

Dennis Berthold, *American Risorgimento: Herman Melville and the Cultural Politics of Italy* (The Ohio State University Press, 2009)

Although Herman Melville visited Italy once only, for two months in 1857, Italian art, writing, politics and history are a vital source of reference in his writing, from his third novel *Mardi* to posthumously-published *Billy Budd*. Always a borrower, one for whom transnational connections are essential to explorations of 'the local,' Melville presents the very image of the writer as reader, a proto-poststructuralist indeed whose literary journeys emphasize, against resolution, excitement of the travel and the rich ambiguities of multiple possibilities of meaning and significance. In the nineteenth century, parallels were drawn frequently between the Italian Risorgimento, culminating in Garibaldi and 'unification' in 1860, and political and cultural movements in America, including the catastrophic events of the American Civil War. As Dennis Berthold points out, notions of American exceptionalism may be revised, deconstructed, in terms of the actual intricacies of cultural and ideological exchange generally and, in particular, the important place played by 'Italy' in the nineteenth-century American imagination. In this process, Melville offers such a rich site for analysis of intercultural connections.

A popular image of Melville at work on the big book, *Moby-Dick*, has him land-locked at Arrowsmith surrounded by a highly significant short library of books. Although it is based upon his first-hand experience aboard whalers together with his extensive research into whaling lore, the voyage of the *Pequod* is one conducted not directly upon water but in the reef-strewn realms of the imagination. It is shaped by works of literature, history, science and philosophy, foremost among them the Bible and Shakespeare but including the writings of Byron and Scott, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Browne's *Religio Medici*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Emerson, Dante, Rabelais, Montaigne, Goethe, Shelley, Coleridge and Carlyle. These are Melville's ship's crew and, as he demonstrates, interplays between the real and the imagined, reportage and creativity, history and fiction are what propel thinking and the journey. Following his very fine studies of the Dantean intertext in *Mardi*, Berthold examines the importance, for Melville, of Italian political movements as metaphorical resource for *Redburn*, *White Jacket* and *Moby-Dick*. What is impressive, here and throughout this study, is his closely-detailed attention not only to movements, events and figures in Italy but also to their representation in American letters, in the leading journals, newspapers and public discussion, all of which creates a vital context for Melville's allusions. Roman and Italian references contribute not only to the timelessness associated with Ahab and the whale, but also to the work's focus on issues of freedom and authority, a debate conducted so variously and vigorously in mid nineteenth-century Italy as well as in America.

Melville had read Dante and been much interested in the Italian Risorgimento when he wrote *Moby-Dick*. By the time he began *Pierre*, the restoration of monarchies in Europe had produced a lull in revolutionary ideals and the republican movement in Italy. He read Machiavelli at this time, *The History of Florence* and *The Prince*, and Berthold traces the effects of this reading in the later fiction. In *Pierre*, Melville uses Machiavellian ideas to counterbalance Dante, thereby extending the dialectic between idealism and pragmatism, an issue not only for American politics

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and culture but also for leadership (Machiavelli held that Princes be part lion, part fox). Following this line of analysis, Berthold suggests that the indeterminacies in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', 'Benito Cereno' and *The Confidence-Man*, so amenable to poststructuralist analysis, have their origins in Machiavelli and the resonance of his thought in American culture in the 1850s. It is Machiavelli's emphasis on historical conditions, on the interplay between individual valor and the events of history, that Melville dramatizes and this is evident in his writing right through to *Billy Budd* where idealism and expedience are presented so overtly at odds in a context that complicates authority and the provenance of all decisions.

In the anti-slavery camp and concerned about whether revolutionary nationalism could provide social stability, Melville explores political issues in *Israel Potter*, an ironic meditation in which the Machiavellian foxes, like Franklin, succeed in the new republic. In *The Confidence-Man*, this is Frank Goodman, one who also relies more on cunning than power, more fox than lion. Tracing the trickster figure's lineage, Berthold's comparative reach provides a sharp focus on the social-cultural implications of Melville's American narrative. It was soon after completing *The Confidence-Man* that Melville made his Mediterranean trip, returning to produce a number of Italy-inspired poems and, seeing parallels between that country before and after 1860 and America before and after the Civil War, he shared a popular fascination that Berthold documents carefully. Travelling in Italy, Melville had noted associations with America; on his return, he lectured on 'Statues in Rome' and participated in the Garibaldi-mania with a critical edge. In 'At the Hostelry' and 'Naples at the Time of Bomba,' Berthold finds representations of Garibaldi not only as an historical figure and poetic symbol but also as a vehicle for continuing debate about 'the contradictory values of authority and individualism, violence and peace, aristocracy and democracy, republicanism and monarchism, all the paradoxes of modern nationalism that beset both the United States and Italy' (207-8). His analysis of the poetry is astute as he traces the Roman history underpinning *Battle-Pieces* and then Melville's characteristic uncertainty and ambiguity in *Clarel*, the 18,000 line epic with its presentation of competing views about political action and authority in post Civil War society, a presentation that Berthold analyses in terms of the Italian reference field and Melville's support for the character Celio's scepticism about lasting solutions to the problem of achieving national unity. It is easy to agree with Berthold that *Billy Budd, Sailor* 'addresses the conflict between authority and liberty central to the American Risorgimento more subtly and completely than any other Melville work' (256). It is a measure of his analysis throughout this study that he locates its resistance to unified interpretation in terms of historical specificities as well as linguistic strategies.

In his focus upon Melville's references to Italy and Rome, to the Italian connection, Berthold makes a most valuable contribution to appreciation not only of Melville's writing but also to the part transnationalism played in nineteenth-century American political thinking and practice. Closely researched, fascinating in its attention to detail, and always persuasive, the book is exemplary as a study in method, a comparative practice that advances connections, political, philosophical, historical and aesthetic, while resisting finalities.

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