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Critical Discussions

MELVILLE IN THE SHALLOWS

by MARK ANDERSON

IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK*, Ishmael reports that many a superstitious sailor attributes to the great white whale a mysterious and astonishing ubiquity. These days one might almost suspect the same of Melville himself, of the author as well as of his masterwork, so thoroughly have they lately penetrated various regions of our popular culture. In the course of little more than one year, several books and newspaper articles, and even a two-part television film, have attempted to reproduce, explain, or appropriate the lessons and multiple significances of Melville's philosophical-creative outpourings. Sad to say, however, none is quite up to the challenge: Melville is great in large part because he is deep—his recent public admirers, unfortunately, are not quite comfortable beyond the safety of the shallows.

An evident aversion to deep diving is the primary vice of Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's chapter on *Moby-Dick* in *All Things Shining*.¹ As surprising as it may be to those who have lost themselves in the plunging profundities of Ishmael's musings on the problem of the universe, Dreyfus and Kelly argue in "Fanaticism, Polytheism and Melville's 'Evil Art'" (*ATS*, pp. 143–89) that Melville's solution is to shun the depths and remain on the surface of life. Ishmael himself never quite explains just what he takes the problem of the universe to be, so we cannot be certain that Dreyfus and Kelly address Melville's own specific concerns. But this is not necessarily an objection to their project, for surely we can allow this pair of philosophers to formulate what they

take to be the most pressing problem confronting us moderns in their own terms and to point to Melville's work as providing a solution, even if Melville himself did not and, perhaps, would not have articulated the problem in their preferred jargon. According to Dreyfus and Kelly, then, the problem, to borrow from the subtitle of their book, is the apparent absence of meaning in a secular age. Having either actively rejected or passively lost our ancestors' confidence in the existence of a metaphysical source of meaning and objective moral standards, whether this be a Platonic realm of Forms or the Judeo-Christian God, we moderns feel abandoned and adrift, alone at sea without compass or chart. This is nihilism, the uncanny guest that Nietzsche once spied darkening the threshold of the twentieth century, and *All Things Shining* is Dreyfus and Kelly's guide to living well in the face of nihilism with help from several Western literary classics, ranging from Homer's *Iliad* to David Foster Wallace's unfinished *The Pale King*.

Melville's *Moby-Dick* is the final text Dreyfus and Kelly consider at length, for in its pages they claim to have found the solution to the problem of modern nihilism clearly expressed. Relying not only upon *Moby-Dick* itself, but also upon the details of Melville's life and correspondence, they argue that the solution, as presented primarily in Ishmael's reflections upon his haunting narrative, is "to live at the surface, to take the events of daily life with the meanings they present rather than to seek their hidden purpose" (*ATS*, p. 163). These words are Dreyfus and Kelly's formulation, but they have drawn the substance of the thought from Ishmael's remark, in "A Squeeze of the Hand," that "in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" (*ATS*, p. 163).

Dreyfus and Kelly make much of this lowering or shifting of our conceit of attainable felicity: Ahab is monomaniacal, and ultimately he must die, precisely because he is unwilling to settle for any other source of felicity than that which finally reveals the deepest depths of truth. He wants too much; he longs to tear through the appearances and discover the meaning lurking behind reality's mask. But there is no final truth, no hidden meaning: there is only the surface play of multiple meanings (*ATS*, pp. 161–63). This is the lesson Ishmael has learned, which is why he is able to find satisfaction in the simple things, in the saddle and fireside. And this is the lesson we all must learn, for the source of our

felicity is not sunk fathoms beneath the waves, but rather is bobbing upon the ever-changing surface of life.

Now I have yielded to Dreyfus and Kelly their own formulation of the problem, which they do not claim to read in Melville precisely as they have stated it. Yet they do ascribe to Melville the solution they propose, and to this I must raise an objection. It seems to me that Dreyfus and Kelly have fastened arbitrarily upon one among many of Ishmael's thoughts to present as the grand summation of his accumulated wisdom. For although it is true that Ishmael reports having "perceived" the truth concerning the source of our felicity "by many prolonged, repeated experiences,"² yet this seems hardly an adequate statement of his philosophy as exhibited in all he says and does throughout the book. Moreover, this passage most definitely does not express Melville's final thoughts on the existential predicament as he brooded upon it while composing his masterpiece, or even at any time thereafter.

The problem with Dreyfus and Kelly's reading of *Moby-Dick* is that they allow neither the book nor its author to speak independently. They have not discovered the solution to nihilism by reading Melville or any of the other classics they discuss. They have instead imposed upon this collection of texts a solution that they themselves formulated beforehand. This is clear in the present case from their practice of selective quotation. They begin their chapter on *Moby-Dick* with an examination of Melville's remark that his novel is a "wicked book," and since in the course of their examination they quote from and analyze the author's letters to Hawthorne and Evert Duyckinck, we may infer that they are familiar with the relevant evidence. Yet in their eagerness to persuade their readers that Ishmael "convinces himself to stop at the surface" (*ATS*, p. 166), and that this surface living is Melville's own solution to the problem of meaning, they ignore Melville's many remarks and reflections consistent with his self-observation, reported in a letter to Duyckinck, that "I love all men who dive."³ They ignore as well Hawthorne's noted observation that Melville "will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief."

Indeed, far from resting content with the possibility that "the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country" are, to quote from Kelly's musings in *The New York Times*, "completely sufficient to hold off the threat of nihilism,"⁴ Melville found it nearly impossible to settle down philosophically. To pick up the thread of Hawthorne's reflections upon his pondering friend: "It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long

before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts . . . He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.”⁵ This is easily one of the most famous contemporary observations concerning the operations of Melville’s mind. The perpetual dissatisfaction, the anxious and endless seeking—to judge from all of the evidence and personal testimony, these forms of intellectual agitation were more characteristic of Melville than Dreyfus and Kelly’s portrait of a man content to repose on the surface of life would lead one to believe. The authors’ problem is that an accurate depiction of Melville’s philosophical perspective would impede all progress toward their predetermined conclusion. The same is true regarding Ishmael: although it would be a mistake to identify Melville with Ishmael, and although Ishmael appears nearer to serenity than does the author who created him, nevertheless Ishmael is not at rest, as we learn from the following, to cite just one of many available passages: “There is no steady unretracing progress in this life; we do not advance through fixed gradations, and at the last one pause:—through infancy’s unconscious spell, boyhood’s thoughtless faith, adolescence’s doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood’s pondering repose of If. But once gone through, we trace the round again; and are infants, boys, and men, and Ifs eternally” (*MD*, p. 492).

This cycling round of uncertainty is inconvenient as well for another author with an interest in Melville: Jay Parini, who, in *The Passages of H. M.*, has drawn a very definite character.⁶ Unfortunately, this character is more a reflection of the author’s lively imagination than of the actual subject of his book. Parini’s Melville is an irresponsible man, by turns a nasty and pathetic husband, a neglectful father, a frustrated homosexual, and a drunkard. Yes, he wrote some novels too, but most of these can be passed over with barely a mention. The subtitle of Parini’s book is “A Novel of Herman Melville,” which perhaps we should read as a plea that we grant the author the leeway of a writer of fiction. But of course we can yield only so much of this freedom, for Parini is not after all inventing a fictional character but rather in some sense describing an actual human being.

The Passages of H. M. is for the most part a typical example of historical fiction, its one distinction being Parini’s imaginings of Elizabeth Melville’s reflections upon her husband’s life, composed after his death, which are interspersed among the narrative chapters. Even with this promising conceit, however, the book exhibits a great variety of flaws. We can com-

municate something of the tenor of the work by concentrating on the chapter dedicated to Melville's friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne. Chapter 12, "Dark Angel," opens with Melville's 1849 voyage to London. For anyone sincerely interested in the development of Melville's mind, and therefore of his art, one of the more notable events of this trip must be Melville's meeting with George J. Adler, an academic who seems to have acquainted Melville with the fundamentals of German idealism, and Kant's transcendental idealism in particular. Melville's mature work is remarkable for its philosophical content, and we know that later in life he was quite taken with Schopenhauer's combination of transcendental idealism and pessimism. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect that an account of his conversations with Adler might contribute to our understanding of Melville—a "pondering man," as he called himself. But Melville's intellectuality is of no interest to Parini, who, rather than include even a hint as to Adler's existence, chooses instead to fabricate a character, Ted McCurdy, whom Melville meets on board ship and to whom he is romantically attracted (*PHM*, pp. 268–69). Unfortunately for H. M., however, McCurdy lacks the charms of Melville's supposed former flame, John Troy, for just one more night with whom Melville "would gladly give away everything in his possession" (*PHM*, p. 269). This entire episode, besides floating free of any connection to actual facts, actively frustrates a reader's attempt to know the real Herman Melville.

Parini manages Melville's relationship with Hawthorne no better. In one of their first acts as new acquaintances Hawthorne lifts a cup of champagne to Melville's lips, from which the latter drinks, working up a thrill of excitement (*PHM*, p. 285); soon he is dashing around, "showing off for Hawthorne," who responds with "sly winks" for reward (*PHM*, p. 286). Later, these two famously reserved men strip and skinny-dip together, and thus is Melville's repressed romance with Hawthorne born. Parini's take on the relationship is encapsulated in his imagining of Hawthorne's unexpected visit to Arrowhead farm once upon a dark and snowy evening. After exchanging greetings with Melville's wife and mother, Hawthorne walks upstairs alone and surprises the author in his study. Upon their meeting Hawthorne "kisse[s] Herman on the cheek," to which Melville responds with an embrace too avid for Hawthorne's comfort (*PHM*, p. 305). Speaking then of their "love," Melville declares that he can talk to Hawthorne as he cannot to his wife. Hawthorne is moved, but guarded. Yet he does stay the night—engaging with Melville in activities that Parini leaves to his reader's primed imagination (*PHM*, pp. 308–9).

In an essay written for *The Telegraph* upon the release of his book, Parini characterizes Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses" as "a big wet kiss."⁷ Then, with reference to the authors' secluded snowy evening together, he coyly remarks that the "extent of their intimacy is unknown, though it has intrigued biographers for a very long time." Parini's intrigue has something of the adolescent about it, characterized as it is with gossipy conceptualizations (yearnings; rebuffs; ecstasies; panicked withdrawals; Melville's "wanting more from Hawthorne—much more—than Hawthorne was prepared to give"). But Parini's problem is not that he insists on homosexualizing Melville, but that his understanding of the inner lives of his characters—including their sexuality—is all too often sophomoric (see, for example, his version of Elizabeth Melville's account of the night she and her husband consummated their marriage [*PHM*, pp. 262–63]). In this Parini has done a disservice to a deep man as well as to every reader with a serious interest in this man's life, thought, and art.

To comment finally upon the latest of these recent works, Nathaniel Philbrick's *Why Read "Moby-Dick"?* is an innocuous little book.⁸ One would not like to handle it too roughly, for it is not at all presumptuous or offensive. It is a modest declaration of admiration that attempts, with no heavy-handed theoretical bluster, to persuade readers of the lasting value of its subject. To this end Philbrick has threaded expressions of his personal appreciation of *Moby-Dick* into the fabric of his summary of the novel's narrative and highlights from Melville's biography. The resulting text is clear, moderately informative, and at times entertaining. Yet one wonders what purpose the author and his publisher had in mind for the work. With references throughout to such contemporary trivia as *This Is Spinal Tap* and *Star Wars*, the book might seem to target American adolescents, whom Philbrick knows to be too distracted and addled to appreciate *Moby-Dick* without the assistance of a patient and thoughtful guide (*WR*, p. 8). But surely the author does not imagine that this same cohort will be seduced by *Moby-Dick's* relation to American history, to the connection he constantly stresses between the book and the social and political pressures that ultimately exploded in our Civil War. No, Philbrick can only have developed this theme with a well-read and intellectually curious audience in mind. But *Why Read "Moby-Dick"?* has little to offer such a public that it does not already know. All this is to say that Philbrick, though no doubt well intentioned, seems to have composed his book with no clear conception of his audience.

But to return to Philbrick's frequent references to American history: one lays down his book with the impression that he formulated his

argument guided by the determination to sum up *Moby-Dick's* specific significance in terms of its relation to the Civil War, to the all-but-total neglect of its deeper and broader resonances. Here and there Philbrick quotes Melville's profound reflections, and he even includes chapters on "landlessness" and Ishmael's "desperado philosophy"; yet it is clear that in treating such matters he is out of his depth. In his own words he can manage only bromides: "As individuals trying to find our way through the darkness, as citizens of a nation trying to live up to the ideals set forth in our constitution, we need, more than ever before, *Moby-Dick*" (*WR*, p. 9). True enough, perhaps, but rather insubstantial. And although it may be true that "embedded in the narrative of *Moby-Dick* is a metaphysical blueprint of the United States" (*WR*, p. 62), if this alone were the sum of the book's wisdom—well, then it would not be wisdom at all. Melville himself may not have been wise, but his greatest work is a repository of wisdom, and this is so precisely because it deals with so much more than America or the social-political ideals and aspirations of her citizens. We might more accurately categorize the book (if it be possible at all to categorize so polymorphic a work of art) as a reflection upon—perhaps even a reckless headlong assault upon—those questions to which Dostoevsky referred as "accursed," those abysmal puzzles that have haunted the human mind since long before America was even a dream. To appreciate this, however, one must regard Melville's work from a perspective at once more expansive and more penetrating than that to which *Why Read "Moby-Dick"?* manages to attain.

Would that I could summon a mood more sympathetic to any one of these three books. I can, at least, recommend *All Things Shining* and *Why Read "Moby-Dick"?* to anyone willing to approach them with moderate expectations. These books will do to stimulate thought, the former more powerfully than the latter. To those who long to be really drawn into a proper exploration of Melville's depths, I suggest a look back to Robert Milder's excellent *Exiled Royalties*.⁹

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1. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining* (New York: Free Press, 2011); hereafter abbreviated *ATS*.

2. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 416; hereafter abbreviated *MD*.
3. Herman Melville, *Correspondence* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 121.
4. Sean D. Kelly, "Navigating Past Nihilism," *The New York Times* (Dec. 5, 2010).
5. Herman Melville, *Journals* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), p. 628.
6. Jay Parini, *The Passages of H. M.* (New York: Doubleday, 2010); hereafter abbreviated *PHM*.
7. All quotations in this paragraph are from Jay Parini, "Jay Parini on Herman Melville," *The Telegraph* (Jan. 14, 2011).
8. Nathaniel Philbrick, *Why Read "Moby-Dick"?* (New York: Viking, 2011); hereafter abbreviated *WR*.
9. Robert Milder, *Exiled Royalties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).