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This essay provides an alternative account of Melville's later career, one that resists the implicit Romantic privileging of literary labor over other forms of work and complicates the familiar late-Melvillean narratives of disillusionment, withdrawal, nostalgia, and transcendence. Contrary to any perceived professional disappointments, Melville the writer and retired District Customs Inspector continued to experiment across a variety of formal approaches, personas, and geographical settings, working through his retirement to develop late writings that were not solely reacting to the indifferent world "out there," but actively engaged in responding to the contingencies of his immediate social and political environment. Melville approached literary composition and revision, in his later years, as an extension of (rather than a release from) other forms of work, an approach that makes his writings remarkably imbricated and coextensive with one another. Emerging from these later works is not any programmatic political or aesthetic testimony or attitude, but rather a sustained experimental exploration of alternative textual interdependencies, of an ongoing and vital entanglement in the world.

Helen Small has suggested that "thinking about old age has always tended towards extremes of optimism and pessimism, often in close conjunction." For every "conventional negative association of 'old age' there is an equally recognisable counter-association: rage/serenity; nostalgia/detachment; loss of capacity or right to labor/release from a long life of labor" (2). Discussions of Melville's later life and writings have often been framed in such terms. Robert Milder sees the transition from *John Marr* to *Billy Budd* as a switch from "nostalgia" to "transcendence" (1), while Hershel Parker, in dramatizing Melville's familiar disillusionment with both job and his spouse, Elizabeth Shaw Melville (referred to in the family as "Lizzie"), claims that "Lizzie knew so little of her husband that she could assert that his work at the Customs House was still 'a great thing for him' when in reality it was wearing him down, more brutally every year" (871). Melville's last years continue to make for maudlin reading: a disappointed and forgotten genius (the story goes) wanders the banks of the Hudson, writes indifferent poetry, and longs for the day when he can stop work and dedicate what energy he has left to

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that resurgent final prose-work *Billy Budd*.[1] Those governmental jobs, as deputy Customs Inspector, and then District Inspector, have proven particularly difficult to assess. For the last twenty years of his working life, Melville not only performed work that was beneath him (read *The Night Inspector* by Frederick Busch for confirmation of that),[2] but also work that seems to compromise the progressive political credo of his writings. While he might have offered a "meditation on the meaning of the state of exception as it pertains to America" (Spanos 4), he was also apparently making sure, on a daily basis, that the Ship of State was paid its dues.

This essay considers what happens to the later texts (as well as the biography) when the contours of this portrait are reimagined and redefined, sketching an alternative narrative for Melville's later career, one that resists the implicit Romantic privileging of literary labor over other forms of work and complicates the familiar late Melvillean narratives of disillusionment, withdrawal, nostalgia, and transcendence. Of course, a wistful nostalgia does permeate *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), and *Billy Budd* does gesture upwards, but there is also something else at play in these texts—something more self-consciously measured and genial, akin to what John Bryant has described as the "warm sparking of Melville's artful repose" (267). In spite of any perceived professional disappointments, Melville the writer and retired customs inspector continued to experiment across a variety of formal approaches, personas, and counterpoint geographies,[3] working through his retirement to develop late writings that were not solely reacting to the indifferent world "out there," but actively engaged in responding to the contingencies of his social and political environment. Melville developed *Timoleon* (1891), *Weeds and Wildings Chiefly: With a Rose or Two* (unpublished), *Billy Budd* and *John Marr* more or less conterminously, and when read in conjunction, and in the context of Melville's retirement sensibility, they help readjust our sense of old-man-Melville occupying "a convent-like retreat . . . carefully protected against incursions from the disorderly world without" (*Exiled Royalties* 223). Melville approached literary composition and revision, in his later years, as an extension of (rather than a release from) other forms of work, an approach that makes his writings remarkably imbricated and coextensive with one another. What emerges from these later works is not any programmatic political or aesthetic testimony or attitude, but rather a sustained exploration of alternative allegiances and interdependencies—of an ongoing and vital entanglement with the world.

Billy Budd scholarship is indebted to Harrison Hayford's and Merton M. Sealts's landmark genetic text (1962). Dissatisfied with Raymond Weaver's early edition of the novella, they returned to the unfinished and jumbled manuscripts that had been kept in a family breadbox for decades following Melville's death

and illustrated for the first time how interconnected these final projects eventually became; how they resonate both outwards and inwards to one another in something akin to a textual feedback loop.[4] They revealed that Melville had initially intended a much shorter version of *Billy Budd* to be included in *John Marr and Other Sailors*. Unable to let the piece go in 1888, he picked up various strands of the story, extended them, and began blunting the acuity of their moral legibility, opening up ever widening margins of possible interpretation. In what the editors call Stage B of revision, Melville transformed Billy, the wily old mutineer of the ballad, into the youthful "illiterate nightingale"; at Stage C, he endowed Claggart with his malevolent grudge; and in subsequent revisions, he bought Captain Vere forward to deliver the final, fraught sentence. As the project took shape, Melville freighted each character with increasingly conflicting responsibilities for Billy's downfall—rewriting, crossing out, and even overlaying palimpsestic redrafts (with pins) as he went.

The genetic text revealed the construction of *Billy Budd* as a process of meticulous revision and suspension, an observation that was then both intuited and capitalised on for the purposes of several subsequent landmark interpretations.[5] John Wenke, for example, argued that "even in the latest fair-copy inscriptions—at stages F and G—Melville was not simply tinkering with words and phrases but making decisive alterations that seem *designed* to thwart determinate readings."[6] And Barbara Johnson, in her well-known essay "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*," noted how "the story ends by fearlessly fraying its own symmetry, thrice transgressing its own 'proper' end." What *Billy Budd* demonstrates, according to Johnson, "is that authority consists precisely in the impossibility of containing the effects of its own application" (569). Melville's retirement provides an unexplored context for such apprehensions of deferral, fraying, and transgression through his recuperative experimentation between alternative forms of labor and between alternative and coextensive texts. In writing his final works, Melville was not simply relishing the opportunity to turn his back once and for all on a twenty-year customs career; and in a similar way, *Billy Budd* does not represent a clear-cut decision to revert from poetry to his supposedly preferred medium of prose. Rather, he held these differing perspectives and approaches in collaborative suspension, often articulating an idea in one forum so as to realize its generative potential in another. These final texts and contexts function as discursively resistant, multifaceted anatomies of one another rather than as inevitable or discrete literary or biographical events. Gilles Deleuze has suggested that while "we belong to the *dispositifs* and act within them," by which he means the material and social apparatuses that produce the human subject, the crucial aspect of this self-production is our ethical imperative to apprehend, and as far as possible, resist any pre-ordained subjectival patterns. What matters

ultimately, "is not what we are but rather what we are in the process of becoming—that is the Other, our becoming-other" (164). Contra any finality or resolution, Melville's late works intensify a preoccupation with an analogous process of intersectional dispersal and recombination, continually striving towards junctures of indeterminacy in which new permutations might coalesce. Adjectives such as "late," "last," and "final" have a tendency to instil this part of his career with a linear determinism and self-realization, retrospectively curtailing the multifarious continuities that Melville began mobilizing at this moment. His retirement did not release him into a terminal creative garret but rather provided another series of parallax perpectives with which to experiment with further proliferating connections. "Late Melville" extends beyond its function as biographical epithet, signalling instead the cultivation of a vital untimeliness—an insistance on never quite arriving at the stipulated place, time, attitude or disposition. The only promise to be found in these texts is the radical imperative to apprehend the promise of one more provisional combination.

Melville's Retirement and the Politics of the Custom House

Melville was partly relieved to stop work and partly frustrated with his failing body, but he was also aware of the social and political pressures that were pushing men like him out of the workforce by the mid-1880s. His job, sometimes exasperating, had been a significant and complicated part of his life for nearly two decades: it was neither something he merely tolerated or wanted desperately to escape. Much credence for the view of Melville as professionally frustrated—as fundamentally at odds with his day job—is drawn from a single letter written in 1873 by Melville's brother-in-law John Hoadley to the newly elected Republican Secretary of the Treasury. Elections usually spelled trouble for civil servants, and Hoadley argued that Melville, working under impossible circumstances, ought to be allowed to avoid the inevitable round of political sackings. Cast in this letter as saintly defender of free commerce and governmental interests, Melville was apparently surrounded by "low venality" and repeatedly offered bribes, "quietly returning money which has been thrust into his pockets behind his back, avoiding offence alike to the corrupting merchants and their clerks and runners, who think that all men can be bought" (*Melville Log* 731). In trying to save Melville's job, Hoadley necessarily overstated the case, providing in turn one of the more highly politicised accounts of the writer we have. Given the nature of his work, it seems naïve to think that Melville remained morally impervious to this most notoriously byzantine of occupations. We also know that he was not so remote as to prevent him handing out signed copies of his works to ease his social

passage into this profession in 1865 (see Parker 604–05). Melville knew as well as the next Customs House employee how to negotiate the patronage system, and he may well have even sympathised with his more unscrupulous co-workers. Many of his colleagues saw such backhanders as a just means of remuneration and retaliation for, as one prominent reformist put it, the "despotic and piratical use of official authority" by the Republican administration in generating funds (Eaton 26). Customs Inspectors like Melville were forced to pay protection money or risk losing their jobs: two percent of their annual wages went to the New York Republican State Committee and, for two years leading up to the general election in 1885, a similar amount went to the national Republican Party (see Garner 12). A report from 1881 sympathised with the plight of corrupt inspectors, arguing that their current state of affairs was the direct result of being "unprotected against arbitrary exactions from their salaries" (Eaton 26). John Hoadley's diagnosis of the "low venality" that surrounded Melville necessarily pandered to the Republican administration's view that the problem lay with the faulty morals of employees, and not with their own extortions.

Andrew Delbanco narrates the story of Melville's retirement as an escape from morally bankrupt colleagues and a demeaning position, enabled by his wife's timely inheritance:

> Melville's tone in *Billy Budd* toward the cheats and sneaks among its minor characters suggests that his mood toward his colleagues at the Customs House was more weary than incensed. There was something grim about holding a job in which graft was a matter of course, since to acquiesce was demeaning while to hold oneself aloof was self-punitive. He retired on the strength of his wife's inheritance from her aunt Martha Marett, who died in 1878, and her half brother Lemuel Shaw, Jr. who died in 1884. (292)

Seven years before Melville retired, the family received the substantial sum of $20,000 from Marett: Lizzie inherited $10,000, with the children dividing the remainder between them (Parker 836). If Melville's job was as burdensome as Delbanco claims, why did he not seize upon this increased financial stability and retire in 1878, or at least take this opportunity to search for something else? Melville's retirement seems difficult to attribute directly to the inheritance of 1884 because payment—amounting to some $80,000—was only made in the fall of 1888, three years after he stopped working (895). For the last few years of his career, Melville did not go to work merely out of financial necessity.

Why retire in 1885, then? In January 1886, Lizzie explained to Kate Lansing that "for a year or so past he has found the duties too onerous for a man of his years, and at times of exhaustion, both mental and physical, he has been on the point of giving it up, but recovering a little, has held on, very naturally anxious to do so, for many reasons" (Parker 878). Few accounts of his attitude

to his job exist, but we may venture a few reasonable speculations concerning the reasons for wanting to continue. Melville patrolled a Manhattan waterfront that at this time constituted one of the great thresholds of transnational exchange; an increasingly complex epicenter of developing global flows. As representative of the New York Custom-House, he found himself occupying a politically conflicted and no doubt intriguing role as apparent gatekeeper of the national interest, given his consistent penchant for questioning national exceptionalisms (see for example Spanos 1–15). He was also surrounded by men who spoke the language of the sea, and as Stanton Garner speculates, in "some ways, it was an agreeable occupation: close to the ships and the seamen he loved" (291). His work thus offered him a point of access to the dynamic and absorbing arena that had always occupied such a central role in his life and writing.

Disadvantages aside, his occupation allowed him to be paid to do what he had always done: observe and interact with a city that had continually fascinated him. No wonder he was in some ways keen to hang on. Melville's job, unlike Nathaniel Hawthorne's, did not necessarily carry with it the acute "suspicion that one's intellect is dwindling away; or exhaling, without your consciousness, like ether out of a phial" (38). Neither was this the alienated work of a Bartleby. Melville, working alongside a partner, was required to tend his district from sunrise to sundown six days a week. During slow periods, it was not necessary that both men be on duty, meaning that Melville often had half days to himself. According to Garner, his colleagues "could mind the office while Melville tended to his personal business of inspecting bookstores, combing through libraries and art galleries, strolling through streets to observe the human comedy and tragedy enacted there and to peer into the store windows, or perhaps even returning home for lunch" (281).

This slightly more generous account of Melville at work casts a very different light on the following letter written by Lizzie on 29 July 1885 (the year of his retirement):

> Herman's position in the Custom's House is in the Surveyor's Department—a *district inspector*—his work is all on the uptown piers nearly to Harlem, and he has held office since Dec. 1866. Of course there have been removals, and he may be removed any day, for which I should be very sorry as apart from anything else the *occupation* is a great thing for him, and he could not take any other post that required head work, & sitting at a desk (Parker 871)

Lizzie's insistence that Melville's "*occupation*" was a "great thing for him" ought to be taken seriously, rather than dismissed—as Parker dismisses it—as the misjudgement of an estranged and insensitive wife. Parker, in one of the more troubling passages from his biography, insists that "Lizzie knew so little of her husband that she could assert that his work at the Customs House was still 'a great thing for him'

when in reality it was wearing him down, more brutally every year" (871). But Lizzie's letter implies that conjugal communication channels were open; Melville kept her up to date with news of his work—of these imminent "removals" or redundancies. It also suggests that even as late as July, the option of Melville's retirement did not immediately present itself. Note also that Lizzie does not seem at all concerned about the financial impact this removal might have on the family.

Lizzie was concerned for her husband because in March 1885, the Democrat and former Governor of New York Grover Cleveland had become the twenty-second President of the United States. With the new administration came the usual round of political dismissals (Hawthorne's sackings are a case in point). The figurehead of what would become known as the pro-business Bourbon Democrats, Cleveland ushered in a new era of reforms that sought to eradicate barriers to competition and free trade. This movement also coincided with the appearance of another social phenomenon that levied distinct pressures on Melville's position. William Graebner suggests that "in the two decades before 1900, age discrimination grew virulently, as the owners and managers who made personnel decisions for American corporations redefined the work force to achieve increased efficiency" (15). Even as a public sector worker, Melville would have felt the ubiquitous impact of this increasingly competitive marketplace. Reforms within the civil service had already been implemented during the late 1870s and early 1880s in order to keep up with the demands of an accelerating and increasingly competitive economy. The most significant of these, the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883, was a major step in transforming what until then had previously been a spoils system into something that began to resemble a meritocracy (Grossman 259). Melville's job had been secured through the patronage of Henry A. Smythe, his former travelling companion, who wrote a successful letter of support to the Republican Secretary of the Treasury in 1866 (Parker 603). By the 1880s, a district inspector like Melville was considered part of the old guard, representative of a corrupt, exclusionary and backward system. As the new Democratic administration came to power in early 1885, a younger and more vociferous workforce was beginning to dominate America's job market, clamouring for better working conditions, better pay, and for the older generation to step aside.[7] This offers an alternative explanation as to why so many of Melville's late poems locate themselves either in the classical past or in the midst of the Renaissance—namely the defining moments of the patronage system. Melville plays on the rear-guard social and economic stance he occupies in a poem such as 'At the Hostelry' when he experiments explicitly with the address of flattering poet to patron: 'TO M. DE GRANDVIN . . . Pardon me, Monsieur, in the following sally I have endeavoured to methodise into literary form, and make

consecutive, upon one of your favourite themes, something at least of that desultory wit, gaiety, knowledge, and invention so singularly yours" (*Works* 355).

The late nineteenth century also saw retirement increasingly touted as a "panacea for the ills that beset . . . particular fields" (Graebner 13). For business leaders, retirement meant a younger and more efficient workforce capable of learning new skills, as well as higher rates of staff turnover; for the church it meant a more galvanised and dynamic priesthood; and for the millions of new immigrants who continued flooding into New York City, it meant work.[8] In 1878, Carroll Wright made the first serious attempt to count the number of people out of work and his 1887 report introduced the "idea of a permanent and potentially dangerous residual unemployment" (Graebner 16; see also Leiby 66). As Graebner puts it, this allowed "employers, scientific managers, economists, and physicians to emphasise the benefits of employing superior workmen and the liabilities of keeping inefficient ones, instead of seeking to use all workers in a tight labor market" (16).

One of the most divisive public debates at the time of Melville's retirement centered on officers in the military. A *New York Times* article of 1881, "Compulsory Retirement," argued that "even granting the serviceable qualities of all the veterans, the fundamental fact to note is that their retirement is the only way just now to secure that steady and equable flow of promotion without which any military service will first fret with disappointment and then stagnate with despair" (np). This argument acquired its potency from the increasingly competitive and mobile workforce. In almost all sections of the working population, retirement was purportedly key to preventing economic stagnation. If senior positions became more readily available, so the argument went, more individuals would be galvanized into working harder, increasing efficiency within the institution and in society as a whole. Whether or not he was explicitly asked to hand in his notice, it seems likely, given the sustained upward pressure of the labor market, that Melville was beginning to feel increasingly anachronistic. During the last years of his career, a confluence of pressures was brought to bear: fatigue, ill health, and weariness—but also administrative change and an increasingly pervasive ageism. At last, in December 1885, and with a host of conflicting sentiments, he was compelled to bring his twenty-year career to a close.

The Posthumous Papers of a District Customs Inspector

Melville wrote one of the earliest cancelled drafts of 'Billy in the Darbies' (composed in the immediate aftermath of his retirement), on the back of a manuscript sketch called "Daniel Orme," a story, like *Billy Budd*, initially intended for inclusion in the *John Marr* collection:

> In his retirement the superannuated giant begins to mellow down into a sort of animal decay. In hard, rude natures, especially such as have passed their lives among the elements, farmers and sailors, this animal decay mostly effects the memory by casting a haze over it; not seldom, it softens the heart as well, besides more or less, perhaps, drowsing the conscience, innocent or otherwise. (Parker 882)

On one side of this draft, we have this meditation on the "animal decay" of a retiree and on the other, we find the earliest versions of a ballad about the impending execution of an old sailor—a Melvillean hanging to the beheading that Nathaniel Hawthorne used as an analogy for his own loss of a patronage position. Hawthorne's customs career was consigned to a similar fate to that of Melville's; he fell victim to the politicised accusations of corruption that followed the victory of the Whig President Zachary Taylor in 1849. Smarting at having been so abruptly 'turned out of office,' Hawthorne wrote to Longfellow that he felt 'pretty well since [his] head has been chopt off' (*Letters* 283). A beheading subsequently appeared in the alternative title the narrator offers for *The Scarlet Letter* (published a year later): 'THE POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF A DECAPITATED SURVEYOR" (43). Melville's last works, analogously bound up with a personal laboring history, are the product of a sixty-six-year-old man coming to terms with his own ousting from the workforce. He was not simply a writer newly liberated from tedious work and finally free to create. Melville was dwelling on what it means to stop work when he started writing "Billy in the Darbies." The older Billy, not the youthful credulous Billy of the prose, sings of the sentence just passed down to him and his imminent fate:

> Good of the chaplain to enter Lone Bay
> And down on his marrow-bones here and pray
> For the likes just o' me, Billy Budd.—But, look:
> Through the port comes the moonshine astray!
> It tips the guard's cutlass and silvers this nook;
> But 'twill die in the dawning of Billy's last day.
> A jewel-block they'll make of me tomorrow,
> Pendant pearl from the yardarm-end
> Like the eardrop I gave to Bristol Molly—
> O, 'tis me, not the sentence they'll suspend.
> Ay, ay, all is up; and I must up too,
> Early in the morning, aloft from alow. (*Billy Budd* 132)

Limping along in uneven triple metre, this singer has a convincing solemnity about him. The romantic muse, "moonshine," filters through the port and illuminates this garret, inspiring one final poetic utterance. But Billy's lyrical ballad hangs in the balance: he suspends "suspend" between a reprieve and a

hanging; "Die in the dawning" carries the paradox of ceasing at the beginning; and "aloft from alow" inverts Billy's fated progression from cell to yardarm. These reversals partially dislodge the sequence of events; they serve as waylaying reprieves, confusing Billy's advance towards his final fate and confusing any sense of release or transcendence by weaving together a tangled network of preoccupied associations: a nautical "jewel-block" becomes a "pearl" that dangles from the yardarm, before transforming into an earring that hangs from the ear of an old flame, Bristol Molly. He thereby defers his own death by suspending a string of connections that lead away from the terminal reality of the noose and back to dry land. The ballad concludes with Billy's moving request: "Just ease these darbies at the wrist, / And roll me over fair! / I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist." In his final somnolent state, Billy apparently confuses his manacles for the weeds that will eventually twist about his body when he is rolled overboard. The ballad thus begins with him trussed in the manacles of the judiciary and ends with him twisted in the fronds of natural decay—and Billy, condemned, dangles somewhere in between, gently agitating against the stasis that will define his inevitable end.

Something else is going on here as well though. Notice that when this "moonshine" (not moonlight) comes through the port, it "tips" the guard's cutlass and "silvers this nook." Is that really the solemn poetic light of the moon? Or is it contraband liquor (this usage of "moonshine" was common by 1885)?[9] Is the apparently anonymous guard, or even the chaplain, supplying this old sailor on the quiet here? It certainly makes you rethink the last line of the revised ballad: "I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist." One explanation is that he may be inebriated (there is even some "port" mixed in, too).

The very things that aestheticize and sanctify this solemn creative garret of the sovereign singer—the priest, the moonshine silvering the nook, tipping the guard's cutlass (just by his trouser pocket)—are all very pretty and pious, but they are also a decoy. The interjection "But look!" forces a metrical pause over a line break, and while our solemn attentions are drawn, the ballad starts quietly dealing on the sly. The speaker relies both on his listeners sympathetically following the meandering contours of his metrics and on their getting distracted by a transcendent poetic light that emanates through the port. But this is the song of a treacherous old sailor, and he has been trying to smuggle something past us here as someone who knows the tricks of the trade. Again, Melville wrote this just as he was forced into inhabiting what he'd begun ambivalently referring to as his realm of 'unobstructed leisure.'[10] And he writes a ballad that refers us back to Melville's own former place of work: the "low venality" of the docks of Manhattan, populated by those "corrupting merchants and their clerks and runners, who think that all men can be bought."

"When buds their bosoms just disclose": Melville's Late Intertexts

In establishing this collusion between his solitary singer and a shadowy extra-authorial presence, Melville hints at the type of experimentation he undertakes in these final years. This is not the work of a downtrodden retiree—it is the light-footed repose and agility of a writer engaged in a process of creative interplay, who scans his predicament for new thresholds of expression and potential intersections across apparently separate texts, personae, and settings. It also enumerates one more way in which Melville situates his writing askance the priorities of an exceptional national framework; in this instance experimenting with a black market poetic persona that seeks to put one over on the officialdom.

By far the least read work of Melville's later years, though composed in tandem with *Billy Budd*, is *Weeds and Wildings Chiefly: with a Rose or Two*. If he returns once more to ships and sailors in *Billy Budd*, Melville in *Weeds* plays on ideas of having been put out to pasture or having gone to seed. As Wyn Kelley suggests, "these poems include flowers, children, small animals, and the influences of pastoral scenes and narratives . . . They exhibit wit affection and charm . . . On the surface, at least, they do seem less fraught with conflict than Melville's published collections" (171); indeed, "it is hard to recognize or locate the Melville many readers know in these seemingly charming ditties and musings on flowers" (172). One way to approach this collection is (to adapt Melville's own metaphor here) to read it as a kind of adjunct literary seedbed—a forum in which he tested and cultivated certain seminal ideas in order to test their durability in alternative settings. This creative process is continuous with an idea put forward by Harrison Hayford in "Unnecessary Duplicates: A Key to the Writing of *Moby-Dick*" (1978). Hayford's apprehension of certain textual anomalies or doublings in *Moby-Dick* led him to claim that the novel is the result of Melville having spliced separate narratives together (thus accounting for the often erratic formal qualities of the work). The interrelated network of texts that Melville cultivates as at this moment also bear the traces of a coterminous, mutually constitutive process of production, suggesting that at this late stage, Melville continued to network his literary labors across seemingly discrete narratives, thematics, and forms.

"The Rose Farmer," one of the longest poems in *Weeds and Wildings*, and one that geographically decamps its narrative to the Middle East, relays a meandering narrative of a retiree who inherits a rose farm from a recently passed friend. He is unsure how to manage and market his crop:

> But, ah, the stewardship it poses!
> Every hour the bloom, the bliss

Upbraid me that I am remiss.
For still I dally,—I delay,—
Long do hesitate, and say,
"Of fifty thousand Damask Roses,—
(For my rose-farm no great matter),—
Shall I make me heaps of posies,
Or some crystal drops of Attar?
To smell or sell or for a boon
Quick you cull a rose and easy;
But Attar is not got so soon,
Demanding more than gesture breezy.
Yet this same Attar, I suppose,
Long time will last, outlive indeed
The rightful sceptre of the rose
And coronations of the weed. (*Weeds* 45)

The work or "stewardship" involved in running this farm seems daunting, and with every hour that passes, he imagines that his flowers reprimand him for being "remiss." He dallies and delays—unsure of whether to turn a quick profit by selling his flowers as they are, or attempt something more ambitious like extracting "crystal drops of Attar"—something that will outlive the ephemeral but "rightful sceptre of the rose." What is the suitable way forward? To make up his mind, he asks a Persian—a "gentleman-rose-farmer" living nearby—for advice. Before answering, the Persian subjects the speaker to a dose of ageism, doubting his ability to create anything at all: "'And you?—an older man than I? / Late come you with your sage propounding: / Allah! Your time has long gone by'" (46). The speaker promptly defends himself with an assertion of his enduring youth and vigour: "these gray hairs but disguise, / Since down in heart youth never dies—/ O, sharpened by the long delay, / I'm eager for my roses quite" (46). He then asks the Persian what he thinks of the possibility of producing of "Attar", which provokes the following discouraging response:

"Attar? go ask the Parsee yonder.
Lean as a rake with his distilling,
Cancel his debts, scarce worth a shilling!
How he exists I frequent wonder.
No neighbor loves him: sweet endeavor
Will get a nosegay from him never;
No, nor even your ducats will;
A very save-all for his still!
Of ***me***, however, all speak well:
You see, my little coins I tell;
I give away, but more I sell.
In mossy pots, or bound in posies,

Always a market for my roses.
But attar, why, it comes so dear
Tis far from popular, that's clear. (*Weeds* 46)

The isolated Parsee is motivated by concerns other than financial—no "ducats" will sway him from his ambition to distil the rose's essence. The Persian wonders how the ascetic Parsee even manages to stay alive; he produces Attar at the cost of making a decent living. It requires such effort ("comes so dear"), yet is not even sought after. The Persian, by contrast, flourishes: he is well thought of; always finds a market for his fresh flowers; and figures his blooms as coins, arranging them in pleasant-looking "mossy pots," or bunches, for popular consumption. The speaker presents two parables of creative labor here: the Persian produces something that is saleable and pleasing, and consequently reaps both financial and social rewards; and the Parsee, in doggedly attempting to extract the quintessence of his crop, forfeits wealth and popularity for a life of rejection and struggle. The wealthy Persian continues:

"I flourish, I; yon heavens they bless me,
My darlings cluster to caress me."
At that fond sentence overheard,
Methought his rose-seraglio stirred.
But further he: "Yon Parsee lours
Headsman and Blue Beard of the flowers.
In virgin flush of efflorescence
When buds their bosoms just disclose,
To get a mummified quintessence
He scimetars the living rose!" (*Weeds* 47)

At the fond "sentence" of the self-aggrandising Persian, his "rose-seraglio" stirs: either his flowers comically swoon at his praise and attention, or they shudder because his 'sentence' means their inevitable decapitation and destruction. He accuses the Parsee of beheading his flowers to get at a synthetic "mummified quintessence," but is this any better than beheading them to turn a quick profit? Of course the temptation is to read this as a thinly-veiled retrospective on Melville's own career as a writer, but the speaker of this meandering poem ensures that it is impossible to know where any allegiance lies. Though potentially ironizing the populist approach of the Persian, he also resists affirming the dogmatic pursuit of any quintessence. But while weighing these alternatives, the Persian then provides what sounds like a reformulation of Billy Budd's hanging, aligning the Parsee's choices with those of Captain Vere: the "headsman" Parsee scimitars the living rose "when *buds* their bosoms just disclose." Billy's killing of Claggart is "just" but Vere realizes that the "quintessence" of the law must be upheld; indeed, Vere knows what he must do as soon as Billy lashes out: "Struck dead

by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" (100). The rose farmer articulates Billy's fate in verse, from the vantage point of a seemingly discrete text, literary form, and geographical location. Melville works through alternative takes of this climactic ending and then leaves traces of their collaborative formulation in both works. Indeed, if we see a residual articulation of Billy's outburst in "The Rose Farmer," we also see a corresponding metaphor blossom at the moment of Billy's death: "Billy ascended; and, ascending, took the full *rose* of the dawn."

Melville's inter-, intra-, and extra-textual experimentations allow such metaphors to extend and develop across apparently discrete projects. Under scrutiny here is an alternatively networked conception of literary production—an exploration of the mediations, complicities, and extensions of creative labor as it circulates among alternative settings. This is also apparent in "Rip Van Winkle's Lilac"—a retelling of Washington Irving's tale (this time in prose) through a series of deferred perpectival shifts, all of which lead to unexpected creative confluences. The narrative is full of abortive, unsuccessful or distracted attempts to finish a job:

> Now Rip's humble abode, a frame one, though indeed, as he remembered it, quite habitable, had in some particulars never been carried to entire completion; the builder and original proprietor, a certain honest woodman, while about to give it the last touches having been summoned away to join his progenitors in that paternal house where the Good Book assures us are many mansions. This sudden arrest of work left the structure in a condition rather slatternly to the externals. Though a safe shelter enough from the elements. (*Weeds* 27)

The woodsman died just as he was about to give his house "the last touches". In attempting to finish off his project he was "summoned away" to the many completed mansions of heaven. The "arrest" or suspension of work leaves the structure looking rather neglected (though still functioning as a shelter). We then find out that adjacent to this house there grows an "immemorial willow", a tree that then suffers a similarly abortive fate to the house. Fed up of it continually dropping broken twigs onto their roof, Dame Van Winkle orders Rip to chop it down. Reminiscent of the landlord's comic woodwork at the beginning of "The Spouter Inn" in *Moby-Dick*, they both feverishly attempt to "assault it", though the tree's "obtuse soft toughness" make it "all but invincible to the dulled axe" (29). They are left with "a monument of the negative victory of stubborn inertia over spasmodic activity and an ineffectual implement" (29). Rip's half-finished house ends up standing next to a half hewn tree.

Long after Rip's disappearance, this spectacle of semi-completion and half finished jobs attracts a further protagonist—an artist—into painting the scene. The tree has finally collapsed of its own accord and a lilac bush has started growing in its place. The narrative relays a dispute between this "meditative

vagabondo . . . a young artist" and "a gaunt, hatchet-faced, stony-eyed individual"—"jogging by on a lank white horse"—who admonishes the artist for not painting "something respectable, or better, something godly"—"our new tabernacle for example" (*Weeds* 30). The artist shudders at the suggestion of this "cadaver"—whose tabernacle is made up of "dead planks or dead iron smeared over with white-lead." When asked if he "will stick to this wretched old ruin then?", the young artist replies: "what should we poor devils of Bohemians do for the Picturesque, if Nature was in all things a precisian, each building like that church, and every man in your image.—But, bless me, what am I doing, I must tone down the green here!" (*Weeds* 31).

The "precisian" (sic) of the tabernacle, with its newly completed exteriority of white-washed symmetry, represents death to this artist, who asserts the importance of imperfection and irresolution by explicitly revising the sharp tones of his canvas. The conversation ends with the indignant cadaver riding away into the valley beneath, "as if swallowed by the grave." The artist, "now suspending the brush", thinks that he has just been visited by death: "And what under heaven indeed should such a phantasm as Death know, for all that the Appearance tacitly claims to be a somebody who knows much?" (32). In revising his work, the artist provokes death into indignant condemnation. As the artist suspends his brush, the narrative suddenly breaks off and returns to the bewildered "tattered" Rip, who cannot understand how a lilac has grown so quickly out of the axe-wounds of his willow. While suspended in his drowsy state, his own aborted efforts with the "ineffectual implement" have blossomed into something unexpectedly beautiful.

Melville's intertextual resonances reflect the continually disintegrating and reintegrating proximities of ongoing literary experimentation. A commitment to an artful repose that always trusted in the untimely possibilities of the arrested utterance, the transgressed demarcation, the possibility of one more moment of becoming. At this stage of his creative life, Melville displays a remarkable openness—a commitment to intellectual suppleness and historical receptivity that confounds the possibility of resolving these labors within any pre-given Romantic or sentimental narratives that have hitherto been associated with "late Melville." As Robert Milder has put it, Melville's creative struggle was not something to be redeemed from; "it was what redeemed" (*Exiled Royalties* 237).

Notes

[1] Robert Milder has Melville "collapsing inwards toward a center of private musing, which in his physically and emotionally weakened state he nurtured carefully against inordinate hopes and the chance of real or imagined slights" (*Exiled Royalties* 222).

[2] See *The Night Inspector*, a novel in which the central protagonist befriends a partcularly beset and dejected Herman Melville.

[3] For Wyn Kelley, Melville "seems to have been looking for a new way to tell stories that was neither wholly prose nor wholly lyric" (160).

[4] See the second volume of Parker's *Biography* for a detailed description of the interrelated way Melville worked on his last projects (880–83). Parker notes, for example, that "the blank verso of a cancelled sheet of poetry from *Weeds and Wildings* was reused in the *Billy Budd* manuscript" (880).

[5] Robert Ryan, another early critic to carefully look at the late manuscripts, revealed that the poems eventually collected in *John Marr* and *Weeds and Wildings* were initially bound together in a volume probably entitled *Meadows and Seas* (16).

[6] Wenke examines the "bifurcated readings" that have so defined the criticism of *Billy Budd*, pointing to the variety of "either/or," "liberal" or "conservative" interpretations the text has inspired (115). Yet Wenke is by no means the first critic to emphasise the text's indeterminacy or provisionality; one of the earliest and most perceptive readers of *Billy Budd* was Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. who called into question the very notion of a definitive version of Billy Budd See his "The Definitive *Billy Budd*: 'But Aren't It All Sham?'"

[7] Larry J. Reynolds has pointed to the labor unrest that erupted in Chicago and New York City (along with several other cities) in May 1886 as a possible influence on the first drafts of *Billy Budd*. See "*Billy Budd* and American Labor Unrest: The Case for Striking Back", 21–48.

[8] Between 1880 and 1900, the population of New York City increased from 1.2 million to almost 3.5 million people. See Allen 910.

[9] The OED dates "Moonshine," "smuggled or illicitly distilled liquor," from 1782, and provides an American usage from 1875.

[10] See Melville's letter to to Professor Archibald MacMechan, 5 December 1889, *Correspondence* 519.

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