FOUR POEMS FOR HERMAN MELVILLE BY ROBERT BURLINGAME

Old Men. Old Groves

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

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

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

But We'd Ask Too Much

And what was Hawthorne really like?

Again and again we think about this. You'd know, could tell us lavishly, where he'd utter nil in irony's whisper.

Was his Sophia really sophia (more owl, less dove)? Or did they throw off bed clothes behind those dim windows at Old Manse? Did others (like Waldo) find

him silent, straddling his white maned sphinx? You could tell us (go beyond Vine). Scholars seek more. If you were still at customs, incorrigibly upright, you'd tell.

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

You Come Like a Cough

You write in *Budd*: "Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its ragged edges." Indeed, you shove barely finished fable

toward fact, fact toward fable. You get as close as that, scarred rose at dawn — in *Budd;* toying with our "expedience" that's induced fear,

you tread over the "schools," our "measured forms." You come like a cough in Tchaikovsky's May night. Suddenly it is cold once again, suddenly what was finished unclothes itself —

unfinished.

Along the Beaches of Your Oceans

I could never write brightly enough about you — your isolatos, your animals as immense as sunrise, your coffin-ship resurrected in the

sweetness of Queequeg's harbor. I could stoop forever to the flowers along the beaches of your oceans and not sufficiently praise their joyous odors.

There's Santa Cruz Island, its mangrove stilts in clasp with rock: so true poem enclasps the other and dies. Perhaps

so true poem enclasps the other and dies. Perhaps only silence after your voice, no leakage to word.

But the wish to praise outrides, and silence leads to sound beyond silence — the hurtle of harp-note, the swan-dip over Avon.

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