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# THE ANATOMY OF MELVILLE'S FAME

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THE extraordinary enthusiasm for Herman Melville in recent years among persons who had not previously heard of him has led to two erroneous conclusions: first, that Melville's contemporaries were blind to the significance of his work, and, second, that until the beginning of the revival of the last decade Melville was completely forgotten.

## I

There is sufficient evidence to show that Melville's contemporaries were fairly well aware of his intentions. The sea romances, *Typee* and *Omoo*, are praised today for the same virtues that were observed in the 1840's, and the attacks upon Melville's later and more philosophical works arose not so much from a lack of comprehension in the critics as from a dislike for the philosophy which they understood only too well. For instance, *The Democratic Review* (July, 1849) pointed out that "Mardi is an allegory that mirrors the world," but the critic was "saddened" because Melville "seems to think that the race is in a vicious circle, from which we cannot escape."<sup>1</sup> A similar point of view was expressed by *The Literary World* (August 21, 1852) in a review of *Pierre*: "The most unmoral *moral* of the story . . . seems to be the impracticability of virtue. . . . But ordinary novel readers will never unkennel this loathsome suggestion."<sup>2</sup>

Melville was attacked by his contemporaries, it is true, for the failure of his later work as literature, but modern critics at the height of the Melville boom have passed virtually the same unfavorable judgments. Compare, for example, the critique published in *The Athenæum* in 1852, which called *Pierre* "a prairie in print, wanting the flowers and freshness of the savannahs, but almost equally puzzling to find a way through it,"<sup>3</sup> with Lewis Mumford's comment, "It is the failure of *Pierre* as literature that draws our attention to

<sup>1</sup> *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, XXV, 44 (July, 1849).

<sup>2</sup> *The Literary World*, XI, 118 (August 21, 1852).

<sup>3</sup> *The Athenæum*, XXV, 1266 (November 20, 1852).

Melville's predicament as a man,"<sup>4</sup> or with H. M. Tomlinson's description of *Pierre* as "a tragic and noteworthy failure."<sup>5</sup> The tone of the modern critics is more sympathetic, but the judgment of *Pierre* as literary art remains much the same.

An apparent exception to the general comprehension of Melville's meaning was the inability or the unwillingness of British critics to see in *Moby Dick* anything more than a poorly constructed whaling story. As early as December, 1851, *Harper's Magazine*, an American journal, said that "beneath the whole story the reader may find a pregnant allegory,"<sup>6</sup> but the British, with an amazing stupidity, never recognized the possibility of a philosophical interpretation. They tested *Moby Dick* by the canons of unity, coherence and emphasis, and found it wanting. *The London Examiner*, for instance, found that in *Moby Dick* "all the regular rules of narrative or story are spurned and set at defiance."<sup>7</sup> *The London Spectator* remarked that "such a groundwork is hardly natural enough for a regular-built novel, though it might form a tale, if properly managed." *The Spectator* censured Melville for "beginning in the autobiographical form and changing *ad libitum* into the narrative."<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, there was always a sharp difference of opinion between British and American criticism of Melville during his creative period, a fact which has not hitherto been stressed by Melville's biographers. Ill feeling, national pride, and a patronizing attitude toward America help to explain the severe condemnation by the English of Melville's "Yankeeisms" and "Go-ahead method." They also help to explain the unexpected English praise of *The Confidence Man*, a book which nearly every one else has whole-heartedly damned. For instance, *The Westminster Review* (July, 1857) said: "Perhaps the moral is, the gullibility of the great Republic when taken on its own tack."<sup>9</sup> Had Americans felt more cultural pride and less inclination to grovel before British oracles, Melville might have become then, as he is now, a great hero of American national consciousness.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1929), p. 218.

<sup>5</sup> H. M. Tomlinson, Introduction to *Pierre* (New York, Dutton, 1929), p. xv.

<sup>6</sup> *Harper's Magazine*, IV, 137 (December, 1851).

<sup>7</sup> *The Examiner*, November 8, 1851, p. 709.

<sup>8</sup> Reprinted in *The International Magazine*, IV, 602 (December, 1851).

<sup>9</sup> *The Westminster Review*, XII, 311 (July, 1857).

Melville's genius was, indeed, recognized by the critics who undertook to evaluate his work as a whole: Philarète Chasles (*Revue des Deux Mondes*, May 15, 1849),<sup>10</sup> Fitz-James O'Brien (*Putnam's Monthly*, February, 1853),<sup>11</sup> "Sir Nathaniel" (*The New Monthly Magazine*, July, 1853),<sup>12</sup> and others clearly apprehended Melville's power, although they might quarrel with him over stylistic excesses or his offenses against the proprieties and evangelical morality, such as references to smoking the vile weed, drinking spirituous liquors, and cohabiting with Polynesian maidens.

## II

The second myth, that after the close of the first productive period Melville was almost completely forgotten, is simply false. It is true that little evidence of the continuation of an enthusiasm for Melville can be found in the literary histories and text-books. Beginning with the Duyckincks' *Cyclopædia of American Literature* and Gostwick's *Hand-book of American Literature*, Melville found a place in a considerable number of academic works; but these notices, in general, reveal a dismal ignorance both of the man and of his work. Academic criticism abounded in plagiarism and paraphrase of previous criticism, and it was apparent that few of the literary historians bothered to read Melville with any degree of critical insight, if at all. More important as indicative of an abiding interest in Melville were the references to him by men of letters and literary amateurs on both sides of the Atlantic. The extent of the interest in Melville among the reading public can never be determined accurately, because the opinions of ordinary readers do not often find their way into print; but a sufficient number of professional writers left comments on Melville to prove the existence of a following, however small it might be. Among the more important men who were admirers of Melville at one time or another during the "dark" periods before 1919 may be mentioned Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Warren Stoddard, Sir Alfred Lyall, John La

<sup>10</sup> Philarète Chasles, "Voyages Réels et Fantastiques d'Hermann Melville," *Revue des Deux Mondes*, II (new period), 541-570 (May 15, 1849).

<sup>11</sup> Fitz-James O'Brien, "Our Young Authors—Melville," *Putnam's*, I, 156-164 (February, 1853).

<sup>12</sup> "Sir Nathaniel," "Herman Melville," *The New Monthly Magazine*, XCVIII, 300-308 (July, 1853).

Farge, Robert Buchanan, Henry S. Salt, Arthur Stedman, Titus Munson Coan, W. Clark Russell, J. M. Barrie, Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Archibald MacMechan, William Morris, and Theodore Watts.

### III

Contrary to the popular impression, the recent revival of interest in Melville is not the first, nor even the second or third, attempt to rehabilitate the author's reputation. It is possible to demark at least four or five movements which sought to reawaken a general interest in Melville. The first occurred in England in the middle 1880's, with Robert Buchanan and Henry S. Salt as the chief advocates.<sup>13</sup> Another occurred in England and America after Melville's death (1891), when new editions of four of the books were published.<sup>14</sup> Professor William P. Trent mentioned a "revival of interest" in Melville—and deprecated it—in 1903.<sup>15</sup> Another revival, which resulted in the acknowledgment of *Moby Dick* as Melville's masterpiece and one of the greatest sea books in all literature, began in 1914 with Professor Archibald MacMechan's essay on the White Whale.<sup>16</sup> The last revival began with the Melville Centenary in 1919 and still continues.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Robert Buchanan, "Socrates in Camden," *The Academy*, XXVIII, 102-103 (August 15, 1885).

*The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, South Seas Edition, edited by Sir Sidney Colvin New York, 1925), III, 71.

Henry S. Salt, "Herman Melville," *The Universal Review*, IV, 78 (May, 1889).

Henry S. Salt, "Imperial Cockneydom," *The Scottish Art Review*, II, 186-190 (November, 1889).

Letter from W. Clark Russell to Herman Melville dated July 21, 1886, published in *The New York World*, October 11, 1891, p. 26. In this letter Russell wrote, "Your reputation here [England] is very great."

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Richard Henry Stoddard, "Herman Melville," *The Mail and Express*, XX, 5 (October 8, 1891).

Arthur Stedman, "Marquesan Melville," *The New York World*, XXXII, 26 (October 11, 1891).

W. Clark Russell, "A Claim for American Literature," *The North American Review*, CLIV, 138-149 (February, 1892).

Henry S. Salt, "Marquesan Melville," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, CCLXXII, 248-257 (March, 1892).

This is only a partial bibliography of notices of Melville published during the years 1891 and 1892.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. William P. Trent, *A History of American Literature, 1607-1865* (1903), New York, 1929, p. 390.

A commentary on the interest in Melville at this time may be found in an article on Herman Melville by Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., published in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, V, 945-946 (April 27, 1929).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Archibald MacMechan, "The Best Sea Story Ever Written." In *The Life of a Little College* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1914), pp. 179-198.

The divergent character of the various revivals is important. In the first two or three Melville was talked of only as a writer of "travel books," the author of the charmingly exotic *Typee* and *Omoo*. H. S. Salt's comment in *The Scottish Art Review* (November, 1899) was typical: "*Typee* takes precedence of all his other writings, in merit no less than in date."<sup>17</sup> When *Moby Dick* emerged in 1914, it was as a glorified sea and whaling story. MacMechan, who set the tone of this revival, was not interested in the philosophy and allegory of *Moby Dick* so much as in its "expansiveness" and "freedom from rules and conventions." The Whitman vogue was in full swing. To MacMechan, Melville was the "Walt Whitman of prose."<sup>18</sup>

The most recent Melville boom began with a repetition of orthodox judgments,<sup>19</sup> and a new note did not enter criticism until the publication of Frank Jewett Mather's articles on Melville in *The Review* in August, 1919.<sup>20</sup> The Centenary reawakened interest in Melville both in England and in America, but again there were important national differences. The English have always been interested in Melville as a writer of travel literature and of books about the sea. Since 1919 English criticism has concerned itself chiefly with style and story. Its main characteristic has been its enthusiasm for *Moby Dick*, an enthusiasm which partly atones for former blindness.<sup>21</sup> But it is an enthusiasm for *Moby Dick* as the whaling epic. English criticism has been, therefore, stylistic and literary, and it is a significant fact that John Freeman's most original contribution to Melville criticism has been his analysis and literary appraisal of the poems.<sup>22</sup> Carl Van Doren could speak in 1921 of the "greater re-

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the Centenary articles in *The New York Times*, LXVIII, July 27, 1919, Section 3, p. 1; *The New York Evening Sun*, XXXIII, August 1, 1919, p. 16; *The New York Evening Post*, CXVIII, August 2, 1919, p. 6; *The New York Tribune*, LXXIX, August 4, 1919, p. 8. In England, F. C. Owlett, "Herman Melville (1819-1891): A Centenary Tribute," *The London Bookman*, LVI, 164-167 (August, 1919).

<sup>20</sup> Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., "Herman Melville," *The Review*, I, 276-278 (August 9, 1919), and I, 298-301 (August 16, 1919).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Viola Meynell, "Herman Melville," *The Dublin Review*, CLXVI, 96-105 (January, February, March, 1920).

E. L. Grant Watson, "Moby Dick," *The London Mercury*, III, 180-186 (December, 1920). Augustine Birrell, "The Great White Whale," *The Athenæum*, January 28, 1921, pp. 99-

100.

F. L. Lucas, "Herman Melville," *The New Statesman*, XVIII, 730-731 (April 1, 1922).

<sup>22</sup> John Freeman, *Herman Melville* (New York, Macmillan, 1926).

vival interest" in England,<sup>22a</sup> but he was not speaking of the great Melville boom which is still going on in this country. The "new" Melville criticism, the reinterpretation of the character of Melville and of his work in the light of modern psychology and philosophy, is essentially an American phenomenon.

#### IV

The recent revival of interest in Melville has been attributed by some to "the spirit of the age." This is undoubtedly true, but "spirit of the age" is a term difficult to define, and one that leaves the inquirer groping for more ponderable reasons. Some have emphasized the appeal of Melville's boldness and expansiveness, which were the same qualities that attracted Professor MacMechan in 1914. A more distinctive characteristic of the third decade of the twentieth century may be its devotion to psychological history, to "case histories" of spiritual struggle and conflict, to the spectacle of man against the world, to all evidences of psychological maladjustment: a devotion induced by the recent enthusiasm for psychology as well as by the post-war psychosis of futility, of futility and defiance.

Mather's importance as a critic of Melville arises from the fact that he was one of the first to see clearly Melville's personal struggle with a perspective on the Victorian age. The point of view was elaborated by Professor Weaver in his biography: "Indeed, Melville's complete works, in their final analysis, are a long effort towards the creation of one of the most complex, and massive, and original characters in literature: the character known in life as Herman Melville."<sup>23</sup> This sentence, indeed, sounds the keynote of the new criticism. For what that "Herman Melville" character is which has been discovered by recent critics, and its meaning to modern life, one must go to the works and the biographies. The important point is that the new interest in Melville is not so much belletristic as biographical, and it is the biographical interest that is responsible for the gradual reclamation of the literary "failures." The unpopular works, even *Pierre* and *The Confidence Man* and

<sup>22a</sup> Carl Van Doren, *The American Novel* (New York, Macmillan, 1921), pp. 75-76.

<sup>23</sup> Raymond M. Weaver, *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* (New York, Doran, 1921).

*Clarel*, have been brilliantly gilded and festooned and illuminated with modern effects, and so rescued from the limbo.

The biographical enthusiasm reached its climax in D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1922), Carl Van Vechten's essay in *The Double Dealer* (January, 1922), and especially, in Lewis Mumford's *Herman Melville* (1929). Van Vechten clearly revealed the attitude of this group of critics:

In spite of all the detractors, I think . . . the day may come when there will be those who will prefer the later Melville just as there are those who prefer the later James, those who will care more for the metaphysical, and at the same time more self-revealing works, than for the less subtle and more straightforward tales.<sup>24</sup>

The excitement over Melville as a man may be held responsible for the sometimes excessive praise of his writing, for the elaboration of awful but often improbable "hidden meanings,"<sup>25</sup> and for the amusing contradictory opinions among enthusiastic critics. To Lewis Mumford, for instance, Melville is always a conscious artist;<sup>26</sup> to Van Wyck Brooks he is an unconscious artist.<sup>27</sup> To M. Josephson, Melville is an "escape" writer;<sup>28</sup> to Mumford he is a realist in the deepest sense.<sup>29</sup> Other examples may be found in the criticism of the last ten years, but these will suffice to show the lack of agreement on the more strictly literary aspects of Melville's work.

## V

In spite of the enthusiasm of the Melville boom, there has been, and there still is, a strong dissenting opinion. *Pierre*, it seems, is as difficult to read as ever. Here again there seems to be a difference

<sup>24</sup> Carl Van Vechten, "The Later Work of Herman Melville," *The Double-Dealer*, III, 12 (January, 1922).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, Seltzer, 1923).

Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York, Harcourt, 1929).

W. S. Gleim, "A Theory of Moby Dick," *The New England Quarterly*, II, 402-419 (July, 1929).

<sup>26</sup> Lewis Mumford, "The Significance of Herman Melville," *The New Republic*, LVI, 212-214 (October 10, 1928).

<sup>27</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *Emerson and Others* (New York, 1927), p. 181.

<sup>28</sup> M. Josephson, "Transfiguration of Herman Melville," *The Outlook*, CL, 809 (September 19, 1928).

<sup>29</sup> Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville* (New York, 1929), pp. 228 and 195.

between English and American criticism, the conservative American critics being suspicious of blurb and exaggeration, and the English being unwilling to evaluate Melville on other grounds than those of intrinsic literary merit. A reviewer in *The Freeman* (October 26, 1921) expressed the cynical American point of view:

Well it was only a question of time: sooner or later the darkness that surrounds this extraordinary man was certain to yield before our indefatigable national appetite for investigation and research. Next year Melville will have been forgotten again. . . . But for the next six months there is to be a Melville boom. Ishmael is to emerge at last: he is to have his little hour. And there will be a few hundred or a few dozen readers, moreover, who, discovering him for the first time in this lime-light, will seize upon his gift as a permanent possession.<sup>30</sup>

Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., commenting on Lewis Mumford's biography, said: "Indeed there is some exaggeration in the general envisagement of Herman Melville as a Prometheus too lonely even to attract the vultures."<sup>31</sup> Professor Weaver limits Melville's claim to fame to three exploits: the literary discovery of the South Seas; the creation, with Dana, of a new world of literature of the sailor; and *Moby Dick*, which reveals a great imagination.<sup>32</sup> But Professor Weaver seems to be doubtful, as he revealed in private conversation, of Melville's claim as a literary artist.

It ought to be remembered that the epic hero, the "Herman Melville" of the modern critics, is an American created by Americans. Differences in national psychology may account for the failure of the English to catch the spark of enthusiasm for this figure. Much of the English criticism has been, therefore, literary and conservative. Michael Sadleir said in 1922: "Apart from *Moby Dick*, the neo-Melvillian has little beyond patronizing approval for the books of his hero." Even *Moby Dick* was over-praised:

In some degree the worship of *Moby Dick* and the comparative neglect of the other work are inevitable corollaries to the Melville boom at its present stage. During the first period of any new æsthetic wonder, the peculiar transcends the normal in the imagination of disciples. . . . In

<sup>30</sup> "A Reviewer's Notebook," *The Freeman*, IV, 166-167 (October 26, 1921).

<sup>31</sup> Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., "Herman Melville," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, V, 945-946 (April 27, 1929).

<sup>32</sup> Raymond M. Weaver, "Herman Melville," *The Bookman*, LIV, 323 (December, 1921).

years to come, when the glamour of oddity has paled a little, it will be admitted that the book labours under a sad weight of intolerable proximity.<sup>33</sup>

Probably the most sober appraisal of Melville's work has come from an Englishman, H. P. Marshall. *Moby Dick* is in a class by itself. *Redburn*, *Typee*, *Omoo*, and some of the *Piazza Tales* deserve to be read for their style as well as their matter. Badly written but interesting, *Mardi* and *Pierre* are books that publishers would call "human documents." But *Israel Potter* has only moments, *White Jacket* is ordinary, and *The Confidence Man* is "extremely dull and monstrously constructed."<sup>34</sup>

## VI

One may suspect that the Melville *culte* is not so large as the mass of recent notices of Melville would seem to indicate. It may be limited, indeed, to those who find in the "Herman Melville" of the recent biographies a kindred spirit, or a life which embodies their own psychological conflicts. The whole subject of Melville's reputation is extremely interesting because it has unusually sharp contrasts and because it permits us to see the complicated process of literary apotheosis going on all around us at the present moment. Perhaps the "spirit of the age" will soon become sufficiently corporeal to enable us to see why there has been such a strong Melville revival in this generation. Although Herman Melville has a throne in our literary Valhalla, it may perhaps be seen, after the rosy clouds have rolled away from the pedestal, that he is balanced precariously on a chair with a single leg, and that made of whale-bone, like the leg of Captain Ahab.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Sadleir, *Excursions in Victorian Bibliography* (London, Chaundy & Cox, 1922), p. 218.

<sup>34</sup> H. P. Marshall, "Herman Melville," *The London Mercury*, XI, 58-59 (November, 1924).