

ROBERT S. LEVINE

INTRODUCTION

But I dont know but a book in a man's brain is better off than a book bound in calf – at any rate it is safer from criticism.

Melville to Evert A. Duyckinck, letter of 16 August 1850

This collection is both a handbook to Melville and a provocation. As expected of a Cambridge *Companion*, it provides readers with comprehensive analyses of the major writings and motifs of a canonized master of world literature. At the same time, this volume has been conceived in a Melvillean spirit of suspicion and revision. Accordingly, it is animated by a dialectical interplay between traditional and newer approaches to Melville. This is a particularly opportune time for such a volume. Over the past two decades or so, the “American Renaissance” has been dramatically reconceived by feminist, African-American, new historical, and other critical approaches. Such key works as Michael Rogin’s *Subversive Genealogy* (1983), Waichee Dimock’s *Empire for Liberty* (1989), and Eric Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations* (1993) are but three of the many books that have offered new ways of thinking about the ideological and political implications of Melville’s art. There have also been major developments in more traditional, archivally based Melville scholarship. Recent discoveries of Melville family papers (now at the New York Public Library), the publication of such important works as John Bryant’s *Melville and Repose* (1993), Stanton Garner’s *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* (1993), several volumes in the nearly completed Northwestern–Newberry edition of Herman Melville, and biographies by Laurie Robertson-Laurant (1996) and Hershel Parker (1996) have helped us to make better sense of Melville’s compositional practices, aesthetics, sources, biography, and relation to contemporaneous literary debates. The renewed attention to Melville hasn’t been confined to the scholarly world. As the contributors to this *Companion* were completing their essays, Hershel Parker’s reworking of *Pierre*, replete with illustrations by Maurice Sendak, was published to considerable fanfare

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by a commercial press; the Robertson-Laurant and Parker biographies appeared one after the other (also to widespread public notice); Melville scholars were featured in a television special, “Great Books: *Moby-Dick*,” on the Learning Channel; and a debate in Melville studies between “traditional” and “revisionary” scholars on the subject of Melville’s possible misogyny (and wife beating) was the subject of a feature article in a December 1996 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*.¹

Discovered – or rediscovered – in the early decades of the twentieth century, Melville now more than ever seems *the* monumental writer of nineteenth-century America whose presence on the literary and cultural landscape is all but inescapable. And yet with the monumentalizing of Melville comes the risk that his texts will lose their ability to speak to readers in fresh and provocative ways. Emerson’s warning about the pitfalls of canonization seems particularly apt today. As he writes in “The American Scholar” (1837), there is the danger that the “love of the hero” will become corrupted into the “worship of his statue.” When such hero worshiping occurs, acolytes tend to perform the “grave mischief” of making the celebrated author’s genius a matter of “the record” and “accepted dogmas.” Tendencies toward cultural monumentalization may suit the annotating needs of the “bookworm” but, Emerson continues, they risk doing infinite damage to the possibilities of what he calls “creative reading,” the sort of reading that encourages dynamic interactions between reader and text.²

Melville was acutely aware of the harm the canonizing practices of his own literary times could do to readers and writers (see especially Book XVII of *Pierre*). In remarks perhaps antithetical to the very title *Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, the narrator of *White-Jacket*, in the course of discussing his seemingly undisciplined reading practices on the *Never-sink*, refers to the “companionable” text: “My book experiences on board of the frigate proved an example of a fact which every book-lover must have experienced before me, namely, that though public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there; those which seem put into our hands by Providence; those which pretend to little, but abound in much.” Though it’s difficult to imagine a reader who could pick up a Melville volume these days without sensing its “imposing air,” I think we should take the sentiments of this passage seriously as a statement of Melville’s desire to engage readers outside the imposing networks of institutional and cultural authority. For the reader willing to “*dive*,” the act of adventurous, unmediated reading, a kind of taking to sea, could provide an enviable education,

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what Ishmael, with reference to whaling, calls “my Yale College and my Harvard.”³

I would suggest that Melville could write so buoyantly in *White-Jacket* of the excitement and value of extra-institutional reading because his narrative strategies really do make him the best sort of guide to his works. Throughout his career, even in the seemingly elusive *The Confidence-Man*, Melville has regularly assumed a metacritical role of guiding and challenging readers’ responses to his works by foregrounding issues of interpretation. Consider, for example, the ways in which Melville in *Typee* links tattooing with writing (and reading); the ways in which he develops connections between reading *White-Jacket* and reading White-Jacket’s white jacket; the numerous moments in *Moby-Dick* when he elaborates analogies between reading whales and reading his complex novel about whales. Melville hardly provides interpretive answers or reassurances, but, even if one grants that the motif of con artistry is central to his writings, his numerous efforts to complicate the reading process are mostly done with the intention of helping readers to become better readers of his texts. As he suggests in *The Confidence-Man*, reworking *Redburn*’s notion of the novel as a kind of guidebook, “true” novels offer something like a map to the reader: “the streets may be very crooked, he may often pause; but, thanks to his true map, he does not hopelessly lose his way.”⁴

Convinced of Melville’s status as “companion” to his texts, I should confess that before I took on the job of editing this volume I had to question its need, even with the upsurge of critical and popular interest in Melville. I also recalled my own experience of beginning to learn how to read Melville. In the 1970s, when I was an undergraduate, I talked myself into a graduate lecture class on Melville, where I expected to be immersed in the latest structuralist, poststructuralist, and historicist approaches to an author I had always found to be imposing and distant. Instead, much to my surprise (and retrospective delight), the professor simply had us read most of everything Melville wrote, in the order in which he wrote it, starting with *Typee* and concluding with *Billy Budd*. (At least I thought he had had us read everything Melville wrote until I learned several years later that Melville was also a poet of the first rank.) The professor’s method of regularly calling our attention to those moments in Melville’s texts when the narratives reflect critically on the interrelated dynamics of writing, reading, and interpretation – and demanding that we come to terms with those moments as central, defining occasions in Melville – quickly helped me (and my classmates) to feel a more intimate connection to Melville’s art. And so we spent a good deal of time discussing analogies between the

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blinkered interpreters of *Typee*, “Bartleby,” and “Benito Cereno” and readers of those works; the connections between fashion and interpretation that inform *White-Jacket*; the similarities between heroic voyaging and intrepid reading developed in *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*; the dualistic rendering of trust and con artistry that animates *Redburn*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence-Man*. Alternately presenting himself as guide and con artist, his texts as scriptures of the age and testaments to blindness and silence, Melville insistently calls attention to the risks, stakes, limits, and joys of interpretation. Attempting to rise to the interpretive challenge, while at the same time remaining aware of the inevitability of a certain sort of enlightening failure, would seem to be the fate of his most sympathetic readers.

All of which may not make Melville sound like the best of companions, except that he is usually never more companionable than when he is theorizing on the complex interpretive challenges of his texts. In fact, Melville has proved eerily prescient on many of the critical concerns that would come to engage twentieth-century theorists. Consider just a few of the theoretical dimensions and implications of *Moby-Dick*. Representations of Ishmael’s various interactions with Queequeq anticipate twentieth-century interrogations of gender, sexuality, race, and nation; “Cetology” points in Thomas Kuhnian and Foucauldian ways to the relation of interpretive paradigms to cultural meanings; the chapters describing whaling practices in the larger context of capitalist enterprise anticipate materialist criticism; the numerous chapters on the whale’s body are at the cutting edge of body criticism; “Fast Fish and Loose Fish” raises the kinds of questions about the politics of reading that would come to inform twentieth-century reader-response criticism; and “The Whiteness of the Whale” and “The Doubloon” chapters anticipate Derridean deconstruction and developments in neopragmatism. And more: “Does the Whale’s Magnitude Diminish? – Will He Perish?,” with its musings on the possible disappearance of whales, anticipates ecocriticism; “The Carpenter,” with its vision of the mechanical constructedness of humankind, cybercriticism; and the novel’s grand conception of a global chase on a ship manned by an international crew, current debates on nationalism and transnationalism.

Given Melville’s own theoretical predispositions, I would suggest (to return to my role as guide to this *Companion*) that doing theoretical work as part of reading and interpreting Melville is hardly a violation but rather of a piece with Melville’s own authorial labors. Yet in Melville criticism a divide has arisen between what Emerson might term the “bookworms” and the “creative readers” – those critics who, on the one hand, practice an accretionary, author-based approach committed to recovering Melville’s intentions by paying close attention to what is known about his biography,

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reading habits, compositional methods, and so on, and those critics, on the other hand, who pay a bit less heed to the ascertainable facts in order to explore from more theoretical and speculative perspectives the cultural discourses, logics, and concerns informing Melville's texts. In the Historical Note in the Northwestern–Newberry *Moby-Dick* (1988), the editors address the divide from the perspective of what one might, perhaps unfairly, call the bookworms. Reminding us of the initial critical fruits of the Melville revival, the editors celebrate “the great generation of Melville researchers of the 1930's and 1940's, whose labors first significantly coalesced in Willard Thorp's *Herman Melville: Representative Selections*, then culminated in 1951 in the first edition of Jay Leyda's *The Melville Log* and in Leon Howard's *Herman Melville: A Biography*. The debt to that generation of scholars remains deep, but this NOTE . . . also benefits from a new stage of scholarship on Melville – a stage arrived at, in part, from the accumulation of biographical and textual knowledge incorporated into the volumes of the Northwestern–Newberry edition published over two decades and still in preparation” (586). After pressing upon its readers the importance of attending to the forthcoming revised *Log* (edited by Northwestern–Newberry editor Hershel Parker), the forthcoming Northwestern–Newberry editions of Melville's letters and journals (since published), and Parker's forthcoming biography (the first volume of which has also since been published), they take aim at what could be called the creative readers, the “many professors [who] . . . have cast their harpoons at phantoms rather than the actual *The Whale* or *Moby-Dick*.” Concerned about what they perceive to be the irresponsible (or parricidal) nature of such work, they assert that those more speculative critics have “trivialized . . . criticism or scholarship” and in doing so are “as solipsistic as Ahab” (756).

On the evidence of recent Melville scholarship, the divide between critical camps has only become wider since the Northwestern–Newberry editors made their pronouncement in 1988. For a quick impression of this divide, one can do little better than to look at recently published books by John Wenke and William V. Spanos. In *Melville's Muse: Literary Creation and the Forms of Philosophical Fiction* (1995), Wenke, drawing on important studies of Melville's reading by Merton M. Sealts, Jr., and Mary K. Bercaw, examines the ways in which “Melville's attraction to ancient and Renaissance writers became integral to his complex response to, and reformation of, Romanticism.” For Wenke, Melville's engagement with Plato, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Emerson, Carlyle, and many others was part of a “deeply rooted process of creative rehabilitation” that constituted “a tour de force of intention.” Diametrically opposed to Wenke's celebration of Melville's brilliant appropriations of canonical figures is Spanos's demon-

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umentalizing *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, The Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies* (1995). Whereas Wenke discusses Melville's reading and writing apart from the social and political debates of the nineteenth century, Spanos insists that Melville was a "writer whose *raison d'être* . . . was to interrogate the relationship between cultural monuments and sociopolitical power." And he maintains that critics (and readers) who fail to challenge Melville's monumental status are complicitous in "the dominant cultural and sociopolitical formation," racism, imperialism, and the like. Rather than working with known facts about Melville's possible political perspectives, Spanos develops a Heideggerian "destructive" reading of *Moby-Dick* as a form of cultural critique.⁵

This *Companion* has been conceived with the notion that it would be salutary for Melville studies if critics like Wenke and Spanos were more responsive to each other's work. Accordingly, though the volume is necessarily limited by the relatively small number of critical voices and perspectives that can be represented here, it nonetheless brings together critics who draw on traditional and newer approaches, and thus inevitably seeks to challenge the fixity and distinctiveness of such categories. We need our bookworms *and* our creative readers, and typically the differences between these two groups aren't as pronounced as Emerson (or the divide between Wenke and Spanos) might suggest. Yet there are differences, and rather than looking forward to a blithe future in which some sort of grand consensus emerges on how best to approach Melville, I would propose that the current critical debates and divergencies are a good thing: a sign of the vitality of Melville studies. For readers who are receptive, competing and conflicting views can help to challenge complacency and thus inspire further creative interactions with Melville's writings.

Melville states in the "Cetology" chapter of *Moby-Dick*: "I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty" (136). I make a similar promise for this *Companion*. That said, an effort has been made to provide a relatively comprehensive overview of Melville's career. *All* of Melville's novels are discussed in the course of the volume, as is much of the poetry and short fiction. An effort has also been made to cover key historical and thematic issues in his writings. Though the contributors all have their principal subjects of focus, they have been encouraged to "trespass" on other contributors' domains. Various works and issues are thus viewed from a number of critical perspectives. Readers interested in *Moby-Dick*, for example, may wish to turn first to the essay by John Bryant, but they will also find relatively lengthy discussions of Melville's masterwork in the essays by Sterling Stuckey, Jenny Franchot, and Robert Milder; readers in-

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terested in Melville's critical reception might want to turn first to the essay by Cindy Weinstein, but they will also find issues of critical reception central to the essay by Paul Giles; and readers interested in race and slavery in Melville's writings will find the essays by Samuel Otter and Sterling Stuckey particularly helpful, but they will learn about these topics from a number of other essays in the volume as well.

Because of the importance of race to his early fiction, considerations of Melville's racial representations provide a useful starting point for the collection. In "Race" in *Typee* and *White-Jacket*," Samuel Otter explores how Melville conjoins the discursive, the corporeal, and the ideological in his inquiries into the constitution and boundaries of human bodies, the science and politics of race, and the structures of racial and individual identity. Melville's fascination with race, particularly with the terms, claims, and procedures of the influential "American school" of ethnology, whose aim was to make flesh and bone reveal human difference, provides the focus for Otter's reexaminations of *Typee* and *White-Jacket*. In "The Tambourine in Glory: African Culture and Melville's Art," Sterling Stuckey recovers and re-creates the African and African-American cultures that Melville would have known and experienced as a young man in the antebellum United States. In doing so, he offers a new perspective on the African-American presence in Melville's fiction, particularly the ways in which his encounters with black culture helped to shape his antislavery politics. An African-American aesthetic, Stuckey argues in his readings of *Redburn*, *Moby-Dick*, and "Benito Cereno," is crucial to Melville's American art and to an increasingly complex and diverse American scene.

The next three essays provide comprehensive readings of Melville's major novels of the 1850s. In "*Moby-Dick* as Revolution," John Bryant develops two narratives of historicism: a "genetic" narrative that tells of an artist's discovery of voice as an inherently ambivalent revolutionary act, one that in its embrace and purgation of Shakespeare serves as a model for the artistic revolutionary's anxious moment of personal and cultural independence; and a "responsive" narrative that, in telling and enacting the reader's dilemma in getting meaning out of a truly fluid text, recapitulates a revolutionary experience of being caught between equally desirable but seemingly mutually exclusive responses: Ahab's monological dramaturgy and Ishmael's dialogical lyricism. Multiplicity as a thematic and mode of reading is also central to Wyn Kelley's "*Pierre's* Domestic Ambiguities," which studies the novel in its biographical, literary, and discursive contexts. Situating *Pierre* in relation to Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Kelley shows how Melville in his own domestic novel offers a utopian version of domesticity based not on family and marriage but on the risks

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of fraternity. Melville's unwillingness to offer a consoling vision of middle-class culture and family religion helped to ensure the novel's commercial failure. Several years after that failure, Melville wrote *The Confidence-Man* (1857), perhaps his most perplexing, difficult, and (for some) nearly unreadable work. In "'A———!': Unreadability in *The Confidence-Man*," Elizabeth Renker takes the novel's perplexities and difficulties as its informing subject. Arguing that throughout his career Melville was frustrated by the ways in which the act of writing stifled rather than enabled his efforts to apprehend and tell great truths, Renker suggests that in *The Confidence-Man* Melville turns his frustrations on his readers. Hence the energetic (even delighted) concern in the novel with the tendencies of letters, characters, and tautologies to block and occlude meaning. Melville's increasing interest in the page, Renker posits, made his move to poetry after the publication of *The Confidence-Man* all but inevitable.

In "Melville the Poet," Lawrence Buell argues that the Civil War poems of *Battle-Pieces* (1866), the epic *Clarel* (1876), and other works reveal Melville as one of the great nineteenth-century poets writing in English. The poetry is neglected, Buell suggests, because of its apparent use of traditional poetic languages and prosody, its seeming emotional restraint, and its knotty language and jagged metrics. In response to a tradition of denigration and neglect, Buell makes the case for Melville as an experimental and, perhaps more significantly, as a cosmopolitan poet who, like his English contemporaries, is concerned with probing systems of belief in an increasingly scientific world. Though the Civil War certainly contributed to Melville's emergence as a poet, Buell ultimately presents us with a transnational writer who, even more so than the "international" Henry James, develops what could be termed an "ethnographical" perspective on history, culture, and religion.

Ethnography is central to Jenny Franchot's "Melville's Traveling God," which investigates the ways in which Melville's theological concerns connect to the relativistic, anthropological domain of ritual and historically contingent belief. Linking the trope of travel in Melville's writings to a rhetoric of ethnographical questing, Franchot, in her revisionary consideration of the place of religion in Melville's writings, explores how Melville's narratives, through their representation of the "exotic," ultimately endow Christianity with new life as metaphor, allusion, and source. In "Melville and Sexuality," Robert K. Martin also addresses questions of culture and otherness as he discusses Melville's writings in relation to shifting cultural definitions of sexuality. As Martin observes, Melville's representations of the problematics of sexual identity always take place in a political context – whether the colonialism and missionary activity of the South Seas novels

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or the industrial capitalism of *Moby-Dick*. Melville's recognition of the complex relations between desire and power is signaled most tragically in his posthumous *Billy Budd*, which addresses, in part, the persecution of the homosexual in the cultural context of the persecution (or regulation) of the sexual.

Essays by Cindy Weinstein and Paul Giles share an interest in Melville's critical reception. Focusing on nineteenth-century discourses of labor, Weinstein's "Melville, Labor, and the Discourses of Reception" studies the relationship between Melville's literary labors and contemporaneous evaluations of his texts, showing how Melville reproduces in his writings the problematics of the marketplace. Melville, Weinstein notes, hardly seeks to separate his own labors from the typical productions of other laborers; rather, he examines in his fiction the value of his own and others' labors, as well as the class structures motivating those valuations. Whereas Weinstein focuses on Melville's response to his American critics, Paul Giles, in " 'Bewildering Intertanglement': Melville's Engagement with British Culture," examines how Melville has been conceptualized by English critics and how he has responded to those conceptualizations. More broadly, Giles considers Melville's sometimes perverse and parodic engagement with various forms of British culture, ranging from the representation of Liverpool in *Redburn* to the ironic conceptions of national identity in *Israel Potter* and the ambiguous accounts of English justice in *Billy Budd*. Recent work by Lawrence Buell and others has found in Melville a "postcolonial" idiom that implicitly serves to compromise the nationalist ethos with which Melville has often been associated. One large purpose of Giles's essay is to analyze how such postcolonial anxieties mediate Melville's accounts of slavery, cultural independence, sexuality, and national differences.

At a time when a bewildering number of "old" and "new" Melvilles confront us, Robert Milder's synthesizing essay, "Melville and the 'Avenging Dream,'" argues that a relatively coherent romantic quest pattern informs Melville's major works, joining his questers and god defers as complementary figures in a private and compulsively reenacted drama. In one variation or another, Milder shows, the myth lies at the imaginative center of *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Clarel*, and the late poem "Timoleon." This essay brings the myth to the forefront, traces its sources in some of the patterning impulses (literary and psychological) in Melville's imagination, and contextualizes it historically within the transatlantic moment when romantic exuberance shaded into Victorian paralysis and doubt. Though not self-consciously "transnational" in its approach, Milder's essay complements Giles's, Buell's, and several other of the essays in the collection in the way its literary-historical approach works to dislocate Melville

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from the nationalistic particularities of his time. In his Afterword, Andrew Delbanco points to other connections among the essays as he takes stock of Melville at century's end.

In *Mardi*, Babbalanja expounds on his impassioned reading of his beloved Bardianna: "For the more we learn, the more we unlearn; we accumulate not, but substitute; and take away, more than we add."⁶ Though some of the contributors to this volume may have qualms about my putting them into an antipositivistic camp, it is my belief that all of these essays help us as much to "unlearn" as to learn. In this respect, it is my hope that this volume, while inevitably contributing to the cultural monumentalization of Melville, will also help to stimulate creative encounters with an author whose writings both invite and resist interpretation. A figure of such interpretive dualism, what Melville in "The Whiteness of the Whale" calls "a dumb blankness full of meaning" (195), can be found on Melville's grave in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Carved onto the granite headstone is a blank stone scroll – a haunting testament, perhaps, to the mysteries of silence but a tantalizing invitation as well to further inscription.

NOTES

1. The epigraph is from Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), p. 174. See also Melville, *Pierre or the Ambiguities: "The Kraken Edition,"* ed. Hershel Parker (New York: HarperCollins, 1995); and Philip Weiss, "Herman-Neutics," *The New York Times Magazine*, 15 December 1996, pp. 60–5, 71–2. The Melville special, "Great Books: *Moby-Dick*," produced by Judith Hallet, premiered on the Learning Channel on 14 September 1996. Complete bibliographical references to the Melville studies mentioned in this paragraph may be found in the Selected Bibliography at the end of the volume.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 57–9.
3. Melville, *White-Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1970), p. 169; Melville to Evert A. Duyckinck, letter of 3 March 1849 (on Emerson's risk-taking philosophical explorations), in *Correspondence*, p. 21; and Melville, *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988), p. 112. Future page references to this edition of *Moby-Dick* will be cited parenthetically.
4. Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1984), p. 71.
5. John Wenke, *Melville's Muse: Literary Creation and the Forms of Philosophical*