

CHAOS IN THE NOVEL, THE NOVEL IN THE CHAOS:

HERMAN MELVILLE AND HIS POETICS: IN SEARCH OF ORDER

In an influential essay titled “Melville’s Quarrel With Fiction”, published in 1979, Nina Baym pushed views standardized in criticism on Melville to the very extreme. She asserted that from early in his career Melville had a low opinion of the novel which turned to open hostility in *Pierre*, where he reached the conclusion that “literature is inherently trivial” (Lee 2001: 173). She wrote about Melville’s evil command of the novel assuming that he was an untutored genius who wrote quirky autobiographical narratives, narratives that were loosely fictional and bore little relation to the traditional novel; she perceived his occupation as “combining the roles of prophet and philosopher, as charged with both discovering and articulating significant truths about man’s place in the universe” (173). The thesis by Baym seems to coincide with the one expressed in Warner Berthoff’s *The Example of Melville* (1962), in whose appreciation of this writer he stresses that he loved to philosophize, but in the end his philosophical statements are less interesting for their intellectual content than for the animated activity of thinking they manifest. Berthoff argues that Melville sees himself as a committed artist, but in the end his works are less remarkable for their achieved perfection than for the spiritedness with which he goes about creating his art.

Indeed, it is virtually since the 1920s and the Melville revival that the autobiographical dimension of his narratives was emphasized. He has always been regarded “as a writer of grasping intellect and great intuitive powers, the American with the richest natural gift as a writer” (Sten 1996: 20). Many critics have been surprised to observe his failure in gaining a solid reputation as a novelist where he has been consistently viewed as a misfit. Was F.O. Matthiessen right when in the *American Renaissance* (1941) he portrayed Melville as a writer “lacking in equipment as a theorist of fiction,” or those who considered him only a “novelist betimes [...] a trial-and-error experimental writer who never quite knew what he wanted to do [...] until he had done it” (Matthiessen 1941: 283). His values of instinctive composition

were praised, as well as his ability to mix exceptionally wide-ranging and various non-fictional writings. The failure to see Melville as writing within the tradition of the novel can be attributed to the scholars belonging to the first two trends of the Melville scholarship, and it is precisely on the autobiographical material that the critics of the first trend concentrated, with particular concentration on substantial material “either from his years at sea or from his youth in upstate New York” (Sten 1996: 22). It is well known how Melville had to convince his English publisher Murray that he was not writing “romance” and to deny that there was anything fictional about his first narrative. He needed every possible argument to prove himself a truthful travel writer, in spite of those who called *Typee* “the pipe dream of an overactive armchair imagination” (23). In a letter to Murray, Melville blasted the “parcel of blockheads” who had questioned the authenticity of *Typee* as senseless skeptics – men who go straight from their cradles to their graves and would never dream of the queer things going on in the antipodes. He was very impatient with the ordinary procedures and demands of the literary market.

I know not to set about getting the evidence – How under heaven am I subpoena the skipper of the Dolly who by this time is Lord know [sic] where or Kory – Kory who I’ll be bond is this blessed day taking his noon nap somewhere in the flowery vale of Typee, some leagues too from the monument. (Hayford and Parker 1967: 561)

It is evident from many studies published during the second trend in Melville scholarship, those concentrating on the extraordinary emphasis on his extensive use of non-fictional sources in his narratives, that cultivated American readers during the nineteenth century had historically displayed a predilection for non-fictional works, as Terrence Martin pointed out. This tendency made the author respond to the colourings of the age, and to the leading modes of cultural production. The public liked reading whaling narratives, sea adventures, cultural and anthropological studies. Especially the books of travel, the whole tradition of them, since the modern age of discovery began, “and particularly the voyages of the eighteenth century described to the reading public by Cook, Carteret, and Bougainville, whose aim was always to be lucid, impersonal, informative; to suppress themselves and to convey the facts, however novel or strange, with the most reasonable and enlightened objectivity” (Post-Lauria 2000: 22). The combination of fact and fiction may explain the success of two of the most widely reviewed and read genres of the decade: travel-adventure narratives and what is generally referred to as domestic or sentimental fiction. Travel accounts which related interesting facts of native lives and cultures, intrigued literal-minded readers and catered to the decade’s demand for realistic description.

According to Post-Lauria the sequential pattern of travel literature – leave taking, discovery, experience, homecoming and reportage – inherently contains a double structure: the narrative of the reporter and the narrative of the journey itself. Melville’s *Typee*, abounding in pictorial effects, wild

and fearful like the gorges, ravines, and chasms of Nuku-Hiva, Arcadian and richly reposeful, like the first breathless glimpse of the Paradisal valley of Typee, with its mixture of elements from the genre of exploration and escape, easily fits this mold. Its digressive form and dual narrative parallel, the bivalency of the travel narrative. Comprehensive source study proved that the double structure emerges from Melville's reliance on conventional expository forms and popular styles, plucked from different sections of his major sources, which he creatively blended into a cohesive literary work that serves multiple purposes.

According to the structure of travel literature Post-Lauria concludes that Melville's *Typee* also contains long passages strictly devoted to informational content – sometimes this material is included verbatim from one or more source-books that he had in front of him. Typically the first-person narrator moves from one observation and anecdote to another. From time to time he records conditions in other lands, scientifically embellishing details in order “to enrich real or pseudo-autobiographical narratives with interspersed factual information provided” (Bercaw 1987: 19). Such interpolated digressions delay the termination of the voyage. It also presents bipartite perspectives on native life and customs. Melville's narrator celebrates the local culture. Certain statements uttered by Tommo, “have encouraged scholars to view *Typee*, as a defense of the Noble Savage” and as an “Earthly Paradise” (25). Melville also intersperses his narration with sentimental images and language, as well as with those that might be defined as sensational further aiding the development of an appetite for the elements of sensibility while being also aimed at eliciting an emotional response of the reading public.

The third trend of Melville criticism produced relatively little works as its concentration had been “on Melville's borrowings from fiction, on his reading in the novel, or on his contribution to its history” (Sten 1996: 24). This tendency, opposed Baym's view that he took up authorship as he had taken up a series of other occupations, with no great seriousness or dedication, and with no ambition other than to see whether he might make a living of it, and William Charvat's according to which Melville, upon entering the literary life, thought of himself as the kind of practical writer who can be called, without prejudice, a journalist, shows that the forms and conventions he used became the subject of isolated attempts to reveal complexity, and many-facetedness in his works, and to prove, according to Sten's words, that each item of work fits into the standard generic category. Far ahead the critics who themselves hold romantic assumptions about literature, “those critics embraced the genre study, seeing it not as a rule bound scheme that inhibits the literary artist's originality, but as a necessary tool for artistic creation and communication, for the writer and the reader” (Hirsh 1967: 22). Hirshe's assertion that all understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre bound, that an interpreter's preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands, and that this remains the case unless and until that generic conception is altered, made us cope in a different way with what we call “signs, words, and sentences,” and countless different kinds of uses grounded

upon the pages of this idiosyncratic and uncommonly inventive writer. The shape of the very new vessel of *Typee* was built out of romance as well as autobiographical and non-fictional material; in structure, incident, character and tone it is evident that *Omoo* "is rambling, leisurely, and open-ended" (Sten 1996: 24), its title character being "not the wide-eyed, sometimes dreamy, sometimes anxious adventurer of *Typee*, but a carefree, down-at-the-heels wanderer, a nineteenth century American version of the picaresque" (25); if you know the beaten track of the allegory and the satiric writings of Lucian, Rabelais, and Swift, you'll be able to understand Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" in the context of Melville's *Mardi*; in *Moby Dick* he told a story similar to the particular spiritual epics like *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*, the "story of a hero who makes a life-transforming journey into the deepest realms of the self and back out again" (26).

It is particularly in *Moby Dick* that the generic approach provides us with a complete idea of the author's intentions in the overall structure and subject matter. This novel, viewed by some of the critics as rather lengthy, un-proportionally episodic, incoherent and charged with elevated language, presents a synthesis of the theory of art whose dominant postulate is the infusion of different elements into a body of work. In this endlessly layered novel autobiographical and non-fictional elements are easily 'detected' on the surface level of the text. Bercaw argues that the inspirational mainstream in the context of *Moby Dick* is characterized by the synthesis of informational and literary sources, as are Benet, Beale, Scoresby, Shakespeare Milton, Shelley, and Carlyle: his borrowings tended to be separate or sequential rather than patched together or interspersed. Those elements are orderly structured around the author's primal intention to "define life, and the quest, in terms of individuation or spiritual awakening and otherwise explore, from a modern, broadly psychological point of view, the gap between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown world" (6). This idea is captured into the twofold generic conception of epic tradition: on the one hand we have a story of Ahab as the central hero of the book. He is seen as the main character of the ancient or primitive national epic of combat in the tradition of legends of Prometheus and Jason, Moses and Christ, Odysseus and Aeneas. On the other hand the Ismaelian story principally focuses on the spiritual quest: his story is more pervasive and profound, "the theme of the quest for the soul takes on an overriding importance" (2).

Although the fiction "is pleasant, charming, apparently harmless surface that does not carry meaning but on occasion gives way to it, and is disrupted and violated by it" (Lee 2001: 174), even the taint of it was the forbidden thing and Melville had to defend every word of his first book as gospel truth once Murray began to show interest in publishing it. But, although mostly defined as popular travel narrative, falling under the rubric of journalism, the term journalism catching the two qualities that dominate the presentation of material – 'factual accuracy' and 'intellectual accessibility' – the traits of romance are evident in almost every page of Melville's first novel. In order to define it we have to turn back to 1785, to the definition of romance which

is still preserved in dictionaries today and “is still employed by critics who make any pretensions of discriminating among narrative forms” (Scholles and Kellog 1966: 6). It is found in the first book wholly devoted to the study of narrative tradition, Clara Reeve’s *The Progress of Romance through Times, Countries, and Manners*, in which, confronted by the common eighteenth-century prejudice against romance, endeavoured to provide a pedigree for the form, she states that “romance is a heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things” (7); in lofty and elevated language it describes what never happened nor is likely to happen in either verse or prose. Romance could also be defined as an extravagant invention, or story, a wild or wanton exaggeration or a picturesque falsehood.

In *The Weaver God, He Weaves – Melville and the Poetics of the Novel*, Christopher Sten traces those elements in *Typee* that ally it with romance. Mainly concentrating on Fry’s formulations, believing them to be sufficiently commodious, systematic, and penetrating, he determines that there is a look of fiction in this book that can be easily distinguished from his adoption of non-fictional material and his personal experiences of events at Nuku-Hiva. As Sten points out, the conventions of prose romance have remained surprisingly stable since the form first appeared in the late classical period of Greece and can be traced by the following scheme: mysterious birth, shipwreck, capture by pirates, enchanted islands, narrow escape from death, oracular prophecies and magic, foster parents, the hero’s loss and regaining of identity, and his eventual marriage with the heroine. Not all of these motifs can be found in all romances, and when it comes to the very detailed comparison with *Typee* it is evident that “it contains no tales of the hero’s mysterious birth, there is no shipwreck at the very beginning of the novel, nor a heroes eventual marriage with the heroine. But Melville’s hero, like the hero of a standard romance, runs the risk of loosing his identity, from the start of his ordeal to the very end.” (Sten 1996: 32).

Sten also suggests that subversive matters like threats to the hero’s selfhood, appearing in the menacing form of sex and violence, are offered through hardly more than a tantalizing peep, and placed strategically, like the famous orgy scene on the Dolly in the second chapter, that affects us as being highly provocative, voyeuristic, and moralizing. What follows is the crucial episode, an important clue to *Typee*’s status as a romance, contained in Melville’s repeated suggestion that his life amid the islanders was constantly threatened. To be sure according to basic conventions of romance, the intended victim is usually a virginal female, and not a strapping young male as in Melville’s case; but aside from the matter of gender, Melville’s youthful hero is strikingly similar. Following the creative adjustments of the romance paradigm, as the dominant tendency in the concept of characterization, the author depicts his hero as educated, virtuous, and refined; “he is a figure of worth and is possessed of the strength of character to try to preserve his moral standing in the face of life-threatening circumstances, and assorted lures of the flesh” (Sten 1996 : 33). According to Sten other clues that abound and mark *Typee*’s status as a romance are:

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- the threat of tattooing presenting an equivalent to the threat of rape;
- motif of amnesia;
- the eternal fountain motif – the hero’s search for eternal youth;
- the stage of dreams and nightmares;
- encounters with difficult and painful trials;
- centering on the adoption of native dress, eating practices, and other daily rituals, to show how hard it is “to change and become assimilated into another culture” (34).

These elements, taken from a surface level of Melville’s text, present the results of a superficial search for the laws that govern it. In his “strange, graceful, most readable books” (Branch 1974: 41), as Walt Whitman concluded in a review after reading *Typee*, in those timeless monuments of richness and diversity, where narrative is a complex phenomenon whose analysis allows infinite perspectives, a whole compendium of them. Melville, although a novelist with a profound autobiographical bent, was weaving “like the warp and woof on a loom, of his own experience and collective experience of his predecessors in the novel” (Sten 1996: 25). Aware of different senses of time to authorship at the end of the “Cetology” chapter in *Moby Dick*, “that concerted mastery unmatched in American literature” (Short 1992: 89), Melville concluded:

But now I leave my cetological system standing thus unfinished, even as the Great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught-nay, but the draught of a draught. (Hayford 1967: 567)

In his writing, like in any other activity of the mind, he was based on conventions of which, with some exceptions, he was not aware. Those conventions, an enormous cargo of them, as Melville used to say, made his art possible, transforming chaos into order, making order emerge from the chaos, letting him hear no mortal voice, but only the humming of the weaving:

we, too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. (Sten 1996: 26)

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SUMMARY

CHAOS IN THE NOVEL, THE NOVEL IN THE CHAOS:
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The aim of this paper is to point to the specific synthesis of autobiographical, non-fictional, and fictional material in literary works of Herman Melville in which, according to the romantic postulates, the affirmation of different generic conceptions is manifested. The special concentration of the paper is on the early period in Melville's career in which the first novel, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, presents the perfect example of the above stated. In this novel the author parodies the romance as a genre and, after a process of modification, 'places' it into the inner construction of his literary texts, where it succumbs once more to the specific laws and especially the horizon of expectation of the reading public in Melville's time. The manifestations of the generic hibridity are evident on many layers of the text.

KEYWORDS: autobiographical, nonfictional, fictional, genre, generic predictability, romance.