BOOK REVIEW: *MELVILLE AMONG THE PHILOSOPHERS*

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Herman Melville (1819-1891) has been for the most part overlooked by philosophers. *Melville Among the Philosophers* considers how philosophers can benefit from the study of this great American novelist and poet as well as how philosophers may help illuminate Melville’s work. The book includes ten newly-published essays in two parts: six essays in “Melville as Philosopher” explore philosophical themes in Melville’s works, while four essays in “Inheriting Melville” view Melville’s work in light of current philosophical concerns including feminism, colonialism, and racism. The essays are written by scholars of diverse backgrounds and philosophical persuasions. The book concludes with an exhortatory Afterword on Melville’s continued significance by Cornel West.

In their introductory essay, the editors argue that the concept of silence is important to Melville ontologically and epistemologically, in that silence expresses human limitations and claims to knowledge. This understanding of silence reflects the religious, questing character of Melville’s work. A second dimension reflects the tendency, in Melville’s day and ours, to silence voices with which one may disagree, including the voices of people of different cultures, races, religions, or points of view. This forms a political dimension of silence. Religion and politics are, in fact, two great preoccupations of Melville, focused upon by readers, critical studies, and the contributors to this volume.

The essays address a range of Melville’s novels, stories, and poetry, including *Typee*, *Moby-Dick* (four essays), *Pierre*, *Benito Cereno*, *The Encantadas*, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, and *Clarel*. Some of these works are familiar while some remain little read. In this review, I focus on the essay on Melville’s first novel, *Typee*, on one of the essays on *Moby-Dick*, and on the essay on *Clarel*. These essays provide consideration of Melville’s writing from its beginning to, with the glaring exception of *Billy Budd*, its conclusion.
Melville’s first book tells an exotic first-person story about a Melville-like character, Tom, jumping ship in the Marquesas Islands and living for several months among the Typee, a tribe of supposed cannibals. Tracy Strong’s essay, “On Religion and the Strangeness of Speech: Typee as a ‘Peep’” combines a close literary study of Melville’s book with philosophical reflection. Strong considers the nature of “peeping” and how Typee offers a “peep” at Polynesian life, especially at its open sexual practices. Sexuality is invariably tied with religion, and Strong explores the philosophical issues the book raises in terms of attempting to understand the nature of religion and, to understand a culture different from one’s own. Tom observes the religious practices of the Typee on a daily basis and confesses his lack of understanding. Tom concludes that the native practitioners don’t understand them either. Tom is accepting of the tribal religious practices until the natives urge him to allow his face to be tattooed. He sees what he regards as a disfigurement of his face as a loss of his identity and thus engineers an escape from the tribe and boards another ship for another voyage.

The inability to understand the nature of religion, both one’s own and others, leads Strong to explore Melville’s view on language. He finds “the inadequacy of language is Melville’s constant theme” (118). To understand the language of the Typee, other than for simple references to objects, a person would need to become part of their culture or the “life-world” which Tom is unable to do. Strong briefly traces his theme of the inability of language to communicate on matters of importance through later works of Melville while he draws as well on apt philosophical sources including Emerson, Wittgenstein and Levinas.

Strong observes that Melville’s view of the limitations of language works against Melville’s attempt to communicate about religion and about the interior life of individuals in his writings. Melville was aware of the conflict and understood, for example, that
it was “a species of folly” to seek to understand God. He nevertheless kept struggling with understanding in his writings knowing that he would inevitably fail. “And that failure,” Strong concludes, “is his greatness as an author” (121).

*Moby-Dick* was Melville’s sixth novel and has become widely recognized as a masterwork. Although in time the novel inspired a massive secondary literature and a great popular following, in Melville’s day the book sold poorly and received tepid reviews. Of the four essays on *Moby-Dick* in this volume, my focus is on the outstanding essay in Part II by Marilyn Nissim-Sabat.

Nissim-Sabat’s philosophically rich essay, “Melville’s Phenomenology of Gender: Critical Reflections on C.L.R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, Castaways* and Paget Henry’s *Caliban’s Reason*” shows a deep engagement with Caribbean philosophy together with a provocative exposition and defense of Husserlian phenomenology. The essay develops its philosophical themes to offer insights into different ways of approaching Melville and also into reading Melville to help understand contemporary issues about gender.

Nissim-Sabat distinguishes between “historicist” and “poetical” ways of reading *Moby-Dick*. The historicist approach, taken by some Caribbean thinkers, tends to involve a strictly political reading of the work in terms of illustrating the flaws of the United States culture of expansionism and domination of other people in Melville’s day. Nissim-Sabat develops the poetical approach from her understanding of Caribbean mythology. A poetic reading of a work takes account of the archaic, universal elements that give it significance. She finds support for her view that universal human characteristics may be found in a particular cultural myth in her defense of the *a priori* (rather than culturally or scientifically conditioned) character of Husserl’s phenomenological reduction. Her distinction between historicist and poetic ways of reading suggests that there are many insightful, even competing, ways of reading a
complex literary work such as *Moby-Dick*.

Nissim-Sabat applies her poetical approach to reflect on *Moby-Dick’s* treatment of gender. She finds in the book hints of a nuanced development of concepts of humanity, femininity, and masculinity that enhance current reflection on these difficult issues. Contrary to readings which see the novel relying upon stereotypes of masculinity, Nissim-Sabat finds many passages in *Moby-Dick* which suggest feminine aspects in the godhead, in the *Pequod’s* crew, and in Captain Ahab. A psychotherapist as well as a philosopher, Nissim-Sabat reflects that traits of masculinity and femininity are separate but not inconsistent with one another and that both traits are found to varying degrees in each human person. In a discussion which draws well on Melville’s text, is philosophically insightful, and avoids ideological posturing, Nissim-Sabat finds that Melville illustrates in his portrayal of Ahab’s inner life “the torment that can result when a human being, for whatever reason, through whatever developmental trauma, attempts to existentially live as incompossible ‘male’ and ‘female’ traits that are actually compossible and therefore can coexist in one and the same person” (145).

Published in 1876, *Clarel* is an epic poem of about 18,000 lines that occupied Melville’s evenings for years while he worked drearily in the customs house by day. The book describes a trip to Palestine by a student, Clarel, in an unsuccessful quest for religious faith. In 1856-1857, following the failure of *Pierre* and *Moby-Dick*, Melville had himself undertaken such a journey. In his essay “In Voiceless Visagelessness: The Disenchanted Landscape of *Clarel*,” philosopher and poet Troy Jollimore weaves together biography, philosophy, and literary analysis, tempting the reader to explore Melville’s little-read epic.

Jollimore presents Melville as preoccupied throughout his life with religious questions. In *Clarel* Melville illustrated the search for God in a world which has become disenchanted through lack of
faith, the failure of the argument from design in light of Darwinism, and the problem of evil. Jollimore makes telling use of the pragmatism of William James in arguing that philosophy is a matter of reflection on lived experience before it becomes a subject for analytical argument. Jollimore offers a broad, provocative restatement of James’ position in *The Will to Believe* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* to argue eloquently that Melville presents religious questions in *Clarel* through characters that illustrate the consequences of different attitudes towards life that the reader can assess by their consequences for human completeness. Jollimore shows, for example, how Melville ties the primary character’s religious quest to the search for one’s beloved (a soulmate or, in Yiddish, *bashert*). Clarel’s search for God becomes intertwined with his unsuccessful pursuit throughout the poem of Ruth, a young Jewish woman whose father has just died. Melville’s poem thus “falls into a long history of Christian metaphors that view union with God through the lens of some earthy, human relationship” (17). Jollimore’s insight in combining Melville’s religious quest with his lifelong search for a *bashert* in his reading of *Clarel* can readily be expanded to help understand much of Melville’s life and writing.

Although Jollimore finds Melville’s poem unsuccessful in its efforts to reconcile science and religion and reason and feeling, he concludes that if the poem does not offer resolution it shows what it means “to find oneself there, mired in a painful and irresolvable conflict of intellect and spirit. And it reminds us that, even if the world does not permit itself to be mastered by human reason, it nevertheless remains an important subject of reverence and awe” (21).

*Melville Among the Philosophers* enhanced my love of Melville and my engagement with philosophical questions. The book succeeds in its goal of showing Melville’s philosophical significance. The essays introduced some philosophers unfamiliar to me and will
probably do so for most readers. Students of Melville and those interested in the relationship between literature and philosophy will enjoy this book.