

FOUR POEMS FOR HERMAN MELVILLE
BY ROBERT BURLINGAME

Old Men. Old Groves

I come back to you, Melville, as your Israel
came back to his walnut grove. Old men. Old groves.
I lean over you as you lie under skies
you will no longer name.

It has to go on, this contest, anger vs. pity.
It has to go on until we die, greenly. You write:
"The old road was now browsed over by sheep."

Old road. Old man. Old grove. All the same —
as uncanceled as Colonus. We browse over you,
Melville, your grove not laid waste, as yet.

But We'd Ask Too Much

And what was Hawthorne really like?
 Again and again we think about this. You'd know,
 could tell us lavishly, where he'd utter nil in irony's
 whisper.

Was his Sophia really sophia (more owl, less dove)?
 Or did they throw off bed clothes behind those dim
 windows at Old Manse? Did others (like Waldo) find
 him silent, straddling his white maned sphinx? You could
 tell us (go beyond Vine). Scholars seek more. If
 you were still at customs, incorrigibly up-
 right, you'd tell.

But we'd ask too much
 about that lonely spring gazer, get to the bottom
 and scoop coarse sand. You'd laugh and shake a bough,
 glistening drops fountaining.

You Come Like a Cough

You write in *Budd*: "Truth uncompromisingly
 told will always have its ragged edges." In-
 deed, you shove barely finished fable
 toward fact, fact toward fable. You get as
 close as that, scarred rose at dawn — in *Budd*;
 toying with our "expedience" that's induced fear,
 you tread over the "schools," our "measured
 forms." You come like a cough in Tchaikovsky's
 May night. Suddenly it is cold once again, suddenly
 what was finished unclothes itself —
 unfinished.

Along the Beaches of Your Oceans

I could never write brightly enough
 about you — your isolatos, your animals as immense
 as sunrise, your coffin-ship resurrected in the
 sweetness of Queequeg's harbor. I could stoop
 forever to the flowers along the beaches of your oceans
 and not sufficiently praise their joyous odors.

There's

Santa Cruz Island, its mangrove stilts in clasp with rock:
 so true poem enclasps the other and dies. Perhaps
 only silence after your voice, no leakage to word.

But the wish to praise outrides, and silence

leads to sound beyond silence —

the hurtle of harp-note,

the swan-dip over Avon.

This you deserve long life's old friend. This you deserve.