MELVILLE'S FAILURE AND SUCCESS

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(Resumen)

La ausencia de personajes femeninos en las obras de Melville es una de las causas por las que fue considerado un escritor misógino. Resultó ser, al mismo tiempo, el motivo de que su obra fuera recibida de forma un tanto anodina por la crítica del momento, sobre todo tras la publicación de *Moby Dick*. El ostracismo sería superado a comienzos de nuestro siglo, los nuevos tiempos trajeron nuevos gustos.

. . . .

The recent centenary of Melville's death can be taken as an excellent opportunity to reflect upon Melville's modernity as well as the relativity of the artist's position within literary history and the canon. It is a well-known fact that Melville's literary career entered into oblivion after the publication of *Moby Dick*. In fact, the account given by *The Press*, a New York newspaper, the day after he died, is quite enlightening:

> There died yesterday at his quiet home in this city a man who, although he had done almost no literary work during the past sixteen years, was once the most popular writer in the United States.
> . . . Of late years Mr. Melville—probably because he had ceased his literary activity—has fallen into a literary decline, as the result of which his books are now little known.
> Probably, if the truth were known, even his own generation has long thought him dead, so quiet have been the later years of his life. (qtd. in Leyda, *The Melville Log* 836)

Quiet for whom? Melville had continued writing and publishing after *Moby Dick*, but all of his books either received bad reviews or passed quite unnoticed. The irony lay in the fact that whenever Melville wrote what he liked best, the critics were against him, as happened with *Moby Dick*, which was rejected by most of them.

It is clear that the reading public and the critics did not share Melville's principles. In a society in which the majority of the reading public was feminine, it is easily understandable that those books which did not include feminine protagonists should meet a negative reception. Furthermore, nineteenth century America demanded certain attitudes in men such as power and economic success, none of which Melville's characters achieved. In addition, Melville's ideas regarding man's behavior and attitudes hardly ever coincided with those of his contemporaries. Thus, in a letter to Hawthorne in 1851 he proposed to speak "though we show all our faults and weaknesses—for it is a sign of strength to be

weak, to know it and out with it" (qtd. in Leyda, *The Portable Melville* 400). Furthermore, he also declared in *Pierre* his intention of "following the endless, winding way—the flowing river in the cave of man; careless whether I be led, reckless where I land" (*Pierre, or the ambiguities* 126). In other words, "I write precisely as I please," he affirmed, thus challenging both his readers and the critics. His conception of what books were did not agree with general opinion. According to him, literary texts were "buoys to our souls," "mirrors reflecting to us our own things" (Ibid. 126), features which require an effort on the part of their readers who need time, patience and palate to be able to dive into them, for "there are more treasures in the bowels of the earth than on its surface" (*Mardi* 331). This reflexive trait, curiously enough, is going to appear in contemporary twentieth century critics such as Harold Bloom, when he asserts that: "There are no texts. There are only ourselves" (qtd. in Saluzinszky 45), or Frank Kermode, when he affirms that "fictions are self-consciously made and their invention is an occasion for us to encounter ourselves and to reflect upon our ends" (2).

Melville's failure, or lack of popularity in his own time, we could then infer, rested in his insistence upon creating a literary corpus that did not respect the general tendency and tastes of his epoch. On the one hand, he only wrote for special readers, *divers* as he called them. In fact, being conscious of the metaphysical ingredients of books such as *Mardi* or *Moby Dick* he dared to suggest this to a female reader:

> Concerning my forthcoming book of *Moby Dick* . . . Don't you buy it—don't you read it, when it does come out, because it is by no means the sort of book for you. It is not a piece of fine feminine Spitafields silk—but is of the horrible texture of a fabric that should be woven of ship's cables and hawsers. A Polar wind blows through it, and birds of prey hover over it. Warn all gentle fastidious people from so much as peeping into the book—on risk of a lumbago and sciatica. (qtd. in Leyda, *The Potable Melville* 450)

On the other hand, the absence of women in his books should account for his scarce, if any, acceptance among female readers. He knew the risk he was undertaking in following this trend, but his sense of failure was different from theirs as well. "He who has never failed somewhere, that man cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness," he claimed. (qtd. in Leyda, *The Portable Melville* 413)

The fact is that a general social critique, and of American society in particular, underlies all his works. He was one of the writers, if not the only one, to denounce in *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) the danger of religion being used to defend ideological interests such as imperialism, as the following quote in *Typee* clearly shows:

> Among the islands of Polynesia, no sooner are the images overturned, the temples demolished, and the idolaters converted into nominal Christians than disease, vice and premature death make their appearance.

> Let the savages be civilized, but civilize them with benefits, and not with
> evils; and let heathenism be destroyed, but not by destroying the Heathen. The
> Anglo-Saxon hive have extirpated Paganism from the greater part of the North-
> American continent; but with it they have likewise extirpated the greater portion
> of the Red race. Civilization is sweeping from the earth the lingering vestiges of
> Paganism, and at the same time the shrinking forms of its unhappy worshippers.
> (Leyda, *The Portable Melville* 266)

In *Redburn* (1849) he showed that inherited ideas are useless when we try to
understand the world; that we have to create our own guide books. In addition, he exposed
the bad conditions and deceits the Irish immigrants had to suffer to reach America, the
Promised Land most of them did not survive to know. His next book, *White-Jacket* (1850),
served to condemn the inhuman conditions, permitted by American laws, in which sailors
lived:

> As a sailor, he shares none of our civil immunities. . . . For him our Revolution
> was in vain; to him our Declaration of Independence is a lie. (145)
> Depravity in the oppressed is no apology for the oppressor; but rather an additional
> stigma to him, as being, in a large degree, the effect, and not the cause and
> justification of oppression. (143)

Furthermore, by stating that "a man-of-war is but this old-fashioned world of ours
afloat" (*White-Jacket* 400), he was clearly identifying the evils of the ship with those of
inland life, being the former just a reflection of what happens in all places, in all
"continents."

Moby Dick (1851), secretly baptized by him "in nomine diaboli," ended by
swallowing its own creator. But this lack of success did not end Melville's "literary career."
Pierre (1852), another failure, was more than his few followers could accept, for it turned
the world upside down, world in which "Silence . . . was the Only Voice of God." The tone
could not be more pessimistic: "By vast pains we mine into the pyramid; by horrible
gropings we come to the central room; with joy we spy the sarcophagus; but we lift the
lid—and no body is there!—appallingly as vast as vacant is the soul of man!" (*Pierre, or the
Ambiguities* 239, 335).

Israel Potter (1856) denounced the lack of recognition of anonymous heroism. Men
who fight to defend their society are forgotten by it when the war ends and are doomed to
survive in rags. *The Confidence-Man* (1857) intended to show the truth of lies and the lie
of truth, in a life game in which we are all cheated, for "looks are one thing and facts
another" (20). The impossibility of self-knowledge is also emphasized many times
throughout the narrative, as this dialogue between two characters shows:

> —I hope I know myself.
> —Who knows my dear Sir, but for a time you may have taken yourself for
> somebody else? Stranger things have happened. (*The Confidence-Man* 25)

This attitude is summed up in the sentence: "Nobody knows who nobody is" (198). The author-confidence-man goes even further telling his readers that "From evil comes good. Distrust is a stage to confidence" (132). His short tales dealt with the dangers the industrialization process produced, and finally *Billy Budd* (1924) attacked the limits social laws impose upon its individuals, as these words uttered by captain Vere imply:

> Our avowed responsibility is in this: that however pitilessly that law may operate, we nevertheless adhere to it and administer it.
> . . . the heart here, sometimes the feminine in man, is as that piteous woman, and hard though it be, she must be ruled out. (1414-5)

Melville's social criticism had a great cost: lack of interest and oblivion in his time. Nevertheless, writers who meet failure while they are alive sometimes become successful once they are dead. The time for Melville came at the beginning of our century, especially after Raymond Weaver wrote a biography of Melville in 1921. This change can be easily understood when we assume that new periods bring new readings. Furthermore, what his contemporaries saw as weaknesses are seen to be the source of his power and attractiveness for a twentieth century reader. His literary production draws our attention precisely because of its subversive character: Melville demonstrates the falseness of the equivalence between logos and truth and defends the "opacity" of both the writing and the heart, the plurality texts allow—for new meanings can be always added—and the relativity of knowledge, all of them clearly illustrated in *Moby-Dick* through the multiple symbolism of the whale and the doubloon. In addition to this, the sort of male protagonists he presented did not meet the expectations of his contemporary male readers, for most of them were either sailors—one of the most despised classes at that time—or unsuccessful business men, that is, the best exponents of what an anti-hero is. Still, the main problem arises when we try to explain the absence of women in the texts of a man who is continuously reflecting upon human life and reality.

It seems obvious that since most of his works were placed in a maritime environment—a setting from which women have always been excluded—the experiences there presented should be mainly related to a masculine world. This answer, however, assumes that it is the scenic framework that determines the presence or absence of female characters in a writer's production. However, in any man's life there usually exists at least one woman: as mother, wife, lover, daughter or sister. In fact, some female protagonists do play an important role in Melville's first works: Fayway in *Typee*, and Yillah, Hautia and Annatoo in *Mardi*. But it is in *Pierre*, the first inland narrative, where a greater number of women appear: widows, spinsters, even (the tragedy of) a single mother. His later texts will include some or none. For example, a woman becomes the main protagonist of the eighth sketch of *The Encantadas* and a group of women serve as the main characters of "The Tartarus of Maids." Curiously enough, a woman is also the main protagonist of a short tale which was never published, "The Agatha Story." However, Melville's last work, *Billy Budd*, does not even mention women.

Although we could easily infer from this that Melville was not in any way interested in the female world, we also find that he gives a great importance to feelings, that is, to the heart, elements usually related to this world. In other words, the absence of women seems to be compensated for by placing a major emphasis on some elements such as unconditional love, tenderness, sympathy and sensibility, generally linked to the female sphere. Actually, some of his great protagonists, Ishmael or Billy Budd for instance, possess them. This is important especially if we bear in mind the social context in which Melville's texts were written.

Nineteenth century America used to divide the world into two parallel halves: male and female, each with a different set of values. Men had to work and bring money home—that is, their territory was outside home—whereas women had to take care of domestic affairs and their dominions were inside the home. Men had to be aggressive and full of ambition to be able to attain wealth, high position, and power. On the contrary, women either adopted a *Victorian* attitude (idle, intellectually stagnant, and totally dependant), or acted as moral guardians of their husbands' excesses. Marriage was the norm. Those who remained single were badly regarded, especially if they were women. Sex became one of the main problems due to the sexual repression inherited from the previous century and to their fear that passion could dangerously interfere with business. That is why most popular novels represented feminine sexuality as a threat and defended chastity and motherhood. Women's attitudes toward men were not better. The majority of them regarded their husbands as "wild beasts" who could not control their bodily appetites, and lived their sexuality as a rape, which explains why a lot of women defended abstinence, and why prostitution increased as the century advanced. The problem was that men did not like their home and used to spend most of their spare time in their club or in the tavern. Most women wanted to abandon their domestic setting as well. It is not by chance that this period witnessed women's liberation movements, especially after the Civil War.

One of the few professions women could have was, precisely, writing. Their fiction became immensely popular and male writers were unable to compete with them. Whereas most women writers could gain a living by writing, most men writers had to earn money doing other things as well. To some extent, these women became their "enemies," as Hawthorne's commentary reflects: "those women scribblers!" This fight between the sexes brought many problems to male authors, as Teresa Kiniewicz mentions:

> In the highly polarized society a male writer was often placed socially in an uncomfortable "in-between" position. By sex he belonged to the enterprising, competitive, acquisitive world of men and business in which intellectual pursuits and literary interests enjoyed little prestige. Writing was hardly a masculine occupation . . . classed with clergymen. Both seemed to belong to a separate species of slightly feminized character. (138)

Taking this into account, we are led to think that male authors under these conditions would try to distinguish their literary production from that of female writers. The easiest way would be not to deal with female themes since they were treated by their

opponents, a decision which can in part explain their being attacked as misogynists. Another possibility consisted in concentrating upon levels of experience related to the male world and which necessarily implied the absence of women. Melville's sea stories could serve as an example. However, the formula chosen by Melville did not bring him success, not even among his masculine readers. The reason for it surely lies in the fact that the characters depicted by this author did not represent the ideal personality and behavior which his reading audience expected. They were sailors, outcasts most of them. And a similar picture is shown in the works set inland, where most protagonists were anonymous men, victims of social evils.

But Melville did not forget the sufferings of those women who spent most of their lives waiting for their husband-sailors to come back home, as the dramatic figure of Hunilla or the sad isolation of Agatha show. Furthermore, he also denounced the bad conditions female workers had to bear in paper mills as it appears in "The Tartarus of Maids." In this short tale Melville presents the ugly reality of a group of silent women who were not only mere cogs to the wheels of the machine, but could not marry or have children if they wanted to keep their deadly job. Moreover, Melville establishes a parallel between the creation of blank paper, which lasts nine minutes, and female pregnancy by pointing to the danger both processes brought to women. The bad working conditions killed many of them, just as some women died of childbirth.

Men and women, therefore, are presented by Melville as victims of a social system that punishes those who do not follow the "right" path, which is the path that enhances the interests of a society that does not care about the most unfortunate.

The fact that there are certain thematic absences—especially that of love—in Melville's work cannot be denied. This void, however, reflects a general social attitude in his time: the incapacity to love, shown by nineteenth century American society—a society which allowed great injustices, such as slavery, and maintained certain prejudices against the most unfortunate of its inhabitants, such as poor people. Melville's primary purpose aimed at showing the falseness of contemporary idealisms regarding primitive societies: the American Dream—as the possibility of finding some sort of Paradise on earth—in *Typee* and *Omoo*; sexual love in *Mardi*; war in *White-Jacket*; religion in *Typee* and *Pierre*; and the positive impact of economic and technological advancement, that respects neither nature nor man, especially in his short tales ("Bartleby the Scrivener," "Cock-A-Doodle-Doo!" "The Bell-Tower," and "The Tartarus of Maids"). Particularly evident in *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*, his rebellion lay in destroying the binary oppositions American society had erected in order to keep man and woman separated by establishing rigid frontiers, not only between them, but also between what was right and wrong, between truth and lie, madness and sanity, central and marginal, surface and depth. He dismantled the oppositions which governed the texts as well as the ideology of his contemporary society. This attitude in Melville brought as a consequence a social vacuum around him. He was condemned to failure, and was made to feel like a stranger and a madman.

However, it is precisely this subversive attitude that attracts a modern reader. Melville not only defended sex as a human necessity—never was sex a base instinct to be dominated or repressed, for both spirit and flesh had to be fed (*Pierre*)—but he was also able

to separate woman from her sexual role. Therefore, according to him, women were not guilty of man's predicament, but victims of a social and cultural heritage, the same as men. Although women, and consequently reality, seemed to have been partially "silenced" in Melville's work, this absence, in fact, mirrored those elements which the writer felt were lacking in American society (love, tenderness, sympathy, and intuition, among others) and which were usually associated with those groups were criticized most by it: primitive cultures, sailors, women, and artists. And it is here where both his failure—during his lifetime—and success—at present—can be found: in having accepted the values these groups represented as positive and necessary for a more "human" existence.

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