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(review)

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GRAHAM THOMPSON

Herman Melville Among the Magazines

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In a 2008 article in *American Periodicals* on Charles Gordon Greene's *Boston Post*, I analyzed that influential Democratic daily's treatment of the three most prominent contemporary American novelists: Stowe, Hawthorne, and Melville. Although the *Post* was staunchly anti-abolitionist, it wrote positively of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, so emotionally gripping did the reviewer find the novel. It also regularly praised Hawthorne's fiction and even went out of its way to boost his fortunes. For instance, in June 1849 it publicized his dramatic "beheading," when he lost his position as Custom House Surveyor in Salem following the ascension of the Whig administration. Melville, however, the paper attacked with unparalleled bitterness and gratuitous cruelty in a series of extensive reviews almost certainly written by Greene himself. Greene could not abide Melville's idiosyncratic style, his refusal to conform to the conventions of fiction as Greene understood them. He urged readers not to waste their money on *Moby-Dick* and condemned *Pierre* as "perhaps the craziest fiction extant," a work that "might be supposed to emanate from a lunatic hospital rather than from the quiet retreats of Berkshire. We say it with grief—it is too bad for Mr. Melville to abuse his really fine talents as he does."

Melville was undaunted. Remarkably, as Graham Thompson shows in *Herman Melville Among the Magazines*, Melville followed the commercial failure of *Pierre* in 1852 by wisely turning to the expanding New York periodical marketplace. Beginning with the appearance of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in November and December 1853, he published some fourteen tales and sketches in periodicals over the next several years. Here Melville found a large and appreciative readership, much larger than for his novels, and earned not-insignificant sums. In May 1856, he gathered six tales in a volume released by Dix and Edwards under the title *The Piazza Tales*. With the exception of the title piece, "The Piazza," written especially for the volume, all the stories had appeared in *Putnam's*, including such masterpieces as "Bartleby, the Scrivener," "Benito Cereno," and "The Encantadas."

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Although the periodical marketplace had enabled Melville to resume his literary career, he withdrew from that marketplace after the appearance of *The Piazza Tales*, a critical but not a commercial success. "In financial terms," Thompson argues, "Melville would have benefitted from more, not less, magazine writing" (207). We do not know why Melville elected to cease writing for the magazines but, thanks to *Herman Melville Among the Magazines*, we can understand just how important the magazine culture of the 1850s was in shaping him as a writer who transformed the tropes and conventions of periodical publishing with "dazzling displays of innovation" (xi).

Thompson argues that Melville's "embedding" in the periodical culture of New York became a necessary condition for the creation of his short fiction: "We can ask how our understanding of Melville's authorship changes when we press his writing back between the leaves of the magazines in which it was published. And we can do so without allowing magazine publication to delimit the possible answers" (19). Thompson's book raises a number of important questions, including just how we should understand the interaction between a periodical's editorial direction and the meaning of particular works that appear in its pages.

The first chapter, "The Plain Facts of Paper," recounts Melville's visit to a paper mill in Dalton, Massachusetts, that gave rise to, among other works, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." Eschewing what he calls an "allegorical reading" of this and other stories where paper figures prominently, Thompson emphasizes Melville's representation of the material reality of paper itself (39). He claims that in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the title character's series of refusals to participate in the work of the law office "can be seen as an aversion not to the reading and writing that is the stuff of authorship but an aversion to interacting with paper itself" (41). He stresses that the story should be read in light of "how it dramatizes a writer's imaginative labor with the materials of his trade" (45) and argues that "only someone who understood paper so intimately could explore how it mediated the writing life" (55). Melville may even have found paper therapeutic: "To recuperate from the strains of writing novels, Melville continued writing, continued to write deeply, and embedded himself in the economy of paper" (55).

"'What Nots' and the Genres of Magazine Writing," the second chapter, explores the tension between the conventional values ascribed to the magazines and the subversive nature of Melville's fiction. But Thompson argues that editors were actually open to experimentation in short fictions, creating an inviting space for a writer whose career as a novelist had seemingly come to an end and still had much to say. And so, as Thompson puts it, the world of magazines served Melville admirably as a "basecamp" from which "he could set off" (77). The pieces that are most successful, most open to continuing interpretation,

are “the ones whose relationship to genre is adaptive rather than derivative” (94). Melville saw his role in part as developing and extending the genre of the magazine sketch, of which Washington Irving was the great pioneer. Thompson’s analysis of “The Encantadas” is particularly rich and suggestive through its attention to Melville’s adaptation of magazine sketch conventions. And he shows how the lawyer-narrator of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” quickly “veers from sketch to tale mode” (89). These changes to the magazine sketch genre directly contributed to the invention of the short story.

The next chapter, “Passing Muster at *Putnam’s*,” examines the complex editorial and personal relationships guiding periodicals. Here Thompson focuses on George W. Curtis, who served as the silent coeditor, along with Charles A. Dana, at *Putnam’s*. Although politically progressive and opposed to slavery, Curtis was determined “to clearly demarcate literature and the arts from history and politics” (124), a stance evident in his letters evaluating Melville’s submissions. Thompson portrays Curtis as “an editor who favored the literature of gentility and sentimentality removed from issues of substance” and maintains that his literary apoliticism “must modify any existing sense of how ‘Benito Cereno’ does cultural work for *Putnam’s*” (124–25).

But must it? The January 1853 “Introductory” essay laying out *Putnam’s* critical and cultural goals commits the magazine to promoting an American literature that will explore the “significance” of the important issues of the time:

We trust to show not only the various aspects of life, but to hint at their significance. In what paper or periodical do you now look to find the criticism of American thought upon the times? We hope to answer that question, too, by heaping upon our pages the results of the acutest observations, and of the most trenchant thought, illustrated by whatever wealth of erudition, of imagination and of experience, they may chance to possess.

Following Thompson’s method of reading backward to periodical context, we might envision Melville coming upon that statement and finding encouragement to submit fiction to a periodical that sought to support American writers who took a critical and imaginative approach to “thought upon the times.” The test of the magazine, the editors wrote, would be nothing less than its ability to reveal the meaning of contemporary life, as discovered in “the more permanently interesting shapes of story, essay, poem, and sketch.” From this perspective, “Benito Cereno” would be consistent with the periodical’s larger aims. In an essay on Cuba in that first number, the magazine articulated its opposition to slavery. We might, then, credit the periodical world of the 1850s with offering Melville an arena that welcomed work that was both formally inventive and thematically complex, even subversive.

Thompson's fourth chapter, "The 'Unbounded Treasures' of Magazine Paratexts," argues that the reader wishing to approach Melville's fiction as his contemporaries did should place it in the context of other pieces that appeared in the magazine when Melville's stories appeared. He usefully reads "Benito Cereno," published in October, November, and December 1855, alongside the December 1855 antislavery satire "About Niggers," a piece that reflects the magazine's support of progressive ideas. The fifth chapter, "Melville's 'Pilfering Disposition,'" considers the ways that Melville transformed readily available stories into such imaginative works as "Benito Cereno" and *Israel Potter*, serialized in *Putnam's* from July 1854 to March 1855. So extensively did he rework "generic characters or ideas" that we can see his "rewriting" as extending "our understanding of what magazine writing involved to include the processes of editing and reprinting" (171). Thompson contends that in writing "Benito Cereno," Melville combined "the roles of writer, editor, and even literary critic, to create out of the DNA of an earlier narrative form a new genotype" (203), which would not have been possible had he not been so intimately familiar with periodical culture.

Thompson leans on the term "embedded" to describe this familiarity, defining embeddedness not in a "socioanthropological sense," but "metaphorically, to indicate special connection to that chain of material creation" (10). He claims that an "author's embeddedness can be deep or shallow," "close or distant" (10). Clearly, Melville did not participate in the sort of deep embeddedness that promoted the career of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose patrons and supporters included, as mentioned above, Greene, William Ticknor, and John L. O'Sullivan, publisher of the *Democratic Review*. (Hawthorne and his wife named O'Sullivan, who regularly included Hawthorne's fiction in his paper, the godfather of their firstborn, Una.) Hawthorne, O'Sullivan and Greene shared a strong allegiance to the Democratic Party, connections that enhanced Hawthorne's market power as a writer and led to patronage appointments as well. As Thompson suggests, Melville's lack of deep embeddedness put him at a relative disadvantage.

Here I would briefly like to take the concept of embeddedness that Thompson so usefully deploys to see if it might have even broader applicability in reading Melville. The concept of embeddedness is complex and has a long history. As the late Bernard Barber writes in a classic 1995 essay in *Social Research*, it is linked to many different structures and systems, the central one of which is the market: "Indeed, the career of the concept of embeddedness can be seen as one long struggle to overcome, to correct, the common tendencies among economists and others to what I have called 'the absolutization of the market.'" I would suggest that the content of Melville's short fiction can be

connected to that effort “to overcome, to correct” the tendency to allow market forces to operate uncontested.

Having been effectively sidelined, or exiled, from the literary marketplace as a novelist following the failure of *Pierre*, Melville was able to participate in the professional economy of authorship through short stories, as Thompson demonstrates. He became embedded, as it were, in periodical culture, part of the new economy of professional authorship. That experience gave him new insights into embeddedness itself, enabling him to write fiction that critiques a market economy in which economic activity is embedded in other social activities. Melville depicts the way that the market economy fails those hidden within it: the maids in the paper-making plant in “Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” and legal copyists such as Bartleby, Turkey, and Nippers in “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” From this perspective, Melville’s short fictions brilliantly and critically explore embeddedness itself. He was able to engage in this critique both in the avowedly critical *Putnam’s* and the more mainstream *Harper’s New Monthly*. For instance, in a 2014 essay in *American Periodicals*, Timothy Helwig argues that in two stories from *Harper’s*, “Cook-a-Doodle-Do!” (December 1853) and “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs” (June 1854), Melville’s protagonists “fulfill a subversive critique of hegemonic marketplace values, and thus of sentimental middle-class domesticity, that threaten to replace the civic republicanism precariously preserved in the figure of the vanishing working-class benevolent patriarch.” Certainly that “subversive critique” is powerfully present in stories for *Putnam’s* as well.

Thus Melville’s far-reaching criticism of the market would seem to anticipate the insights as Karl Polanyi (1886–1964), the great theorist of embeddedness, whose “central argument” in *The Great Transformation* (1944) is that “a self-regulating economic system is a completely imaginary construction; as such, it is completely impossible to achieve or maintain,” as Fred Bloch and Margaret Somers write in the Spring 2014 issue of *Dissent*. Embedded for a time in the culture of magazine fiction, Melville worked out devastating critiques of embeddedness itself. But that should not surprise us, coming from the writer who told Hawthorne that “Dollars damn me” and who would go on to produce in *The Confidence-Man*, published by Dix and Edwards in 1857, one of the sharpest critiques of greed and materialism in American literature.

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