

CHAPTER I

Introduction:
Melville Studies, Old and New
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The world is forever babbling of originality.

—Melville, *Pierre* (1852)

About halfway through *The Confidence-Man* (1857) – Melville’s wonderfully odd, unnerving novel about belief in the modern age – the narrator discusses the near-impossibility of inventing something new. Every story, he says, has already been told. Every genre is ancient, and every character is based on the personalities we find in the world around us. Even in those rare instances in which an artist seems to have created something utterly and shockingly unique – an unprecedented plot or character – it often turns out to be “singular, or striking, or captivating,” but not wholly *original*. Nor is such newness theoretically possible, since it is “as true in literature as [it is] in zoology, that all life is from the egg” (CM 239).

Why, then, try to produce anything at all? Melville was sometimes troubled by that question. He was a relentlessly experimental writer with acute traditional inclinations; an author who worked within highly established genres while twisting them in distinct ways. For Melville, writing tapped into a basic human impulse: an irrepressible will to create even if everything has been created – to reinvent, in lieu of inventing. Scholars who work on Melville tend to find themselves in a similar situation. Almost everything that critics are now examining, from Melville’s materialism to Melville’s aesthetics, was already examined, to one degree or another, generations ago. There is also an inherent traditionalism to the very idea of “Melville studies”: it foregrounds a single, highly canonical author; indicates a distinct career and set of works; and it suggests that the principal subject of literary studies is imaginative writing. Yet there have undoubtedly been important turns and advances. We now know far more about Melville’s life, ideas, and contexts than we previously did. Scholars have unearthed writings that had been forgotten or overlooked. And Melville

criticism has always occupied a central place in the evolution of literary studies: there is hardly a single method or theory that has not been applied to Melville's works – or originated in Melville studies then migrated outward.

This volume captures the dualistic nature of Melville studies and shows why this pull between the old and the new, instead of presenting a problem to be overcome (or innovated out of existence), is responsible for the field's enduring power. All of these essays are “singular, or striking, or captivating” in their readings and approaches. Moving between the postcritical, the posthuman, and the postsecular, *The New Melville Studies* addresses many of the theoretical questions that are currently redefining literary studies. The following essays also address a wide range of topics – the slipperiness of genre and sexuality, the vicissitudes of belief, the relation between form and feeling – and offer fresh accounts of Melville's writings. Yet this volume converges around a single, influential author and a scholarly tradition that has a long, layered history.

In other words, the “new” Melville studies is both new and not-so-new. Let us look first at what is distinct, and then at what is not.

What Is New in *The New Melville Studies*

“Every generation,” writes Christopher Castiglia, “needs a new ‘Melville’ suited to that generation's assumptions and needs.”¹ The history of Melville's reception bears out this point. Ever since the Melville Revival of the 1920s, Melville has proven to be a crucial voice, an author to whom we repeatedly – indeed, almost obsessively – return. It is difficult to think of another writer who has become such a cynosure for literary critics: regardless of how the field morphs, or which theories rise or fall, interest in Melville never seems to wane. However, the nature and terms of that interest *do* change, sometimes quite dramatically, in response to new events and ideas. Melville continues to anchor our sense of the field, but the shift that Castiglia announced – the making of a new Melville, and a new Melville studies, suited to a different set of assumptions – is undoubtedly occurring.

For a long time now, scholars have been accustomed to reading Melville against the grain. With the flowering of New Americanism in the 1980s and 1990s, Melville's writings came to be seen as texts shaped in complex ways by their discursive and historical circumstances. Approaching literature as a means of cultural diagnosis and political critique, New Americanism reinvented Melville for a scholarly generation influenced by the political

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upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. New Americanism disclosed the intricate capillaries of Melville's world, showing us how his writings stage subtle dialogues with racial discourses, class formations, and sexual practices. It elevated neglected works, such as *Pierre* and *Benito Cereno*. It pulled Melville out of the Cold War era that had either disguised or obscured some of his political commitments. And it linked Melville to an array of developments in American history, from the development of jurisprudence to the *longue durées* of colonialism and imperialism.

The field is now undergoing a transformation, and scholars are searching out alternative interpretive frames for Melville's formal commitments, philosophical entanglements, and cultural exchanges. The new Melville studies grows out of a keen awareness of the fact that every interpretation – as the New Americanists showed us – bears as much on the present as it does on the past, and the institutional and intellectual circumstances that scholars inhabit in the twenty-first century are quite different from the circumstances that prevailed 30 years ago. As Robert S. Levine noted in his *New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, this change was already afoot in 2014. “Melville,” Levine points out, “could understand and critique his culture as well as any” modern-day literary critic.² *The New Melville Studies* extends Levine's claim. These essays ask: What might it mean – and what would it look like – to read Melville *with* the grain?

Something you will not find, in any sustained or robust form, are readings predicated on the notion that the critic occupies a position outside or above Melville's works that allows them “to diagnose texts' allegiances as the product of a bounded historical moment.”³ (Edward Sugden's essay comes closest, but he is less interested in Melville's implication within structures of power than in the dynamics of nineteenth-century border zones, dynamics to which Melville himself was quite attuned.) If New Americanism tended to approach literature vertically, viewing texts in terms of surfaces and depths (a paradigm that recent calls for “surface reading” retain), these essays are oriented along decidedly different axes.⁴ They read Melville from positions within or next to Melville's works. Although they differ in their interests and emphases, these essays all tend to read adjacently and position themselves alongside Melville as he writes.

Two modes of reading come into focus here. Part I, “Feeling with Melville,” focuses on the moods, tones, and sentiments that vitalize Melville's works. Gillian Osborne shows how, in *Weeds and Wildings*, Melville approaches flowers as both a literary conceit and a vehicle of homosocial attachment. Justine S. Murison emphasizes a different but no less defining feature of Melville's writing: its sly, raucous humor, which

often scrambles the way we read Melville's stories. As Murison points out, "Melville not only anticipates our current debates about the efficacy of critique . . . but also points us to what is definitively left to the side of these debates: the depths of surfaces and the perversities of a joke." Other essays recover a wide range of felt experiences that are released by Melville's writing: feelings of marginality (Edward Sugden), racial acoustics and performances (Christopher Freeburg), and senses of belief and unbelief (Brian Yothers).

The essays in Part II, "Thinking with Melville," take the well-established tradition of using a theory to read Melville and flip it on its head, disclosing how Melville's writings *themselves* advance numerous theories – about language, the body, even matter itself. These essays recover Melville's mind at work, showing how his ideas bubble up, descend, circle back, and leap forward. Elizabeth Duquette elucidates the analogies that hold together Melville's poetry and prose, while Samuel Otter retraces the verbal and ideational movements that mark Melville's style. Other essays in Part II have a different focus – Melville's materialism (Michael Jonik), perfectionism (Dominic Mastroianni), fascination with paranoia (Paul Hurh), interest in consciousness (John Bryant), understanding of poetic networks (Eliza Richards), and his view of literature as a vehicle for theorizing (Jennifer Greiman) – but the "egg of suggestion" (CL 294) is that Melville saw practicing philosophy and writing literature as mutually constitutive acts. Poetry and prose are for Melville ways of testing out ideas, exploring concepts, and examining the relation between the mind and the world; and philosophy, in turn, is a creative process that always involves acts of writing, reading, and interpretation. As Jennifer Greiman aptly puts it, "Melville proposes that philosophy and fiction share a common world of figures and conceits, fables and counterfactuals, so why not read accordingly?"

Despite the volume's bifurcated structure, it is best to read these essays together. Almost everything Melville wrote, from *Typee* through *Billy Budd*, suggests that feelings are ideational and that ideas have psychic and emotional dimensions. This is one of the major insights of Melville's art: it reveals – and finds both joy and terror in – the incessant intermingling of thought and feeling. In reading *The New Melville Studies*, one should take a cue from Melville and approach Part I and Part II as critical diptychs – scholarly versions of "The Two Temples," or the Stonewall Jackson poems, or "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." For Melville, the mutuality demanded by diptychs has a twofold effect: it both accentuates and reveals, disclosing overlaps and clarifying differences.

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When read alongside one another, many of the essays have precisely that effect. The unsettling of perspective that, according to Samuel Otter, anchors Melville's style also has a political dimension that Edward Sugden captures in his essay; and Otter's essay suggests that Sugden's "border zone" – which is filled by "recalcitrant . . . points of blockage, erasure, and duress" – might have distinct linguistic features (and, for Melville, aesthetic consequences). There is also a great deal of continuity, even a shared energy, in the essays by Jennifer Greiman, Justine S. Murison, and Paul Hurh. (So the volume has at least one triptych, too.) All three critics approach Melville as a kind of theorist in his own right, as a writer who was deeply and passionately interested in the pleasures, limits, and complexities of various reading practices. All three essays also take up Eve Sedgwick's model of "reparative reading" in an effort to place Melville vis-à-vis recent debates about the role of suspicion in literary criticism.⁵

Reading these essays together clarifies other shared concerns as well. One of the signal changes in Melville studies over the past twenty years is the renewed interest in Melville's poems.⁶ This volume both responds to and reflects on this turn in the field, with Melville's poetry playing a prominent role in several of the essays. But to my mind, the focus on Melville's poetry is less notable than what these critics *do* with it: they each read Melville's poetry with and through Melville's prose, approaching the poems not as disparate experiments but as a vital part and connective force in Melville's broader career. As Gillian Osborne demonstrates, Melville did not merely write *Weeds and Wildings* and *Billy Budd* around the same time; these books are aesthetically, erotically, and textually entangled. Samuel Otter shows that *Clarel* and *Typee* share a common approach to landscapes, language, and the relation between them, while Elizabeth Duquette links *The Confidence-Man* to *Battle-Pieces* through their joint interest (which is formal as well as philosophical) in analogy. And for Brian Yothers, Melville's lifelong fascination with belief, his "complex dialogue with the secular and the sacred," animates his poetry and prose alike, tying *Timoleon* to *Typee*, and *Clarel* to *Omoo*, *White-Jacket*, and *Moby-Dick*.

These essays also join the ongoing conversation about whether critique, in Bruno Latour's words, "has run out of steam." In recent years, many scholars have claimed that the common practice of treating literary works as ideological symptoms – an approach through which the scholar probes texts for what they conceal or repress – has reached an endpoint. According to Rita Felski, literary studies has been overly reliant on a "style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment," a style grounded in the assumption that a critic's aim is "to expose hidden truths and draw out

unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see.” In a similar vein, Joseph North argues that the rise of the “historicist/contextualist paradigm” did not merely coincide with the ascendancy of neoliberalism; it was a direct result of that ascent and the accompanying retreat of the radical left.⁷ These critiques of critique, as it were, have yielded robust replies and counterarguments. As Justine S. Murison points out, these responses often fall into one of two different camps: “articulations of what their theory omits in their account of symptomatic reading, and attempts to proliferate approaches to literary history beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion.” Carolyn Lesjak reminds us that symptomatic reading is not as uniform or monolithic as its detractors would believe: it is not a fixed “hermeneutics of suspicion” but an eclectic array of interpretative methods which only in their most reductive, watered-down forms treat literary works as mere cultural containers. Timothy Bewes claims that what is actually being reconsidered is not critique as such but the spatiality of the act of reading. The challenge of twenty-first century literary studies, according to Bewes, is to rethink the “topographical conception of the literary text” as well as “the scene of the critical encounter,” in “full acknowledgment that the notion of critical distance, and the innocence it implies, can no longer be regarded as a given – or at least that the current problems faced in literary methods arise with the persistence of this notion.”⁸

Although these essays situate themselves in diverse ways in relation to this debate, some shared claims do emerge. Melville’s writings (and interpretations thereof) indicate that the choice to critique or not to critique is a bit of a false choice. Jennifer Greiman makes a similar point in her essay, which recasts *Pierre* as a narrative *about* the failure of critical theory. That, of course, is the situation in which Melville’s protagonist finds himself: in the wake of his “great life revolution,” Pierre has taken up reading, writing, and philosophy only to discover, to his almost catastrophic disappointment, that such heady pursuits never succeed in remaking the world (P 225). Melville, however, is less interested in the mere failure of critique than in what it tells us: “Rather than indicting philosophy, theory, and criticism for not remedying the world, as his protagonist does, Melville instead subjects these to the figures, fables and conceits of *Pierre*’s fictive universe and discloses their explicitly literary enterprise.” Literature and criticism, she writes, both tend to fail, and “fail in precisely the same way,” yet they persist, propelled as they are by our endless will to construe. The inexorability of literature and critique is embodied, Greiman suggests, in Plotinus Plinlimmon’s pamphlet, which “puts into practice the very work of literary criticism,” revealing

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that “the fallacy of criticism” lay not “in the belief that subterranean political content can be mined through symptomatic reading, nor in the assumption that [literature] can perform, in its very literariness, political acts. Instead, criticism fails when it does not recognize that it shares a common hermeneutic plot with literature itself – a plot in which the very thing we try to read slips between a surface and a lining to be unwittingly carried everywhere.”

That is elegantly stated. But if we flip Greiman’s conclusion, inverting it like Hawthorne’s moonlight, we can see the positive claim it implicitly forwards: criticism *succeeds* when it recognizes that it, too, is a creative process that is constantly adjusting, adapting, and weaving conceits. That is one of the benefits of reading Melville adjacently: it neither mistakes the critic’s position as transcendent nor abandons the ethics, politics, and aesthetics afforded by critique. Instead, it sees criticism as an act of reconstruction – a means of retracing an author’s ways of thinking, feeling, and writing – which requires both critical *and* postcritical modes of reading.

To guide their reconstructions, many of the contributors turn to Melville’s own reading, as well as his thoughts about reading, as a model. Few writers were so ardently, even compulsively interested in the phenomenology of interpretation. This is partly (though not entirely) a result of Melville’s philosophical bent. As Branka Arsić observes, Melville is a “thinker of genuine philosophical significance for current agendas,” a writer who “used every resource of thought and language of the time in order to make philosophical contributions that belong to all time.” Those contributions are finely assessed in Corey McCall and Tom Nurmi’s *Melville Among the Philosophers* (2017), Branka Arsić and K.L. Evans’s *Melville’s Philosophies* (2017), and Paul Hurh’s *American Terror* (2015), which examine Melville’s elaborate engagements with posthumanism, new materialism, and philosophical traditions from ancient Greece, Renaissance Europe, and the wide, rolling Atlantic world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹ What makes Melville’s philosophies possible – indeed, what engenders his motley speculations about art, nature, history, language, violence, and knowledge – is the way his writings think about thinking. Melville routinely puts thinking on display in diverse and intricate ways, unraveling how thoughts flit, moods fluctuate, and beliefs advance or retreat.¹⁰

Melville’s imagined worlds are worlds populated, first and foremost, by thoughts, and those thoughts suggest that critique is an essential mode of experience, an almost primal human endeavor with distinct delights, disappointments, advantages, and insufficiencies. Melville’s writings also

illustrate an important axiom: how we interpret something – including whether and to what extent we critique it – depends on one’s perspective, and the best interpretations are based on multiple, juxtaposed perspectives that are capable of wrestling with life’s paradoxes. Both of these points – i.e., the nontranscendent yet inexorable nature of critique and the value of using, while not collapsing, different hermeneutic viewpoints – unfold across Melville’s works, animating everything from the cultural disorientation in *Typee* to the philosophies of knowledge in *Moby-Dick*; the proliferating perspectives in *Battle-Pieces*, *Clarel*, and *John Marr*; the aesthetic investments of *Timoleon*; and the many “ragged edges” in *Billy Budd* (BB 128). These essays follow Melville’s lead and try to inhabit, to the degree that it is possible, the myriad viewpoints that Melville provides in, across, and between his works.

What Is Old in *The New Melville Studies*

These scholars are not the first Melvilleans to make that leap. Some version of this method, in different forms, can be found in Melville studies ever since its inception. C.L.R. James’s luminous book, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* (1953), is perhaps best known for what we might call its thoroughgoing critique: *Moby-Dick*, according to James, limns the origins of state capitalism. That fateful fusion of capitalism with state governmentality is embodied by Ahab, with his fanatical soul and insatiable desire to have men – ideally, “manufactured men” – under his thumb (MD 212). Nonetheless, what so interests James about Melville is not his symptomatic evocations of nineteenth-century American culture; it is Melville’s astounding creative and critical vision, his ability – much like Toussaint L’Ouverture in *The Black Jacobins* (1938) – to not only see the shape of modernity but also explore everything it unleashes.¹¹ How, James wonders, did Melville do this? How did he somehow anticipate so much of what was to come?

The best answer is given by Melville himself. He once explained how great writers wrote great books. A character like Ahab is an original character, . . . a type of human being that had never existed before in the world. Such characters come once in many centuries and are as rare as men who found new religions, philosophers who revolutionize human thinking, and statesmen who create new political forms. Melville mentions three: Satan from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Hamlet from Shakespeare’s play and the Don Quixote of Cervantes. That is how rare they are. According to Melville,

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many a gifted writer can create dozens of interesting, sprightly, clever, intriguing characters. But original characters? No. A writer is very lucky if in his lifetime he creates one.¹²

James, riffing on *The Confidence-Man*, puts his finger on Melville's method, which is at once literary, sociological, historical, and artistic. In describing these original characters, James is also, in a way, describing Melville himself: such artists only come along very rarely, and they are as consequential as the founders of religions and philosophies. Though contemporary scholars tend to shy away from such grand claims (as well as the gendered language in which James pitches his assessment), James centers his book around Melville's capacious imagination, which James brilliantly reprises and reexamines.

The temporal modifier in this volume's title is therefore a bit misleading. The "new" Melville studies is not wholly or entirely new; it is also the result and outgrowth of previous scholarship, and some of the newest approaches echo some of the earliest studies. The recent swelling of interest in Melville's ties to science and materialism was anticipated by Elizabeth Foster's "Melville and Geology" (1945) and Walter Bezanson's seminal work on *Clarel*.¹³ Similarly, the philosophical qualities of Melville's writings have been a perennial focus of Melville studies, from F.O. Matthiessen to Charles Olson. And what are books such as William Braswell's *Melville's Religious Thought* (1943) and Ronald Mason's *The Spirit Above the Dust* (1951) but works – to invoke a much more recent term – of "postsecular" criticism? Critical shifts tend to be pitched as agonistic battles or revolutionary displacements, but in reality, and in practice, they tend to resemble musical performances. Melville studies is a kind of song being passed from one set of players to another (or, in some cases, back to a seasoned musician who is now taking up a different style).¹⁴ The notes and arrangement may differ, but in many cases the song is the same.

One of the songs that has been played almost on repeat has to do with the range and resonance of Melville's imagination. I do not simply mean the Romantic notion, with which Melville was of course familiar, that the imagination is an elevated and distinctive form of thinking, a version of Thoreau's claim that he'd never "met a man who was [fully] awake."¹⁵ Nor do I mean that that all politics are imaginative and we access the world by constructing and reconstructing it in our minds – though that is certainly true, and it is on display throughout Melville's works. Rather, what we take from Melville –

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and from Melville studies, when it is done well – is that the imagination is the richest and most wide-ranging resource not only for writers but also for critics. It is what enables us to envision worlds beyond our own, and it is what allows us to read with – or better yet, next to – Melville, following his thoughts as they rise, fall, ripen, or jolt, even now, after all this time.