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One Foot in the Finite: Melville's Realism Reclaimed

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018. xiv + 210 pp.

One *Foot in the Finite* mounts an argument against the view that *Moby-Dick* is a heterogeneous novel interested in the multiplicity of belief and against the underlying theoretical and moral convictions that lead us to locate and valorize such relativism in literature.

Evans argues that Melville was committed to a project of connecting language to experienced life along lines that are best understood in relation to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose work emphasized the way that the meaning of language is defined by our use of it in lived practice. The core of *One Foot in the Finite* is its extensive examination of what it would mean to say that Melville was committed to a Wittgensteinian philosophical realism in which concepts have an actual rather than an ideal or imaginary existence and in which language is something made in and of—hence inextricable from—experience, not a conventional structure that impedes our access to the real.

Although the book is at heart a philosophical inquiry and not an intellectual history, Evans does position Melville in relation to the two major philosophical positions of his time, empiricism and transcendentalism. Melville rejected Locke's view that all we know is derived from the senses, and he rejected Kant's view that we have no direct knowledge of the noumenal realm and know it only through a priori conditions of the mind. More deeply, Melville rejects the idea that thought is fundamentally a matter of the private subject's mind, a position Evans traces to Descartes, and instead embraces a Platonic realism in which concepts are indeed real, or of this world. The worldliness of concepts is, however, much more important to Melville than to Plato, and the emphasis on how concepts appear within life is one of the major ways that Melville can be said to anticipate Wittgenstein. In essence, Melville argues for the nonduality of reality, in which conceptual life and language are not split off from our experiential, embodied existence but are part of it. In Evans's often compelling handling of this idea, we come to sense that "the world" might mean not materiality or things beyond our mind but the web of action, sensation, and logical

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framing that form human experience. This book, in other words, pays little deference to the posthumanist trend in the humanities.

Much of the book's interest lies in the multiple approaches that Evans takes to explaining Melville's philosophical and linguistic realism. She does so through readings of Melville that frequently engage with Cavell, Wittgenstein, and a range of philosophers who do not often appear in literary criticism, among them Patricia Hanna, Bernard Harrison, Hugh Knott, Julius Kovesi, and Rush Rhees. At its broadest, the book uses Melville and the philosophical realist tradition to suggest that postmodernist thought—with its skepticism about the validity of human knowledge and its confidence in the creative force of newly minted terms—has hampered our ability to engage meaningfully with actual life. Its polemic for trust in language and a conviction in the reality of concepts is a welcome shift away from criticism that continues to deconstruct language, representation, and thinking.

In terms of Melville studies, the book argues against the dominant view that *Moby-Dick* is, for better or worse, a bit of a mish-mash. Evans argues at length that Melville's own characterization of his work as a magnificent but failed compromise between his audience's expectations and his own wishes does not truly apply to *Moby-Dick*. She also argues that we should not read the book as a wondrous, baggy amalgam of myriad perspectives, one that emphasizes the folly of believing in singular truth. Instead, she asserts that *Moby-Dick* stages a dialogue of multiple perspectives on language and knowing that as a whole supports one view: a philosophical realism in which concepts are objective and language can be trusted.

One of the most persuasive aspects of that reading of the novel is Evans's emphasis on practices. To say, for instance, that we know what a whale means by knowing how whalers handle whales gives a fresh sense of why Melville includes so much detail about such matters. And *Moby-Dick* is indeed fascinated with the minute mechanical details of how things happen, as Evans reveals in a lovely discussion of the passage in chapter 53, "The Gam," describing how a ship's captain might "seize hold of the nearest oarsman's hair" to steady himself (qtd. on 168). Her book gives us a philosophical position in which *Moby-Dick*'s many details of whaling are not detours but the very place in which we learn what words mean by learning what it is to be, or to encounter, a whale or a captain.

Melvilleans may find another idea in Evans harder to swallow: that Melville rejects Ishmael's exiled and doubting sense of the world in favor of Ahab's commitment to the reality of the meaning humans find in the world. If Ahab finds the separation of truth from the embodied, mortal life crushing, he learns in the novel that one can reject that separation. In this sense, Evans breaks with

a generation and more of Americanists to present Ahab as a victorious figure who embraces the reality of human conceptual activity as it is grounded in the life of the body and social being. Ahab's case shows us how we can trust our knowledge if we insist on its connection to our own experience—to the feeling of the body and the actions we perform—and how the world is something we can live in and with through words and thoughts. Readers may have reservations about the claim that it is Ahab who “expresses the essential features of Melville's vision” (150). If so, why is he treated with such fear, and why does his journey end in death? They may also question why philosophical realism should be worked out through a character who tyrannizes over others. If Ahab stands for a Wittgensteinian sense of the commonality of practices that create meaning, his autocratic solitariness suggests that Melville had reservations about the beliefs for which Ahab, in Evans's reading, stands.

Furthermore, if the Wittgensteinian principle is that language use comprises common practices, those practices seem to be so common—formed by such a multitude of moments—that they do not clearly pertain to democratic politics. If meaning comes about through “long centuries by collective human effort” (132), such a collectivity seems to be one in which differences and disagreements do not have a place. The common effort that produces language is largely unconscious, emerging from a total society's behavior, and thus is quite distant from democratic processes of negotiating conflicting interests, beliefs, and desires and arriving at sustainable, often temporary compromises. My point here is that there is a disconnect between the way that Evans affirms knowledge in this book and the terms of political discussion in US literature. What did it mean for Melville to become interested in the kind of philosophical truths that would remain beyond the fray of political or philosophical argument and working out?

Although Evans's book contends powerfully against the critical habit of doubting language, or seeing truth as beyond words, it has less to say about the distinctive power of Melville's style than one might expect. In redeeming conceptual and linguistic work from the categories of the imaginary and constructed, the book frames the novel as a work of realism. But what to do with the prodigious literary skill everywhere on display in *Moby-Dick*? Why should philosophical realism find its outlet in such outlandish language? Evans mentions the aesthetic briefly but only to define it as a category identified with the particularity of experience, hence not with the account of experience as the location of the real world that matters so much to the book. This lack of interest in the aesthetic and literary qualities of the book seems inadequate to Melville. To put it another way, the status of imagination in the realism presented here remains an open question. Early chapters account for Melville's realism in

literary terms by pointing out that for Melville, as for Eric Auerbach, realism is about a narrative style committed to representing ways of experiencing the world, not about detailing the bare empirical appearance of things. Still, the intricate, elaborate quality of Melville's writing calls for further explanation in relation to his realism.

In conclusion, *One Foot in the Finite* offers an important account of Melville's realism through a series of readings of Wittgenstein and other philosophers. These readings run starkly against the grain of much recent work in the humanities. The book shows what it could mean to think about the body without assuming that to do so is to dispense with the power of thought, and what it could mean to believe in concepts and even representations without dismissing the world of appearances or sensory being. In these aspects, it provides an original and useful reframing of basic terms in the humanities that merits attention even by critics who are not Melvilleans. As a reading of *Moby-Dick*, the book offers an account of Melville's attention to whaling practices, an argument for the novel's unity, and a new reading of Ahab that is well worth the attention of Melville scholars and is sure to spark discussion.

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