
Combustible Man: Consumption, Cannibalism, and Commodity Horror in *Redburn*

IAN GREEN

EASTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

As an attempt at writing an orthodox maritime travel narrative, Herman Melville's 1849 novel, *Redburn: His First Voyage*, must be considered a failure. It refuses hegemonic bromides, forecloses possibilities for human connection, and renders the relationship of one character to nature resolutely pessimistic. Consequently, at the time of its publication, it was generally met either with amused condescension or outright scorn—even from Melville himself. Where *Redburn* succeeds, however, is as a horror novel about the uncanny effects of market relations in the Atlantic. As readers reencounter Melville on his two hundredth birthday, it is only right to reconsider a novel that has struggled to escape its reputation as a minor step toward more commanding work to come as, instead, a major achievement in horror fiction. This is not an adventure, or even a documentary account of merchant service, but a novel about fear and victims—principally among the class of merchant sailors who give their lives for the sake of Atlantic trade. It describes a market that has attained divine cosmic status by commodifying, consuming, and sacrificing its human servants. Even so, Melville presents a novel whose tensions are telling. The protagonist is given to melodrama, but his most romantic expressions address labor conditions that everyone around him recognizes as banal. Meanwhile, the horrific fate of the laboring class appears in a prose that often seems cunningly dull. And why not? The violent incursions of capital into ordinary lives are constant, ordinary, and deeply terrifying.

Although Melville explained to English publisher Richard Bentley that it contained “no metaphysics, no cosmic sections, nothing but cakes & ale” and was “picked up by [his] own observation under *comical* circumstances,” readers should make no mistake: *Redburn* is a horror novel and an important one. Melville gives the game away when he observes that books “calculated merely to please the reader” arrive “masqued in an affectation of indifference or contempt” (*Letters*

109-10). He cannot help himself. His contemptuous smuggling of theme into a text that proclaims its lack of one is its most potently horrific element. A product of capitalist necessity, the book mirrors the aspect of capitalism itself, which remains not only indifferent to the very public that it appears to serve, but that also offers up violence as unremarkable. In fact, it cannily presents one of the most shocking deaths in fiction—the spontaneous combustion of impressed sailor Miguel Saveda—in a tone so matter-of-factly as to very nearly escape attention. Death in the Atlantic accretes, until people forget to be shocked by it.

It is critically easier to describe *Redburn* as horrific than to classify it as a horror novel but, when critics consider its use of horror tropes in combination with its overall conclusions, it is clear that it merits placement in the lineage of American horror fiction. It is true that *Redburn* mobilizes familiar Gothic tropes toward its biting critique of Atlantic capital's deadly oblitative power. It also promiscuously interpolates social realist polemic, travel narrative, and melodrama alongside its Gothic tropes. It might also be read as a naturalist novel, given that Atlantic capitalism is not so much evil in *Redburn* as it is disinterested. Thus, it takes not sublimated psychological anxieties as its subject, but rather intrusive capitalist anxieties.

In some cases, Melville's treatment of horror—especially Gothic horror—tropes borders on the parodic. For example, Melville recontextualizes his protagonist's Byronic heroic aspirations as pure naiveté in the face of something much worse than emotional strife. *Redburn* imagines: “a vague prophetic thought, that I was fated, one day or other, to be a great voyager” (11). He embarks on his adventure very nearly delighting that “cold, bitter cold as December, and bleak as its blasts, seemed the world then to me” (15). In his first encounters with the world of maritime travel and adventure, the young narrated *Redburn* swells, even as the older narrator *Redburn* shrinks. The narrator reflects: “I know not how to account for my demoniac feelings, of which I was afterward heartily ashamed...The devil in me then mounted up from my soul, and spread over my frame, till it tingled at my finger ends.” With resignation, the narrator sighs, “Such is boyhood” (18-19), thus offering a potential Byronic hero, only to undermine and even ridicule him.

It also offers readers its own version of a Gothic haunted house.

Redburn leaves his ancestral home to enter a mobile domestic space in the Atlantic. He goes to sea having internalized romanticized notions of place, but discovers that place is deceptive, that home never was, that the landscape consumes rather than mirrors individual experience. Redburn's ship, the *Highlander*, is haunted by the "damned" ghost of capitalism's past victims, such as the spontaneously combusted Miguel Saveda.

Redburn similarly disrupts the Gothic nationalism of Melville's friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose presentation of America's past violence self-consciously argues for America as a place with history to rival that of Gothic Europe. Melville's Gothic landscape is transnational, linking America, England, and the mobile routes of Atlantic exchange. Nor does he ever allow his readers to forget the link between transnationalism and the human traumas that instantiate it. Instead of a home that draws its familial inheritors back, Melville offers "a small archipelago, an epitome of the world" (234). This is the same space where Redburn will see flesh cut from bodies and resold, where he will witness children starving to death in the streets, and where his most cherished ideals will falter and fail.

The text is also full of the kinds of maritime horrors evoked in novels such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, especially the ships full of the dead, and implicit or explicit gestures toward the specter of cannibalism. It is also full of potentially supernatural events, most obviously Saveda's spontaneous combustion. Like Poe, Melville also presents scenes that destabilize rational thinking and perception in order to place the protagonist in a state of material danger and existential doubt, particularly in Redburn's sojourn to the pleasure house with Harry Bolton, the conman. These are events and tropes fully at home with the horror narrative conventions of the 1840s. The novel also engages with the horrific elements of social realism, particularly with the long descriptions of starving bodies in Liverpool and on the ship. Melville therefore constructs a novel that is both horror and horrific, both genre-situated and genre-indebted toward a structure that defies genre so as to direct Redburn and readers toward a deeply pessimistic ending.

Unsurprisingly, *Redburn* remains stubbornly difficult to define, even in response to the horror fiction of its time. Jonathan A. Cook describes *Moby-Dick* as a novel that ends "in nihilistic despair," and

the same might be said of *Redburn*, but it lacks the catastrophic climax that would make it a “rewriting of traditional Christian apocalyptic” (120). Paul Hurh and others have noted the horrific nature of Sveda’s immolation, but contextualized it as one of many digressions in a highly-edited and sometimes awkward novel, rather than as an emblem of the presentation of experiences of labor as inexplicable horror. The Sveda episode likewise evades the conventions of nineteenth-century Gothic, with which it might ordinarily pair. Although aesthetically familiar to the Gothic, the moment does not rest upon the revelation of familial or local archaism. There is no secret to hide or disclose. Indeed, where there is a family tome, the novel actively mutes its significance. Likewise, it never engages in psychological complexity and thereby not satisfy readers who approach American horror with Charles Brockden Brown or Edgar Allan Poe in mind. Nor does it comfortably participate in the sort of city mystery horror popularized by George Lippard. True, the London portions do gesture in this direction, but *Redburn* critically deviates because it actively mutes its more lurid details. This is not a fun novel. If a salacious plot was Lippard’s vehicle for making grander political or ideological statements, Melville’s seemingly straightforward narration arrives at a similar critical end, but with radical stylistic differences. The shock of Sveda’s death makes vivid the violence, dehumanization, and exploitation of capitalist life that have been otherwise sublimated across every page. Resituating *Redburn* within the lineage of American horror reveals its most potent critiques of the market not as an immoral hegemon to be reformed, but as an amoral cosmic monster, feeding upon the suffering of common laborers. By the time that people begin literally to explode, it is clear that Melville’s failure to produce a travel narrative that might impress its critics or exceed its influences has produced something else entirely: a horror story about capital itself.

Redburn, therefore, is no mere parody of its influences. Instead, its combination of melodramatic style and focus on capitalist anxiety offers a bridge between two periods of American horror. *Redburn* links the age of American Gothic horror and the age of Weird fiction and Cosmic horror that, generations later, would populate global spaces with monsters that consume but also disregard, with terrifying disinterest, humanity.

Moreover, the novel is no polemic. It offers no solutions.

Instead, it offers the human experience of life within capitalism, full of anxiety, panic, and, ultimately, a recognition of futility. It offers multiple instances in which Redburn approaches an experience with no expectation that it will harm him and in which, consequently, the reader makes no moral or ideological assumptions. Yet, each of these experiences strips Redburn of more agency and of his optimistic belief in such stabilizing signposts as the comforting sociality of life among the working class, the adventure to Europe, his father's guide, even the cozy hierarchies of working life.

Only Redburn and, by extension, the reader require this education. Redburn's fellow sailor, Jackson, is the loudest and most frequently named member of the crew, and his captain, Captain Vere, controls everyone's fate. These two characters announce and acknowledge the nature of the marketplace as inescapable and ultimately crushing. It is only Redburn who does not see this. Consequently, if the novel serves also as a bildungsroman, it is one that directs its main character not toward a kind of romantic self-knowledge, but toward a knowledge of his own embeddedness in a market.

The tension between *Redburn's* seemingly straightforward presentation and its complex ideas has driven critics to dismiss this subversive approach since its first publication. After the critical failure of Melville's prior work, *Mardi*, contemporary reviewers saw *Redburn* as an attempt by the once-famous writer of Pacific travel narratives to recapture an audience that had loudly rejected him. *The Knickerbocker* offered faint applause for *Redburn's* "daguerreotype-like naturalness of description" and compared it favorably but infantilizingly to the "admirable and justly popular work, the *Two Years Before the Mast* of the younger Dana" (*Reviews* 101). *Literary World* used similarly damning praise when it insisted that "there is no sentimentality, no effort to elevate the 'people' or degrade the commodores" (101). *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* even went so far as to advise Melville to "take time and pains, and not over-write himself." Even when Melville noted in a letter to George Duyckinck that the novel "to [his] surprise, seems to have been favorably received," he saw fit to describe it as "beggarly." He remarked: "I hope I shall never write such a book again" (*Letters* 146).

The critiques can be similarly scathing. *Blackwood's* adds: "*Redburn* is a clever book, as books now go, and we are far from visiting

it with wholesale condemnation; but it certainly lacks the spontaneous flow and racy originality of the author's South Sea narration" (*Reviews* 266). The *London Morning Herald* is much less polite. The reviewer announces that "*Redburn* is not a novel; it has no plot; the mysterious visit to London remains more or less an enigma to the end . . . [it has] a most lame and impotent conclusion" (272). Neither review is incorrect, but both miss the point entirely. The "daguerreotype-like" descriptions are particularly suited to sketch the tedious contours of an endlessly hungry market sustained by the sacrifices of "the people." If Melville does not "elevate" his victimized sailors, it is only because he means to reveal the impossibility of doing so.

Although more recent scholars (Brian Yothers, Benjamin S. West, and Neal Tolchin) have pointed out the novel's investment in questions of poverty, charity, and the innate violence of social interaction, its critical rehabilitation has been constrained by Melville himself, who "dismissed *White-Jacket* and *Redburn* as books written to order" (Yothers 73). Not to ignore Melville's own self-assessment, but the "written to order" novel contains some of his most terrifying and challenging writing. William H. Gilman's seminal analysis demonstrates the degree to which Melville mined his own biography for material. These details, however, only make clear that Melville's inventions amplify his generic interaction with horror and his engagement with it as a critique of social life. Gilman, for instance, points out that "the death of Jackson instead of being inspired reporting is one of the many artistic tours de force with which the pages of *Redburn* are liberally strewn" (203). The same is true of Sveda's immolation. In both cases, Melville invests scenes that might fit into preexisting genres, particularly of Gothic horror, with an emphatic social critical perspective. This, then, is the real achievement. Its horrors function as critiques not of science or archaism, as the Gothic genre might demand, or of psychology, as American fiction after Poe might invite, but of the ordinary experience of capitalism, from the perspective of capitalism's victims.

Melville first draws the reader's attention to the horror of commodity practices by emphasizing alcohol, an important symbolic fixation of social reform and American Gothic literature, as well as an intensely significant commodity in the Atlantic market. Max, a friendly face aboard the ship, is referred to as a "combustible man" for both

the coloring and the unpredictability that attend his drunkenness (79). The moniker prepares readers for the moment's shocking sequel, in which a drunken Miguel Saveda, impressed while unconscious and taken aboard to fill the ranks of the crew, spontaneously combusts (244). This moment literalizes the anxious uncanny nature of labor commodification. Its absurdity exposes the obliterative violence of a life lived not only among, but also as the commodities that the market trades and consumes. The man and the commodity become intertwined in a mutual circuit of consumer logic by which two of the Atlantic world's most valuable and profitable goods—rum and human bodies, spirits and spirits—become equivalent in the most terrifying possible fashion.

For all its shock and foreboding, the death does absolutely nothing to push the plot forward. The ship does not lose a day. In its rush to reproduce the experience of Atlantic capital, even the text almost forgets to narrate it. This pointlessness is its point. The sacrifice is not for anything, except for the sake of sacrifice, for the market's need to relentlessly and, in so many cases, literally consume human persons. The spontaneous combustion does not even serve the limited purpose that a similar moment serves for Dickens in 1853's *Bleak House*, since Saveda never had any bearing upon the plot, so his removal is neither convenient nor inconvenient. If anything, the event only promises more as the age of industry will use up ever more human fuel and leave ever more human ashes behind. The sailor's body is no different from coffee and coal, commodities designed to be consumed through fire, to release energy for use by the market.

The very lack of plot impact is the scene's most horrific element. Exactly because it does not affect the overall trajectory of the narrative or the journey, Saveda's death should teach Redburn and the reader that the Atlantic market has become a system of power that exists beyond human endeavor. It does not care to preserve the essential humanity of humans, as evidenced by the text's frequent metonymic conflation of laborers to their tools and the crew's subsequent belief in the taboo nature of objects. Nor does it need to communicate with people, as evidenced particularly by the utter uselessness of Redburn's father's out of date travel guide. "Vague prophetic" motivations and visions, felt by Redburn and supplied by figures like the fortune-telling De Squak, do appear, but they promise only nameless death and loss.

The horrific central turn remains largely inexplicable, except through the simple logic of power enlarging itself through the sacrifices of the powerless. Paul Hurl locates the horror of Melville's writing in the author's attention to incomprehensibility. Hurl points to the "unresolved tensions underlying terror's simultaneous demand and resistance to being fit within a causal sequence" (162). At the risk of betraying Hurl's injunction against seeking causes even while agreeing with his focus on interpretive resistance, the causal ambiguity in *Redburn* further contributes to its capital critique. Ahab's whale elicits terror not through antipathy but through apathy, and the market that destroys Saveda produces horror not out of theater but out of silence. Interestingly, Hurl characterizes Saveda's death a "frenzied suicide," but it would probably be better to consider it a murder with no murderer, an accident with no accidental elements (161). Saveda's death is necessary and necessarily frightening because it was carried out by processes, not by hands. Clearly something—something that uses humans but is not human—is at work in the world, but *Redburn's* sailors will never understand what it is. Melville suggests that even he does not quite know what it is. The perspective is economic and cosmic because the economic is cosmic. Its pragmatic amorality reveals the pragmatic amorality of reality itself. Melville, his sailors, and his readers can only hope to realize what *Redburn* ultimately learns: that the whole meaning of human life is to be consumed in death.

In *Redburn*, Melville trades upon this logic of equivalence between the person and the thing, and the haunting of the thing by a spiritual essence, as its central horror motif. Throughout, the narrator's metonymic slips confuse *Redburn* for the hammers he wields or the buttons he wears, and the supernatural consequences of this process come into focus later, when *Redburn* witnesses the funerary practices aboard the ship. He notes that "an iron pot of red coals was placed in [Saveda's] bunk, and in it two handfuls of coffee were roasted. This done, the bunk was nailed up, and was never opened again during the voyage" (245). Colin Dayan describes the sorts of reliquary religious tradition here on display. Fetishism, Dayan explains, insists upon the over-determination of a thing with social and even supernatural significance. The body, the relic, and the coin all function with the logic of the thing possessing and containing spirits of social interaction and even divine intervention. Similarly, Michael Taussig,

writing primarily about pre-capitalist societies, reminds readers that commodities are both inert things and animate entities in society, with spirit and godlike life-force (5). These customs, common throughout the churning syncretic Atlantic, reveal and confront the spectrality of capital. The sailors recognize that the market ensouls commodity items with evaluative spiritual essence.

Redburn's sailors similarly refuse to trespass upon Saveda's haunted bunk, but Melville does not offer this up as merely exotic superstition. Rather, the possessions and the bunk remain queasy reminders that the vessels and routes of Atlantic trade are occupied always by the dead. Hurh observes that "Melville depicts the encounter with fear as a spatial negotiation between bodies" (209). This is an apt description. Saveda's bunk, the ship's hold, the pleasure den Redburn will visit later, and the Atlantic itself are spaces where the fearful processes of the market cosmos descend upon the body. Fear, however, in this capitalist horror novel is also a negotiation between things, and between bodies transformed into things.

Likewise, Saveda's immolation reminds readers that death is no escape from the space of the market, that the absent body retains abstract value even if its material has been melted into air. The sadistic, quasi-villainous sailor Jackson thinks that "the man had been actually dead when brought on board the ship; and that knowingly, and merely for the sake of the month's advance, paid into his hand upon the strength of the bill he presented, the body-snatching crimp had knowingly shipped a corpse on board of the Highlander, under the pretense of its being a live body in a drunken trance" (*Redburn* 245). Jackson, although cruel, is not wrong: experiences like the death of Saveda are worse than *memento mori*; they are reminders of the labor class' total entrapment and disposability.

Even the gestures toward Transcendentalism recognize that human life is not one of spiritual enlargement, but one of material embeddedness. As Redburn attempts to project himself onto the wider world of nature and its populations, he tacitly acknowledges the ineluctable logic of market-use when he compares the working class to the wheels of a coach. He notes that "They carry missionaries, ambassadors, opera-singers, armies, merchants, tourists, scholars to their destination: they are a bridge of boats across the Atlantic; they are the *primum mobile* of all commerce" (139). Amidst his reverent

description of the centrality of Atlantic trade in the modern world, Redburn loses the clarity of his pronouns, letting “they” conflate the sailor with the ship. The confusion is all too telling, drawing the reader’s attention to the exploitable nature of humans as tools, to the animate character of the fetishized things with which they labor, and to the market-nature of the space upon which and toward which they cast their consuming gaze.

Melville insistently notes that this proximal and metonymic commodity relation becomes a form of personal identification with commodities. Redburn describes, for example, being conflated with his outfit and writes “sometimes they used to call me ‘Boots,’ and sometimes ‘Buttons,’ on account of the ornaments on my pantaloons and shooting-jacket” (74). Such moments not only use clothes to make the man, but also use the man to make the clothes. Things take on sublime material-spectral life, while the working class are rendered into purely utilitarian and exchangeable things and abstracted values in the ineffable ecosystem of commerce.

When the *Highlander* passes a ship with the dead crew still lashed in place, still at work even after death, Redburn is confronted with the ultimate consequence of this embeddedness (103). No, the sailors lashed into place have not been placed there by some monster or spirit. However, the dead are literally still lashed to their work after their death. They remind Redburn not only of the omnipresence and inevitability of death, but also of the inescapability of labor and the market. They even remain in literal circulation within the same maritime trade routes in which they lived, labored, and died. The dead thus announce the many ways in which the market makes use of the whole person, as laborer, as a spectralized commodity, and even as an incorporated loss.

When Redburn and his fellow sailors seek out mutual intimacy in one another, they still find themselves lost in frightful and confusing mazes rather than found in the connective cosmology of the all-soul. In London, Redburn meets the young conman Harry Bolton with whom he explores the city and then ships back to the United States. Bolton is a figure of desire and of the potential to actually connect to another human being in the market-driven world. Even so, Bolton’s friendship only draws Redburn into yet another fearful scene. In this case, Bolton invites the naïve young man into some kind of lounge,

called Aladdin's Palace, an opulent warren peopled by men exchanging furtive and meaningful glances, whose significance Redburn fails to catch. For David Greven, the passages devoted to Bolton reveal how "the disruptive potentiality of gender nonconformity illuminates the perils and possibilities of sexual nonconformity" (2). However, Bolton is clearly a prostitute; therefore, the sexual and social escape he offers is, itself, a commodity. His body has a price as well as the fantasy of non-laboring union. Ironically, Redburn imagines that he also offers Bolton an escape from the market, by bringing him out of the pleasure dens of Liverpool and onto the ships of the Atlantic. Bolton, however, will die there in the end. He will never be anything but a laboring body and an exchangeable commodity. This is a critical irony and, again, one to which Redburn is blind even if the reader is not. For in his efforts to instantiate human connections, even Redburn does the work of further entangling his friend into the system that will destroy him. Redburn misinterprets sex work as sexual freedom and misinterprets commodification as fraternity.

Sari Edelstein argues that the coming of age portions present growth as "profoundly ideological, tied to capitalist and nationalist agendas" (552). If so, she reads it as "part of a tradition of nineteenth-century American novels that thwart the conventional coming-of-age plot and instead offer delayed, inverted, rerouted, interrupted, or otherwise unconventional life narratives" (555). These scenes, therefore, function as protests against the conformist drive of an America commonly presented as in an adolescent state of becoming. The novel refuses to offer a stand-in for an American identity coalescing around normative values of sex, gender, class, or nationalism. However, readers should note that the anxiety that this refusal generates is twofold: Redburn becomes anxious at the prospect of his own non-normative identity; then again becomes anxious as he is subsumed into grim normativity. Indeed, he is horrified at both. Horror is rightly inescapable because both options entail the same obliteration. Either Redburn will be destroyed in his exclusion from normative society, perhaps lost forever in Aladdin's Palace, or he shall be destroyed within the hold of the ship where he is properly and productively meant to sail.

Rather than experience reassuring intimacy with Bolton, Redburn finds himself reminded of the constraints of human

contact in a nation or, more rightly, in a universe fueled by human ruin. Matthew Knip reads homosociality or homosexual intercourse in Melville as “the utopian impulses of the narratives, which depict men’s desire for other men as a binding paradisiacal glue” (358). This remains true in *Redburn*, but only if readers are willing to reconsider paradise within the market cosmos. Just as it is in *The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids*, paradise is a knot of sex, power, and exploitative labor. If utopia means order, then again *Redburn* obeys the principle, but only in that the market’s order is a balance-sheet of human loss and exchange designed for its own enlargement. The utopia on offer is not for the individuals who seek it out through bodily communion within the market, but for the market that reproduces itself through the communal suffering of those bodies.

Even the desire of thought acts as a form of psychological horror. As Bolton leaves to attend to some unexplained business, it does not take long for Redburn’s curiosity to turn into panic. “A terrible revulsion came over me,” he explains. “I shuddered at every footfall, and almost thought it must be some assassin pursuing me” (233). Redburn’s panic escalates while, just as Saveda will become an incorporeal element in the haunted Atlantic, and just as material goods circulate as immaterial value in the market, the potentially sexualized bodies of Aladdin’s Palace transform into ghostly echoes. This is where the horror reveals its dread aspect that, as Hurh explains, “prefigures freedom because it opens up self-difference and generates possibility” (213). Surmises and evocations close in on Redburn, as the possibility of union with another becomes the fear of the loss of self within a marketplace that dissolves difference by turning individuals into equivalently exchangeable things. “The whole place seemed infected,” Redburn explains, “and a strange thought came over me, that in the very damasks around, some eastern plague had been imported.” He continues: “was that pale yellow wine, that I drank below, drugged? thought I. This must be some house whose foundations take hold on the pit.” (233). How sad that, because Redburn’s world is defined by transaction and violence, friendship, even potential romance, eventually comes to obey the narrative’s inevitable drift toward human silence in the face of the market’s cruel apathy. Their love corrodes into dread, because intimacy is forged in the shared experience of fear and, ultimately, death.

The sojourn to Aladdin's Palace, read in the context of Melville's dark transcendentalism, might even demonstrate the beginnings of cosmic horror. Timothy Jarvis's reading of a significantly later horror writer, H.P. Lovecraft, demonstrates the logic that Melville exploits in order to transform one young man's coming of age into a bridge between transcendentalist philosophy and cosmic horror. In a number of Lovecraft's fictions "the hidden world that is hinted at by the collapse of the distinction between the rational and the supernatural is linked to the undifferentiated condition of the womb" (Jarvis 142). In Aladdin's Palace, Melville dramatizes the same process, by which a perspective-limited psyche reenacts the womb, awakening to the fact that the world is alien, indifferent, and deadly. Furnished in his own womblike room, a room constructed for the express purpose of conning or seducing the innocent, the childlike Redburn can only hear and glimpse, but never fully understand the hidden world that his brain is, as yet, unable to process. His fearful impressions then are not misapprehensions. Instead, they are missives from the true and terrible world that he can experience but never fully see.

This dark transcendental bildungsroman forces individuals to lose themselves utterly to unhuman forces, to accept, if nothing else, madness. Appropriately, in the closing passages, Redburn learns that Bolton has died aboard a whaling ship; the text intimates that he has essentially committed suicide at sea. Redburn's self-rebirth and his potential unity with another teach only one lesson: that, at birth, we enter into a world we will never understand and that will never permit escape. Edelstein rightly acknowledges that Bolton's grim fate is not a sign of his unfitness for the market, but rather of his natural position within it: he dies because sailors like him are meant to die (572). Even so, Saveda's more theatrical death calls attention to this horrific reality by making the death of a seaman at sea so theatrically alien. This is, indeed, the unique role that horror can play as a mode of cultural critique. It is especially important in this capitalist context because death, within the market, is ordinarily rendered mute, the sort of thing that occurs, as it does for Bolton, as postscript.

Abused and constantly reminded of their subject status, the sailors aboard the *Higlander* even lose their claims to their most personal possessions: their own bodies. Melville describes his fellow sailors' tattoos as attempts to announce self-possession. Redburn tells

readers: “I saw a sailor stretched out, stark and stiff, with the sleeve of his frock rolled up, and showing his name and date of birth tattooed upon his arm. It was a sight full of suggestions; he seemed his own head-stone” (Redburn 178). A moment later, Melville writes: “I was told that standing rewards are offered for the recovery of persons falling into the docks; so much, if restored to life, and a less amount if irrecoverably drowned.” He then describes the market for these marked bodies among urchins who, like “the rag-rakers and rubbish-pickers in the streets, sally out” to retrieve them. Melville observes that “there seems to be no calamity overtaking man, that cannot be rendered merchantable” (179). Geoffrey Sanborn notes how tattoos and cannibalism register classed inequalities in the ostensibly savage society of the pre-capitalist Typee (113). Here, Melville situates those taboo inequalities in the supposedly civilized world of the capitalist Atlantic. As an effort to protect the self from market consumption, the tattoo is ultimately a futile gesture. The flesh remains mere currency in a market that finds a use for it, even as death forces the laborer to give up his claim to his own body.

Of course, the preoccupation with skin must remind readers of the importance of race in the hierarchies of Atlantic power. The ship’s journey toward Liverpool draws Redburn along the third leg of the mobile slave economy. As a result, readers should hardly be surprised when Redburn beholds a statue celebrating Nelson’s “principal victories,” and sees the “swarthy limbs and manacles” that recall “four African slaves in the market-place” (155). Redburn notes also the appearance of “a little brig from the Coast of Guinea . . . the ideal of a slaver . . . her decks in a state of most piratical disorder” (175). Jackson plays upon this context with disturbing relish so as to taunt the non-working passengers of the *Highlander* by spreading a rumor “that [Captain] Riga purposed taking them to Barbary and selling them all for slaves” (260). Slavery even announces itself in the mild diversions of the Atlantic. Redburn passes a carnival and reflects upon “jet black Nubian slaves [who] flight themselves on poles; stand on their heads; and downward vanish” (251). Redburn’s exposure to the abusive practices of the market has revealed the blood of the slave upon which all of the Atlantic market sails.

The similarity between supposedly free white and deliberately unfree black bodies in the maritime market becomes especially fraught

when disease breaks out among the emigrant passengers with death following in due course. The crew begins pitching bodies over the side of the ship, prompting Redburn to remark that “the bottomless profound of the sea, over which we were sailing, concealed nothing more frightful” (288). Yet these are not the only dead bodies “concealed” beneath the waves. They follow countless scores of bodies, free and unfree, that have been sacrificed to Atlantic trade. Ian Baucom recognizes the importance of such bodies when he examines the case of the *Zong* massacre of 1781, in which sick slaves, functioning as “commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized decentered but vast trans-Atlantic banking system,” were thrown overboard in the Caribbean, so that the crew could maintain their profits through insurance claims (61). Noting how the insurance claim asserts the slaves’ value, even in their disappearance, he writes: “in a money culture or an insurance culture value survives its objects” (95). Having already paid for passage, the bodies of the *Highlander’s* passengers become similarly secondary and “value survives its objects.”

If the body does retain value, it is only through the novel’s most fully frightening evocation of barbarism at the heart of maritime horror fiction and capitalist modernity: cannibalism. Redburn explains that the dying passengers “made inroads upon the pig-pen in the boat, and carried off a promising young shoat: *him* they devoured raw, not venturing to make an incognito of his carcass; they prowled about the cook’s caboose, till he threatened them with a ladle of scalding water . . . they beset the sailors, like beggars in the streets, craving a mouthful in the name of the Church” (284). Melville’s emphatic italicization of “*him*,” along with his intentional failure to clearly indicate what “mouthful” the starving masses seek, invites the reader to confuse the consumption of livestock with the consumption of persons.

The text only hints at cannibalism rhetorically, but it does so in the context of a history of human bodies being disarticulated and consumed. Taken together, the tattooed flesh flayed and sold in Liverpool, the starving survivors on the ship, and the pigs they set upon in terms that conflate their flesh with human flesh, all evoke the tropes of cannibalistic peril. These haunt the sorts of maritime narratives familiar to Melville, most spectacularly so in the *Essex’s* disaster, which would go on to inspire Melville’s most famous novel. All of this shows yet another way in which Melville uses horror, both as genre

and as experience, to surround Redburn and the reader with constant reminders of the violent consumption that takes place between and at the ports that sustain Atlantic capital.

Violence and violent consumption reside, therefore, at the moral heart of a cosmic order of power that enlarges itself by consuming the individual. Assessing anthropological accounts of cannibalism, Peggy Reeves Sanday notes that, while descriptions of hunger cannibalism frequently present it as “revolting and reprehensible, the ultimate antisocial act,” reports of ritualistic cannibalism “refer not to hunger but to the physical control of chaos” (5-6). When Melville imagines the starving passengers at the door of the Church, he uses the possibility of both ritualistic and subsistence cannibalism to comment upon the economy’s need to consume individuals in order to produce its own necessary balance.

When Redburn elsewhere transforms a sexual fantasy into one of cannibalistic ingestion, he employs the language of sacramental consumption to create a blasphemous, yet prosperous, communal relation. Redburn recalls that “There they sat—the charmers, I mean—eating these buttered muffins in plain sight. I wished I was a buttered muffin myself” (Redburn 214). The sacrament by which Christ allowed himself to become a thing to be consumed and, through this act, to instantiate a community, replays as a dark comedy in which the individual becomes a meal around which a society—here a society playfully engaged in group sex—may be formed. Recalling Montwieler and Boren’s description of the connections between “violence, sexuality, and hybridity,” Melville, at first playfully and then more frightfully, restages the communion ritual of consumption of Christ’s body as the ghastly possibility of cannibalism at sea (Hartman 53; Montwieler, Boren). The description of the starving human mass descending upon “him” and the “buttered muffin” both qualify as “revolting.” Yet, from both events emanates the sacred logic of capitalist reality. Profane human hunger empowers the unhuman market to assert, in Sanday’s words, “control of chaos.”

This recasts the sailor as a kind of human sacrifice. Having signed binding contracts, the sailors aboard Redburn’s *Highlander* are liminally situated between voluntary and involuntary offering to this endlessly hungry market god. Mary Nyquist notes the vital necessity of volition to the sacredness of human sacrifice. Similarly, Saidiya

Hartman contends that submission and slavery are “a form of willed self-immolation” (53). One might ask whether Saveda had his immolation willed for him or whether he willed it himself by living a life amidst Atlantic trade in the first place. The captains and owners see the sailors’ initial choice to participate in the market as a form of capitulation to a system that will use them to the point of real and total blood sacrifice. However, if Melville’s own *Bartleby* from 1853 teaches readers anything, it is that this is a false choice.

Voluntary or not, the working-class sailor must sacrifice or be sacrificed for the sake of market growth and exchange, in the name of capital, the only universal interventionist force in the market world. The “small archipelago,” the “epitome of the world” that Redburn describes, is “where all the nations of Christendom, and even those of Heathendom, are represented” (165). This congress of merchant ships reconciles not only Christian sects, but also a multitude of diverse worldwide faiths, all brought together through and for the god of Atlantic trade.

Nevertheless, it appears that this spiritual union occurs in a fallen world. The Mate’s punctuating question after the most theatrical moment of sacrifice, “Where’s that d—d Miguel?” frames Miguel Saveda’s immolation as a hellish punishment. Likewise, Redburn remarks “I almost thought the burning body was a premonition of the hell of the Calvinists and that Miguel’s earthly end was a foretaste of his eternal condemnation” (245). The moment is of a piece with Melville’s ongoing efforts to comprehend a fallen world that asks individuals only to endure and then to die. Later in life, he annotated a passage of his 1891 edition of Schopenhauer’s *Studies in Pessimism* that reads: “There seems to me no better explanation of our existence than that it is the result of some false step, some sin of which we are paying the penalty” (*Log* 832). Perhaps Melville took the language of “paying the penalty” literally because, if humanity, like “that d—d Miguel,” is fallen, it is fallen into a world of economic transaction where humans suffer because they are the commodities that the universe exploits, trades, kills.

These moral claims take on greater urgency within the context of horror fiction, a genre that resists easy answers because it not only describes terrors, but it also forces the reader to experience them. This novel’s unique approach is to link this pessimistic morality to horrific

violence and to house both within language that evokes the market's natural inclination toward death as necessary but unremarkable. *Redburn's* horrors, even at their most shocking, are ordinary horrors. They are the fears that reside within boredom. Melville does not need to craft an obviously fictive world of ghosts and monsters; he has found one right here, in a nineteenth-century world bound together by Atlantic trade. This market world enlarges itself through death as well as through pain, violence, and horror directed at and experienced by the laboring classes. In a novel that Melville describes as "comical" and that *The Knickerbocker* calls "daguerreotype-like," heterogeneous seamen of the ship, the African laborers and slaves who haunt Redburn's imagination, the passengers driven to mad extremity by hunger, all come together around the burned flesh of Miguel Saveda, the sick bodies of slaves thrown overboard, and the sacrificial flesh of livestock. The text does not call this sacred because the defining state of capitalist subjectivity is equal parts dreary and dreadful. *Redburn* then is among the most successful pieces of horror fiction to emerge after the development of Atlantic capitalism rendered all human life useful.

By the end, it has become undeniably clear that whatever sublime experiences are to be had produce their own grim foreclosure. Jerry Phillips observes this as a capitalist paradox in Marx. Phillips writes: "On the one hand, capitalism is regarded as an agent of 'progress' . . . but on the other hand, capitalism is also viewed as a bloody and barbarous system." He goes on to describe: "the conception of capitalism as the 'hell' that illuminates 'heaven,' as the savage state that casts into relief the last civil polity" (185). Even when Redburn glimpses natural heaven, as he thinks he does in his transcendentalist moments, he does so from the bowels of laboring hell. Marx, according to Phillips, further observed the "profound irrationality of a system that must perforce devour itself," but to call this "irrationality" is not quite right (185). This endless cycle of brutality is a feature of capital, not a flaw. The capitalist universe is constantly destroying itself to remake itself, constantly destroying the very same laborers who it must produce in order to grow.

Restrained though it may be, *Redburn* is possibly Melville's most terrifying depiction of capital because it discovers the monstrous in the mundane. Moreover, it refuses to safely quarantine horror,

instead taking the time to acknowledge the universality of suffering within the market-driven world. In London, for instance, Redburn finds himself surrounded by images of poverty that transform the city into a claustrophobic sort of necropolis. He describes “the figure of what had been a woman. Her blue arms folded to her livid bosom two shrunken things like children, that leaned toward her, one on each side. At first, I knew not whether they were alive or dead. They made no sign; they did not move or stir; but from the vault came that soul-sickening wail” (180). All of Redburn’s dreams of maritime adventure have led only to this: the gaunt half-corpse of a woman clinging to her possibly dead children. Like Saveda’s death, such images haunt the prose and the protagonist even in the moments that appear directed toward more positive, or at least more ordinary, topics. Redburn, in turn, returns to the United States a beaten and deeply cynical man. The novel’s style, or seeming lack of style, must also contribute to this critique, presenting the worst kind of horror, which is the horror of silence, one that the individual almost fails to notice.

Anticipating the brutal directness of modernism by two generations, *Redburn* speaks to a cold economic universe in its own language. Wyn Kelley, responding to Bethanie Nowviskie, describes “Melville’s ‘inhuman’ universe” as “a bracing alternative to a touristic vision” (134-35). *Redburn*’s plain prose, masking surprising horrors, projects a dark horrific transcendentalism proper for the capitalist sublime. Joyce Rowe put it well when she noted that “Redburn’s tale illuminates the difficulty of knowing on what ground a coherent sense of identity might be established within the expanding capitalist order of his day” (245). But Redburn does arrive at knowing, just as the quickly-forgotten Saveda or the perversely-vocal Jackson or the ill-fated Bolton arrive at it. All come, in their time, to know that the only fate available to the individual is a death too insignificant to merit real consideration.

Even as a response to his national cultural moment, Melville’s novel exposes the horror housed within the ordinary. Edelstein, for instance, reads the failure of Redburn’s father’s guidebook to London as part of a national generational discordance as the nation moves into the rapidly expansive, industrial and market-oriented future (567). This too Melville renders as a horrific trauma, a loss of the past leading to Redburn’s panicked bewilderment in the city that threatens to entrap

or abscond him altogether. Melville blends a thwarted bildungsroman with a warped travel narrative with a pessimistic transcendentalist treatise. The titular Redburn finds himself drawn, as in a gyre, ever closer to an insignificant watery death.

As the novel comes to a close, the ship's crew and its passengers, reduced to ashes or morsels, serve as the fuel to sustain trade. Melville shows readers skin picked as rags, skeletons lashed to their labor, flesh burned as offering, people confused with pigs to be eaten, and bodies pitched into the sea to join their nameless fellows. Jackson, the ostensible villain of the story, actually offers an incisive critique of faith among merchant men. "Don't talk of heaven to me," he declares because, to him, "it's a lie—I know it—and they are all fools that believe in it. . . . Avast! When some shark gulps you down his hatchway one of these days, you'll find, that by dying, you'll only go from one gale of wind to another" (104). Miguel Saveda's death by spontaneous combustion may be the novel's most dramatic fate, but it is by no means its most terrible. Indeed, the implied collective grinding murder of the laboring class is *Redburn's* true subject. The critiques of horror as an ordinary aspect of capitalist processes and its contributions to horror as a generic response to a capitalist life are singular and crucial to reevaluations of Melville's work even two centuries after his birth. And so, as an orthodox maritime travel narrative, *Redburn* may, indeed, be the failure that its early critics saw, but as a covert horror novel about the forces of Atlantic trade, it is a stunning and terrible success.

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