# *"READ IT IF YOU CAN": DECONSTRUCTIONIST AND POSTSTRUCTURALIST READINGS OF HERMAN MELVILLE'S WRITINGS*

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***Abstract:*** *The current paper highlights a number of landmarks in the exegesis of Herman Melville's fiction undertaken from the perspective of deconstructive and poststructuralist criticism. Deconstructive readings of Melville are meant to bring to light the limits of what is possible for literary criticism to accomplish just as deconstruction reveals the limits of what is possible for human thought to accomplish. The deconstructionists hailed Melville as an unparalleled master of aporia and indeterminacy which he handled with intellectual ease - a quality which singled him out, distancing him from his unsophisticated contemporaries. The notions of de-centering, displacement, secondariness, the turning of reference into self-reference, defining for any deconstructive practice are employed in the exploration of the American author's writing with a view to foregrounding the idea that the metaphysical and epistemological questions in his work become mere linguistic questions, reality being generated by the free interplay of signifiers.*

***Keywords:*** *post-structuralism, deconstruction, reading*.

A fresh approach to Melville's fiction is offered by the critical tools of deconstruction which can retrieve the meaning that traditional criticism ambiguates by simply reading "against the grain" of that tradition.

Derrida's coinage, "deconstruction", represents a particular method of textual analysis and philosophical argument involving the close reading of works to reveal logical or rhetorical incompatibilities between the implicit and the explicit planes of discourse in a text and how these incompatibilities are designed and assimilated by the text. A deconstructive reading focuses upon the binary oppositions in a text. Derrida's deconstructive method focuses on those textual points where a dichotomy or a line of argument breaks down to reveal radical incongruities in the logic or rhetoric. The contradictions expose the text to a displacement from a univocal center of meaning. Derrida and his followers do not seek to destroy meaning but to expose the production of meaning as an arbitrary effect of writing. With all its strategies of de-centering, de-totalization, free-play and self-referentiality, a deconstructive reading of a text reveals that there is nothing except the text; that is, one cannot evaluate, criticize or construe a meaning for a text by reference to anything external to it. Douglas Tallack generates a fluid and sophisticated discourse about the short-story genre by deconstructively reading a number of 19th century short stories, Melville's tales being a focal point of his analysis. He investigates some of Melville's narrative techniques, identifiable both in his tales and his novels. For instance, the search for "a definitive point of view, present in *The Town Ho's Story* is repeated at length in *Moby Dick*", each shift of perspective bringing a "displacement of self" (Tallack, 1993: 160): the self "who trod the ship and knew the crew" is replaced by the self who knew Moby Dick and so the process goes on. Eventually, Melville's displacement of himself and on to Ishmael, is implicated in "the same problematic

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of proximity and distance, originality and secondariness" (Tallack, *op. cit.* 161).

Tallack looks upon *Bartleby the Scrivener* as an eloquent example of the category of secondariness. For the narrator of Bartleby, the hero's singularity can only be accounted for with reference to primary or "original sources" (Melville, 1961: 107), but in Bartleby's case, "those are very small" (idem). The narrator's "temporalizing of representation" (Tallack, 1993:162) indicated by the several displacements signaled by constant changes of tense, is indicative of a tension between a hidden narrative which promises a recuperation of the truth about Bartleby and a surface narrative which fails in its task. The surface narrative throws at us the challenge of responding to "an unknowing silence, the void that underlines all human artifacts" (*ibidem* 163).

This brilliant study foregrounds the notion of de-centering, defining for any deconstructive practice. Melville's choice of New York as the urban setting for *Pierre* as well as *Bartleby*, "emphasizes the lack of center and the need for other kinds of knowledge besides that which concentrates attention in a single place" (*ibidem* 167).

Tallack quotes Kazin's description of New York, which, "for more than a century, has been an imperial center with most of its people in outlying provinces which are not the center of anything" (Kazin, 1973: 7). The context of *Bartleby* is even vaster than the imperial New York, comprising the postal system with all its indeterminacies, since Bartleby "has been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington" (Melville, 1961: 140). As a former clerk in the Dead Letter Office, Tallack observes, "Bartleby has given up on signification, although the lawyer is still trying out models of communication" (Tallack, 1993: 172).

The solidity of the Tombs - a place of symbolic concentration par excellence - is somehow made fluid by its degree of "dissemination" - a "spilling" or "diffusion" of meaning (idem). The critic calls our attention to the fact that we should not miss Melville's mention of the grass in his description of the prison-yard, which evokes a grave-yard, a place where death is interconnected with an "inscribed history" (idem) – as he puts it – and not with a universal nature. The sequel to the story serves to return Bartleby to the world of representation and history, instead of interring him in the ground from where he will spring up like the fresh shoots of grass. In this way, Bartleby achieves a human voice instead of an immortal vision.

John Carlos Rowe proposes an engaging deconstructive reading of *Bartleby*, in which he emphasizes the transformation of the physical Tombs into "a psychical monument" through the agency of Bartleby who

> continues to circulate as the Derridean principle of difference: the uncanny and vagrant property in language that motivates expression. The avowed purpose of this tale has been to awaken curiosity, which the narrator has been unable to gratify. We are only left with a 'vague report' of a certain suggestive interest in which dead letters and dead men are equated (Rowe, 182: 137-138).

Another seminal work offering a deconstructive "reading" of Melville and other writers of the American Renaissance writers is authored by John Irwin. Irwin investigates a recurrent motif in *Moby Dick*, namely, the undecipherable character



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of the hieroglyph. The central hieroglyph is Moby Dick with its "pyramidical white lump" and its "mystic-marked brow" (Melville,1952: 308). Ahab functions as the whale's human hieroglyphic counterpart, being described as looking like "a pyramid" and having "an Egyptian chest" (idem), the marks on his brow being redolent of the hieroglyphics markings on the forehead of the whale. Ishmael's discussion of the whiteness of the whale reveals indecipherability as the essential characteristic of the hieroglyph for Melville. The hieroglyph of the world, represented by Moby Dick, is inscrutable not because it does not bear any meaning at all, but, as Irwin points out, "because its own indefiniteness allows it to bear any and every meaning and, since it means everything, it means nothing"(1992:109). The critic identifies this "colorless all-color of meaning" as a critical condition emblematic of the 19th century:

> with the loss of belief in an external absolute and in the possibility of objective knowledge, the self expands to fill the void, but at the moment when the self becomes the absolute, when everything becomes a projection of itself, then the self realizes it has become nothing, that it is indistinguishable, a 'colorless all-color' (Irwin, 1992: 112).

Following the same deconstructive line of argument, as deconstruction turns reference into self-reference, Irwin takes the discussion of absence/presence one step further. He submits that "if all the various appearances of the world are only projections of the self and if the world appears to be a void, the only conclusion is that the real void is within the self" (idem). Therefore, the attempt to hunt down the whale turns out to be a self-destructive one in the final analysis. The qualities Moby Dick displays are simply the projected attributes of its hunters. *The Doubloon* chapter makes it explicit through Ahab's interpretation of the markings on the coin as tokens of his self. The process of interpretation attains fulfillment the moment the tattooed Queequeg contemplates the hieroglyphic coin. The hieroglyphic subject contemplates the hieroglyphic object.

According to Irwin, this encounter reveals the double indecipherability of the world: it is indefinite in itself and "in its own indefiniteness it allows the individual subject to project on it the structure of a self as inscrutable as the world itself" (1992:110). The circular nature of this process has no connotations of redemption or perfection which are usually associated with this geometrical figure. On the contrary, for Melville, the circle which governs the hieroglyph of the Universe inspires the terror of a self-enclosed knowing process in which, as Irwin phrases it, "man projects the self's personal structure on an indeterminate ground and then reads it back" (idem). The essayist foregrounds the self-reflexivity of the symbolist tradition initiated by the literature of the American Renaissance, a literature that "self-consciously makes the process of symbolization its continuing theme" (Irwin, 1992:112).

A deconstructive analysis operates upon the assumption that a text cannot be related to anything extra-textual and that reference is ultimately self-reference. The essayist makes the observation that, in the works of Melville, metaphysical and epistemological questions become mere linguistic questions, "not questions of what really is but rather how in our knowable model of the world language creates what really is" (Irwin, 1992: 108).

In the *Cetology* chapter Melville attempts a classification of the world of whales by arranging them according to their sizes and for this systematization he



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employs as ordering metaphor the sizes of books -"folio", "octavo" and "duodecimo". The book metaphor is symbolic of the fact that the world of whales is governed by linguistic order. John Irwin concludes his exquisite analysis with the essentially deconstructive contention that reality is generated by the free interplay of signifiers and that "for man, the ultimate reality is language" (*ibidem* 112).

Barbara Johnson is the proponent of an exciting anti-naïve reading of *Billy Budd*. All the claims she makes are entirely supported by the text itself. Johnson's first item on her deconstructive agenda is to call Billy's innocence into question. She looks upon Billy as a "literal reader" (Johnson, 1980: 85), in the sense that he seems to take things at face value, mistaking what seems to be for what really is. The critic claims that what Claggart questions in Billy is precisely the potential discrepancy between seeming and being, in other words, is Billy as innocent as he seems to?

Johnson contends that Melville's delineation of the character of Billy Budd is itself not exactly as it appears to be. Although Billy is a "literal reader" he seems capable of editing out whatever does not fit into his outlook on life. Unlike Billy, Claggart is "an ironic reader" (*ibidem* 88), that is, he is apt to always suspect the disparity between seeming and being. However, she insists, this is not always the case. When one of his spies makes up lies about Billy, Melville tells us that Claggart "never suspected the veracity of these reports" (Melville, 1961: 41). That is, he can be naïve too, just like Billy. Both of them suppress or fail to read whatever does not dovetail with their world outlook. As Johnson rightly observes, "Billy is sweet, innocent and harmless, yet he kills. Claggart is evil and (…) perverted, yet he dies a victim" (Johnson, 1980: 82). Finally, she contends, "the fatal blow, far from being an unmotivated accident, is the gigantic return of the power of negation that Billy has been repressing all his life" (Johnson, 1980: 91).

Deconstructive readings of Melville are meant to bring to light the limits of what is possible for literary criticism to accomplish just as deconstruction reveals the limits of what is possible for human thought to accomplish.

Poststructuralist theories and practices in general share an oppositional stance towards traditional humanism and place a special emphasis on the role of language in all signifying practices. This emphasis is easily noted in those critical methods concerned with hyper-textuality, meta-textuality and the instability of meaning.

According to A. Robert Lee, Melville's *The Confidence Man* is so open-ended that it could, "with some justice, claim to operate as the exemplary postmodern text, subversive of and at all times deconstructing its own idiom and imagined world"(1984:158).

George Landow has pointed out that de-centeredness and lack of narrative closure are defining traits of hypertexts, which are, in fact, interactive forms: the text has a distinct identity, while its narrative can be constructed and reconstructed according to the reader's participating disposition, on account of the impressive number of hyperlinks: "we must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks" (1989:2).

Gustaaf Van Cromphout argues that Melville's narrative strategies result in a subversion of the idea of epistemological stability: Melville's narrative strategies also call into question the possibility of one's knowing others. Critics



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have often commented upon the narrator's unreliability, inconsistencies, equivoques, and general trickery at the reader's expense - characteristics reflected in, among other things, a self-contradictory rhetoric and an indirect, convoluted, self-referential, and sometimes "self-erasing" style (Van Cromphout, 1993: 40). This playful, de-centered anti-narrative form is suggestive of Melville's sustained "engagement with questions of epistemology", which, in the critic's view, marks his mind as distinctly "modern" (*ibidem* 37).

Takashi Tsuchinaga, a Japanese Melvillean scholar, addresses a similar matter, namely the metafictional facet of *Bartleby*. He argues that Bartleby is both an author and a text, that *Bartleby the Scrivener* is allegorically Bartleby the author/text, pendulating between these two stances. The critic emphasizes the inexhaustible power of the text to generate commentary although no final interpretation is possible. "This generative power of the text constitutes its potential life" (Tsuchinaga, 1991: 12), he observes.

Marvin Hunt engages the issue of the ever-fluctuating multitude of interpretations and the instability of meaning in the same Melvillean story. He surveys other interpretations advanced by "postmodernist critics who have shifted the argument from the ethical status of the attorney-narrator to the problematics of language" (Hunt, 1994: 275). In support of his analysis, Hunt quotes an insightful poststructuralist opinion, formulated way before the advent of post-structuralism in America, belonging to James Guetti, who identifies in *Moby Dick* the presence of "special and artificial kinds of language serving to draw attention to the limitations of such language" (Guetti, 1967: 28).

Hunt formulates the basis of his poststructuralist perspective, stating that he aims to investigate the premise that "the narrator finally does comprehend Bartleby […] by insisting upon the linguistic basis of that comprehension" (Hunt, 1994: 280). He notes that the concluding remark of the story "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" coincides with the final stage of a "reductive process that construes truth/reality as ultimately linguistic" (Hunt, 1994: 283).

He goes on to discuss the systematic isolation of Bartleby from the material world and his progressive metamorphosis into a linguistic icon: "the devolution from functioning scrivener to starved corpse represents a shift of value from factual to the symbolic, from Bartleby as flesh-and-blood reference to Bartleby as verbal sign (*ibidem* 284).

The thrust of the study is that the synecdochical utterance which closes the story is in fact an illustration of the narrator's progress from limited, legal rationalism towards his "prefer[ring]" a metaphorical language - for "Bartleby is humanity, the unabridged text of universal fate" (*ibidem* 287). At the end of his experience with the scrivener, the narrator is "epistemologically reformed", Hunt contends, for Bartleby motivates "a new idiom": through Bartleby's agency, the narrator leaves behind an inefficient rationally-based Enlightenment methodology in order to embrace a mode of speaking and knowing constructed upon super-rational linguistic mechanisms. Therefore, from a poststructuralist stance, Marvin Hunt reveals the logo-centric nature of the reality in *Bartleby*, a single "word" being able to "turn tongues and heads" (1994:275).

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