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WHICH WORLD? WHICH WORK? WHICH MELVILLE?

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Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Knopf, 2005)

Robert Milder, *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Edgar A. Dryden, *Monumental Melville: The Formation of a Literary Career* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)

Reading Melville in relation to intellectual history is both necessary and hard. His writings explore (among other things) political and legal theory, theology, aesthetics, natural philosophy, and what he once called "ontological heroics."[1] Yet if Melville engages ideas as intensely as any United States literary figure, his work remains difficult to locate within intellectual traditions. Largely an autodidact, Melville read eclectically; and unlike Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller—all of whom have occasioned intellectual biographies—he left no extensive journals or letters from which to reconstruct his education and mind. We have the checkmarks, scores, and occasional comments of his partially recovered marginalia, important evidence that can raise as many questions as answers regarding influence and intention. Melville's novels, short fiction, and poetry thus bear the heaviest burden of proof as to his thinking, though these texts are also tricky, not only because of their famously complex structures and ambiguities, but also because they tend to subvert the intellectual systems they inhabit. Melville's tendency to push ideas to their limits is part of his achievement and appeal, and befitting his image as a roughhewn sailor there is a kind of skeptical restlessness to his thought. To appreciate Melville's relation to ideas is to pursue a commensurately unbounded mode of inquiry that includes (among other things) literary criticism, cultural history, and biography.

[1] Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 29 June 1851, in *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 133.

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Three recent accounts of Melville's life and writings take up this challenge with varying emphases. None of the books are primarily directed at intellectual historians, but as established explicators of Melville trained before the history of ideas lost prominence in literary studies, Andrew Delbanco, Robert Milder, and Edgar Dryden help situate Melville within intellectual contexts. Taken together, their books portray a capacious, evolving thinker whose commitment to ideas cannot be separated from his personal and social experiences or from literary and aesthetic traditions. How to make sense of these interrelated discourses is a demanding task, particularly considering that Melville's career stretched across five decades, one war, and radical changes in his generic practices and professional status. Delbanco, Milder, and Dryden all see the career as a kind of fall, though to different degrees they also suggest how the later Melville participates in intellectual history in ways that scholars are only now beginning to apprehend.

Andrew Delbanco's *Melville: His World and Work* is a good place to start and a strong benchmark for comparison, if only because of its comprehensiveness and deservedly wide acclaim. Written for both general and specialized readers, the book is a literary biography grounded in nineteenth-century United States culture, though it begins by making a compelling case for the abiding influence of Melville's work in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Like an iceberg, most of Delbanco's learning lies beneath the surface of his text, but what we do see—carefully selected quotes, fulgurous moments of explication, knowing nods to critical history, concise historical and theoretical orientations—indicates a formidable amount of expertise and much narrative discipline. Given Delbanco's broad audience and relative brevity (415 generously spaced pages), finely grained scholarship and dialectical argument should not be expected. Nor should one mind the infrequent colloquialism or allusion to popular culture (though whether future generations will recognize *Forrest Gump* (1994) remains to be seen). Delbanco puts more stock than some in Freud, and he highlights the influence of a modern, diverse, rough-and-tumble New York City on Melville. Perhaps, too, Delbanco's cosmopolitan knowledge and references to Melville's transatlantic connections complicate his picture of a national Melville "as vast and contradictory as America itself" (16).

Be that as it may, *Melville: His World and Work* is a major achievement—an inclusive, judicious, memorable book that moves easily between diverse discourses while presenting the "intellectual and political context in which [Melville] lived and worked" (xxiii). General readers will find the prose accessible, the narrative engaging, and the ideas challenging, while specialists should appreciate Delbanco as a stylist and public representative of the field. I found my own existing knowledge of Melville enlivened by Delbanco's details, and his original insights and contextual mastery are bound to fill gaps in one's

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learning and improve one's teaching of Melville. Two examples can indicate the scope of Delbanco's method and thinking. In a few brief pages on cultural relativism that accompanies a discussion of Melville's early South Sea travels, Delbanco weaves together Montaigne and Friedrich Wolf, Benjamin Franklin, James Fenimore Cooper, Emerson, Abner Kneeland (whom Melville's father-in-law convicted of blasphemy), and the founding of the American Ethnological Society in 1842. In another section on the tyrannical power of speech in the famous "Quarter-Deck" chapter of *Moby-Dick* (1851), Delbanco invokes Kierkegaard, Wagner and Nietzsche; Hawthorne and W. H. Auden; American oratorical heroes such as Patrick Henry and Daniel Webster; and mid-twentieth-century Melville scholars from the distinguished F. O. Matthiessen to the recently reclaimed C. L. R. James. Here and elsewhere, Delbanco integrates intellectual, literary, biographical, cultural, and critical histories, a smooth catholicity that is difficult to fault except to second-guess proportions: with so much Melville, so many contexts, and so little time, it is impossible to please every special interest.

Perhaps for this reason and others, Delbanco hews fairly closely to the dominant narrative of Melville's career. Melville was and is best known as a novelist who commenced with the popular success of *Typee* (1846), reached his aesthetic apex with the misunderstood *Moby-Dick*, burned his professional bridges in *Pierre* (1852), and—after a few noteworthy short stories—drifted toward silence after *The Confidence-Man* (1857). Melville then spent three solitary decades laboring over unappreciated poetry until his death in 1891, after which his prose masterpiece *Billy Budd* (1924) appeared as if to vindicate and retrospectively sum a career just beginning its revival. William Dean Howells once said, "what the American public always wants is a tragedy with a happy ending."[2] Melville's life can indeed take a tragic arc that ends in belated redemption, and Delbanco says of this classic story, "None of it, of course, is exactly true" (288). Which is also to suggest that it is largely correct, a position Delbanco advances by dedicating most of his book to Melville's novelistic period and spending two of twelve chapters ("Season of Death" and "The Quiet End") on his postbellum and predominantly poetic career.

In many ways, this choice makes excellent sense. Melville's topmost greatness remains his prose, and his life was most eventful before he became a customs inspector in 1866. How can his resistance to minor bribes compete with maritime adventures, and flights of fancy with Hawthorne? After *Moby-Dick*, how can any book not feel somewhat anticlimactic? Delbanco does linger over the (probable) suicide of Melville's son, Malcolm, in 1867, but he prefers Melville as a representative writer of and in his time, not as an aging, brooding genius for

[2] Howells quoted in Edith Wharton, *A Backwards Glance* (New York: Scribner's, 1933), 147.

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the most part separated from public life in general and intellectual community in particular. Melville biographers have largely shared this preference—from Lewis Mumford's 1929 book that imagines the monotony of Melville's later days, to Newton Arvin who in 1950 likened the aging Melville to an injured athlete still desperately trying to compete, to the increasingly psychologically debilitated Melville of Edward Haviland Miller in 1975. Delbanco's culturally rich portrayal of Melville differentiates his book from previous biographies, yet this almost guarantees that Delbanco will focus on the active, more public antebellum career. It is a testament to his professional judgment that Delbanco does not push idiosyncratic interpretations but rather sharpens and adds to a critical tradition. Compared to the shifting portrayals of, say, Emerson, Whitman, and Dickinson, Melville biography has remained relatively stable—despite new evidence, changing critical interests, and disagreements over Melville's sexuality and relationship with his wife. Perhaps such stability is for good reason: sometimes the old stories are largely correct, if not exactly true. And so a book designed in part to introduce Melville to a general audience should offer, as Delbanco's does, the best account of Melville that we have.

Yet for some specialists, including those with interests in intellectual history, there may be more to say about the elusive postbellum Melville, particularly considering the second volume of Herschel Parker's magnificent *Herman Melville: A Biography* (2 vols., 1996, 2002), which suggests that the later Melville is a rich field of study that has yet to be fully elaborated. Delbanco attends to Parker's work and, of course, treats Melville's postbellum writings. He finds the Civil War poetry collection, *Battle-Pieces* (1866), uneven and strangely removed from events. References to poems from *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888) and *Timoleon* (1891) appear occasionally near the end of the book. Delbanco spends more time on *Clarel* (1876), Melville's intimidating five-hundred-page poem that imagines a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But while Delbanco identifies *Clarel*'s dramatization of religious skepticism in a scientific age, he finally finds it "hopelessly talky" and moves on toward *Billy Budd* (285). If *Moby-Dick* is the book that some people do not finish, *Clarel* is one they do not start. Yet the text is important if only because it reflects Melville's commitment to thinkers and discourses that Delbanco mentions but does not pursue. For more sustained discussions of Melville's later writings and his postbellum mind one must look to other books with more speculative and specialized license.

If Delbanco provides a panorama on Melville, Robert Milder's *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* offers a series of snapshots that are not intended to form a literary biography but do trace chronologically Melville's life through many of his writings, especially his struggles with religious and philosophical doubt in the second half of his career. Roughly half of the chapters draw from articles published between 1981 and 2001, which may explain some of

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the turbulence in the book: pacing varies, methodologies shift, not all of the chapters are committed to integrating recent Melville scholarship. Yet considering Melville's philosophical pluralism and generic experimentation, Milder seems justified in eschewing a "monolithic or thesis-ridden" book (xiii). And a book it is rather than a collection, for in addition to Milder's consistent sensitivity to Melville's restless thinking and style, at least one argument binds the chapters together in a generally cohesive, often synergistic, and ultimately satisfying whole.

For Milder, Melville throughout his career is haunted by a sense of fallen grace and a "remarkable premonition of decay" (xii). Such loomings begin with Melville's youthful experience as a faded aristocrat (two grandfathers were prominent Revolutionary heroes, but his father failed in business when Melville was eleven before dying and leaving the family dependent on relatives). Milder traces the echoes of this disaster across Melville's long career—from history's assault upon innocence in *Typee*, to the chastened naturalism of *Mardi* (1848), through Ishmael's lamentations of exile (from which Milder takes his title), all the way to the end of the career when intimations of decay are vindicated by experience and memorialized in Melville's verse. Like Delbanco, Milder demonstrates how culture, biography, and ideas intertwine in Melville's work, and he also tells a story of declension that is dramatically and analytically compelling. More than Delbanco, however, Milder discusses lesser-known writings from the later career—a shift in focus that strengthens his account of Melville's struggle to keep faith in a fallen, open-ended world.

For Milder, the crisis appears as early as *Mardi*, which he calls a "post-Romantic" work—a term meant to suggest that Melville was moving beyond Romanticism even as he first encountered it (31). Milder sets Melville's "intellectual coming-of-age" in the late 1840s when he was first exposed to (among others) Goethe, the Schlegels, Schiller, Coleridge, and Carlyle (36). As a result of these influences, as well as that of Byron (to whom Melville came earlier), Milder argues that *Mardi* "replicated in condensed form more than half a century of Western literary and intellectual history" (31). Milder defines Romanticism as the modern recognition of a tragic "fall into knowledge"—a loss of innocence that separates self-conscious humans from nature and can only be remedied by the pursuit of further knowledge. For Milder, however, Melville first experienced such a fall not through Romantic thinkers, but through his family history and especially his Polynesian travels in the early 1840s (28). These experiences help explain what for Milder represents the "post" in Melville's post-Romanticism: his skepticism about the possibilities of forging through new knowledge a more unified relationship between the self and the world. As if tracking disenchantment in real time, Milder sees *Mardi* moving through various stages—from early "'vatic' Romanticism" to "the neo-Romanticism of Carlyle" to "a post-Romanticism like that of Arnold" (41). Whether or not one agrees with Milder's taxonomy—which

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is further complicated by such terms as "(Post−)Romanticism" (27), "proto-existential naturalism" (38) and "negative romanticism" (46)—he does place *Mardi*'s search for truth within a complex history of Romantic ideas, while also suggesting how Melville's life experiences and temperament conditioned his response to such contexts.

Exiled Royalties further pursues Melville's skepticism in two chapters on *Moby-Dick* that touch on Melville's struggles as an antebellum author but come to dwell on his spiritual doubt. For Milder, Ahab disastrously demands sure answers to the most vexing Judeo-Christian problems, while Ishmael offers a more modern response that accepts "indeterminacy" and "agnosticism" (90). Whereas Ahab is linked with tragic romantic seekers such as Prometheus, Faust, Manfred, and Teufelsdröckh, Ishmael's more open-ended comportment prefigures the thought of William James and Paul Tillich. Milder attends again to Melville's reading in Romanticism (as well as in Gnosticism), but he is less concerned with specific source study when invoking later figures. It may not matter that James seems only to have known Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo* (1847), which he used for bedside reading, yet it would be interesting to hear more of Melville's influence (if any) on Christian thinkers of the time and beyond. Overall, Milder's rich account of *Moby-Dick* follows the robust Hawthornian tradition of placing Melville uneasily between belief and unbelief, and it takes *Moby-Dick* not only as a climactic text, but also as a prelude to Melville's later writings.

Whereas Delbanco recounts in four pages Melville's trip to Europe and the Levant (1856–7), and whereas he describes Melville's hastily scrawled journal thereof as "a document of spiritual exhaustion" (257), Milder spends a chapter finding in the journal "an imagination at work joining impressions into what will later coalesce into ideas" (153). For both Milder and Melville, the fruits of the journal turn out to be original and significant, though not always consistent. Melville's lecture based on his trip, the less-than-popular "Statues in Rome" (1857), marks his first sustained work in aesthetics and (surprisingly) reflects a preference for idealized and "rarefied" aspects of classical art (165). Such idealism, however, does not survive in *Battle-Pieces*, which furthers Melville's skeptical tendency to subordinate Christian and Romantic idealism to "metaphysical realism" (183). Milder may find more closure in *Battle-Pieces* than some critics do, but he exposes the book's complex balancing of formal, ideological, and religious tensions that reflect Melville's struggle to reconcile ideals with the Civil War and the history of fallen civilizations.

Given his interest in Melville's crisis of belief, it makes sense that Milder treats *Clarel* at length, though less expected, perhaps, is the intellectual terrain in which he sees the postbellum Melville operating. William Rounseville Alger, David Friedrich Strauss, Barthold Niebuhr, Ruskin, Schopenhauer—these thinkers are not typically associated with Melville, in part because literary

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critics have traditionally emphasized the post-Kantian philosophers and British Romantics who influenced American transcendentalism. Yet for Milder, Alger and Schopenhauer form part of the intellectual background that shapes *Clarel* and Melville's later verse, all of which expresses a tenuous "'faith'. . . in the sanctifying power of living in a state of intellectual and spiritual aspiration" (194). This kind of faith accords with Ishmael's agnosticism, though *Clarel* differs from *Moby-Dick*; for while Ishmael largely defines his pluralism against Ahab's towering Romantic absolutism, Clarel travels in a kind of disenchanted funk through the ruins of intellectual history. The formidable range of the poem's ideas helps account for the relative dearth of attention to it. Readers most comfortable with Romanticism, as is often the case with Melville scholars, may find themselves putting down their Byron and Schiller and picking up Arnold and Darwin. Moreover, *Clarel* frustrates the periods established by anthologies and curricula, for Melville's most immediate peers—Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, and Thoreau—had the good sense to die or (in Emerson's case) decline before the end of the Civil War. Milder vividly shows how Melville kept reading and writing across the divide, retaining many of his early commitments but pursuing them in different intellectual contexts and, for him, new literary forms.

The strengths and limits of Milder's account of this story are evident in his final chapter. While explicating Melville's later poetry, including the posthumous "Weeds and Wildings" (1924), Milder mentions hints of Balzac, the influence of Schopenhauer, and possible links (through Edward Fitzgerald) with Swinburne, Pater, and Wilde. *Exiled Royalties* mainly reports these echoes without suggesting how such ideas were circulated and received in America at the time. Given Melville's separation from intellectual companionship, this may accurately reflect his encounters with such thinkers. And considering the low profile of Melville's later poetry, Milder must first discuss the texts in themselves, leaving less space for broader concerns. Milder shows that the poetry is emotionally charged, verbally sophisticated, and allusively complex, and yet one reason why the antebellum Melville is so compelling to study and teach is that he works within larger intellectual movements, most prominently Romanticism. Melville's postbellum career, which Milder provocatively reads as increasingly Victorian, lacks the deep critical tradition that Delbanco and Milder's early chapters represent so well. This is not to underrate the many strong studies of Melville's later years, especially Parker's second volume. Rather, the postbellum Melville is just beginning to be placed within cultural, literary, and intellectual histories, and *Exiled Royalties* does good work in moving toward this end.

How Edgar Dryden participates in this project may not be immediately apparent, for his contribution takes the form of something like a challenge. *Monumental Melville: The Formation of a Literary Career* spends four of five chapters on Melville's poetry, focusing on Melville's evolving conception

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of "the literary as such" (13). Defending "formal, aesthetic, and rhetorical readings" against cultural and historical methods, Dryden acknowledges—one is tempted to say, confesses—his dedication to close reading, knowing full well the established arguments against the supposed hermetic sins of New Criticism (1). Yet instead of denying the explanatory powers of ideology, culture, and history, Dryden adapts them to his ends, arguing that Melville's experiences in the antebellum literary marketplace forced him to confront issues of literary distinctness with which scholars struggle today. Dryden thus resists (if not quite escapes) transcendent definitions of the literary, treating it as a historically grounded category that Melville writes within and against.

Dryden's specific argument is a version of the classic declension story with an eye toward genre. Unable to sustain the heterogeneous achievements of *Moby-Dick*, Melville comes to recognize the limits of fiction, particularly the burden of mimesis that traps fiction in the dominant ideology of a readership that demands realism. Because of such demands, Melville turns to poetry as a genre whose verbal intricacies and relative insulation from the market allow for freer, more imaginative expression, including critiques of the literary marketplace. For Dryden, *Battle-Pieces* registers "an incompatibility between the aesthetic and the contemporary" in that Melville resists the cultural pressure to bring convenient closure to the war (69). Similarly, *Clarel* resists conventions of character so as to retain a tenuous faith not so much in God, as Milder would have it, but in "the intrinsic worth of the literary" (134). Dryden's readings of Melville's later verse focus on the restorative potential of poetry, though such power is defined so much against nineteenth-century literary culture that the concept of a literary career in the end seems "deeply ironic" insofar as Melville had ceased to be recognized as a writer with a career (194). Dryden, then, does not deny the increasing alienation and silence that Delbanco emphasizes, but—like Milder—he argues that decline itself became a subject of Melville's imagination that led to passionate, carefully crafted, and metacritically complex poems. In this sense, the narrative of declension only partially holds true. That Melville left professional writing (or it left him) is undeniable, that his personal life suffered is more or less clear, but whether and to what extent his artistic and intellectual powers faded is open to debate.

As a proponent of the later Melville, Dryden argues in two ways. Theoretically, he takes the Romantic position that the artist is a tragic rebel and, accordingly, that popular literature is overdetermined by culture and lacks truth-telling power. Or as Melville wrote in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), "Failure is the true test of greatness."[3] More convincingly, to my mind, Dryden also works inductively,

[3] Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in *Herman Melville: Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd, Sailor* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1154–71, 1164.

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offering extended close readings of the poetry to demonstrate their value. With an excellent ear for allusions to classic literature, Dryden shows how intertextually dense Melville's poetry can be. And particularly with the later poetry, which can feel a bit occasional and disjointed, Dryden insightfully shows Melville returning time and again to "the situation of the poet in the modern world" (184). What seems missing in *Monumental Melville* is a more careful defense of its animating claims. It is not clear that Dryden's reading practices are incompatible with the methods he resists, especially considering Delbanco's success as both a cultural historian and a close reader of Melville. Dryden also relies on generic distinctions and chronological arcs that can be difficult to maintain. For instance, character may function in *Mardi* in ways quite similar to *Clarel*, and Melville may quarrel with poetic form as much as he does with the novel (particularly if *Billy Budd*, which Dryden barely mentions, represents a return to prose).

But what I wanted most from *Monumental Melville* was a deeper engagement with intellectual history. Dryden argues early on that Melville resists history's encroachment on formalist aesthetics and instead is more apt to align literature with philosophy. Such claims, however, are not sustained over the course of the book, or rather they are pursued without much reference to aesthetic and philosophical traditions, except as such traditions inhere in Melville's allusions to classic texts. Part of the reason for this is that Dryden does not want the literary reduced to other discourses, though Melville's later reading suggests how valuable such discourses can be in a supportive role. For his part, Milder in *Exiled Royalties* demonstrates Melville's abiding interest in philosophy and theology. And Parker shows that when Melville made himself a poet, he also studied commentators on art, including Arnold (whom Dryden mentions), Hazlitt, Ruskin, Georgio Vasari, and Victor Alfieri (through Francis Jeffrey and Henry Tuckerman). To be fair, these figures are by no means mainstays in Melville criticism, and Dryden's formalism is under no obligation to call upon the history of aesthetics. Yet aesthetics and to a lesser extent philosophy may actually help defend the literary against reductive and politically inflected historicism. Dryden's provocative attempt to defend the literary as such is thus a double-edged sword in the case of Melville: it reveals Melville's complicated work as a poet in a largely hostile culture, but it precludes some of the ideas that Melville potentially used to mediate that relationship.

From their different perspectives, Delbanco, Milder, and Dryden show how difficult it is to limit Melville to specific disciplines, methods, genres, or periods. And one lesson that Melville often teaches is how hard it is to stand still—despite the burden of history, the power of hegemony, and the emotional and intellectual desires for stability. True to form, Melville throughout his career moves restlessly across intellectual history—from his early readings in Romanticism to his later engagements with theology and aesthetics. The first part of this story has been

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studied at length, and Delbanco can stand, in part, as a culmination of that tradition. The second half of the career may hold more opportunities, particularly for scholars working in and around intellectual history. As Milder shows, Melville's theological and philosophical concerns have a fervent life beyond Romanticism. As Dryden suggests, Melville becomes increasingly interested in theories of poetry and the role of the poet. Literary scholars have begun the work of reading Melville's later texts against his later intellectual sources. Much, however, remains to be done, especially if we are interested in Melville's place within the history of ideas.

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