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“No Life You Have Known”: Or, Melville’s Contemporary Critics

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Mid-nineteenth century evaluations of Herman Melville’s work share a common attention to what many reviewers—and it can seem like all of them—called the “extravagance” of his writing and his imagination. Critics remarked on his general “love of antic and extravagant speculation” (O’Brien 389) and found that his imagination had a “tendency to wildness and metaphysical extravagance” (Hawthorne and Lemmon 208). In their estimation the “extravagant” *Mardi* featured “incredibly extravagant disguises” (“Trio” 462) and contained “a world of extravagant phantoms and allegorical shades” (Chasles 262), while *Redburn* was notable for “episodic extravaganzas” (“Sir Nathaniel” 453). “Unlicensed extravagance” (454) characterized even *White-Jacket*; and “the extravagant treatment” (454) given to whaling in *Moby-Dick* stood in for the novel’s “eccentric and monstrously extravagant” nature (“Trio” 463), containing as it did “reckless, inconceivable extravagancies” (“Trio” 463) in addition to “purposeless extravagance” (A.B.R. 364). These surpassed the only “passable extravagancies” of his earlier works (“Book Notices” 93).

The critical account offered above was assembled from fragments of criticism of the novels of Melville’s mid-career; readers of *Pierre* will hear in it the echo of Mary Glendinning’s equally insistent—and equally regulatory—catalogue of her son’s qualities: “A noble boy, and docile. . . I thank heaven I sent him not to college. A noble boy, and docile. A fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy. . . . His little wife, that is to be, will not estrange him from me; for she too is docile,—beautiful, and reverential, and most docile. . . . How glad am I that Pierre loves her so. . . the fine, proud, loving, docile, vigorous boy!” (NN *Pierre* 19-20). In the cases of both Melville’s contemporary critics and Mary Glendinning, the unstinting replication of the descriptor reveals less a judgment of some intrinsic quality in Melville (or *Pierre*) than a substitution of linguistic performativity for subtlety of critical acumen. The repetitions indicate that the speech act of labeling Melville’s prose is, in fact, more desirable than the critical act of describing it. The lack of synonyms for “extravagant” and “docile” suggests both the critics’ and Mary Glendinning’s

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tautological refusal to recognize other possibilities, other governing structures at work in Melville's career. In the anxious repetitions uttered on Melville's behalf, we can sense a desire less to will the term to be appropriate than to arrest any slippage of meaning, to stabilize or to familiarize Melville's writerly character through reiteration, just as Mary Glendinning's reiteration strives to insist upon the docility it describes.

The word "extravagance," signifying a mode of excess to avoid, has been on many tongues since the economic downturn of 2008. Used this way, extravagance refers primarily to something that exceeds the "bounds of economy or necessity in expenditure," something that is wasteful or excessive or unnecessarily elaborate (*OED*). Yet Melville's critics were using the word in its earlier sense—one still economic, but tied more explicitly to an economy of limits. The primary definition of extravagant from the seventeenth until the mid-nineteenth centuries was "to wander, stray outside limits; to go beyond bounds; to exceed what is proper or reasonable"; to be irregular. Whereas a lively imagination could certainly be a desired quality in an author, Melville's extravagance was presumed to wander beyond the comfort of a boundary. And aside from his transgressions of taste and propriety, the limits that Melville was judged to have exceeded were formal: not just the parameters of narrative form, but those of imagination, as well. He was thought to possess what William Dean Howells called (in a review of *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*) "the negative virtues of originality," to such a degree that *Battle-Pieces* "not only reminds you of no poetry you have read, but of no life you have known" (Howells 252).

Melville the outsider, the outlier, the man out of time: scholars have embraced this view precisely because of the peculiar extravagance of both his literary vision and the rhetoric of its contemporary reception.¹ In crafting such an image, critics have turned to the moments in Melville's correspondence in which he gives voice so acutely to the stresses of his position in the literary marketplace, especially in the presumptions, taxonomies, and forced classifications of its genres. Yet rather than categorize Melville's work as resisting the generic expectations of the day, I read his novels as exploring what happens when the expectations of a literary genre are stretched to their farthest point—yet not violated. What Melville found most provoking was the market's judgment that his novels failed because of incoherence or inaptitude. Rather than straying outside the precincts of fiction's formal expectations, Melville's real

¹ Notable exceptions to this view of Melville's exceptionalism can be found in Post-Lauria and Evelev, who argue persuasively that his writing was very much in line with popular genres.

extravagance lies in his turn to a structural innovation that tests the elasticity of possibility within a given genre.

Take *Pierre*. A convention of the mid-century sentimental novel is that the heroine ultimately marries a man who had figured in her early life as a brother, father, or cousin.² If we approach *Pierre* as Melville's attempt to try the outer limits of the genre, then Pierre Glendinning's relationships with his half-sister Isabel, mother, and cousin Glen Stanly take the logic of the sentimental novel to its most literal extreme: they must be incestuous. Not an attack on the form of the sentimental novel, *Pierre* instead makes provocative claims for the possibility of innovation within conventional forms.³

In what follows, I discuss Melville's engagement with the formal terms proposed by his contemporary critics in the early years of his writing career. In the final section, I read *Mardi* as Melville's intervention into a critical conversation in which "genre" sustains an expansive critical potential. By this I mean that Melville is using the very idea of "genre" as a staging ground for debate, finding its narrow application by critics to be a misreading of the formal category—not his own place within it.

Hit or Miss

In 1849, with *White-Jacket* in proofs and *Redburn* just published, Melville memorably wrote to his father-in-law Lemuel Shaw, "So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to 'fail.'—Pardon this egotism" (Melville to Lemuel Shaw, 6 Oct. 1849; NN *Corres* 139). His rejection of the standards of success—critical and popular approbation—can be read as more than the flip or defensive posture of one misunderstood. This desire not so much to fail but to be "said to 'fail'" underscores Melville's keen attention to the duration of the critical conversation about his works. And in recognizing this desire as an "egotism," Melville stakes out a space for himself on the perimeter of that critical conversation. In the extant correspondence produced by Melville between the composition of *Omoo* and of *Pierre*, we see him nimbly shifting from sales pitches to his publishers, to defenses of his formal choices, to alternately defiant and despairing proclamations to friends about the efficacy

² See, for instance, Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* (1850), Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), and E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* (1859). On the question of whether Melville was sincerely trying to write a sentimental novel and failing, or else intending a savage parody of the genre, see Brodhead and Weinstein.

³ I take up aspects of this line of argumentation in "Melville and the Novel of the Sea," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto, Benjamin Reiss, and Clare Eby (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

and longevity of his fictional efforts. His attunement to his works' formal reception is more than a byproduct of the professionalization of authorship in mid-nineteenth-century America. Melville in fact shares his awareness of the limits and possibilities of literary convention with those sailors whose own sea writings—with which Melville is in constant conversation—demonstrate an attunement to the forms and expectations of maritime literature. Self-conscious reflections on the requirements of the sea narrative were a hallmark of the genre.⁴

Melville's experiments within the restrictions of genre began with his first novel, *Typee*. The genre of the Polynesian romance, as Jonathan Lamb describes it in *Preserving the Self in the South Seas*, takes an ethnographic approach to travel; yet this perspective is oriented less towards the presumably elevated religious and political beliefs of white, Western travelers than towards the disordered, unsettled sensations they experience. *Typee* stages these concerns—nakedly—from its opening chapter. An early missionary to the Marquesas had brought his young wife with him, Tommo reports, and the islanders viewed the woman as “some new divinity.” But in their curiosity “they sought to pierce the sacred veil of calico” that robed her, and the islanders tore off her undergarments. “Her sex once ascertained,” Tommo continues, “their idolatry was changed into contempt” (NN *Typee* 6). As a counterpart, he offers another scene of expectation and exposure, which he claims to have witnessed several years after his own island sojourn. The “king and queen” of the Marquesas made a state appearance aboard Tommo's American ship, along with the French officials who by then had possession of the islands, and who believed that they had imparted to the islanders “proper notions of their elevated station.” Spying a well-tattooed old “salt,” the Polynesian queen caressed the sailor to the embarrassment of her French mentors, and, “eager to display the hieroglyphics on her own sweet form, bent forward for a moment, and turning sharply round, threw up the skirts of her mantle, and revealed a sight from which the aghast Frenchmen retreated precipitately” (8). In both scenes of exhibition, the aesthetic judgment privileged is that of the islanders rather than that of the Westerners, and the trappings of respectability are presented

⁴ One example comes in the anonymous *Life in a Man-of-War* (1841), a significant source for *White-Jacket*. In its preface, the author imagines his narrative as a ship; he had intended “to slip the moorings of the present little *Craft* and let her glide before the public without anything in the shape of the prefatory remark.” His shipmates, however, are too savvy in the ways of ship governance and literary publishing to let this idea stand, as the narrator reports: “as soon as I mentioned the circumstance to some of the *literati of the galley*, they condemned loudly and emphatically my determination. ‘What,’ cried one old weatherworn customer, ‘print your book without a preface, that ain't ship-shape no how; I thought you have more *savey* than all that; damme, man, now-a-days a book without a preface is like a topmast without a *fid*, its whole dependence gone, small as it is” (“A Fore-top Man” xv).

as false and idolatrous. The paired scenes reveal much about Melville's generic method. One of the formal elements of the South Sea romance is the white traveler's curious or scandalized response to indigenous bodily contact and sexual conduct. Tommo is terrified of having his face tattooed by the artist Karky, for example, but is willing to adopt an inked arm, which Western clothing would conceal. But from the narrative's opening pages, Melville strips all pretenses to observational restraint. *Typee* presents to the public's face the formal skirts of its construction as well as the provocative "sight" of its undercarriage.

The critical response to *Typee*, while largely positive, focused on the narrative's veracity. Even though it was marketed as a personal narrative of the author's South Pacific experience, not a novel (as was *Omoo*), its authenticity was called into question by many critical notices. As one reviewer held, "We cannot escape a slight suspicion... that there is an indefinite amount of romance mingled with the reality of his narrative" (Rev. of *Typee*, *Harbinger* 263). A representative sentiment can be seen in a review in the *Christian Parlor Magazine*: "We have borne with the pretensions of this book as though it were a narrative of real events. It may be, and likely is, though somewhat highly colored" (Bourne 202). The lack of surety in this reviewer's conception of the generic requirements of a "narrative of real events" is evident from the weird, almost nonsensical modification of the tale's degree of "color" or artifice: it is seen as "somewhat highly" achieved. Melville's response to this discourse on genre (best seen in his correspondence with his London publisher, John Murray, who challenged the authenticity of *Typee*) responds in kind, calling attention to the affective value of the narrative's verisimilitude—Melville writes of himself "one really feels in his very bones that he has been [in *Typee*]" (Melville to John Murray, 2 Sept. 1846; NN *Corres* 65). His explanations to Murray also invoke the structural facts of the sea narrative form—specifically, the literariness both of American sailors and of the narrative accounts they produced. Such terms were suggested by a review of *Typee* in the *London Examiner*, which had wondered at the meaning of young, educated Americans such as Melville and Richard Henry Dana enlisting as common seamen: "The precise meaning or drift of this custom, we confess we cannot arrive at," the notice offers, "unless it be to qualify for the writing of interesting books" (Rev. of *Typee*, *Examiner* 11).

During the composition of *Mardi*, when Murray was still looking for "documentary evidence" of Melville's South Seas sojourn, Melville took up the point made in the *Examiner*, writing to his publisher: "will you Britons not credit that an American can be a gentleman, & have read the Waverly Novels, tho every digit may have been in the tar bucket?—You make miracles of

what are commonplaces to us" (Melville to John Murray, 25 March 1848; NN *Corres* 107). Melville's follow-up to *Typee* had produced a similar conversation about narrative reliability within the context of the sea narrative. Although the narrator of *Omoo*, like Melville in his own wanderings, confesses that he kept no journals, he assures the reader that the frequency "with which these incidents have been verbally related, has tended to stamp them up on the memory" (NN *Omoo* xiv). An analogous claim had been made in the preface to *Typee*, and in many other sailors' narratives: the sailor maintains that the degree of repetition of the yarn or the nautical history is an argument for its truth.⁵

As was the case with *Typee*, this nautical verisimilitude provoked both praise and uncertainty for *Omoo*. Called by one reviewer the "American Rabelais" (Chasles 89), Melville himself described the narrative as presenting "the 'man about town' sort of life, led, at the present day, by roving sailors in the Pacific" (Melville to John Murray, 29 Jan. 1847; NN *Corres* 78). The digressive nature of this form of narration was observed in a review credited to Walt Whitman, who wrote of *Omoo*, "All books have their office—and this is a very side one" (Whitman 212). Yet this same picaresque tone was a cause for some rebuke, such as the *American Whig Review's* judgment that "Omoo finds it easier to address himself to the pit of the world than its boxes." The *Whig* reviewer saw not lightheartedness in Melville's tone but "cool, sneering wit. . . . The writer does not seem to care to be true" (Rev. of *Omoo*, *American Whig Review* 37). Coolness and wit are hallmarks of the sea narrative genre within which Melville worked, as is the form's structural reliance on the "yarn," or the oft-repeated and frequently tall sailor tale, addressed to an audience of fellows. What the *Whig Review* misses in characterizing the genre of his early novels is sea literature's persistent commitment to meta-fictional reflection on what is "true" about maritime life and labor. In making both humor and the repetition of narrative constitutive elements of *Omoo*, Melville invokes the genealogy and structural elements of sea writing as part of a discourse on genre in which he participates in both his fictional output and his correspondence. It is a discourse suggested in part by his critics, who imagine readers talking back to Melville. For instance, the "wild reality" of *Omoo* might cause readers to question aloud—in improper, childish impetuous ways—their *vraisemblance*: "Everybody knows that *Robinson Crusoe* is a tale of the imagination, yet nobody publicly acknowledges the fact. . . . Now something very like the

⁵ One example of another sailor's invocation of these terms occurs in Samuel Leech's introduction to his narrative, "My object is to give a true picture. That, I have done, as far as a remarkably strong memory enabled me. I kept no journals, and consequently some slight mistakes in names, dates, and places, may be found in my book; but I have been careful to state nothing of *facts*, of which I was not certain" (Leech v-vi).

contrary to all this holds good of *Omoo* and *Typee*. They profess to be genuine histories, and yet the hitches occur so often that children will be disposed to question their authenticity. The illusion is not perfect” (Rev. of *Omoo*, *The Times* 229). Much like the audience in the theatrical “pit” envisioned by the *American Whig* reviewer, these readers are figured as skeptical, playful, and mouthy. While such responses indeed call attention to the imperfect illusion of fiction, they are in keeping with the sea narrative genre in which Melville explicitly places his work.

When reviewers questioned the terms with which he framed *Typee* and *Omoo*, Melville identified a “change in [his] determinations” after the first two novels. Writing to Murray, who published primarily nonfiction, Melville declares that *Mardi* would break not with convention, but with his critics’ ideas of how he inhabits convention: “To be blunt: the work I shall next publish will in downright earnest [be] a ‘Romance of Polynesian Adventure’—But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation of being a romancer in disguise has at last pricked me into a resolution to show those who may take any interest in the matter, that a *real* romance of mine is no *Typee* or *Omoo*, & is made of different stuff altogether” (Melville to John Murray, 25 March 1848; NN *Corres* 106). More than a contrarian impulse to subvert the expectations that critics have brought to bear upon his work, Melville here seeks to inhabit the genre of romance within its own terms, and his. Yet the bravado of his letter to Murray—in which Melville says, in effect, *you want romance?—I’ll give you romance*—gives way to a different justificatory tenor after Murray passed on *Mardi* as fiction. After his new London publisher, Richard Bentley, had reported that sales of *Mardi* were disappointing, Melville wrote to him, “You may think, in your own mind that a man is unwise, — indiscreet, to write a work of that kind, when he might have written one perhaps, calculated merely to please the general reader, & not provoke attack, however masqued in an affectation of indifference or contempt. But some of us scribblers, My Dear Sir, always have a certain something unmanageable in us, that bids us do this or that, and be done it must — hit or miss” (Melville to Richard Bentley, 5 June 1849; NN *Corres* 132).

Hit or miss: indeed, the internal struggles presented in Melville’s correspondence manifested themselves as a cleaner set of oppositions in critical notices. Reviewers increasingly saw an irreconcilable dualism in his published works and in the writer himself; “Surely the man is a Doppelganger — a dual number incarnate [singular though he be, in and out of all conscience],” one reviewer hazarded (“Sir Nathaniel” 307). Such judgments reflected Melville’s uneasy habitation of the forms of fiction. And this dualism registered (especially in his early career) as a tension between fact and fancy.

Alarmed Fancy

Reviewers of *Typee* and *Omoo* figured “romance” as being at odds with “narrative”; yet the tension between fancy and fact was productive for Melville, as the preface to his third novel, *Mardi*, makes clear. “Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such.” The aim of this playful about-face, Melville continues, is “to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity; in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.” Although Melville here presents “romance” and “fiction” as opposed to each other, we might use these terms as mutually constitutive frames for understanding his interrogation of the expectations of genre. In the preface, Melville presents contrariness as a generative force, one that animates the composition of *Mardi*—but not in so strict a reversal. For as the preface concludes, the thought that the romance of *Mardi* would be received as “a verity” was only the “germ of others, which have resulted in *Mardi*” (NN *Mardi* xvii). Melville seems to provide a genealogy of his generic ambitions for *Mardi* in its antonymy from the first two novels, but in withholding the “others,” obscures the final, determinant thoughts behind his formal experiment. The preface therefore advertises the idiosyncratic origins of *Mardi*, in its stubborn resistance to easy categorization; the result is a novel that from its opening lines treats its own genre as discursive.

We see such taxonomic interrogations in the factors that compel the narrator, known later as Taji, to jump ship in the opening chapters of the novel. The whaleship on which Taji labors has had poor success in locating sperm whales, and the captain decides to make a perpendicular turn from the Line (i.e., equatorial sailing) in order to head toward the Arctic grounds of the right whale. This new tack Taji finds to be “a tacit contravention of the agreement” between him and the captain, and indeed we might see the narrative line itself turn at right angles from the tacit agreement governing a reader’s relationship to the Polynesian voyage narrative (NN *Mardi* 6).⁶ What complicates Taji’s decision to abandon ship is the long sea calm that occurs as he begins to formulate his desertion plans. This calm is both a strategic impediment and an intellectual crisis, one in which “existence itself seems suspended” (9). The narrator recalls his first experience of the doldrums when, still a landsman, he had been profoundly unsettled by the ship’s stasis. For the calm affects the boundaries of his imagination: “To his alarmed fancy, parallels and meridians

⁶ I am indebted to Rachel Bara and other students in my spring 2010 Herman Melville graduate class at Penn State University for this observation.

become emphatically what they are merely designated as being: imaginary lines drawn round the earth's surface" (9-10). In characterizing Taji's engagement of fancy (which romantic conception would hold is less sophisticated than the power of imagination) as "alarmed," Melville shows Taji's fancy as "called to arms, aroused," not disturbed (*OED*). To "emphatically" become something "imaginary": it is this quickened fancy that permits this institution of meaning. In other words, in Melville's conception, designations or signifiers are real, but no less the product of imagination. The parallels and meridians of Taji's calm serve a heterotopic function, one that recognizes that imagination remains within a linear demarcation. Melville's discursive attention to genre takes a similar form, identifying imaginative possibility within the bounds of formal limitation.

Late in *Mardi* Melville stages an extended scene of formalist literary debate that takes up anew the discourse on genre in which he had participated in various media. In "Some pleasant, shady Talk in the Groves, between my Lords Abrazza and Media, Babbalanja, Mohi, and Yoomy" (Ch. 180), Babbalanja describes the masterpiece of the famed Mardian poet Lombardo (who has been widely accepted as a figure for Melville himself). "When Lombardo set about his work," Babbalanja reveals, "he knew not what it would become. He did not build himself in with plans; he wrote right on; and so doing, got deeper and deeper into himself; and like a resolute traveler, plunging through baffling woods, at last was rewarded for his toils" (NN *Mardi* 595). The chartlessness of Lombardo's epic—and of Babbalanja's meandering account of his compositional method—is not just a figure for *Mardi*, as numerous scholars have noted, but for Melville's repeated iterations of his narrative method in the novels that followed.⁷ When referring to the formal idiosyncrasies of the *Koxtanza* (Lombardo's masterwork), Babbalanja's interlocutors pose a question asked in turn of Melville's work: "why choose a vehicle so crazy?" (592). Yet this very focus on the form, the "vehicle," was a sign, for Lombardo, of his critics' inadequacies in judgment: "They are fools. In their eyes, bindings not brains make books. They criticise my tattered cloak, not my soul, caparisoned like a charger" (599).⁸ Lombardo attacks those who dismissed would *Mardi* for its formal motley.

⁷ We see this, most notably, in *Moby-Dick* ("This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught"); and in *Pierre* ("I write precisely as I please").

⁸ Some critics, of course, took exception to Lombardo's scathing indictment of critics: "Mr Melville is hard upon the critics. We somewhat question the good taste of his remarks on the topic. The only difference between critics and other readers is that the former *print* their opinions" (Watson 273). Provocatively, with regard to the idea that "bindings not brains make books," Melville would review, one year after publishing *Mardi*, a revised edition of James Fenimore Cooper's sea novel *Red Rover* entirely in terms of its binding ("A Thought on Book-Binding").

The novel ends shortly after this chapter's literary historical conversation, with Taji endlessly, and seemingly futilely, pursuing the maiden Yillah across the Mardian archipelago. Sheila Post-Lauria has identified this lack of closure as "a conventional literary ending"—that is, one that keeps its metaphorical implications alive and in play—"rather than the traditional ending of the travel genre," which would have concluded with the narrator's return home, or an equivalently tidy and presumably non-literary resolution (Post-Lauria 76). His contemporary critics had similarly cast about for terms with which to categorize *Mardi*.⁹ I see Melville, instead, as engaged in identifying the possibilities for structural radicalism within the genre of the travel narrative (or the Polynesian romance, or the sea narrative, or the novel of sentiment). If the travel narrative documents the expansion of a narrator's experiential and interpretive perspective, what kind of literary artifact, Melville seems to propose, is produced by that expansion's endless proliferation on the level of form? The true extravagance of Melville's fiction, I argue, resides within the grounds of the generic outlines available to him. Rather than think of Melville's formal innovation as out of bounds, we should look anew at the surprising and imaginative use he made of formal enclosure.

⁹ One review deliberated: "If this book be meant as a pleasantry, the mirth has been oddly left out—if as an allegory, the key of the casket is 'buried in ocean deep'—if as a romance, it fails from tediousness—if as a prose-poem, it is charged with puerility" (Chorley 235).

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