Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies: An Aesthetics in All Things by Cody Marrs (review)

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CODY MARRS

Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies: An Aesthetics in All Things

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It is fairly well known at this point but worth restating: Melville, lout-genius of political thought and tragedian of defiance, was powerfully oriented toward aesthetic experience. In his poetry, he often seeks formal pleasures in an almost line-by-line way—which is, I think, the main reason why many readers of his poetry feel impeded in their progress, slowed down by waves of concise formulations, rhythmic shocks, grammatical inversions, and allusions. In his prose fiction of the 1850s, especially *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, he frequently aspires toward a greater and greater complexity of reference through cascades of modifying, vivifying clauses; there are sentences in *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, "Benito Cereno," and *The Confidence-Man* that I look forward to in the same way that I look forward to certain songs in musicals. And everywhere in his work, aesthetics and thinking—sensing beauty and seeking knowledge—are phases of a single process, a process that is, Melville thinks, too often oversimplified, too often arrested in one phase or the other.

For the last thirty years, however, most literary critics have insisted that an attraction to aesthetic form signifies an attraction to totalized control. "In a formalist sense," Russ Castronovo writes, "the aesthetic object aspires to wholeness and unity, criteria that in a geopolitical sense supply the logic for the expansion of world markets underwritten by U.S. militarism" (Castronovo, Russ. "Geo-Aesthetics: Fascism, Globalism, and Frank Norris," *boundary 2*, 30.3 (2003): pp. 163–64). Most critics have insisted, as well, that it signifies an exclusionary connoisseurship. "Exclusion," Amelia Jones writes, "is the primary function of aesthetics and the rhetoric of beauty as these have conventionally been wielded" (Jones, Amelia. "'Every Man Knows Where and How Beauty Gives Him Pleasure': Beauty Discourse and the Logic of Aesthetics." In *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Eds. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 215–40. p. 218). In the mid-2000s, Samuel Otter and I coedited a collection of essays entitled *Melville and*

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Aesthetics as a means of showcasing the various ways in which certain Melville critics were integrating historical, political, and theoretical perspectives with aesthetic modes of response. Our own experience had been that aesthetic modes of response were unpredictable, intellectually stimulating, and deeply woven into more obviously social styles of analysis. We knew very well that "wholeness and unity" had been the primary determinants of literary value during the Cold War and that "aesthetics and the rhetoric of beauty" had been mobilized to exclude works with wilder hearts, especially when the writers of those works were not white, straight, and male. But we did not believe that aesthetics and beauty were inherently imperialist and exclusionary. They could be made to serve the interests of consolidators, but they were too chance-like, glance-like, and unruly to be defined by those kinds of uses.

In *Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies: An Aesthetics in All Things*, Cody Marrs similarly attempts to expand beyond the dominant conception of aesthetics by modeling a different way of approaching beauty. "For Melville," he writes, "beauty is an experience of non-sovereignty, a feeling of weakened or blurred autonomy that reconnects us to the world" (1). Or, put another way, "[e]very time we happen upon beauty, it makes us suddenly and intensely aware of something or someone beyond the self 's previously narrow purview—some corresponding vibrancy that had previously gone unnoticed" (43–44). According to Marrs, Melville's attention to such vibrancies represents "a significant departure from the possessive strains of Euro-American aesthetics, which tend to grasp beauty as a function and result of the ego's independence" (82–83). For Melville, Marrs writes, beauty is not "a rarefied property felt solely in the mind" (96); it is, instead, "the substance and spirit of intersubjectivity, a kind of *sensus communis* without individuated subjects" (viii).

The heart of the book is a series of three chapters on *Timoleon*, *Weeds and Wildings*, and *Moby-Dick* in which Marrs conveys, in various ways, Melville's profound interest in the desubjectifying and leveling effects of the experience of beauty. In the chapter on *Timoleon*, Marrs emphasizes that beauty emerges all over the place, "in everything from lines to ripples of water, flashes of light, and moments of stillness," and that "[e]ven the poems that are ostensibly about the epic monuments of earlier civilizations are primarily about the natural shapes and materials out of which such monuments were composed" (30). In Melville's "The Parthenon," Marrs writes, "one can see the frieze's humans, horses, gods, and demigods for what they are: an equal set of beings, 'contrasting' in their moods and actions yet tiled together in symmetric unity. . . . The beauty evoked by 'The Parthenon' is the ego-dissolving, non-essentializing beauty of natural relationships rendered through human art" (38). And in his reading of "The Attic Landscape," Marrs draws attention to the poem's central

image, in which "clear-cut hills carved temples face, / Respond, and share their sculptural grace." The temples and the hills "shar[e] a common configuration and energy," he writes, "as though 'respond[ing]' to each other. The impact has nothing to do with the sublime, the picturesque, or any other tradition invented by human beings. It is instead a quiet magic that simultaneously resists expectations and encircles everything that exists" (46).

The second chapter, on the overlooked *Weeds and Wildings*, is even more responsive to Marrs's approach. In that work, Marrs shows, Melville throws himself more fully than ever before into the midst of all of the overlooked forms of life on the planet, mingling his verses with the "*Chee, Chee!*" of bobolinks, the "*Caw! Caw! Caw!*" of a crow, and the simple, unobtrusive presence of a "way-side Weed divine." Marrs is well-attuned to the brimming spirit of that self-demotion: "Nearly every poem is shot through with a sense of exhilaration, a joyous discovery of beauty's plenitude" (57). "A weed grew here," Melville writes in "Inscription," a poem that he imagines being carved into "a Boulder near the spot where the last Hardhack was laid low," somewhere in the fields surrounding the Pittsfield, Massachusetts, house that he had once owned. "Weeds turn no wheel, nor run; / Radiance pure or redolence / Some have, but this had none. / And yet heaven gave it leave to live / And idle in the sun" (NN *Billy Budd, Sailor* 100). As Marrs notes, this poem is a kind of weed itself: not useful, not conventionally attractive, but "here" nevertheless, and significant for that reason alone—even if it almost no one ever read it, either on the lonely boulder or in the manuscript of *Weeds and Wildings*, unpublished in Melville's lifetime. The almost inaudible, invisible defiance of something idling in the sun, something that has been granted "leave to live," is what the joy springs from in this poem; the weed expresses, just by growing "here," something like what Moby Dick expresses when he "bodily burst[s] into view!" (557). And that expression ramifies, Marrs insists, into "nature writ large" (57). "In these poems of praise," he writes, "Melville provides a vision of life's gifts, documenting the myriad ways in which 'Without movement of speech / Day deepens its sweetness'" (54).

Having addressed "ancient beauty" in *Timoleon* and "floral beauty" in *Weeds and Wildings*, Marrs turns in his third chapter to the subject of "appalling beauty" in *Moby-Dick*. Upon being confronted with the novel's appalling vision of terror and beauty as "different versions of the same experience" (79), Marrs writes, one is faced with the following question: "How does one think and feel one's way out of consternation, out of being appalled?" (80). His answer is that one does so by "prioritizing life itself in all its appalling beauty" (86). That seems both true and consonant with the argument of *Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies*, but Marrs drifts in the remainder

of the chapter into a more common and less challenging reading of the novel, one that praises things identified as good (Queequeg, tolerance, democracy) and excoriates things identified as bad, such as Stubb, "the very definition of an asshole" (88) and "a symbol of civilization's appetite for death" (90). This cannot be described as prioritization of "life itself"—Stubb is an instance of life too, as are the self-disemboweling sharks, the pulpy squid, and Ahab. It is, instead, an act of projective identification, a way of saying something like what Starbuck self-protectively says upon sensing the "latent horror" in life: "'tis not me! that horror's out of me" (*NN Moby-Dick* 170). Marrs's thesis—beauty disintegrates individuality and multiplies associative relations—most certainly applies to *Moby-Dick* and continues to function as an interpretive tool, but it is strangely subordinated in this chapter to a condemnation of life that does not give itself up to self-loss and dissemination, especially when that kind of life takes the shape of a moody, impulsive, monologuing, narcissistic, individualistic, grudge-holding lord. Can I dismiss the feeling that this is a function of living through the Trump years? I cannot.

Although Marrs declares in his postscript that "criticism must concentrate not on *a priori* beliefs (whether the author's or the critic's) but on the distinct cluster of impressions produced by a work of literature" (107), he does have, as we all do, beliefs that exist apart from any one cluster of impressions, beliefs that emerge in incalculable ways over the course of a lifetime from many such clusters (the implication that all beliefs are *a priori* beliefs is a bit of a dodge). As I have just indicated, Marrs very clearly identifies himself with an "open, lateral, and loving viewpoint that sees human and non-human life as beautifully interwoven" (78). This is totally fine; no one can hold their mind ajar and belief-free for an indefinite period of time. It means, however, that when one is expressing such beliefs in a work of scholarship, one is expected to explain where those beliefs have come from and why they are truer, better, or more useful than other imaginable beliefs. The major absence in *Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies* is a defense of the validity of its underlying concepts, a defense that would articulate the genealogy of those concepts and seriously consider their alternatives. I thoroughly sympathize with Marrs's desire to emphasize text-by-text responses, but I also think it is vital to recognize that our ideas, formulated or not, are always involved in those responses, and that we should always be prepared to give an account of—oh, let's just say it—the theories that animate our inquiries. Marrs could have provided a sketch of the defining controversies in the philosophy of beauty and located his own thinking in relation to them, for instance. He could also have given us, by way of context, an overarching survey of the various ways in which ecocritical scholars have understood the phenomenological experience of beauty. When

critics do not come forward with those kinds of comprehensive discussions, their ideas can come to seem self-willed, the product of private conviction and public insistence. Their arguments do not have the weight of a tradition of thought at their foundation.

But somehow I grow merry again, as someone says somewhere. Flip it around: by refusing to seek the support of established philosophical arguments, Marrs chooses lightness, a flitting of perception, a freedom of thought. Instead of addressing the idea of beauty from within the Western philosophical tradition, he chooses to spring forward from the idea of beauty that presents itself most powerfully to him, the idea of beauty that is, in a sense, most beautiful to him. Most active: "What accounts for the ways in which we are pulled—as if by some quiet, irresistible force—toward a picture, a line, or a body, then toward other beautiful forms that seem to be utterly distinct yet uncannily familiar?" (102). Most vast: "Each experience we have with beauty, each time we are washed by its waves, we wade into the 'wide sea of beauty,' which knows neither beginning nor end" (24). Least graspable: the beauty of whales "has less to do with conceptual categories than with flickerings of color, sound, texture, and sensation that exceed the bounds of language" (81). In response to Melville's response to the desubjectifying, vibrant, ungraspable "phantom of life" (*NN Moby-Dick* 5), Marrs extends himself toward beauty, in a singular, never fully justifiable way. And it works. The peculiar grip of Melville on him makes me feel, once again, the peculiar grip of Melville on me. If I could have only one of the things that I wish for in a work of literary criticism, this is what it would be.

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