



ON VOYAGING AND *BILDUNG* (The Case of Wellingborough/Redburn)

When I reflect on the curious trajectories of the Americanists of my generation living in the former Eastern Bloc countries, I am often struck by a profound sense of wonder. Immobilized behind the Iron Curtain, the only transoceanic expeditions we could afford were those of the imagination—journeys fueled by novels, travel reports, and films, more or less selectively aired by our state-run televisions. Then came the breakthrough of 1989, and although the fall of communism made it theoretically possible for us to travel, academic salaries were prohibitively low; the sheer cost of accommodation in Western countries at the time would keep us sedentary for years. And it dawns on me that were it not for the fact that, at least in the context of my country, Poland, sea sailing became our window onto the world¹, I might have never become an Americanist, I might have never joined IASA, The Melville Society, ASA, or MLA, and in all probability, I would have never written books about literature and the sea. Yet, nothing in life happens by chance: there only are coincidences. One such fortuitous convergence of circumstances was my encounter, in the middle of the Baltic Sea, with the Polish sail training ship the *Zawisza Czarna*. Returning from Scandinavia aboard the heavily damaged yacht *Witeź II*, we found ourselves adrift in a September calm, pitching on a lifeless swell.

When I spotted the distinctive outline of the Polish tall ship on the horizon, I hailed her on the radio. Captain Andrzej Drapella responded, and immediately offered assistance. The ship approached our tiny vessel: the crew provided us with water, food, and much-needed

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1 For a more thorough explanation of these phenomena see: Jędrzejko 2015: 101–119.

cigarettes, and the Master, epitome of maritime elegance, invited me aboard. Once I climbed the tall side, his tone suddenly changed:

“You are Paweł Jędrzejko, are you not?” he demanded.

“Aye, Sir.”

“According to my documents, you were supposed to be in this crew: you signed up a year ago.”

“Well, yes... but...”

“Enough with buts! In September, you *shall* attend my maritime workshops. And next March, you *shall* report on board this ship.”

“Aye, aye, Captain. And where are we heading?”

“To the Americas.”

The Americas... the very sound of it. Could this dual continent, distant enough to seem improbable, and improbable enough to seem mythical, be within my reach? Indeed, it was. And the fantasy came true: in 1992, I eventually sailed to the Caribbean, the US, and Canada as the mate of the Fourth Watch aboard the *Zawisza Czarna*, a ship universally loved by Polish sailors.

Many years later, that first voyage around the North Atlantic—the Grand Regatta Columbus ‘92—inspired me to write several chapters about the formative experiences of another young man, Herman Melville, whose first transatlantic journey marked an epistemic breakthrough that influenced almost all of his literary work and shaped the paths of his evolving philosophical reflection². The following text, while not an autoethnographic account of my experiences with/of/in America, integrates my observations on the formative nature of the journey undertaken by Wellingborough Redburn with my own youthful hopes, fears, and projections. But as I look at Wellingborough, I see my younger self, and I smile warmly at the young man, who has long since become me.

* * *

In his 1996 book, *The Weaver-God: He Weaves*, which explores the poetics of Herman Melville’s prose works and their genre implications, Christopher Sten dedicates a chapter to the novel *Redburn: His First Voyage*. Analyzing the transformations undergone by the protagonist, whom circumstances compel to prematurely attain an “adult” identity, the author categorizes the work as follows:

2 The book in question is *Płynność i egzystencja. Doświadczenie lądu i morza a myśl Hermana Melville’a* [Liquidity and Existence. The Experience of the Land and the Sea in Herman Melville’s Thought] (Jędrzejko 2008).

Redburn is not a pure example of the bildungsroman. It lacks the scope and fullness of the classic instances of the genre, such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. It tells us relatively little about the hero's childhood (although it does reveal something, particularly in the first chapter), and offers only a few hints about his later life, hardly more than the fact that "years" later he found himself "a sailor in the Pacific, on board of a whaler" and that, later still, he wrote *Redburn*. Even so, it still qualifies as an abbreviated version of the form, particularly if it is accepted that, as Jerome Buckley has observed, the typical bildungsroman is "strongly autobiographical," as *Redburn* is, and that it has close ties to "confession," as Melville more than hints at in the subtitle. If it fails to give us even so much as the single *Lehrjahre* of Goethe's hero, it at least provides the critical four months of Redburn's "first voyage." And it focuses not simply on an important chapter in that life, when he leaves the protection of his home and family to venture into the world for the first time on his own. (112)

Approaching *Redburn* as a novel about character formation, Sten identifies genre elements that allow the narrative sequence to be considered in terms of the protagonist's evolving state of consciousness, shaped by his subsequent experiences. The portrayal of the protagonist begins with his depiction as a child raised under the protective wing of his parents, living in a world governed by clear, comprehensible, and unquestioned rules. The next stage of his evolution involves the confrontation of childish imaginings with practical life, which experience marks a pivotal point on his path to the third stage—discovering an "adult" identity, whose further pursuit involves successive iterations of the continual process of reconstructing, or re-inventing, the "self."

It is worth noting that like *White-Jacket* and *Ishmael*, also the narrator of *Redburn* presents his story retrospectively, thus with an awareness of past changes and their impact on the evolution of the storyteller. Consequently, we encounter a protagonist who simultaneously represents two viewpoints: one based on *naïve awareness* (when recounting his childhood) and another, shaped by *experienced awareness*, contemporary with the narrative. Furthermore, one cannot overlook another layer of consciousness embedded in this work: the *authorial awareness*, which manifests itself through stylistic manipulation. Lawrence Thompson emphasizes this point in his seminal study *Melville's Quarrel with God* (1952). Discussing *Redburn*, he points out the importance of the "tripartite perspective" embedded in the construction of the central character. Thompson argues that, although the book's theme is "merely [...] a young man's experience in leaving home for the first time" (75), this seemingly ordinary storyline allows Melville to identify and contrast three stages of his own spiritual

and intellectual development. The scholar indicates that the three distinct viewpoints, reflecting three different autobiographical phases of Melville's intellectual evolution (which Thomson aptly dubs "phases of disillusionment"), can be observed with particular clarity when analyzing the stylistic devices employed by the writer to build his literary analogon. The scholar proposes that the first viewpoint, corresponding to the "naïve phase of autobiography," be termed "the Wellingborough viewpoint"—because recounting his own story, the narrator refers to his past self, using only his first name. "The Narrator viewpoint" (or "the Redburn viewpoint")—corresponds to the second stage of the evolution of the character's individual *weltanschauung*, when the protagonist already perceives the difference between his past self and present self, but has not yet re-evaluated or revised many of the elements of his former worldview. The third stage, in turn, corresponds to "the Melville viewpoint"—that of the artistic manipulator who engages the previous two perspectives in a unique interplay with his own, mature, understanding of the human condition (Thompson 75–76).

Adopting such a division facilitates considering the transformations of Wellingborough Redburn in terms of his *pre-visions*, *experience*, and *post-visions*, as each of these phases corresponds to one of Thompson's "viewpoints." The "then," represented by the version of the character to which Melville refers by the name "Wellingborough," is the starting point of the process, for which a state of pre-visionary inventory can be defined.

INNOCENCE. PRE-VISIONS

The very title of the first chapter—"How Wellingborough Redburn's Taste for the Sea Was Born and Bred in Him" suggests that the transformation of the protagonist's *worldview* is a significant theme of the novel: it shapes the reader's expectations. The implied question about "origins" sanctions the retrospective narrative of the bildungsroman: it points to the "then" as it is seen from the position of "now." Following the genre's conventions, the first chapter provides an image of what Wellingborough was "equipped with" before experience made him Redburn.

Providing Wellingborough with the essentials necessary for his journey into adulthood, Melville is rather sparing. Redburn speaks of his "then" self in this way:

I was then but a boy. Some time previous my mother had removed from New York to a pleasant village on the Hudson River, where we lived in a small house, in a quiet way. Sad disappointments in several plans which I had sketched

for my future life; the necessity of doing something for myself, united to a naturally roving disposition, had now conspired within me, to send me to sea as a sailor. (*Redburn* 1)

Melville “equips” his character with a rather typical set of memories. Wellingborough Redburn spent his childhood years in an atmosphere of prosperity, security, and warmth in one of America’s busiest major cities. Nineteenth-century New York, where the family lived until the father’s death, was a bustling hub of contrasts—a cosmopolitan center of maritime trade. It was also trade that allowed the protagonist’s father to prosper—and stories of his business travels, not unlike in the case of Melville himself, would kindle the boy’s imagination:

[...] my father, now dead, had several times crossed the Atlantic on business affairs, for he had been an importer in Broad-street. And of winter evenings in New York, by the well-remembered sea-coal fire in old Greenwich-street, he used to tell my brother and me of the monstrous waves at sea, mountain high; of the masts bending like twigs; and all about Havre, and Liverpool, and about going up into the ball of St. Paul’s in London. Indeed, during my early life, most of my thoughts of the sea were connected with the land; but with fine old lands, full of mossy cathedrals and churches, and long, narrow, crooked streets without sidewalks, and lined with strange houses. And especially I tried hard to think how such places must look of rainy days and Saturday afternoons; and whether indeed they did have rainy days and Saturdays there, just as we did here; and whether the boys went to school there, and studied geography, and wore their shirt collars turned over, and tied with a black ribbon; and whether their papas allowed them to wear boots, instead of shoes, which I so much disliked, for boots looked so manly. (*Redburn* 3)

Wellingborough, like any young boy, dreams of adulthood, which “then” appears to him as a collective function of external attributes—sometimes as simple as footwear. In the protagonist’s imagination, men’s high boots hold a much higher status than boys’ low shoes: the person who wears boots is an *adult*—like his father—and, like him, can travel. The father, admired and loved, represents the ideal of masculinity to which the boy subconsciously aspires. Learning values—and concepts—that would eventually allow him to navigate the reality he is only just beginning to know, he starts with adopting behavioral models from his parents, and, like almost every child, he takes parental visions of the world for granted: he believes them to be unquestionably reliable and true beyond doubt. Soon, inevitably, the radical clash with the mundane reality, resulting in painful disillusionment, will crush Wellingborough’s childish sense of certainty, energizing his struggle to eventually build his own, independent, identity. However, before that happens, his

sense of security will continue to be the “fertile soil,” upon which his childhood dreams of distant journeys may flourish. These fantasies of travel naturally align with his curiosity about the Other and Otherness, perceived through the lens of his father’s inspiring stories in terms of an idealized “world across the ocean,” immensely attractive to Wellingborough’s “young, inland, imagination”:

For months previous I had been poring over old New York papers, delightfully perusing the long columns of ship advertisements, all of which possessed a strange, romantic charm to me. Over and over again I devoured such announcements as the following:

FOR BREMEN.

The coppered and copper-fastened brig *Leda*, having nearly completed her cargo, will sail for the above port on Tuesday the twentieth of May. For freight or passage apply on board at Coenties Slip.

To my young inland imagination every word in an advertisement like this, suggested volumes of thought.

A brig! The very word summoned up the idea of a black, sea-worn craft, with high, cozy bulwarks, and rakish masts and yards.

Coppered and copper-fastened! That fairly smelt of the salt water! How different such vessels must be from the wooden, one-masted, green-and-white-painted sloops, that glided up and down the river before our house on the bank.

Nearly completed her cargo! How momentous the announcement; suggesting ideas, too, of musty bales, and cases of silks and satins, and filling me with contempt for the vile deck-loads of hay and lumber, with which my river experience was familiar.

Will sail on Tuesday the 20th of May—and the newspaper bore date the fifth of the month! Fifteen whole days beforehand; think of that; what an important voyage it must be, that the time of sailing was fixed upon so long beforehand; the river sloops were not used to make such prospective announcements.

For freight or passage apply on board! Think of going on board a coppered and copper-fastened brig, and taking passage for Bremen! And who could be going to Bremen? No one but foreigners, doubtless; men of dark complexions and jet-black whiskers, who talked French.

Coenties Slip. Plenty more brigs and any quantity of ships must be lying there. Coenties Slip must be somewhere near ranges of grim-looking warehouses, with rusty iron doors and shutters, and tiled roofs; and old anchors and chain-cable piled on the walk. Old-fashioned coffeehouses, also, much abound in that neighborhood, with sunburnt sea-captains going in and out, smoking cigars, and talking about Havanna, London, and Calcutta.

All these my imaginations were wonderfully assisted by certain shadowy reminiscences of wharves, and warehouses, and shipping, with which a residence in a seaport during early childhood had supplied me.

Particularly, I remembered standing with my father on the wharf when a large ship was getting under way, and rounding the head of the pier. I remem-

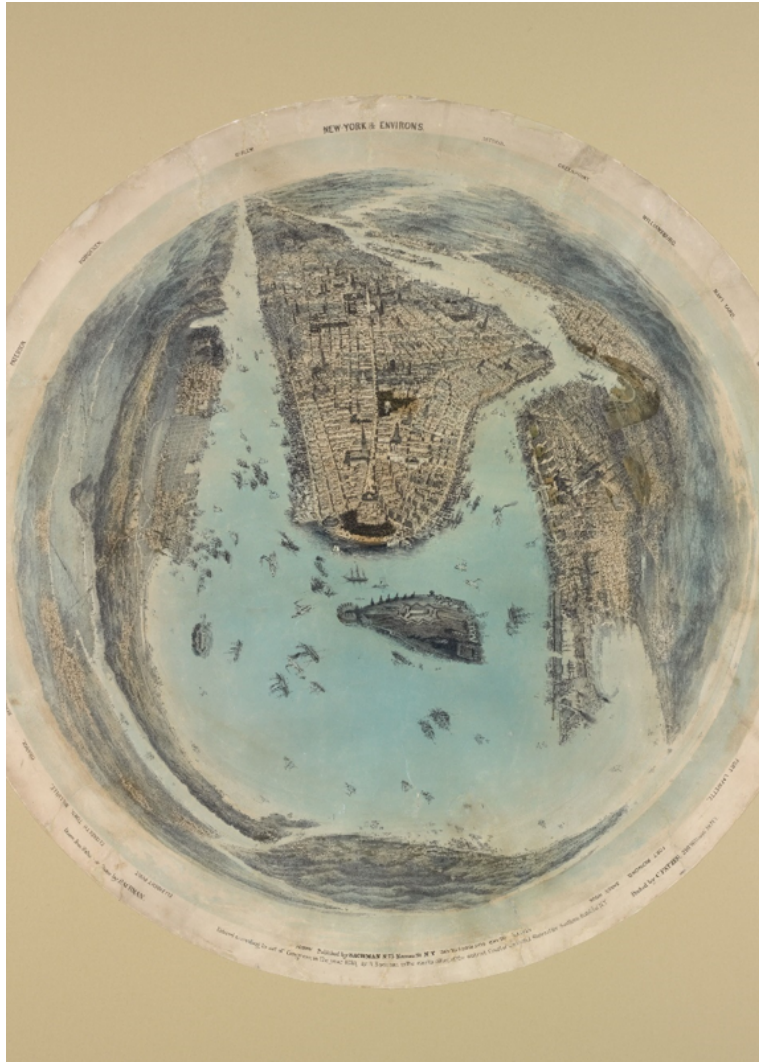
bered the yo heave ho! of the sailors, as they just showed their woolen caps above the high bulwarks. I remembered how I thought of their crossing the great ocean; and that that very ship, and those very sailors, so near to me then, would after a time be actually in Europe. (*Redburn* 2–3)

Interestingly, the early childhood memories, such as the one described above, seamlessly fuse two perspectives reflecting the “duality” of the perceiving protagonist. The first perspective, nonexistent “then” but reconstructed “now” to form the authorial retrospection³, merges with the narrator’s perspective—that adopted by Redburn himself. Melville, the “artistic manipulator,” expresses his—evidently nostalgic, yet serene—vision of the youthful naïvety of the past, with a touch of irony. He has Redburn recount his experiences as the young Wellingborough, who is thrilled comparing an ocean-going brig to a river sloop. Of course—the copper-clad ship *must be* superior to the riverboats: it is larger, less commonly seen, capable of crossing the ocean, and its cargo is *undoubtedly* much more valuable than the ordinary loads of hay and wood transported aboard river vessels. For Wellingborough, who does not yet know how long a transatlantic voyage ordinarily lasts and what preparations it requires, the fifteen days from the date of the announcement to the planned departure of the *Leda* seem an exceptionally long time. Such a significant advance call suggests to him that the voyage *must be* a mission of immense importance. Redburn—the narrator seems to “aid” the reader in noticing that the frame of reference for all the evaluative statements the Wellingborough—the boy makes is his knowledge of riverboats “then.” Similarly, his youthful vision of the travelers of ocean-going ships is endearingly naïve: in Wellingborough’s imagination, they are exclusively people of dark complexions and wearing black mustaches, i.e. possessing characteristics that—in his childish reasoning—define them as foreigners. Moreover, they all speak *French*—which, essentially, means *not English*—as French was the only foreign language the boy could hear at home. In Wellingborough’s perception, French epitomizes *all* foreign speech, as well as the exotic, fascinating world of the Others.

Furthermore, Coenties Slip, where the architecture of the city almost touches the waters of the East River, almost imperceptibly transitioning into the piers of the port, appears in the boy’s hazy memories as a “border zone,” separating the known world from the unknown, while simultaneously combining the land and the sea. Thinking of Coenties

3 Note the past forms in the grammar of the narrative already embedded in the past, indicating past perfect, e.g., “I remembered,” not “I remember” in the last paragraph of the quoted fragment.

Slip as the place beyond which lie “foreign lands,” Wellingborough unconsciously overlays the limits of the world with the boundaries of New York and the City’s immediate surroundings. To him, in fact, Manhattan Island is the only known continent, centrally placed on his mental world map. An analogous perspective is beautifully illustrated by John Bachmann in his 1859 lithograph “New York and Environs”:



*JOURNEYING AMERICA(N)S
On Paradoxes of Travel
(and) Narratives*

RIAS—Vol. 17, Spring—Summer, № 1/2024

Fig.1: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. “New York and Environs.” A lithograph by John Bachmann (1859). The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Public Domain. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e3-b9bd-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Hans Bergmann analyzes the image as follows:

John Bachmann's lithograph published in 1859, "New York and Environs," is the most extraordinary view of New York during the period. Here is the bird's-eye view gone fish-eye. New York in this view is not simply a landscape by itself, filling up and an otherwise blank world: the city is the world itself. The Navy Yard and Sandy Hook are the far edges of the globe; Broadway is the Greenwich meridian. The commercial and cultural centrality imagined in this conception is manifest: there is nothing but New York, and nothing but contemporary New York. Bachmann's illustration published just at the end of the antebellum period, is a remarkable step beyond the exuberant boosterism of panoramas of the early 1850s. Saul Steinberg's *New Yorker* cover illustration looking across the Hudson to "Japan" comes again to mind, and its self-deprecating humor reminds us that Bachmann's illustration may have been comically self-aware too. Bachmann so exaggerates the idea that New York windows are windows on the world, that quotidian New York I everything there is to know, that we cannot help thinking that he might intend a joke. (48)

Although the lithograph was created a decade after *Redburn's* publication and is obviously based on different assumptions—and despite the fact that the analogy is valid only to a certain extent—the fish-eye vision itself seems to adequately render Wellingborough's youthful concept of the topography of the world. *Redburn*, of course, does not elaborate on Wellingborough's way of thinking to give himself an opportunity for a political *exposé*; instead, he does so to highlight the boundaries beyond which once lay a distant, idealized world, defined solely by his own, immature, imagination. Young Wellingborough *knows* that across the Ocean lie Europe, Africa, and New Zealand, but his understanding of *what they are like*—and, more broadly, *what the world* he has not yet explored *is like*—is mediated to him only through stories, literature, and paintings. *Redburn* recalls:

[...] we had several oil-paintings and rare old engravings of my father's, which he himself had bought in Paris, hanging up in the dining-room.

Two of these were sea-pieces. One represented a fat-looking, smoky fishing-boat, with three whickerandoes in red caps, and their browsers legs rolled up, hauling in a seine. There was high French-like land in one corner, and a tumble-down gray lighthouse surmounting it. The waves were toasted brown, and the whole picture looked mellow and old. I used to think a piece of it might taste good.

The other represented three old-fashioned French men-of-war with high castles, like pagodas, on the bow and stern, such as you see in *Froissart*; and snug little turrets on top of the mast, full of little men, with something undefinable in their hands. All three were sailing through a bright-blue sea, blue as Sicily skies; and they were leaning over on their sides at a fearful angle; and they must

have been going very fast, for the white spray was about the bows like a snow-storm.

Then, we had two large green French portfolios of colored prints, more than I could lift at that age. Every Saturday my brothers and sisters used to get them out of the corner where they were kept, and spreading them on the floor, gaze at them with never-failing delight.

They were of all sorts. Some were pictures of Versailles, its masquerades, its drawing-rooms, its fountains, and courts, and gardens, with long lines of thick foliage cut into fantastic doors and windows, and towers and pinnacles. Others were rural scenes, full of fine skies, pensive cows standing up to the knees in water, and shepherd-boys and cottages in the distance, half concealed in vineyards and vines.

And others were pictures of natural history, representing rhinoceroses and elephants and spotted tigers; and above all there was a picture of a great whale, as big as a ship, stuck full of harpoons, and three boats sailing after it as fast as they could fly. (*Redburn* 4–5)

It is primarily the images that captivate Wellingborough's imagination, and although reading might still be too demanding an activity, the mere fact that the volumes from his father's library come *from abroad*, are beautifully published, and written in an incomprehensible language, evokes fascination:

Then, too, we had a large library-case, that stood in the hall; an old brown library-case, tall as a small house; it had a sort of basement, with large doors, and a lock and key; and higher up, there were glass doors, through which might be seen long rows of old books, that had been printed in Paris, and London, and Leipsic. There was a fine library edition of the *Spectator*, in six large volumes with gilded backs; and many a time I gazed at the word "*London*" on the title-page. And there was a copy of D'Alembert in French, and I wondered what a great man I would be, if by foreign travel I should ever be able to read straight along without stopping, out of that book, which now was a riddle to every one in the house but my father, whom I so much liked to hear talk French, as he sometimes did to a servant we had. (*Redburn* 5)

For the young Wellingborough, the existence of the distant world is "not quite certain"; the contents of the home library and the small art collection are not yet sufficient evidence that another reality *could* exist beyond the familiar, palpable, "home" world. For the child, Paris, London, Leipzig—all these names might have held a similar status as the fantastical cities from the *Arabian Nights*, which Melville himself used to devour in his own nubile age. This is clearly indicated by the boy's doubts concerning the French origins of the servant:

That servant, too, I used to gaze at with wonder; for in answer to my incredulous cross-questions, he had over and over again assured me, that he had really been born in Paris. But this I never entirely believed; for it seemed so hard to com-

prehend, how a man who had been born in a foreign country, could be dwelling with me in our house in America. (*Redburn* 5–6)

The books on the shelves, the paintings on the walls, and the engravings and watercolors collected by his father—all these objects whet the boy’s craving for travel. Yet, a precious family heirloom—a intricately crafted glass model of a warship—inspires him above all:

But that which perhaps more than any thing else, converted my vague dreamings and longings into a definite purpose of seeking my fortune on the sea, was an old-fashioned glass ship, about eighteen inches long, and of French manufacture, which my father, some thirty years before, had brought home from Hamburg as a present to a great-uncle of mine: Senator Wellingborough, who had died a member of Congress in the days of the old Constitution, and after whom I had the honor of being named. Upon the decease of the Senator, the ship was returned to the donor.

It was kept in a square glass case, which was regularly dusted by one of my sisters every morning, and stood on a little claw-footed Dutch tea-table in one corner of the sitting-room. This ship, after being the admiration of my father’s visitors in the capital, became the wonder and delight of all the people of the village where we now resided, many of whom used to call upon my mother, for no other purpose than to see the ship. And well did it repay the long and curious examinations which they were accustomed to give it. (*Redburn* 6)

For Redburn “now,” *La Reine* (for that is the name of the little ship) triggers associations with the glorious history of his family, but is also a metaphor for his own transformation. However, for Wellingborough “then,” *La Reine* is an inaccessible toy, encased in glass. The world of the miniscule man-of-war strikingly resembles that of a real vessel: every detail of the model is meticulously crafted. The artist fashioned each element of the hull and rigging to perfection, precisely shaped the tiny figures of sailors and officers engaged in their usual activities, rendering the little universe complete by including in it a barking dog with a red muzzle. For the reflective Redburn, the model is a rare piece of art; yet, for Wellingborough, who fills the world he is only just discovering with the work of his imagination—the toy ship is a portal to an imagined reality. After all, a child playing with a toy car truly becomes its driver, and engages in play so profoundly that the role he or she assumes and the surrounding objects become (for a moment) the *actual reality*, evoking genuine emotions. For Wellingborough, too, the glass ship is a *real vessel*, in whose holds a *real treasure* must be hidden:

In the first place, every bit of it was glass, and that was a great wonder of itself; because the masts, yards, and ropes were made to resemble exactly the corresponding parts of a real vessel that could go to sea. She carried two tiers of black

guns all along her two decks; and often I used to try to peep in at the portholes, to see what else was inside; but the holes were so small, and it looked so very dark indoors, that I could discover little or nothing; though, when I was very little, I made no doubt, that if I could but once pry open the hull, and break the glass all to pieces, I would infallibly light upon something wonderful, perhaps some gold guineas, of which I have always been in want, ever since I could remember. And often I used to feel a sort of insane desire to be the death of the glass ship, case, and all, in order to come at the plunder; and one day, throwing out some hint of the kind to my sisters, they ran to my mother in a great clamor; and after that, the ship was placed on the mantel-piece for a time, beyond my reach, and until I should recover my reason.

I do not know how to account for this temporary madness of mine, unless it was, that I had been reading in a story-book about Captain Kidd's ship, that lay somewhere at the bottom of the Hudson near the Highlands, full of gold as it could be; and that a company of men were trying to dive down and get the treasure out of the hold, which no one had ever thought of doing before, though there she had lain for almost a hundred years. (*Redburn* 6–7)

Imaginative fantasies thus determine a child's here-and-now: the promise of an adventure shapes it, translating stories into plans, and propelling actions. However, the first confrontation with the external world—unsheltered, unlike the family home—may cause the fragile glass of youthful projections to shatter:

So much for *La Reine*. We have her yet in the house, but many of her glass spars and ropes are now sadly shattered and broken,—but I will not have her mended; and her figurehead, a gallant warrior in a cocked-hat, lies pitching headforemost down into the trough of a calamitous sea under the bows—but I will not have him put on his legs again, till I get on my own; for between him and me there is a secret sympathy; and my sisters tell me, even yet, that he fell from his perch the very day I left home to go to sea on this *my first voyage*. (*Redburn* 8)

The glass ship with its proud figurehead will never be repaired: there is no return to the blissful state of innocence, where reality is defined by fixed principles and unbreakable values, and the confusion of imagination and facts has no unpleasant consequences. The “son-of-a-gentleman” dreaming of a voyager's fame, who trusts adults, is an active member of the Juvenile Total Abstinence Association, does not curse, and, in his naïveté, does not understand how relative the values of birth and upbringing can be—will receive his first lesson in reality with the passing of his father. Sensitive yet proud, convinced of his house's greatness and accustomed to a benign environment where honesty, honor, biblical truths, and good manners prevailed—the child of a once-wealthy family will become a simple ship's boy. “Equipped” with curiosity about the world (awakened by others' stories), a rifle, a hunting jacket featuring enormous buttons,

and an old green morocco guidebook to Liverpool, Wellingborough will set out on a journey from which he will return as Redburn.

THE VOYAGE: TOWARDS EXPERIENCE

As it has already been hinted, in the novel the young Wellingborough is fashioned as a *type*, while the mature Redburn is granted the status of a fully developed *character*. This distinction is particularly evident in the closing words of the novel's second chapter, where Melville, in Redburn's words, makes a significant generalization about Wellingborough's past: "Such is boyhood." This remark, singled out in its own paragraph, is distinctly set apart from the rest of the text and serves as a rhetorical gesture that conceptually separates Redburn-the-narrator (an already evolved personality) from Wellingborough, the "typical" child of a good pedigree, who prematurely enters the adult world. However, once he is aboard, the *Highlander*, young Wellingborough's "boyhood" begins to end. He quickly loses his naïve belief in the constancy of the values in which he was raised: his hunting jacket—a symbol of high status—exposed to the elements, loses its style, and his high boots must be drastically adjusted (with the help of a knife) to suit the conditions of life and work on a sailing ship. Even so, at the beginning of the voyage the boy would still experience the new flavors of reality quite euphorically:

At last we hoisted the stun'-sails up to the top-sail yards, and as soon as the vessel felt them, she gave a sort of bound like a horse, and the breeze blowing more and more, she went plunging along, shaking off the foam from her bows, like foam from a bridle-bit. Every mast and timber seemed to have a pulse in it that was beating with life and joy; and I felt a wild exulting in my own heart, and felt as if I would be glad to bound along so round the world.

Then was I first conscious of a wonderful thing in me, that responded to all the wild commotion of the outer world; and went reeling on and on with the planets in their orbits, and was lost in one delirious throb at the center of the All. A wild bubbling and bursting was at my heart, as if a hidden spring had just gushed out there; and my blood ran tingling along my frame, like mountain brooks in spring freshets.

Yes! yes! give me this glorious ocean life, this salt-sea life, this briny, foamy life, when the sea neighs and snorts, and you breathe the very breath that the great whales respire! Let me roll around the globe, let me rock upon the sea; let me race and pant out my life, with an eternal breeze astern, and an endless sea before! (*Redburn* 64)

In Melville's universe, it is precisely the young and inexperienced dreamers who are granted the privilege to share in the cheerful

transcendentalism of Goethe's and Emerson's. Therefore, while Wellingborough experiences a joyful trance, Redburn's share will be a life marred with doubt and informed with the immediacy of the terrifying, absurd reality. Melville foreshadows this transformation in the next paragraph when he punch-lines the youthful enthusiasm with a comic—and somewhat ironic—juxtaposition of the sublime and the mundane, indicating how the sense of unity with “the All” in a wonderful state of elation quickly yields to tangible, brutal facts of life. Wellingborough ruefully confesses:

[...] soon these raptures abated, when after a brief idle interval, we were again set to work, and I had a vile commission to clean out the chicken coops, and make up the beds of the pigs in the long-boat.

Miserable dog's life is this of the sea! commanded like a slave, and set to work like an ass! vulgar and brutal men lording it over me, as if I were an African in Alabama. Yes, yes, blow on, ye breezes, and make a speedy end to this abominable voyage! (*Redburn* 64)

The experiences that daily encounters bring hardly provide a trustworthy basis for an entirely joyful outlook on the world; the smiles of Melville's mature characters are always bitter-sweet. Although the beauty of the tranquil ocean and the charm of sailing can uplift one's spirits, the “adult” characters harbor too many existential doubts to succumb to euphoria. Only someone as young as Wellingborough can “forget” the terror experienced at the moment of his first direct clash with incomprehensible death, when one of the sailors, in a delirious frenzy, commits suicide:

[...] we were all startled by a horrid groaning noise down in the forecabin; and all at once some one came rushing up the scuttle in his shirt, clutching something in his hand, and trembling and shrieking in the most frightful manner, so that I thought one of the sailors must be murdered below.

But it all passed in a moment; and while we stood aghast at the sight, and almost before we knew what it was, the shrieking man jumped over the bows into the sea, and we saw him no more. Then there was a great uproar; the sailors came running up on deck; and the chief mate ran forward, and learning what had happened, began to yell out his orders about the sails and yards; and we all went to pulling and hauling the ropes, till at last the ship lay almost still on the water. Then they loosed a boat, which kept pulling round the ship for more than an hour, but they never caught sight of the man. It seemed that he was one of the sailors who had been brought aboard dead drunk, and tumbled into his bunk by his landlord; and there he had lain till now. He must have suddenly waked up, I suppose, raging mad with the delirium tremens, as the chief mate called it, and finding himself in a strange silent place, and knowing not how he had got there, he rushed on deck, and so, in a fit of frenzy, put an end to himself.

This event, happening at the dead of night, had a wonderfully solemn and almost awful effect upon me. I would have given the whole world, and the sun and moon, and all the stars in heaven, if they had been mine, had I been safe back at Mr. Jones', or still better, in my home on the Hudson River. I thought it an ill-omened voyage, and railed at the folly which had sent me to sea, sore against the advice of my best friends, that is to say, my mother and sisters. (*Redburn* 47–48)

The author “lets” Wellingborough momentarily suppress his fear, continue appreciating the beauty of the world, and still partake of the joy of life. The suicidal sailor disappears from view and thus ceases to be a part of the protagonist’s world; his death is swift, seemingly “painless” for the witnesses. However, Wellingborough will face death again—but this time, the experience will prove impossible to erase from memory. It is this participatory experience of protruded dying, to which the protagonist becomes an involuntary witness in the bustling, wealthy Liverpool, that will allow Wellingborough to finally become Redburn.

To his surprise, in the great city, whose idealized image—inspired by the accounts of his gentlemanly father—he had formed, the protagonist finds, alongside the splendor of architecture and the wealth of affluent neighborhoods, a world of extreme poverty that overshadows the city’s brilliance. During his wanderings in the port district of Liverpool, he encounters a family dying of starvation: a mother and three children. Wellingborough tries to obtain help for them and, after being refused, attempts to procure food that could save their barely flickering lives. Alone in his efforts, he begins to understand the terrifying truth about the world’s indifference and the heartlessness of people; he must come to terms with the paradox that his attempts to help only prolong the agony of those he seeks to save. While he could rationalize the sudden suicidal death of the sailor aboard the *Highlander* as a consequence of his drunkenness, and quickly move past it, he now becomes part of a slow, absurd dying process. Wellingborough—whether he wants it or not—now has *time* for painful reflection. Above all, by participating in the demise of the destitute family as a powerless observer, he experiences death’s radical—and palpable—alienness:

[...] Hurrying to the lane, I dropped the food down into the vault. One of the girls caught at it convulsively, but fell back, apparently fainting; the sister pushed the other’s arm aside, and took the bread in her hand; but with a weak uncertain grasp like an infant’s. She placed it to her mouth; but letting it fall again, murmuring faintly something like “water.” The woman did not stir; her head was bowed over, just as I had first seen her. (*Redburn* 176)

Wellingborough is not prepared for such an experience. Although he intuitively feels that he will not be able to save the dying people, he feels an imperative to act. Unable to do much more, he brings water to the exhausted victims:

[...] I returned to Launcelott's-Hey; and with considerable difficulty, like getting down into a well, I contrived to descend with it into the vault; where there was hardly space enough left to let me stand. The two girls drank out of the hat together; looking up at me with an unalterable, idiotic expression, that almost made me faint. The woman spoke not a word, and did not stir. While the girls were breaking and eating the bread, I tried to lift the woman's head; but, feeble as she was, she seemed bent upon holding it down. Observing her arms still clasped upon her bosom, and that something seemed hidden under the rags there, a thought crossed my mind, which impelled me forcibly to withdraw her hands for a moment; when I caught a glimpse of a meager little babe—the lower part of its body thrust into an old bonnet. Its face was dazzlingly white, even in its squalor; but the closed eyes looked like balls of indigo. It must have been dead some hours.

The woman refusing to speak, eat, or drink, I asked one of the girls who they were, and where they lived; but she only stared vacantly, muttering something that could not be understood.

The air of the place was now getting too much for me; but I stood deliberating a moment, whether it was possible for me to drag them out of the vault. But if I did, what then? They would only perish in the street, and here they were at least protected from the rain; and more than that, might die in seclusion. (*Redburn* 177)

Entering the grim basement that serves as a wretched shelter for the unfortunate poor, Wellingborough is not yet aware that the world he has entered is not his own. He looks at the dying people with the eyes of a sensitive and emotionally susceptible person, but one who thinks logically—in terms that are foreign to the mother of the deceased infant and the two little girls. He expects answers to his questions, completely failing to grasp the absurdity of asking *any questions* at all: if the family had somewhere else to live, they certainly would not dwell in the tomb-like cellar, and “who they are” is more than obvious: they are *no one*, or even less—they are a burden to others, an unbearable remorse to Christian morality.

Wellingborough has entered a tomb where death already reigns. He cannot prevent it, but he cannot stop being its witness. He does not understand death, but tries to fit the dying people into something that could be called the “ontic empire of life,” viewing them through the filter of his own categories. In the girls’ gazes, he sees only an “unalterable, idiotic expression,” stimulating his somatic reaction: he is on the verge of fainting. The woman he addresses, as he per-

ceives it, refuses to respond or accept food, and her daughter “stares at him with a vacant look” and “muttering something that could not be understood,” a phenomenon not unfamiliar to therapists like Alexander Lowen:

A genuine smile is the result of a wave of excitation that flows upward, brightening the face and lighting up the eyes, just as a house lights up when someone is home. Vacant eyes give the impression that a person’s house is empty. The emptiest eyes of all are those of a dead person. I once looked into the eyes of a patient and saw the empty look of death. I was sure that the person had died a long time ago, not physically but emotionally [...]. (86)

The protagonist intuits that he stands face-to-face with death, yet he cannot comprehend that the people whom he is trying to engage in a conversation *epitomize dying*. Wellingborough has not yet developed any discourse-based defensive mechanisms or emotional armor that—unlike it is the case with physicians dealing with death on daily basis—would allow him to maintain a healthy distance from dying, and to separate himself from the agony, the transitional state between life and death. Quite comprehensibly, soon, the atmosphere of the place becomes “too much” for him. Living the lingering death of another person, he organically experiences basic anxiety (*ur-Angst*). Dying becomes part of his unmediated, direct experience, which he can neither non-verbally grasp, verbalize, nor rationalize—and, consequently, he is unable to integrate it into his framework of learned or inherited concepts. However, because Melville portrays him as a sensitive person, his feelings are, as Alexander Lowen would describe it, attuned to a particular kind of unconscious “resonance”:

Our ability to sense what is happening to another person, an ability I have described as empathy, is based on the fact that our bodies resonate with other living bodies. If we don’t resonate with others, it is because we don’t resonate within ourselves. If a person can say, “I don’t feel anything,” then he has cut off not only the feeling of his own aliveness but any feeling he might have for others, both people and beasts. (Lowen 43)

His attitude is thus not only a symptom of mental health: it is also a gesture of saving his own empathetically threatened vitality. When he visits the cellar again and does not find those he is looking for, Wellingborough—who has now become Redburn—feels relief: “[...] they were dead, departed, and at peace.” And although he is comforted by the passing of the unfortunate family, which brings an end to their suffering and grants them the peace of soul for which he prayed,

to the boy their “departure” does not prove to be final. Redburn confesses:

But again I looked down into the vault, and in fancy beheld the pale, shrunken forms still crouching there. Ah! what are our creeds, and how do we hope to be saved? Tell me, oh Bible, that story of Lazarus again, that I may find comfort in my heart for the poor and forlorn. Surrounded as we are by the wants and woes of our fellowmen, and yet given to follow our own pleasures, regardless of their pains, are we not like people sitting up with a corpse, and making merry in the house of the dead? (*Redburn* 178)

Wellingborough can no longer forget what he saw. Although only the first sentence of the quoted passage is formulated in the past tense, the present tense of the whole narrative is markedly branded by the past: the “transformed” Redburn suppresses the traumatic experience, seeking spiritual support from the Bible, which promises resurrection and happy life to all Christians—including the woman and children who met a terrible death. Only this thought allows the protagonist to continue functioning in the world. Nevertheless, the mature Melville, Thompson’s “artistic manipulator,” bitterly asks, “What are our creeds?”—ultimately questioning the humankind’s worthiness of the biblical promise.

FAREWELL DEAR DELUSION: TOWARDS POST-VISIONS

The death of his father and the subsequent voyage aboard the *Highlander* transform Wellingborough into Redburn. All experiences related to his first transatlantic crossing, culminating in the squalid basement at Launcelott’s-Hey, force the “son-of-a-gentleman” into developing an identity independent of the inherited patterns—and into premature adulthood. It is already the first encounters aboard that make Wellingborough bitterly realize how false his self-perceptions are. The construct of his aristocratic “self” collapses when his proud-sounding name—Wellingborough—is reduced to a nickname. To the tars aboard, the boy is little more than Buttons or Boots, names that refer to the obvious attributes of his appearance. Such a reduction of a self to a mere object makes it possible for Wellingborough to discover that—unlike his former high status—the buttons on his hunting jacket and his high boots are all that, in the eyes of the others, he truly possesses: these emblems define him in the “here and now.” Gradually, the protagonist learns that his identity—and thereby also his self-esteem—depends on the relational epistemologies, determined by the reality that seems to impose the shape of his relationships

with people and objects. When the *Highlander* reaches Liverpool, the former Wellingborough looks at the clothes he once was proud of with nostalgia. Although the hero may not yet fully know *who he is*, he has certainly gained an awareness of *who he is not*—but, the above notwithstanding, the power of the youthful fantasies of the exploration of the faraway world and the persevering paternal ideal of “gentlemanly worldliness” continue to drive his actions.

When I left home, I took the green morocco guide-book along, supposing that from the great number of ships going to Liverpool, I would most probably ship on board of one of them, as the event itself proved.

Great was my boyish delight at the prospect of visiting a place, the infallible clew to all whose intricacies I held in my hand.

On the passage out I studied its pages a good deal. In the first place, I grounded myself thoroughly in the history and antiquities of the town, as set forth in the chapter I intended to quote. Then I mastered the columns of statistics, touching the advance of population; and pored over them, as I used to do over my multiplication-table. For I was determined to make the whole subject my own; and not be content with a mere smattering of the thing, as is too much the custom with most students of guide-books. Then I perused one by one the elaborate descriptions of public edifices, and scrupulously compared the text with the corresponding engraving, to see whether they corroborated each other. For be it known that, including the map, there were no less than seventeen plates in the work. And by often examining them, I had so impressed every column and cornice in my mind, that I had no doubt of recognizing the originals in a moment.

In short, when I considered that my own father had used this very guide-book, and that thereby it had been thoroughly tested, and its fidelity proved beyond a peradventure; I could not but think that I was building myself up in an unerring knowledge of Liverpool; especially as I had familiarized myself with the map, and could turn sharp corners on it, with marvelous confidence and celerity.

In imagination, as I lay in my berth on ship-board, I used to take pleasant afternoon rambles through the town; down St. James-street and up Great George’s, stopping at various places of interest and attraction. I began to think I had been born in Liverpool, so familiar seemed all the features of the map. And though some of the streets there depicted were thickly involved, endlessly angular and crooked, like the map of Boston, in Massachusetts, yet, I made no doubt, that I could march through them in the darkest night, and even run for the most distant dock upon a pressing emergency. (*Redburn* 144–145)

Excited at the prospect of exploring Liverpool, of which his father had told him so much, Wellingborough disembarks, unaware that another reality check awaits him on land. He knows the maps contained in the guide—with streets once traversed by his father marked in pencil—by heart. Eagerly, he awaits the moment when he would finally be able to see the world through his eyes. Soon, however, he discovers

that his meticulous study of the green morocco guidebook, feeding his imagination, was in vain:

Dear delusion!

It never occurred to my boyish thoughts, that though a guide-book, fifty years old, might have done good service in its day, yet it would prove but a miserable cicerone to a modern. I little imagined that the Liverpool my father saw, was another Liverpool from that to which I, his son Wellingborough was sailing. No; these things never obtruded; so accustomed had I been to associate my old morocco guide-book with the town it described, that the bare thought of there being any discrepancy, never entered my mind. [...] Then, indeed, a new light broke in upon me concerning my guide-book; and all my previous dim suspicions were almost confirmed. It was nearly half a century behind the age! and no more fit to guide me about the town, than the map of Pompeii. [...] It was a sad, a solemn, and a most melancholy thought. The book on which I had so much relied; the book in the old morocco cover; the book with the cocked-hat corners; the book full of fine old family associations; the book with seventeen plates, executed in the highest style of art; this precious book was next to useless. Yes, the thing that had guided the father, could not guide the son. And I sat down on a shop step, and gave loose to meditation. [...] Here, now, oh, Wellingborough, thought I, learn a lesson, and never forget it. This world, my boy, is a moving world; its Riddough's Hotels are forever being pulled down; it never stands still; and its sands are forever shifting. This very harbor of Liverpool is gradually filling up, they say; and who knows what your son (if you ever have one) may behold, when he comes to visit Liverpool, as long after you as you come after his grandfather. And, Wellingborough, as your father's guidebook is no guide for you, neither would yours (could you afford to buy a modern one to-day) be a true guide to those who come after you. Guide-books, Wellingborough, are the least reliable books in all literature; and nearly all literature, in one sense, is made up of guide-books. Old ones tell us the ways our fathers went, through the thoroughfares and courts of old; but how few of those former places can their posterity trace, amid avenues of modern erections; to how few is the old guide-book now a clew! Every age makes its own guidebooks, and the old ones are used for waste paper. But there is one Holy Guide-Book, Wellingborough, that will never lead you astray, if you but follow it aright; and some noble monuments that remain, though the pyramids crumble. [...] But though I rose from the door-step a sadder and a wiser boy, and though my guide-book had been stripped of its reputation for infallibility, I did not treat with contumely or disdain, those sacred pages which had once been a beacon to my sire. (*Redburn* 145–151)

Wellingborough's reflection, although fundamental in the process of the formation of his identity, is, nevertheless, ambiguous. On the one hand, the protagonist realizes that the frame of reference according to which his father lived and within which he made decisions will not apply to his own life. Even though it turns out that the "old morocco," more misleading than informative, is worthless as a navigational aid, Wellingborough holds on to his emotional attachment to the booklet: the old guidebook acquires a new value. It now becomes a nostalgic

memory of a happy childhood and all that it entailed: naïve dreams, familial warmth, and safety. Letting go of the belief that his own visit to Liverpool could possibly emulate that of his father's, he embraces the inevitability of discovering reality on his own.

On the other hand, Wellingborough, whose voice becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from that of Redburn's, extends his doubts concerning the guidebook's applicability to reality to encompass all narratives. This indication is interesting: if books cannot serve people as guides-to-reality, then the only reliable touchstone of truth is reality itself. However, if this implication is taken critically, one must also conclude that the error against which Wellingborough/Redburn/Melville warns the reader has just been committed: if literature should not be trusted, then the book in our hands is, by definition, untrustworthy. This metatextual reflection seems consistent both within and outside the presented world of Melville's bildungsroman: Wellingborough, reading the guidebook, fails to learn any truths about the world that he could employ in his own life; likewise, seeking "objective" truths in *Redburn*-the-novel, the reader who wishes to apply the lessons learned by the protagonist from reality in their own context will inevitably be disappointed. The only path leading to self-knowledge is through one's own, direct, unmediated, often painful, experience.

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Wellingborough knows *who he is not*, and realizes that until he embarked upon his journey his vision of the world had relied on constructs corresponding to reality to the same extent to which the green guidebook corresponded to contemporary Liverpool. However, as long as even one element of the formerly embraced grand narrative remains intact—he cannot become adult: religion, which he does not question as a child, remains a constitutive part of Redburn's worldview, and thus stands in the way to his own transformation into Melville, the existentialist philosopher, whose lifelong "quarrel with God" will eventually lead to his "laudation" of the sea, which, as an "inhuman deity," requires no theodicy. Such faith, propelled by aporias, will be a difficult faith—the faith of an "existential man," which forms the core of Redburn's *post-vision*, fundamental to Melville's mature philosophical reflection, determined by his "leaps of faith." Yet, his recurrent choices to embrace "the truth" despite the aporetic "dead-ends" of discourse go hand in hand with his readiness to *revise* such "truths" in confrontation with each new existential experience. Acknowledging the perma-

nence of angst, embracing the fundamental liquidity of discourse, one learns to profoundly accept uncertainty, impermanence, and transience, defining the human experience, a *sine-qua-non* condition of the constant evolution of *epistemes*.

Abstract: Paweł Jędrzejko's reflection on the career trajectories of Americanists from Eastern Bloc countries, including his own, spurs off his autoethnographic account of how sea sailing in Poland became a gateway to the world, leading to his involvement in Melville Studies. His chance encounter with the Polish training ship *Zawisza Czarna* in the Baltic Sea, marking the beginning of his Americanist journey, becomes a point of departure for a literary analysis, in which the author draws parallels between his own youthful experiences and those of Melville's character Wellingborough Redburn. Exploring the character's transatlantic journey in the context of the autobiographical characteristics of the genre of bildungsroman, Jędrzejko analyzes Redburn's journey from naïve boyhood to mature identity, emphasizing Melville's use of Redburn's voyage to Liverpool as a mirror of his own confrontation with reality, the collapse of inherited ideals, and the development of independent self-awareness. The author highlights the importance of direct (unmediated) experience in the shaping of one's self-awareness, and poses questions concerning the reliability of narratives as "guides to reality." By reflecting on the transformative nature of travel and the epistemological shifts it entails, Jędrzejko integrates his personal narrative with broader philosophical inquiries into identity formation, the fallibility of inherited knowledge, and the existential challenges faced by individuals in their pursuit of truth. The text serves as a meditation on the fluidity of discourse and the necessity of embracing uncertainty and impermanence as inextricable determinants of the human condition.

Keywords: American literature, bildungsroman, sea voyage, Herman Melville, identity formation, Redburn

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