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Moby-Dick

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**New Melville--A Synopsis and Critical Analysis of Recent
Researches**

The March 1994 issue of *American Literature*, devoted entirely to essays on Herman Melville, provides an illuminating examination of contemporary critical study, revealing a broad spectrum of views ranging from the perspicacious to the ridiculous.

Paul Lauter's leading essay, "Melville Climbs the Canon," provides a scholarly examination of the mutation of Melville, during the 1920s, from uncelebrated teller of tales to canonised savant, supplying both a chronicle of events as well as examining the underlying philosophical imperative which allowed for this vicissitude of status.

With a style both prosaic and lucid, Lauter fittingly begins his inquiry with an anecdotal account of his college students' aversion to all things Melville, concluding that this antipathy stems wholly from Melville's "allusive syntactically intricate style and convoluted plotting."⁽²⁾ Alternatively, and certainly ironically, it is this very rampart that now challenges and so enthralls critics.

Providing an interpretative historical context, Lauter takes us to 1919 and the centenary of James Russell Lowell, poet and

longest serving president of the MLA. Besides celebrating Lowell, the four day long festivities--held in New York and featuring English, Canadian and US lecturers--provided an occasion to underline the unity of English speaking nations and promote English as *the* universal language. Unanimous concord was equally the name of the game and the nature of the proceedings. Lauter craftily juxtaposes this harmony with the discord that actually typified the contemporary world: problematics of the Paris Peace Conference; warring with Bolsheviks; the prohibition movement making criminal gatherings of the middle class; the riotous passage of the Women's suffrage bill; the General strike in Seattle and the police strike in Boston; racial turmoil. Providing proof of this turmoil, Lauter offers: "As one businessman wrote to the attorney general, 'There is hardly a respectable citizen of my acquaintance who does not believe that we are on the verge of armed conflict in these country.'"(4) Besides these problems, the period was one marked by an immigration deluge: between 1901 and 1920, 14.5 million mostly Eastern and Southern Europeans had entered the country, bringing amongst their luggage what seemed to American's an alien and threatening culture. This sentiment found expression in the ideology of Anglo-Saxon primacy, including increased activity of the Ku Klux Klan and the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, which entirely excluded Japanese and stemmed the tide of Eastern and Southern Europeans. As a footnote to this, Harvard was busy incorporating social intolerance within the academic world,

earning itself a new reputation for anti-semitism.

Lauter suggests that younger intellectuals of the period saw Lowell's centenary as anachronistic. "I imagine them looking back into the nation's earlier history for a new champion, someone who might uphold against British condescension American claims to an equality in culture which would be consonant with America's established title to military and diplomatic parity."⁽⁵⁾ *New York World* provided a timely survey of candidates from the centennial class of 1919: Walt Whitman was popular amongst anarchists and German sympathisers; Susan Warner, like Lowell, seemed dated and had been all but abandoned. Melville's name was conspicuous only by its absence--remarkable then that he should be the final choice.

Lauter, as explanation for this anomalous conclusion, suggests that Melville was constructed in the 1920s as part of an ideological conflict: advocates of modernism and traditional high culture, in opposition to the social and cultural "Other," portrayed often as "feminine, genteel, exotic, dark, foreign and numerous." Melville, ironically, is rendered a masculine Anglo-Saxon beacon against this "other." This construction, of course, entails oblivion to the particular issues of race, eroticism and democracy--the very substance of contemporary studies.

Despite Melville's exclusion from the *New York World* list, 1920 saw new editions of *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*. Indeed, *Moby-Dick* had earned certain prestige as the first American novel included in the important *Oxford World's Classics*. Further

Melville momentum was garnered by the publication of an obscure collection of sketches and poems. Concomitantly, in 1921, Weaver released the first ever Melville biography. The engine behind this increasing interest was at least partially powered, according to Lauter, by a contemporary infatuation with Primitivism. Besides this, Melville was quickly becoming the symbol of the American literary heritage.

During a period conspicuous for American expansionism and imperialism both, Melville was seen as demonstrating the appropriate relationship between America and primitive peoples: sensitive to the exotic, yet detached, as one maintaining uninvolved scepticism. The casting of Melville in this socio-symbolic role required critics of the 1920s, as mentioned, to overlook democratic and homo-erotic themes, as well as the dramatisation of American racism. Rather, Melville was reckoned, according to the postulate of artist as hero, as one apart and above society whose early lack of appreciation was symptomatic of the "plight of the artist" convention.

Thus, Melville was entrenched in modernist ideology, where real art, defined as masculine, autonomous and experimental is held separate from false art, the feminine, referential and traditional. According to the same elitist ideology, Melville is not measured against traditional standards of merit; but rather the readers' worthiness is measure by his response to Melville.

Appealing to the boy in men, as a validation of boys' taste in adult male criticism, the directness of *Typee* and *Omoo*

provided the stylistic nucleus of praise during the formative years of the Melville revival. Within a decade, however, it was the sophistication of later works that most appealed to modernist readers, validated by suggestions of influence upon Henry James. *Pierre*, in particular, saw several reprints and was newly penetrated according to Freudian theory.

Melville then was constructed as an icon of modernist values in 20s. The movement in interest, from *Typee* to *Moby-Dick* to *Pierre* tracks the progress of academia--with its changing conceptions of literary worth--whereby texts upon which he was initially judged have long since been supplanted.

Lauter provides an interesting and largely convincing account of Melville's association with academia. The essay's chief weakness lies in the fundamentally hypothetical nature of its conjecture, where the imaginary is presented as history. Similarly, Lauter's speculation regarding "real" and "false" is resplendent with unsupported terminological determinants: masculine, autonomous, experimental, feminine, referential and traditional. Besides this, the selection of Melville as an American iconic author in preference to others candidates is superficial examined and entirely avoids the influence of early British interest. Nevertheless, the active and principle formulant of Lauter's style, lucidity, allows an essay happily free from esoteric verbosity, reaching largely percipient conclusions.

Caleb Crain's "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels," a title guaranteed to catch

the eye and wobble the stomach, begins with offering Theodore Géricault's famous painting *The Raft of the Medusa* as the basal connective between cannibalism and homosexuality. Inspired by newspaper reports of a shipwreck off the western coast of Africa in 1818, Géricault's painting depicts a raft bearing passengers adrift on the high seas. Of the initial 149, only fifteen were still alive when rescue finally came. Although the most sensational aspect of the episode was the rampant cannibalism that took place, Géricault's chose not to include this in his portrayal. Crain suggests that contemporary sensibilities proscribed such and that homo-eroticism supplied a symbolic representation in its stead. To support this suggestion of incorporated homo-eroticism, Crain makes allusion to a recent Greenwich Village play whose theme is people with AIDS and is entitle *The Raft of the Medusa*. In addition to this, the Irish rock group The Pogues--whose name is accounted to be early twentieth century American slang for the passive homosexual--chose *The Raft of the Medusa* for the cover of an album entitled *Run Sodomy and the Lash*. With such evidence presented, Crain announces: "Géricault and his audience must also have seen this homo-eroticism . . . The unusual male-male intimacy was representing an extremity too grizzly for canvas."(26) That extremity then is cannibalism. Crain concludes: "Representation of cannibalism by homo-eroticism is not intuitive today."(26)

Crain moves to more directly pertinent material in a further effort to establish the link between homosexuality and

cannibalism, proposing that many nineteenth century texts exist wherein the beauty of South Sea Island men is acclaimed. The man, boy and girl triangular relationship mentioned in *Typee* is also offered as an instance where homosexual *possibility* is represented by the *certainty* of Cannibalism.

If there is indeed a link between homosexuality and cannibalism--an notion that seems at least a logical possibility--Crain's essay is by no means the locale for its establishment. It is an untempting offering formulated upon empty assertions and tenuous connections that neither whet the appetite nor satisfy the hunger. Empty assertions are plentiful: "The public already associated the South Seas with cannibalism and a peculiar voluptuousness."(32) Granting this as a truism, it is dubious logic to imperiously equate "voluptuousness" with homosexuality. Also: "The discovery of cannibalism in Melville resembles the discovery of homosexuality in Gothic Novels,"(33) is a vast statement offered as a tid-bit entirely void of substantiation.

Tenuous connections are likewise abundant. Crain asserts that the horror and fascination for cannibalism is equivalent to "homosexual panic." Similarly, Crain suggests: "Once revulsion at the particular act of Cannibalism is overcome, it can be seen differently . . ."(35) much like western mutilation of executed criminals. He concludes: "This defence is intriguingly similar to the contemporary rationale by which homosexuality is justified in public discourse."(35)

Succeeding analytical inaccuracy with factual manipulation,

Crain also offers: ". . . sodomy is a crime so dire its name derives from the story of Sodom, a mythical destruction of civilisation,"(38) where in actual fact the S'dom represents not civilisation but simply a morally corrupt city. Also, the definition of "The Pogues" is uncited and seems entirely wrong. According to biographical information, their original name was Pogue Mahone, Gaelic for kiss and ass, respectively. Kiss My Ass, during record deal negotiations, was deemed too offensive in sensitive Catholic Ireland and the name was duly change to The Pogues: The Kisses.

The foundation upon which the entire thesis rests--the symbolic representation of cannibalism as the homo-eroticism depicted in Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*--is a hypothesis that leaks in a thousand places and is certain to sink. Though the semi-clad bodies do lie prostrate about the composition, the scene is one of destitution, not homo-eroticism. Art historians are unanimous in their reading of the allegorical message as one suggesting an indictment of the restored Bourbon monarchy: the incompetent captain of the *Medusa*, a reactionary old émigré, had been appointed to his post solely because he was favoured by the regime. Crain eventually manages to unmake his own argument by suggesting that homosexuality was *not* open for discussion in 19th century and that Cannibalism was often a topic of journalistic discussion. If this were the case, Géricault would surely not portray common cannibalism through veiled symbolic depiction of scandalous homosexuality.

Finally, Crain's most ridiculous attempt to equate love--now offered as synonymous with sex--and cannibalism emerges from his outlandish analysis of "Hansel and Gretel," which can be summed up in its entirety by: "Instead of eating Hansel, the wicked witch might want to sleep with him." It seems necessary only to cite common sense as a solid rebuttal; however, more learned proof comes from this century's most reputed child psychiatrist, Bruno Bettelheim. In his landmark *Uses of Enchantment*, "Hansel and Gretel" is granted the more credible interpretation as a warning against oral regression.

With a theme of decided potential, Crain drifts about gormlessly, seeking sanctuary from tenuous connections, empty assertions, analytical inaccuracies and factual manipulation ending his journey washed up on some distant and largely imaginary shore.

Samuel Otter's "The Eden of Saddle Meadows: Landscape and Ideology in *Pierre*" takes as his thesis the understanding that Melville's representation of Saddle Meadows is a response to the pre-war effort to "construct and empower" the American "difference" through representations of land.

It is New York City's cultural establishment, with a particular focus upon the Northeast and the Hudson river, that effectively shapes and popularises the character of aesthetic sensibility. Irving's short fiction, Bryant's poetry, paintings by Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, Coles "Essay on American Scenery," landscape gift books, Nathaniel Willis's *American Scenery* and a plethora of travel literature, all play

their part in this multi-media exercise. The fundamental quality of this new aesthetic sensibility is, of course, the representation of land. According to the European tradition--a tradition here abandoned--land is a place of history of people and of struggle; but also an Eden "urging its own manipulation and destruction," concerned not with history but present and future.

Cole's "Essay on American Scenery," in particular trains the eye not to the story of American landscape but to its sublimity: "He who stands on Mount Albano and looks down on ancient Rome, has his mind peopled with gigantic associations of the storied past; but he who stands on the mounds of the West, the most venerable remains of American antiquity, may experience the emotion of the sublime, but it is the sublimity of a shoreless ocean un-islanded by the recorded deeds of man."(60) Contemporaneously, anti renter conflicts of the 1830s and 1840s were essentially a struggle with feudal landlords in which five Southeastern tribes were forcibly displaced to reserves in Oklahoma. As Cole and his contemporaries train the eye upon what to see, what to *dis-see*, the stories of the American landscape remain unread and associations disassociated.

In addition to the landscape being robbed of its historicity, contemporary artistic sentiment adopted what was essentially a philosophy of destruction--all in the name of progress. Nathaniel Willis provides a keen instance of this:

Instead of looking through a valley, which has

presented the same aspect for hundreds of years--in which live lords and tenants, whose hearths have been surrounded by the same names through ages of tranquil descent . . . [the American] sees a valley laden down like a harvest wagon with a virgin vegetation, untrodden and luxuriant; and his first thought is of the villages that will soon sparkle on the hill-sides, the axes that will ring from the woodlands, and the mills, bridges, canals, railroads . . .(63)

Bryant, "America's most beloved poet,"(64) augments this celebration of nature's destruction with gleeful depictions of Native recession.

In response to this, Melville, in *Pierre*, describes American landscape, like European, as one of history and struggle, with a plot that describes movement from "rural golden age, sentiment to idealism, dilation to collapse."(55) The rural paradise is undermined by a narrative strategy which utilises "hyperbole, unsettling juxtapositions, emphatic allusions to struggle, displacements, overstatements, anticlimaxes and the mingling of categories,"(55) as primary tools.

Thus, Saddle Meadows is a choking scenery offering no potential. "It had been his choice fate to have been born and nurtured in the country, surrounded by scenery whose uncommon loveliness was the perfect mould of a delicate and poetic mind."(55) The seeming accord with pre-war artists is undermined and the loveliness of scenery is actually a "Perfect mould" for Pierre's mind which results in deformation. The delicate and poetic mind then is really

"divided, dependent and guilty."(56)

Saddle Meadows' place names naturally display a family history of ownership. Further, anachronistic vocabulary such as "Sires," "Swales" and "manor," along with allusions to tenant-landlord class structure, suggest more history and un-American Aristocracy.

Finally, Melville associates possession of land with exploitation of Native Americans and poor whites. Landscape then is described in terms quite converse to those of the Hudson River group: a landscape tied to the past and not the future.

Otter provides a well executed and convincing essay, with any remaining doubt resting solely in his repeated use of "destruction" in his assessment of artists' association with the American landscape. The word is, of course, loaded, and once unarmed, the scenario might quite possibly be one in which such artists were working according to the *same* principles as Melville in *Pierre*: destruction then might be better described as modification, *civilisationing*, making American scenery more like the European.

"Melville's Handsome Sailor: The anxiety of Innocence" by Nany Ruttenburg, begins:

Walt Whitman, in his *Democratic Vistas*, laments:

I feel, with dejection and amazement that few or none have yet really spoken to [the American] people, created a single, image making work for them [so that their] central spirit [remains] uncelebrated, un-expressed. (qtd. *American*

Literature 84)

From the same: "The noiseless operation of one's isolated self"(84) is the source of all genuine poetry.

Emerson, in "The Poet," the opening of essay of *Essays: Second Series*, (1844) states that inarticulateness is the fundamental trait of the American national poetic character: not silent by nature but silenced at the behest of the critic. "Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that dream power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity."(qtd. *American Literature* 85)

Ruttenburg finally suggests, in this meandering manner, that Billy Budd exemplifies Emerson's ideal poet and conforms to Whitman's ideal poetic character, including the association he represents of perfect poetry with the perfect physicality of the poet.

When Billy hits Claggart: "Struck dead by an Angel of God. Yet the Angel must die."(qtd. *American Literature* 84) Vere faces a dilemma, for the sacred embraces all considerations of narrative context. To eliminate ambiguity, he declares mitigating circumstances--context--to be immaterial. Hence lie becomes truth: the lie about mutiny leads to the punch which is an actual act of mutiny. Vere's attempt to halt the narrative, by necessity, upholds the lie.

Like Billy, Ruttenburg opines, the narrator stutters,

proceeding in fits and starts, withdrawing and undermining information. Like Vere, the narrator cannot bring himself to examine anything but the "literal surface"(95) of the act. At the point of describing how "innocence and transgression"(95) intersect, he backsteps and describes only the physical.

Vere and Claggart bear striking resemblance: they share intellectual capacity; their respective sanity is questioned: Vere by the surgeon, Claggart by his actions.

The main issue of Ruttenburg's essay is America's inability to express itself with a defining poetic voice. The source of this inability, as Whitman suggests, is America's continued and erroneous labour under debt to its parent culture. America should rather submit to the more legitimate future, crude and primitive, and seek a manly innocence, devoid of conscious pretensions. Billy Budd then is Melville's version of Whitman's great American poet as sleeping infant.

Whitman's ideas, central to Ruttenburg's thesis, unfortunately are offered like Christmas baubles clinging to Easter decorations: unexplained though pretty pretty. This, coupled with an awkward structure, produces a rambling essay which virtually defies analysis, leaving the reader impressed with the quite good or quite bad of the whole thing, though decidedly unsure which.

Turning, thankfully, to a more scholarly and less Byzantine essay, "The Moby-Dick White Elephant," by Julian Markels, takes as its subject the 1988 Publication of the North-Western-Newberry *Moby-Dick*.

Markels begins with the fallacy of Edmund Wilson's 1969 objection to the MLA project of editing American authors, where textual variants, the reprinting of authors' working notes, manuscript revisions *et al.* are seen as profitless, superfluous and of interest to no one. "What is important is the finished work by which the author wishes to stand." (qtd. *American Literature* 106)

The question, of course, is what constitutes a finished work? *Moby-Dick* provides an exemplar: differences between the British and American first editions are manifold: with 700 differences in wording and thousands of punctuation; with thirty-eight passages of at least one sentence long and dozens shorter; with chapter twenty-five and the epilogue entirely missing in British edition.

Markels suggests the need for a "studiously neutral edition" (106) of *Moby-Dick*, to which the North-Western-Newberry editors respond with an expanded commission to include debatable extra-textual interpretations. Only Tanselle, the author of Section VI, works according to Markels' guidelines of the neutral and germane, providing exhaustive research into textual variations between the British and American editions, examining every possible hypothesis as to how we might deduce an authentic text.

Alternatively, *Hayford*, responsible for Sections I and V, seeks a metatext embedded in what he sees as an imperfect text, botched by editors and Melville's own creative method of conceiving work in progress. He includes a ten page account of

scholarly examination—a “who,” “what” and “when” of *Moby-Dick* study; a thoroughness and attention to detail that is reminiscent of Tenselle, with the critical difference being that Tenselle took as his material the *Moby-Dick* text, whereas Hayford’s material is his colleagues hypotheses.

As an example of extra-textual hypothesis, Hayford’s support of a two *Moby-Dick*’s theory is cited, where the first twenty-one chapters—one fifth of the book—before the voyage is understood as a residue of an earlier composition.

Hershel Parker describes, in section II, Melville’s life up until *Moby-Dick*; section III, the working conditions during *Moby-Dick*; section VI, sources; section VII, the British and American reviews; section VIII, the British rediscover of *Moby-Dick* and American Melville revival; section IX, the enduring importance of *Moby-Dick*. Markels suggests that sections II, VIII and IX are quite illegitimate in an edition of *Moby-Dick*, but that the relevant is thus buried by the irrelevant. Examples of superfluous material within these sections include: the conclusion that Melville’s sister and mother thought him twice rude for dropping them off at a train station and not waiting for the train to leave; casting Melville’s wife and mother and sister as nemeses to his creative genius; the suggestion that Melville’s response to reviews of *Moby-Dick*, whilst writing *Pierre*, caused him to botch that novel.

Markels’ primary concern is the mark of authority granted the extra-textual analysis in such a prestigious edition. Such

analysis gains an untouchable status despite being by no means superior to much elsewhere extant. What should have been a public-trust then, becomes nothing more than a self-serving exercise. His essay is lucid and essentially without fault, though this is not to say that it might meet unanimous approval.

Elizabeth Renker's "Herman Melville, Wife-beating, and the Written Page" provides an interpretative view of Melville's mistreatment of his wife. This mistreatment is presented as part of a psychological network which includes a "tortured relation to writing"(123) and dependence upon and resentment of the Melville women whose labour he required as copyists.

In 1867, two letters, one by Melville's half brother, the other by his wife, Elizabeth, were discovered. The subject of both was a proposed kidnapping of Elizabeth--with her co-operation--in order that she might escape "ill treatment."(124) The plan was finally abandoned, according to Renker, because Elizabeth was afraid of public opinion.

Renker cites numerous proofs of Melville's wife-beating, first describing the inconclusive evidence as being qualified by social pressure and precedence. Such accusations, she suggests, were largely thwarted, necessitating the employment of code words such as "drinking problem"--Melville was known to drink heavily.

Besides this inference, Renker provides a variety of other evidence: Eleanor Melville Metcalf--Herman's oldest granddaughter--was interviewed by Raymond M. Weaver in 1919,

resulting in *Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic*, where family papers were reportedly burned by Melville; misogynous markings in the margins of manuscripts were deliberately erased by Melville women; Frances, the only child to marry, in later life would not hear her father's name spoken.

Renker next turns to literary evidence, suggesting an analogue between the frustration of writing with domestic frustration. Thus, the excruciating process of composing *Pierre* lends itself to autobiographical inference. Further irritation of writing is suggested by Melville himself: "What I feel most moved to write--that is banned,"(qtd. *American Literature* 131) in his famous letter to Hawthorn. Melville also had great difficulty spelling. There was also a physical struggle made apparent in his autographic problems, as well as the eye, back and head trouble which made writing painful.

Renker also suggests that Melville disfigures the page, filling up every space, cutting and splicing and pinning fragments, roughly crossing out sections and concluding:

These frustrations with his writing illuminate a series of textual effects that associate women with blank pages and textual production.(132-133)

Further evidence of this comes in an epistolary sketch from "Fragments from a Writing Desk," in which Melville attempts to describe, to someone identified only as "M--," the types of beauty found in Lansingburgh:

I feel my powers of delineation inadequate to the task; but, nevertheless I will try my hand at the matter, although like an unskilful limner, I am

fearful I shall but scandalize the charms I
endeavour to copy.

Come to my aid, ye guardian spirits of the
Fair! Guide my awkward hand, and preserve from
mutilation the features ye hover over and protect!
Pour down the whole floods of sparkling champagne,
my dear M--, until your brain grows giddy with
emotion.(qtd. in xxx 133-134)

Here then Melville delineates women's "loveliest faces" and
acknowledges that his "awkward" writing hand threatens them
with mutilation.

In "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,"
Melville describes a paper mill staffed by pale girls who are
blank pages incarnate; where the "Blood River" represents the
menstrual flow providing power to the mill.

"The endless production of paper simultaneously
raises the spectre of writing "without end"; thus
the relentlessness of blank paper associated with
the girls challenges the narrators own ability to
produce."(137)

The aggregate of all this, Renker states, is the inference
that Melville associates writing with misery, women with
misery, and women with writing. Melville's dependence and
resentment of Melville women constitutes the secret madness
and anguish of his writing. His sole domestic fiction, *Pierre*,
presents writing in painful and destructive terms. Striking
women from his work, therefore, is an attempt to remove a
creative blockage.

Despite the somewhat subjective and insubstantive nature of

the evidence, and notwithstanding certain weak points of argumentation, particularly Melville's violent treatment of the page, Renker presents a thoughtful and provoking essay which is largely convincing. Unfortunately, her thorough treatment of biographical points is met with a substantial lack of literary analysis, resulting in a text which is little more than accusatory.

The essays here examined, as suggested by the corresponding criticism, are a varied bunch, offering an equitable indication of the form and character of modern Melville studies, as well as collectively providing testimony to the continuing challenge of America's most canonical writer as an abstruse and eclectic source of new and varied interpretation. Not surprisingly then, the body of critical and scholarly literature concerning Melville, of which this is only a small sample, continues to grow towards a state both leviathan and catatonic.¹

¹Poetic license here applied.

Works Cited

Gohdes, C. *American Literature*. Durham, N.C. Duke University Press, 1994