ANALYSIS

Redburn: His First Voyage (1849)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

"In *Redburn* (1849), the Adamic coloration of the ["jumping off" into] experience which most interested Melville became explicit…. The boy hero of the novel 'sets out from his mother's house in a state of innocence like that before the fall'; and the voyage to Liverpool and back comprises for young Redburn 'the initiation of innocence into evil.' Here we are at the second stage of Ishmael's soliloquy [in *Moby-Dick*]: the exploration of the degree of sickness in the world, of hospitals and jails and graveyards, of deserts and griefs and 'Virginia's Dismal Swamp.' For Melville and Redburn the swamp is not a comforting assurance of nature's variety, as it was for Thoreau. Much of the physical and spiritual disease the young lad discovers is packed symbolically into the demonic figure of the sailor Jackson; and Jackson is introduced eating a bowl of mush that 'looked for all the world like…the Dismal Swamp of Virginia.' With the appearance of Jackson, the consciousness alive in the story passes from the opening mood of elementary cheerfulness to the injured tone at the novel's center….

But the emphasis in *Redburn* is perhaps less upon what happens to the boy himself than upon the wretchedness and depravity that are uncovered as existing independently of him in the world; Redburn emerges with, at most, a sort of jocular but puzzled ruefulness… The Liverpool through which Redburn wanders, growing ever more appalled at its stench of corruption, may well remind us of the plague- and crime-ridden Philadelphia of [Charles Brockden Brown's] *Arthur Mervyn*; but Redburn is more the passive spectator than the ludicrous reformer. What Redburn beholds in Launcelot's-Hey, along the dock walls, and in 'the booble alleys' of Liverpool merely adds to the cluster of scabrous impressions that begin with the deceitful pawnshop keeper in New York and continued with the drunken sailor who jumps overboard on Redburn's first nightwatch and the plague which breaks out among the passengers. All these impressions become concentrated and intensified for Redburn, in the 'foul lees and dregs of a man' which were all that remained of the dying Jackson.

It is Jackson who reveals to Redburn the power of the scabrous, the terrible power of mental superiority when it possesses a nerve of the diabolic. 'He was the weakest man, bodily, of the crew'; but he was the crew's bully. His power operated through and not in spite of his wasted appearance; and the strength of his fascination for Redburn (who is aware, though only very dimly indeed, that Jackson in turn is covertly fascinated by him) suggests something not yet articulated about disease in the world at large. Yet, while Jackson is a wicked man, as Redburn tells himself in his Sunday-school language; there is a still deeper possibility—that 'his wickedness seemed to spring from his woe' [like Claggart in *Billy Budd*; Redburn prefigures Billy]….

This conjunction of sickness and power and wickedness and sorrow is the substance of *Redburn*: these and the impression they make upon the lad's character…. In Liverpool, taking with him the guidebook which his father had used to explore that very city 'years and years ago,' Redburn sets forth to follow his father through the town, 'performing a filial pilgrimage.' The sense of his father becomes so vivid that Redburn feels that, if he hurries, he will 'overtak[e] him around the Town Hall…at the head of Castle Street.' Both the hope and the guidebook are cheats; the guidebook is half a century out of date, and his father is not just around that corner or any other: 'He had gone whither no son's search could find him in this world.' This is the moment when Melville's hero realizes that he is an orphan; but since the realization comes together with the discovery of the amount of destructive unhealthiness in the world and in human nature, it has little of the hopeful joy of a liberation from family and history. It partakes rather of the tragic feeling of the lost son, or even, perhaps, of the son betrayed.

We ought to locate the moment chronologically not in 1839, when young Herman Melville actually did visit Liverpool, but ten years later, when he was investing that visit with meaning in the writing of

Redburn. For in that book, two perceptions which would be the making of Melville as an artist hovered on the verge of the fusion—the betrayal by the father and the corruption in Nature. These were the elements which decisively shaped Melville's treatment of the hopeful legend: what we may cautiously call the 'objective'—the knot of hostility in the very structure of created things; and the 'subjective'—the bubbling-up of whatever Melville had suffered during those dreadful weeks in 1831 when his bankrupt father went mad and died, leaving behind (abandoning, deserting, as it must have seemed to the bewildered child) a lost, helpless, poverty-stricken family. These were the elements and the perceptions which took the form of a growing resentment in Melville: something which only just begins to get into the writing of *Redburn*, but which had…to 'blow itself quite out' in the books that followed."

R. W. B. Lewis
The American Adam:
Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century
(U Chicago 1955) 136-38

"His next book, he knew, would have to be in the manner of his earlier successes—in a manner, that is, which Melville now felt he had outgrown. Not daring to indulge his philosophical passions, he dashed off his 'beggarly' *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1849). As he had hoped, it was an instantaneous success, and not the bad book he imagined it to be. There are themes in *Redburn* which reverberate throughout Melville's works: the inhumanity of man to man, which provoked Melville's anti-missionary propaganda in *Typee* and *Omoo*, and which would find expression again in *White Jacket*, is here denounced in the scenes of Liverpool squalor. Even the theme of the differentiation between reality and appearance, so important in *Mardi* and later in *Pierre*, Melville smuggles into *Redburn* in the hero's discovery that Captain Riga is not what he seems. The novel recounts a young man's first confrontation with the larger world, an encounter which matures him without making him cynical…. Redburn is the comic hero of Melville's only comic novel."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 724

"Melville's fourth and fifth books are generally bracketed together not only because he wrote them in one spasmodic burst of energy during the summer of 1849, but also because both tell of youthful voyages by ship, both share a certain jacket comically introduced in the narrative for symbolic reasons, and both have the same general tone or level of writing. Both increased and strengthened Melville's following. *Redburn* is his remembrance of things past, of time recaptured, in which the recapturing process itself is a significant element in the story. The Redburn who writes is a mature man looking at the young Redburn he was, and thus portraying with benevolent irony the innocence and the inadequacies of adjusting himself to the world of ship and of foreign land—a young boy completely on his own, faced with an indifferent, and even hostile, universe in which he must make significant accommodation. Both this book and *White-Jacket* are sea stories; the first about the merchant marine, the second about the United States Navy."

Howard P. Vincent
Guide to Herman Melville
(Charles E. Merrill 1969) 15-16

Michael Hollister (2015)