopted aboard a man-of-war to control a crew of mixed morals and nationalities, not only from a disciplinary standpoint, but from

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a military standpoint as well. Melville conceded that the responsibilites of a commanding officer at sea demanded that his authority be supreme, but he argued for more judicious laws that would encompass both officers and men. He disclaimed any authority which did not equalize punishment for the quarter-deck as well as the forecastle. He wrote:

By the Articles of War, and especially by Article I., an American captain may, and frequently does, inflict a severe and degrading punishment upon a sailor, while he himself is forever removed from the possibility of undergoing the like disgrace; and, in all probability, from undergoing any punishment whatever, even if guilty of the same thing—contention with his equals, for instance—for which he punishes another. Yet both sailor and captain are American citizens.

It was understandable that there was always a need for men to man the ships, when an existing naval code cast fear into the hearts of men. Melville contended: "[T]he same principle that operates in hindering Americans from hiring themselves out as menial domestics also restrains them, in a great measure, from voluntarily assuming a far worse servitude in the Navy." Therefore, it was natural that when he wrote White Jacket, he included men of all races and nationalities, men whose loyalties were to no one but themselves. Patriotism was a rare thing to be found in a man-of-war, for most of the men had no family ties and drifted from one ship to another, caring little which flag it

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3 Ibid., p. 181.
4 Ibid., p. 476.
flew. Melville, with his experience in merchantmen, compared the two services and found the Navy wanting, because of its severe discipline, and, particularly, the practice of flogging, in addition to the lack of shore leave and low pay. There was little wonder that the majority of men who served in the Navy were indigent and depraved, as respect for human dignity was unknown. About all that could be said for the Navy was that it fed those who otherwise would have been wards of the state.

Officers admired:

a fellow without shame, without a soul, so dead to the least dignity of manhood that he could hardly be called a man. Whereas, a seaman who exhibits traits of moral sensitiveness, whose demeanour shows some dignity within; this is the man they, in many cases, instinctively dislike. The reason is, they feel such a man to be a continual reproach to them, as being mentally superior to their power. He has no business in a man-of-war; they do not want such men. To them there is an insolence in his manly freedom, contempt in his very carriage. He is unendurable, as an erect, lofty-minded African would be to some slave-driving planter.

As long as the officers could maintain their supremacy by enslaving the men, so long would despotism reign on the quarter-deck.

The capacity for evil was not limited to the malevolent efforts of individuals to promote it, but included outside support of constitutional laws under which the man-of-war operated. Melville, then, made his brief against civilization emphatic by

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5Ibid., pp. 485-486.
distinguishing between potential evil-doers, which were the intangible facets of evil, and, the evil done knowingly and with malicious intent, or, the tangible facets of evil. The intangible facets of evil were the suppressed violence and hatred that seethed inner man, exemplified when "White Jacket" was brought to the gratings for a violation of a regulation of which he was unaware. On evil which was deliberately inflicted, Melville explicitly and appropriately detailed his example in the case of a midshipman who maliciously caused an elderly seaman to be flogged.

There was no one to champion the seaman's cause, as Chase and Colbrook had championed "White Jacket's," and the unjust punishment was sustained. Under the prevailing regulations intercession by one of the people would have been futile and, for that matter, extremely foolhardy. The consequence of evil here was compounded by the Articles of War, as a part of the collective evil, aided and abetted by the commission of crimes, such as the act of the midshipman. By the same token, the Articles of War served to protect the agent of the crime from prosecution or even detection.

The main attack on evil was launched by Melville out of pity for the people, and their impotency and inability under the system to ameliorate or alleviate their condition. The point of approach Melville used in White Jacket was well-formulated, and lay in his probing and insistent questioning of the supreme
authority of the Haverseine's commanding officer.

There was no evil implied to the commanding officer as a brutal overseer or tyrant, or even a benign individual who used utmost discretion, humanity, and diplomacy in the exercise of his vested authority, but evil lay in the fact that such inhuman and archaic regulations and laws were at his disposal if he should deign to use them.

The naval fallacy that lashing, keel-hauling, and other forms of brutal treatment were necessary for utmost efficiency and discipline was disproved by Melville in citing the record of Admiral Collingwood of the British Navy:

He was an officer who held in abhorrence all corporal punishment; who, though seeing more active service than any sea-officer of his time, yet, for years together, governed his men without inflicting the lash.6

Melville was careful to note that Collingwood's men were, for the most part, products of British jails.

He believed that naval officers could command the respect of the crew if they were of the stature of Mad Jack or Admiral Collingwood. Unfortunately, in his opinion such noble officer types were in short supply. Accordingly, the cat-o'-nine-tails found strong advocates among those lacking in leadership ability.

The reasons advanced for the continuation of corporal punishment were based solely on the past. The United States Navy

6Ibid., p. 134.
operated under the code that there were always precedents for its rules and regulations, with the conclusion, in this particular case, that "since scourging has so long prevailed, some virtue must reside in it." 7

In distinguishing between the future and the past, Melville’s text was:

The world has arrived at a period which renders it the part of Wisdom to pay homage to the prospective precedents of the Future in preference to those of the Past. The Past is dead, and has no resurrection; but the Future is endowed with such a life, that it lives to us even in anticipation. The Past is, in many things, the foe of mankind; the Future is, in all things, our friend. In the Past is no hope; the Future is both hope and fruition. The Past is the text-book of tyrants; the Future the Bible of the Free. Those who are solely governed by the Past stand like Lot’s wife, crystallised in the act of looking backward, and forever incapable of looking before. 8

Flogging, to Melville, was the greatest debasement a man faced, other than hanging. He bore the scars on his back for the rest of his life as a public reminder that he had been whipped as an animal, the one most degrading punishment, which destroyed all human dignity.

Mason reiterates:

Whenever anything happens on board the Neversink, it has its roots in one kind or another of cruelty or indifference; the small comradeships, the enduring goodness even of a character like Jack Chase, are

7Ibid., p. 138.
8Ibid., p. 138.
lightweight beside the overpowering onset of the negative principle which was becoming Melville's obsession. The legal heartlessness of the Articles of War, the pedantic heartlessness of Surgeon Cuticle, the brutal heartlessness of the captain, the scheming heartlessness of Bland, accumulate upon Melville's sensibility until every incident, and every reasoned argument that it calls out, drives home with increasing intensity the insistent awareness of the presence of crude evil at the heart of human society.9

The fury of Herman Melville's pen ran the gamut from the ship's regulation of the only hours a man could smoke to the murderous practice of "flogging through the fleet." He attained some petty satisfaction in giving up smoking altogether rather than be regimented in this, the personal enjoyment of tobacco. It was a hollow victory, but in resolving the antimonies that result in a conflict between rules for military government and the dictates of ordinary, decent treatment of fellow beings, Melville ran afoul of the differences in thinking between what was good for military discipline and what was best for its proper administration. The matter of the smoking regulation only pointed out that he was determined the Navy would not escape from obloquy, whether merited or not. The heat of his passion affected his sound reasoning here, for he was surely aware that it was not an arbitrary, but a safety, order for the welfare of the ship and men.

In only one instance did he recognize any humanitarian qualities in the Reversink's officers. The Bungs episode evinced

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the Navy's policy of precautionary measures for men falling into
the sea, and the effort made to recover a man overboard.

*White Jacket* was a severely partisan narrative, and a mordant
castigation of the naval service. The heartless brutality prev-
valent in a man-of-war's world met with the full approbation of
the United States Navy, and was reinforced by the provisions of
the *Articles of War*. Until the social and moral inequities of the
naval service, which he marshaled with authenticity through the
pages of *White Jacket*, were balanced more evenly between officers
and men, Melville would be its most dangerous protagonist.

Coincidental with his diatribe against the Navy were his re-
marks in *Omoo*, written just three years before:

I do not wish to be understood as applauding the
flogging system practised in men-of-war. As long,
however, as navies are needed, there is no substi-
tute for it. War being the greatest of evils, all
its accessories necessarily partake of the same
character; and this is about all that can be said
in defence of flogging.10

According to Charles Roberts Anderson:

This comment, in a footnote, is apropos of the
French policy of not administering regulation
floggings to the boys on board their frigates.
Melville adds, with apparent pride, that on Ameri-
can and English ships the younger men are brought
right up to the gratings just as the seasoned
sailors are, and that they stand up to their
punishment like heroes. To this tough training
he attributes *[sic]* the superior bravery of the

10Herman Melville, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the
American and English seamen to the French.\footnote{11}\footnote{Charles Roberts Anderson, \textit{Melville in the South Seas} (New York, 1939), p. 492.}

Much expatriation about the influences of \textit{White Jacket} on subsequent social reform in the United States Navy has clouded the facts of its actual value, and the cogency of these assertions is no longer axiomatic. \textit{White Jacket} may be classed as intentional propaganda, or it may be summarily dismissed as only coincidence that after its publication certain far-reaching reforms were instituted in the Navy.

Samuel R. Franklin's comment in his \textit{Memories of a Rear-Admiral} in 1898, that "\textit{White Jacket} had more influence in abolishing corporal punishment in the Navy than anything else,"\footnote{12}\footnote{Samuel R. Franklin, \textit{Memories of a Rear-Admiral Who Has Served for More than Half a Century in the Navy of the U.S.} (New York, 1898), p. 64.} is without foundation. Long and heated debates on the subject were taking place in Congress before \textit{White Jacket} was written. Rear-Admiral Franklin's statement that it was placed on the desk of every congressman is also in error. At no time was Melville's name, or \textit{White Jacket}, mentioned during the long congressional controversy. During the Congressional Session of 1849-1850, a proviso for the abolition of corporal punishment was attached to a Naval Appropriations Bill, and passed both Houses of Congress, being made into law on and after September 25, 1850.\footnote{13}\footnote{\textit{U. S. Congressional Globe}, 31st Congress, 1st Session (1849-1850), XXI, 2057-2061; \textit{U. S. Statutes at Large}, IX, 515.} Melville
wrote Evert Duyckinck on the news of the passage of the bill: "Thank you for letter with the paper the other day. I am offering my devout jubilations for the abolition of the flogging law." 14

Unlike Rear-Admiral Franklin, who wrote in retrospect, Commander Thomas O. Selfridge, Sr. wrote in July, 1850, but did not publish, a castigation of Melville's narrative, saying:

We have never known a work, professing as this does to give a true picture of men & things, in which was to be found so many misnomers, misstatements & inconsistencies—so many improbabilities, false premises & false conclusions—so much of the marvellous & absurd. 15

The fact remains, however, that whatever the comments, Herman Melville's acute grasp of seafaring men in a man-of-war's world was one of the most realistic and faithful accounts of the United States Navy under sail. "White-Jacket shows Melville in complete command of the resources of his art, the narrative style precise or evocative at need and the rhetorical flights confined to the possible." 16 He did more than describe a ship and the men who sailed her; he put the reader in the ship as an ordinary seaman and let him live the cruise.

14 Herman Melville to Evert Duyckinck (Pittsfield, Massachusetts), October 1850, NYPL, Duyckinck Collection, quoted in Eleanor Metcalf, Herman Melville: Cycle and Ericycle (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953), p. 95.


16 Stone, Melville, p. 125.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

A gentle breeze filled the sails and the *Never sink* dipped her bow as the helmsman steered a course homeward bound. The Virginia Capes were broad on the beam when Herman Melville closed his annals of a man-of-war's man asea in a man-of-war's world. "Let us leave the ship on the sea," he said, "still with the land out of sight--still with brooding darkness on the face of the deep. I love an indefinite, infinite background--a vast, heaving, rolling mysterious sea!"

Nathalia Wright maintains:

In all that Melville wrote he was no nearer saying what he had to say at the end than he was at the beginning. His effect, like Shakespeare's, is one of extension rather than of volume. One receives the impression of spaces and distances, of approaches and retreats, of vistas opened but not entered upon. One is always traveling but never arrives. Structurally there is no end to

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his tales; they go on and on with the progression of an infinite series. 2

Herman Melville's technique as a social propagandist in nautical fiction was that of a painter, as he mixed the warm and cool colors of his characters in distinct arrangements and variable quantities. By using the warm colors in strong tones, his effect was more evident on the light areas. Thus, when Captain Clarret appeared on the quarter-deck with his face more florid than usual, the effect of military absolutism was highlighted against the paler tints of a crew, held in contempt by its officers. Or, similarly, when Melville desired to paint the heat of his anger at a decadent naval system, he employed the device of a seaman in a white canvas jacket. "White Jacket" remained in the background as the observer and inquisitor of naval discipline and routine until Melville wished to emphasize his challenge to naval policy.

He chose for his seascape the voyage from Callao to Norfolk, and presented his characters in tableaux against its backdrop. His palette was the Navesink, whereon the quarter-deck and forecastle were arranged in regimented classes of strong and weak mixtures of personality. On occasion he permitted them to commingle, but, for the most part, the gulf of their social caste was too wide to be spanned. Only when the officers "shipped their quar-

ter-deck faces* to exhibit a common enthusiasm with the men was there a blending of the two.

It was Melville's purpose to transfer to the pages of his narrative only the important truths, or blatant abuses, observed during his enlistment in the United States Navy. That he was unable to achieve this perfection was due to the fact that he could not ignore trivial factors in his earnest desire to include every detail for support of his declamation. Seeing the evil in man's nature that had propagated the Articles of War and other regulations to enslave the crews of men-of-war, his sense of perspective was blurred by bitterness; and he resorted at times to petty recriminations. In its entirety, however, White Jacket was a just and faithful account of naval life. It was only when a routine or regulation touched a personal habit, such as smoking, that he was unwarrantable in his criticism.

In the words of Thompson:

Melville had the talent for telling what life was like, aboard a man-of-war; but his "genius" probably impelled him to do two other things, simultaneously: with a prophetlike missionary zeal, he translated his narrative into a denunciatory propaganda tract in order to attack the brutal tyranny of the naval officers toward the enlisted men, and particularly to attack the cruel practice of flogging; but, covertly, he endowed both narrative and propaganda with allegorical connotations to illuminate his own personal and private religious reaction against his Calvinistic heritage. In White-Jacket, then, Melville again braided three different strands: the navy story, the propaganda tract, the allegory.3

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3Lawrence Thompson, Melville's Quarrel with God (Princeton, 1952), pp. 93-94.
Melville's contrasts were sharp and clear. The smooth, softly rippling ocean, or the motionless ship in port, were the surfaces he used for his presentation of extreme severities imposed by a naval regime. During the turbulent days rounding the Horn, or in other rough weather, he delineated the men, their stations, and the daily routine. He was as accurate in his description of the chain locker as when he explained the firing of twenty-four-pounders.

The horizon of his seascape was widened by the incorporation of events not within the scope of his experience, happenings that were infused into his canvas derived from other sources and other pens, and imaginary inclusions that reflected his valid acerbity.

William Pitt, in a speech before the House of Commons in 1783, said; "Necessity is the plea for every infringement of human freedom. It is the argument of tyrants." Naval officers defended their opposition to the abolition of flogging with the plea that it was the only means of maintaining an efficient military organization. Using White Jacket as his standard, Herman Melville upheld the words of Pitt with the full potency of his art.

He wrote Evert Duyckinck in 1850:

[T]aking a book off the brain, is akin to the ticklish

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& dangerous business of taking an old painting off a panel—you have to scrape off the whole brain in order to get at it with due safety—even then, the painting may not be worth the trouble.

His unsurpassed painting of naval life in the mid-eighteen-hundreds was well worth his painstaking reporting. With ceaseless fervor, the salt spray of his vituperation suffused the shape, value, and color of his work. When the Neverysink struck soundings at last, Herman Melville had also risen from the depths of a fathomless existence onto the sandy beach of maturity with the future stretched out before him.

Melville and his shipmates ended their cruise together, and in his nostalgic farewell to this chapter of his life, he said:

We have reefed the last topsail; trained the last gun; blown the last match; bowed to the last blast; been tranced in the last calm. We have mustered our last round the capstan; been rolled to grog the last time; for the last time swung in our hammocks; for the last time turned out at the seagull call of the watch. We have seen our last man scourged at the gangway; our last man gasp out the ghost in the stifling sick-bay; our last man tossed to the sharks. Our last death-denouncing Article of War has been read; and far inland, in that blessed clime whitherward our frigate now glides, the last wrong in our frigate will be remembered no more; when down from our mainmast comes our commodore's pennant, when down sinks its shooting stars from the sky.

White Jacket was Melville's man-of-war, which he sailed forth into the sea of humanity, all guns trained on the target of social

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5Herman Melville to Evert Duyckinck (Pittsfield, Massachusetts), December 13, 1850, NYPL, Duyckinck Collection, quoted in Jay Leyda, The Melville Log (New York, 1951), I, 401.
reform. Something else was required to give immortality to his writing. *White Jacket* has lived through the genius of Herman Melville. His one enlistment in the United States Navy was a conjunction to be long remembered. Herman Melville was an ordinary seaman in the United States for only fourteen months, but American literature is forever indebted to him for his extraordinary perception and sensibility in presenting a living portrait of the world in a man-of-war.
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