Reviewed by John Wenke

In their Introduction to this book, Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn observe that American literary studies divide the practice of aesthetic criticism in two, setting an exclusionary exercise in cultural elitism against an inclusionary view of "aesthetics as the basis of a radically democratic politics" (2). As presented here, aesthetic criticism does not simply assess what is beautiful or what constitutes high, low, or middle art; it entails an entire value system that informs, as it justifies, those determinate conclusions deriving from a particular hermeneutical process. Twentieth-century aesthetic criticism on Melville, the editors contend, has been limited in range, concentrating primarily on matters related to the sublime, the picturesque, and the slants of light that fall between. In twelve chapters, the editors present disparate critical "experiments" (3) that "reconsider the relationship between aesthetic and political modes of analysis" (5-6). In fusing phenomenological and ideological approaches, the editors do not purport to trace the development of Herman Melville's aesthetics from *Typee* (1846) to *Billy Budd* (1924) or to compose a unified body of political criticism. Rather, their contributors explore specific aesthetic problems posed by selected works of Melville and base their careful textual analyses on sophisticated theoretical foundations.

The protean eclecticism of Melville's fiction and verse invites such a wide-ranging inquiry. Melville could not so frequently have re-conceived himself as a writer without knowing how aesthetic choices support narrative purposes. By rejecting the ostensible limitations of his
early fictionalized travel narratives in order to create the allegorical and satirical world
of *Mardi* (1849), Melville transformed his work aesthetically, just as he would shortly turn a
book about whaling into the expansive, multi-vocal pages of *Moby-Dick* (1851). When Melville's
muse called, he re-made himself into a spectacularly failed romancer in *Pierre* (1852), an
anonymous short story writer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), a historical novelist in *Israel
Potter* (1855), a satirical cultural anatomist in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), a war poet in *Battle
Pieces* (1866), and an epic poet in *Clarel* (1876).

To meet the challenge posed by the diversity of Melville's works, Otter and Sanborn
divide the essays into two sections: "The Matter of Style" and "Case Studies" (6). Although these
designations do not appear in the Table of Contents or in the text itself, they nevertheless aptly
explain the organization of this book. While the first three essays explore the consequences of
Melville's stylistic extremity, the "Case Studies" section includes three essays on *Moby-Dick* and
single pieces on *Pierre*, "Bartleby," *Israel Potter*, *The Confidence-Man*, *Battle-
Pieces* and *Clarel*.

In a playfully serious way, Alex Calder's "Blubber: Melville's Bad Writing" considers
how many of America's greatest writers "have written badly," and iconoclastically charges that
"Melville has written more badly than most" (11). But Calder's trenchant essay seeks not so
much to excavate a risible heap of rhetorical infelicities as to show how "the excessive and
extravagant qualities" of Melville's prose complicate the processes of canon formation and
masterpiece making (13). What may be called "bad writing" gains complexity when we
recognize its oscillations in lyrical and thematic intensities, what Calder identifies as "differences
in inventive power" (13). Examining R. P. Blackmur's misgivings about Melville's prose, Calder
shows that "Blackmur's diagnosis" of his novelistic flaws echoes complaints made by Melville's
contemporaries in their reviews: he is great; he overwrites; he carries things too far. But when viewed in light of Romantic theories of organic form and process, Calder argues, such "bad writing" can be re-evaluated (17). In elaborating on the prevalence of what Morse Peckham calls "willful modal discontinuity" (qtd. 30), Calder's argument illuminates the gnarled interstices that sometimes make Melville's style seem overwrought.

The title of Theo Davis' essay, "Melville's Ornamentation: On Irrelevant Beauty," seems to promise a further investigation of Melville's "bad writing." But instead she considers the purpose of beautiful passages, especially the irruptive appearance of descriptive ornamentation that has no overt utilitarian function. By transfixing the reader's gaze, she argues, these verbal ornaments call attention to their own implacable presence as things of beauty in a book about the ugly slaughter of whales. "The ornamental aesthetics in Moby-Dick," Davis notes, "flout any demand that beauty be ethically meaningful, as beauty remains and even flourishes in the midst of cruelty and desolation" (45). In effect, these moments separate a poeticized beauty from the thematic frameworks that give extrinsic value to the scene. Melville's imagery becomes "intractably irrelevant, at once unavoidable and unnecessary" (46).

The third essay in "The Matter of Style" section tracks a "loose tradition at least 60 years old" (49). In "Melvillean Provocation and the Critical Art of Devotion," Andrew DuBois shows that Melville's work has provoked extreme aesthetic responses from such critical experimentalists as Charles Olson, C. L. R. James, Paul Metcalf, Susan Howe, Frank Lentricchia, and K. L. Evans. In a host of hybrid books and essays that critically examine Melville's work, says Dubois, they construct highly personal self-portraits. Olson's Call Me Ishmael (1947), for instance, exemplifies how this "tradition" thrives on "risk taking and risking failure." Just as Melville's own aesthetic grew out of his omnivorous consumption and
assimilation of source texts, a writer who imitates Melville may find his or her own way to originality. In DuBois' fine and persuasive discussion, the narrowly understood concept of literary influence gives way to the radical force of "provocation": Melville's hybrid texts incite new forms, new possibilities, and unusual "stylistic choices" that come to "critique professional and institutional norms of argument" (59). Thus these innovative writers expand the reach of literary criticism, often in ways that are polemical or iconoclastic.

The remaining nine essays are case studies of Melville's work. Three of them use narrowly defined aesthetic complexes to expand hermeneutical approaches to *Moby-Dick*. In "Strange Sensations: Sex and Aesthetics in 'The Counterpane,'" Christopher Looby shows how sexuality itself became an aesthetic category in the nineteenth century. Modifying Stephen Shapiro's discussion of Michel Foucault's theories of sexuality, Looby explains that nineteenth century Americans "did not habitually think in terms of sexual identity, but in terms of sensual tendency or sensual practices" (69). In Looby's illuminating close reading of Ishmael's anxiety and ambivalence, the patchwork counterpane itself blurs the distinction between the culture of sensuality, with its roots in eighteenth century sensibility, and the slowly emerging construct of sexuality. Given its highly charged erotic implications, Looby argues, Melville's chapter marks a significant stage in the psychosexual history of the United States.

Turning from sex to dead bones, Jennifer Baker explains how "empirical modes of analysis are integral to the book's aesthetics" (86), especially since Ishmael's many scientific investigations into all things cetological establish a "precondition for his experience of awe, astonishment, and marvel" (85). This sense of wonder springs from one process and initiates another. Emerging as a kind of field naturalist in the manner of Thomas Beale and Charles Darwin, Ishmael often disputes the findings of "closet naturalists" (87) who lack the hands-on
experience of whaleboat empiricists. But photography as well as first-hand experience played a part in the making of *Moby Dick*. Laura Rigal finds its aesthetics traceable "not only to the genres of European literary and visual art. . .in Melville's print collection, but equally to. . .the [Berkshire] Athenaeum archive of Melville family photographs" (103-04). Linking action scenes in the novel with a cultural studies analysis of the nineteenth century developments in photography, Rigal shows how Ishmael's language generates the illusory rush of sudden acceleration. Melville's delineations of speed resemble "the accelerated reproductive techniques of Victorian photo-genesis" and, by implication, may well anticipate the far more rapid reproductive modalities of cinematography (109).

Most of the essays in this book examine Melville through the lens of twentieth and twenty-first century criticism and theory, and thus conduct--as the editors intend--a range of provocative experiments in aesthetic criticism. Even so, one wonders why the contributors pay so little attention to *Mardi*. Except for a few scattered comments regarding allusion, narrative form, and--what else?--"bad writing," *Mardi* is ignored. Though dismissed by Calder as "that career-breaking book" (12), *Mardi* is Melville's first major literary experiment. Elaborating in its extensive dialogues on the dynamics of poetics and inspiration, it shows how a literary genius "created the creative" and could yet be "full of trash" (*Writings of Herman Melville* 3 [Northwestern-Newberry, 1970] 595). *Mardi* not only made possible the composition of *Moby-Dick*, but also impelled Melville's confident and career-long penchant for form-breaking and unrepentant literary excess. Melville's aesthetic discoveries in *Mardi*, informed as they were by Plato, Rabelais, Thomas Browne and Robert Burton, among others, are accessible through the historicist mode of source study, but his third book seems a perfect subject for analyses generated by the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, most notably his concepts of heteroglossia and
dialogism. Like Bakhtin, Melville closely read Rabelais. Both writers responded enthusiastically to Rabelais' open fictional world, especially his delineation of comic excess, as new scenes and new dialogues within his mock epic quest proliferate wildly from the imagination of the author.

I interject Bakhtin here to suggest one way of integrating source study with the modern theoretical methodologies favored by the editors. Bypassing the most immediate sources of Melville's aesthetics in *Pierre*, Elizabeth Duquette uses interpretive paradigms derived from Paul de Man. To explain why *Pierre* is "written as it is," Duquette does not invoke Melville's avowed purpose—to dwarf the enormity of his Whale with an outsized "Krakens" book—but looks instead to the style of *Pierre* as a key to Melville's theory of language: his "deeply philosophical questions about how words work, what they can do, and how this doing gets done" (118). Rather than linking Melville's language to that of the pot-boiling contemporary romances that he was ostensibly emulating (and in effect parodying), Duquette reads him first through I. A. Richards' "new Rhetoric" and then through theoretical frameworks supplied by Paul de Man. Since Melville's style exemplifies for Duquette "the materiality of language and the aesthetic possibilities that are associated with it" (119), she argues that "Melville's inquiry in *Pierre* is de Manian in its fusion of questions about what words can do with the consideration of how aesthetics might account for the materiality of language" (121) Duquette contends that Melville's aesthetics anticipate de Man's discussions of Kant and Schiller. Similarly, Nancy Ruttenburg applies "the Derridean figure of silhouette and content" (138) to collisions between quotidian and strange realms of experience in "Bartleby." She then synthesizes the approaches of such European theorists as Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze with historical and cultural readings associated with American criticism. Her reading celebrates Melville's "emplotment of contingency" (147) and leads her to explain how Charles Brockden Brown's protean biloquist
Francis Carwin and his "purely positive freedom" offer an American antecedent to Bartleby (150).

In examining "The Revolutionary Aesthetic of Israel Potter," Robert S. Levine not only looks back at Melville through late twentieth century (and Kantian) aesthetic theory; he also shows how Melville reworked his source materials so as to place Potter in the company of such pivotal historical figures as Benjamin Franklin and John Paul Jones. Rejecting Elaine Scarry's notion that the nature of beauty is universalized and "consensual" (qtd. 157), Levine finds Melville expressing beauty through "chaos . . . disorder and devastation" (158). Levine magisterially argues that Melville's account of the naval battle between Jones' Bonhomme Richard and the British warship Serapis is "the novel's key site of aesthetic contemplation" (158). The fractured beauty visible amidst the horror of war, Levine contends, arises not from grace and proportion but from the flash of killing lights viewed from a distance by "the onlooking crowd" (167).

Levine's late discussion of "tricksters [and] plotters" (170) finds a fitting complement in Jennifer Greiman's account of The Confidence-Man, wherein the text, she argues, "both practices and theorizes theatricality in radical ways" (174). In responding to Terry Eagleton and Jonas Barish, Greiman explores the proto-modernist quality of the novel's "structure of repetition and succession" (184), focusing on how Melville "propagates a strangeness . . . that binds aesthetic practice to an ethics of plurality" (190). Complementing Levine in a different way, Peter Coviello shows how Melville demythologizes war in "A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight." This poem, he argues, exemplifies the ambivalence of Battle Pieces: its "characteristically charged ambivalence about the practices and purposes of the war only lately concluded" (194). Melville's aesthetic choices, he adds, measure the complexity of "the problem of war without
simplification, false piety, or self-exoneration" (196). In the volume's final essay, a penetrating study of Clarel, Ilana Pardes argues that Melville's massive poem provides "an indispensable route for exploring the interrelations between Melville's aesthetics and his exegetical and theological obsessions" (213). Pardes shows how Melville's synthesis of the literal and the allegorical becomes a paradoxical expression of artistic originality: "Melville both advances a new literal reading of the Song and refuses to relinquish allegory. Placing the literal and the allegorical side by side, while redefining the two concepts, he insists on the relevance of both to his biblical aesthetics" (216).

This collection of essays makes an essential contribution to American literary scholarship by expanding the hermeneutical possibilities of theory and practice as well as enriching our understanding of Melville's literary works. Despite slighting the significance of Mardi and making a few errors--one author has Melville dying in 1890 instead of 1891 (105)--these twelve essays not only realize the "multitudinous particularity" (3) pursued by the editors; individually and collectively, they also provide foundational points of illumination and disputation for any reader interested in what aesthetic criticism can accomplish.

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