Books

# Call Him Herman

*Melville: His World and Work*, by Andrew Delbanco. (Knopf, 2006. 416 pages, $30)

By
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**Most biographers** labor under a surfeit of information about their chosen subjects, their challenge being to find the expressive shapeliness that will do full justice to the life lived. Approaching Herman Melville, the glowering titan of 19th-century American prose, Andrew Delbanco finds himself in the opposite position. For a writer of Melville's (now) undisputed stature, there is a striking lack of those primary materials that are the biographer's stockin- trade: letters, diaries, photographs . . . As Delbanco writes in his preface, "Most attempts to tell his life are notable for the discrepancy between the vividness of what he wrote and the vagueness of the figure who appears in writings about him."

But obstacles that might defeat another kind of interpreter have, in Delbanco's case, spurred the most relevant and revealing kinds of compensations. Casting Melville in profound ways as a man of his time, Delbanco, author of *The Death of Satan*, *The Puritan Ordeal*, and *Required Reading*, among other books of distinguished literary scholarship, reads the enigmatic life and work in the light of the contemporary history, in addition to searching for the author in his creative singularity. The double vantage works beautifully.

Enigmatic is the fitting word, I think, and with Melville it can be made to carry a certain weight of defeat.We want our great figures, whatever their art or occupation, to yield lessons and insights commensurate with their stature. Melville, flatly, does not. If the prose steps triumphantly off the page, the life itself shows little comparable drive or certainty. Rather, it offers a chronicle of expectations thwarted and greatness strangely mislaid.

Born in 1819 in New York City to a family flailing in financial uncertainty, Melville grew into a fairly boisterous, wandering young manhood, signing on to work on ships, knocking about in the South Seas (is there anything remotely comparable these days?), and gathering the experiences that would be recast in the highly autobiographical accounts *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) and start him toward his first literary notoriety.

The arc of Melville's early life shows him poised for possible success. Married to Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of the well-known Boston jurist Lemuel Shaw, well published, living in New York City, he experienced right at mid-century the phenomenal surge of inspiration that would issue in *Moby-Dick* (1851), one of the few bedrock works of our literature. Delbanco excels as bricoleur-historian here, weaving together what evidence he has of Melville's state of mind (his literary doings in the city, the ripening friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne, his family life, and the sudden enormous expansion of his reading) with the larger energizing tensions of a nation growing more polarized and volatile by the day.We can almost feel the novel emerging from the author's complex course corrections, the originally envisioned account of a whaling expedition rapidly assuming its more archetypal lineaments. At the same time, Delbanco makes clear how Melville's language, his idiom, rises to the new task, picking up its dramatic pulpit cadences but also admitting the taxonomic fervor that expresses so much about his burgeoning culture.

This is where the historian's eye and passion serve the biographer's enterprise so well. Explosive events and works of art are not generated in isolation. *Moby-Dick* — the sui generis fission of that prose — makes a good deal more sense once we understand some of the larger contexts, like the face-off over slavery and the wildfire expansion of the nation, epitomized in the foreground by the astonishing growth of New York City.

The city where Melville lived and worked for the greater part of his life — we forget this — transformed between the writer's birth and death from a bustling urban enclave at the lower edge of Manhattan to the electrified world city we would recognize today. Melville's writing manifests the charge. As Delbanco notes,"His sensibility . . . had been formed by a city — specifically by New York City, where he learned to write with the miscellaneous profusion of a magazine, sending out in divergent directions short chapters that spill onto each other like the overlapping advertising posters on an urban wall."

But I spoke of enigmas, and there are many to contemplate in Melville, from the remarkable hothouse ripening of his masterpiece to the fact of its utterly disappointing initial reception. During Melville's lifetime, the book "never came close to selling out its first edition of 3,000 copies." How do we explain this? Do we say that the nation was simply not ready, lacking the culture of critics who could steer readers toward its immensity; or that the prose would have to slowly form the taste that would recognize its greatness? Whatever the reason, the commercial failure of that great book did much to determine the rest of Melville's career.

Looking back with the discerning eye of posterity, we note that Melville went on to write such works as *Benito Cereno*, *Billy Budd*, and that masterful tale of passive-aggression (or is it a harbinger of nonviolent resistance?), "Bartleby, the Scrivener," and we are apt to deem the output more than worthy, if not quite touching the high bar of Moby-Dick. Discussing these works, their strikingly pared-down prose, Delbanco manages to be thematically astute while at the same time avoiding the ingested-textbook feel we get from so many critical biographies.

But praise these writings as he will, our biographer must also hew to the subject's own perspective. Simply: The remaining decades of Melville's life felt, to him, his family, his publishers, like an ongoing failure. As those publishers grew less and less willing to stake bets on him, as he sank into his own home brew of drink-fueled bitterness, he took employment with the United States Custom Service. For the last two decades of his life, Melville toiled at what could not have been much more gratifying than a scrivener's post, writing little — mainly poetry. He endured ailments and grave sorrows (two of his five children died in his lifetime, his firstborn, Malcolm, a suicide), and he became the glumly brooding figure we see in the late photographs and paintings, seemingly without any prophetic inkling that he would come to be chiseled into granite as one of our few true masters. He died in 1891.

How can so large a talent be so blind to its larger fate? Indeed, how can such relative failure attend on such greatness? More enigmas. But Delbanco accords his Melville a great deal of dignity, showing the man in the full texture of his time and place, and tracing the growth and change of mind and spirit through the work, while at the same time capturing the life in its universal context of unknowns.We never feel he is subjecting the writer to the warping pressures of academic agenda or using him to score points for any team. The effect — vitally bracing — is to put the mystery back where it belongs, mainly in the art that overpowered dreary contingency again and again, even when it must have appeared to the artist that the

opposite was true.

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