

# DETESTABLE AS JOINT-STOCK COMPANIES OR NATIONS: MELVILLE AND THE INTERNATIONAL

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Reviewing Loren Goldner, *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic Man—Race, Class, and the Crisis of Bourgeois Ideology in the American Renaissance Writer*. New York: Queequeg Publications, 2006.

## **Abstract**

Tally reviews Loren Goldner's *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic King*, which posits that Melville was the American Marx, exposing the crisis of bourgeois ideology in the revolutionary period around 1848. In this, Goldner follows a tradition of Marxian scholarship of Melville, notably including C.L.R. James, Michael Paul Rogin, and Cesare Casarino. Tally concludes that Goldner's argument, while interesting, is limited by its persistent belief in an American exceptionalism that prevents it from recognizing the postnational force of Melville's novels.

In 1953, in a work that is almost without peer in its elegant combination of literary analysis and political theory, C.L.R. James made this astonishing assertion: "The miracle of Herman Melville is this: that a hundred years ago in two novels, *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, and two or three stories, he painted a picture of the world in which we live, which is to this day remains unsurpassed."<sup>1</sup> In his close readings of Melville's work, James discovered the outlines of the postwar world system, an analysis of the destructive effects of nationalism (as practiced by either the left or the right), the savage exposition of twentieth-century intellectual malaise, and the thoroughgoing critique of industrial capitalism. In a key passage from the same work, James notes that

Melville is not only the representative writer of industrial civilisation. He is the only one that there is. In his great book the division and antagonisms and madnesses of an outworn civilisation are mercilessly dissected and cast aside. Nature, technology, the community of men, science and knowledge, literature and ideas are fused into a new humanism, opening a vast expansion of human capacity and human achievement. *Moby-Dick* will either be universally burnt or be universally known in every language as the first comprehensive statement in

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<sup>1</sup> James 2001, p. 3.

literature of the conditions and perspectives for the survival of Western Civilisation.”<sup>2</sup>

James’s work, arguably the first formulation of a postnational American Studies, remains among the best, and it is a touchstone for any critic interested in understanding Melville’s work and the world system today.

Melville’s work has proven especially suitable for materialist criticism. As James noted, Melville engages directly with the world of industry, of men at work, and of the relationship between historical processes and Nature. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Edward Ahearn chose *Moby-Dick* as his example *par excellence* of a work performs a critical analysis of industrial capitalism of the sort done by Marx. Indeed, for Ahearn, *Moby-Dick* stands alongside *Capital* or the *Grundrisse* as key texts in the critique of bourgeois society and the capitalist mode of production. Likewise, in “La Travail de la baleine,” Jean-Pierre Lefebvre finds “elective affinities” between Melville and Marx, and he reads Melville’s whaling epic as a mirror text to Marx’s *Capital*. In a similar vein, Cesare Casarino has read *Moby-Dick* in conjunction with the *Grundrisse* and found that the texts interweavingly form a single work, “differently dictated not only by the first modern crisis of 1857 but also by the same new conception of crisis.”<sup>3</sup> And, earlier, Michael Paul Rogin’s magisterial reading of *Moby-Dick* as an expression of the “American 1848,” with *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as a guiding thread in Melville’s own revolutionary prose, discovers a Marxian critique in the form of Melville’s sprawling novel.<sup>4</sup>

In this tradition, now comes Loren Goldner’s fascinating study, *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic Man—Race, Class, and the Crisis of Bourgeois Ideology in the American Renaissance Writer*. Goldner’s book offers a novel reading of Melville’s works, laying out an argument about the mythopoeic origins and effects of Melville’s work in relation to American Studies and the capitalist world system. Goldner argues that Melville discovered and elaborated the American analogue to the revolutionary spirit of Europe’s 1848; whereas 1848 revealed a new universal in the working class in Europe, Melville discovered the American revolutionary force in the “antemosaic” other, the Native American, African, or Polynesian man counterposed to the bourgeois norm of the Calvinist, the liberal, or the Transcendentalist – or, in the characterisations of *Moby-Dick* itself, the harpooners (Tashtego, Daggoo, and above all Queequeg) versus Ahab, Starbuck, and Ishmael, among others. In presenting his revisionist reading of Melville’s work, Goldner argues for a new approach both to Melville and to socialist thought in America.

Goldner’s argument is rich and complex, combining the exploration of myth with historical analyses of mid-nineteenth-century events, biographical information with symbolic representations, and cultural studies with a kind of atomistic or physical theory of history, in which historical movement is imagined in terms of the helix and vortex, as with particles moving through space rather than events occurring over a *longue durée*. In

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<sup>2</sup> James 2001, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Casarino 2002, p.69.

<sup>4</sup> See Ahearn 1989, Lefebvre 1990, Casarino 2002, and Rogin 1983.

elaborating his argument, Goldner provides readings of almost the entirety of Melville's oeuvre, as well as surveying key texts of Melville criticism, including James's *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* (to which Goldner devotes an entire chapter). The result is an erudite, if not altogether convincing, presentation of an original way of looking at Melville's life, times, and work.

Goldner's book is divided into three parts, each of which covers different periods in Melville's literary career and presents different arguments about Melville's cosmic mythology and politics. The first part focuses on *Moby-Dick* and the revolutionary year 1848, and more generally on the period of 1846 to 1851 during which Melville produced six books involving sea voyages. Goldner argues that this Melville represents the American counterpart to Marx in Europe, and that Melville establishes a critique of the bourgeois ideology of his day while presenting the "antemosaic cosmic man" as the figure of the revolutionary consciousness that supersedes the bourgeois ego. In the second part, Goldner analyzes what he calls "the mercurial arc of negation without collectivity," that is, Melville's anticipatory modernism in locating the spirit of negation in the interior space of the individual cut off from society and from classes. Examining Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* writings, from *Pierre* to *The Confidence-Man*, Goldner shows how Melville presents the pseudo-sacred in the devalued cosmic king, a variation on Marx's quip (in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*) about Hegel's notion of historical repetition: first time as tragedy, second time as farce. Finally, in a brief glimpse of the post-productive Melville years (1857–1891), in which Melville wrote little other than poetry and left behind the posthumous "Billy Budd" for his twentieth-century epigones, Goldner depicts a Melville who moves beyond negation, presenting a mutual destruction of the contending classes in a Miltonian world of the constant struggle against radical evil.

The crux of Goldner's argument is that Melville represents the "American Marx," operating through literary texts rather than political theory. Indeed, since Goldner wishes to emphasize the distinctiveness of the American experience in contrast to that of Europe or elsewhere, Melville is more effective than Marx. "For Melville achieved what few subsequent Marxists achieved, namely the ability to see American history without the distorting lenses of European history" (p. 23). Following the somewhat dubious but long-standing tradition in American Studies, Goldner takes for granted a kind of American exceptionalism – that is, that the experience of those in the North American colonies that became the United States, as well as that of those in the actual United States, differs from European and other experiences to such a degree that comparison is largely fruitless. Specifically, Goldner invokes the notion that America had no medieval or feudal period, no castles and kings, and thus lacked the points of reference for European social history of both the left and the right. But Goldner adds a significant feature to this assumption. He argues that, in lieu of a medieval history, Americans had a mythic and Biblical, antemosaic frame of reference, a "primordial myth drawn from the imagery of the Old Testament" (p.24). This mythic iconography would make possible the national narrative so familiar in an older version of American Studies, what Donald Pease has called the "image repertoire" of American national narrative, which connects "an exceptional national subject (American Adam) with a representative national scene (Virgin Land) and an exemplary national mission (errand into the wilderness)."<sup>5</sup> With

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<sup>5</sup> Pease 1994, p. 4.

Goldner, however, the Adamic individual is less the representative subject of the national, but the *ur*-figure of the outsider, the American Indian or Pacific Islander.

Goldner's overall argument is too complex and multifaceted for brief summary, as it will involve the mythic images of a cosmic king (that is, in a European tradition, the figures of Charlemagne up to Louis XIV, not to mention Napoleon and Louis Philippe later), a "helical-vortical" theory of history (contrasted with not only the liberal-progressive model, but also the Second Law of Thermodynamics or entropy, which had stood as a model of historical progression for Henry Adams, among others), and the strictly biographical and genealogical analysis of Melville's own family (with particular emphasis on his father's failed business as an importer of "French luxury goods"). For the sake of this review, I will focus primarily on Goldner's analysis of Melville as the American Marx, and I will look at his reading of *Moby-Dick* in the context of American Studies and world politics.

Goldner accepts the premise that American thought and culture is exceptional, that it developed in wholly different ways from its European counterparts. The assumption is Goethe's ("America, You've got it better / Than our continent. Exult! / You have no decaying castles ..."): America lacks castles and is therefore a *tabula rasa* on which to inscribe history unfettered by any traditions. In looking at Melville's own time, Goldner argues that the American Romantics (whom Goldner folds together with the Transcendentalists) differed from the European Romantics insofar as they lacked a feudal past from which to draw inspiration; instead, the Transcendentalists turned to mysticism, primitivism, and Orientalism. Goldner sees this turn as essentially a recapitulation of the older Puritan errand into the wilderness, which reshaped the imaginary geography of the continent as an unspoiled Adamic or Edenic wilderness. In Goldner's view of the Calvinists, the "Mosaic" world they create imputed the Adamic innocence to Indians, African slaves, and eventually Polynesians.<sup>6</sup> Goldner further suggests that the Americans lacked the statist institutions that enabled European intellectuals to become tied to civil service; this, in turn, allowed American intellectuals to operate as "marginal men." These factors explain the differences in the experiences of 1848, which in Europe produced a kind of Marxian socialism while also effecting a "dual revolution" whereby the ostensibly working-class parties completed the socio-economic revolutions of the turn-of-the-century's bourgeoisie (p. 117). In the United States, both *avant garde* aesthetics and socialism would have to wait until the twentieth century. But in Melville a different kind of working class, one made up of Queequegs, takes a radically alternative view of reality, resisting the bourgeois ideologies of the Ahab, the Ishmaels, or the Starbucks. In Goldner's view, the unique circumstances of the American experience bring forth a wholly different type of class struggle, one in which the seemingly primitive Queequegs actively resist the technological and capitalist system by exhibiting a more natural relation to the cosmos. The American 1848 thus involves not barricades and brickbats, but the natural supersession of the work/leisure divide in their inactivity – that is, in their very unwillingness to rise up against the Ahab.

Goldner's book is well researched, drawing from a vast library of sources, including works of Eastern philosophy and religion, French political history, Marxist

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<sup>6</sup> Goldner does not examine how the reading of Ishmael as an Adamic figure functions to make *Moby-Dick* itself a national narrative, overlooking its postnational or international forces. See Tally 2007.

theory, American Studies, literary criticism, and natural science. However, it seems somewhat behind the times in certain areas, lacking any mention of Melville criticism written after the mid-1980s, for instance. For example, Goldner takes no notice of the large and growing body of work on Melville's complex take on imperialism or the world market. Also, in specifically couching his argument in a discourse of American exceptionalism, Goldner must ignore the increasingly transnational or postnational approaches to Melville and to American literature more generally.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Goldner's vaguely transhistorical ideas of the cosmic king or the antemosaic man draw heavily on a mystical tradition that often seems at odd with the more properly historical project involving the revolutions of 1848 and the prospect for social movements today. Fascinating though Goldner's presentation of ideas in *Herman Melville* is, these drawbacks make the argument seem rather untenable at times.

Goldner's conclusions involve a rather bizarre mixture of nationalism and mysticism, as the revolutionary working class (figured as the Queequegs of the world) is depicted as an almost prehistoric force from below, or from athwart, the capitalist world system. As Goldner sums up the first part of his argument,

the American socialist intelligentsia which has, understandably, compared its own situation with its European political and cultural counterparts and found that situation wanting, has to date misunderstood the possibilities inherent in the specificities of American historical experience. The "Mosaic" consciousness of the bourgeois ego in the United States, in contrast to Europe, had no intermediary "feudal" imagery interposed between it and the "antemosaic" realities of the "Queequegs" and the cosmic apprehension of nature available to the Queequegs. And because of the weakness of the statist traditions in the United States, the "Queequegs" have not been enlisted in "socialist" projects alien to their own tasks. That this has left them susceptible, on occasion, to enlistment in even more retrograde ideologies may in fact be the case, but when a socialist movement finally worthy of the potentials of the "antemosaic" realities of American history finally comes into existence, it may finally show that the Adamic myth present in the founding of America was not so much an escape from history (the latter understood in the European sense) as an anticipation of a completion of the history contained in the prophecies of a cosmic man in the ancient Near East, the archetypes of modern primitivism and Orientalism, in the beginning. (p. 118)

Such a view, from the perspective of a historical materialism, is disturbing, and a political movement based on such mystical foundation is much closer to eschatological Messianism than any meaningful form of socialism.

Not helping matters for Goldner is his somewhat scattershot approach to the actual reading of Melville's fiction. Goldner places an heavy emphasis on certain key terms and phrases that appear to have little of the intended force in Melville's original usages. Notably, Goldner's infatuation with the concept of the *antemosaic*, a word used only once in all of *Moby-Dick*, and even then used to mean something like "very old" or "from time immemorial," seems utterly misplaced. In the chapter devoted to "The Fossil

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Dimock 1991, Sanborn 1998, and Dimock and Buell 2007 .

Whale,” Melville uses the term along with “pre-adamite” and “antechronical,” indicating that the whale existed before time itself, “for time began with man.” In contemplating an actual fossil, that is, Melville expatiates on the timelessness of the whale, who “having been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Goldner makes much (too much, in my view) of Melville’s metaphors involving royalty, such as the many references to Pharaohs, Emperors, Czars, and so on. Melville’s interest clearly does not lie in establishing a king, cosmic<sup>9</sup> or otherwise. His hyperbolic prose is most frequently employed to grapple with the representational problem of the Whale itself, the grandest living thing in the known world, as well as the prodigious industry of whaling, a global enterprise with a multinational working class and a deadly combination of precapitalist hunting/gathering and heavy industrial commodity production. Indeed, Melville often employs such language whimsically or ironically, and the grandiose diction is sometimes mobilized for a bit of tongue-in-cheek humour, as when Melville includes the universe’s “suburbs” in his comprehensive sweep of “all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs.”<sup>10</sup> Goldner frequently takes any allusions to royalty or empire all too seriously or even literally.

In a like manner, Goldner occasionally overstates his premises, thus casting his overall argument into further doubt. For instance, Goldner’s insists that Melville himself was a *grand bourgeois*, an “exiled royalty” (borrowing a once-used phrase from *Moby-Dick*); Goldner cites Melville’s two grandfathers’ Revolutionary War heroism, and to his father’s business as “an importer of French luxury goods,” and some genealogical evidence of Allan Melvill’s ancestry in Scottish royalty. Such a view of Melville’s class status is somewhat misleading, however. It is true that Melville’s ancestors were as close to aristocracy as might have been found in the United States after the Revolution, but Melville’s life was an example of the precariousness of such class status. His father, despite his noble lineage,<sup>11</sup> is the very image of *le petit bourgeoisie*, and his business failures when Melville was still a child forced the family’s move from the grand *bourg* of New York City to the prosaic, small, upstate town of Albany.<sup>12</sup> To claim that Melville’s family resembled the grand bourgeoisie of Europe is to miss the point of the economic crises of the nineteenth century, an epoch in which one’s fortunes depended little on name, reputation, or legacy, and much on forces well beyond one’s ken. Such forces, like the white whale, were “inscrutable” to most of those who felt their consequences. And, it is worth noting, such forces were persistently transnational – affecting Americans and Europeans alike – as Marx so clearly demonstrates in the Bastiat and Carey sketch at the beginning of the *Gründrisse*.

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<sup>8</sup> Melville 1988, p. 447.

<sup>9</sup> The word “cosmic” does not appear in *Moby-Dick*.

<sup>10</sup> See Melville 1988, p. 456.

<sup>11</sup> Goldner follows the excellent study of Melville’s *subversive genealogy* in Rogin 1983.

<sup>12</sup> The opening scene in Hershel Parker’s biography depicts the move as a sneaking out in the dark of night in order to avoid his creditors. See Parker 1996, pp. 1–21.

Goldner also repeats the canard about how *Moby-Dick* was a thoroughgoing failure commercially and critically. Although Melville would have preferred even greater sales and acclaim for *Moby-Dick* (and what author wouldn't?), by the standards of the day and of Melville's own publishing history, *Moby-Dick* was relatively successful, if by no means a bestseller. Especially in the United States, it received largely positive reviews, and its poor reception in England has been blamed on severe bowdlerisation and editorial errors – most notoriously, the omission of the Epilogue, which meant that the story ended without the apparent survival of a narrator to tell it. Had *Moby-Dick* been the failure that some assert, it is rather unlikely that publishers would have eagerly commissioned and published *Pierre*.<sup>13</sup> This book, not *Moby-Dick*, is the commercial flop that drove Melville into the world of magazine writing, as publishers were not willing to risk another disaster; but even so, Melville enjoyed the highest salary paid to writers for *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* for such works as "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno."<sup>14</sup> The supposed "failure" of *Moby-Dick* says much more about how canon-forming intellectuals in the twentieth century wished to establish a key work as revolutionary and as outside of the mainstream than it does about Melville's own relationship to the readership of his day.

However, the most egregious problem with Goldner's study lies in an assumption, rather than its method or conclusions. Goldner accepts without much question the myth of the Puritanical origins of American civilisation, never mind that such a view must ignore not only the non-English influences of the colonial period, but the thoroughly non-Puritan origins within the English colonial history of North America. As Sacvan Bercovitch has pointed out, even the colony of Massachusetts was not Puritan by 1690, and few other parts of what would become the United States were even remotely influenced by puritanical Calvinism.<sup>15</sup> Of course, the myth of Puritan origins of America became entrenched in the popular historiography and literature of the 1830s and 1840s, and it has been a cornerstone of American Studies in the era following World War II. But to accept uncritically such a false notion as fact – regardless of its ideological power in the popular discourses of nineteenth-century public life or twentieth-century American Studies – inevitably hurts Goldner's otherwise interesting comments. By accepting the basic premise of American exceptionalism, Goldner ignores more recent interventions into the field of American Studies, including those with a more transnational focus.<sup>16</sup> This, in turn, leads him to ignore the degree to which the American experience was *always* an international experience, with transatlantic and Pacific influences as well as the cultural, political, and economic factors operating across borders to determine the shape of life in and outside of the United States. By defining his study of Melville and Melville himself as distinctively and exceptionally *American*, Goldner presents a Melville *and* an America that are not very true.

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<sup>13</sup> The English publisher, John Murray, in fact turned down the *Pierre* manuscript.

<sup>14</sup> See Sealts 1987, p. 484.

<sup>15</sup> Bercovitch 1991, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of this, see Tally 2006.

This is all the more lamentable because of the insistently postnational program Melville establishes in *Moby-Dick* and elsewhere. Melville reviles all national prejudices and patriotic homilies, as he embraces the same internationalism that Marx and C.L.R. James espouse. In *Mardi*, Melville identified his antinationalism specifically in relation to the international working class, insisting that sailors are true cosmopolitans who speak a postnational patois known to all workers in the trade (“You sink your clan; down goes your nation, and you speak a world’s language”); in *Redburn*, Melville asserts that Americans should extinguish all national likes and dislikes, for “We are not a nation, so much as a world.”<sup>17</sup> In a passage from *Moby-Dick* quoted (actually, misquoted) by Goldner, Melville announces that “Men may seem detestable as joint-stock companies or nations ... but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature.”<sup>18</sup> What Melville is celebrating is not the human ideal in a mythic, mystical, Romantic or Platonic form, but the thoroughly *embodied* spirit, “that immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves,” that allows him to ascribe “high attributes” and “tragic graces” to “the meanest mariners, renegades and castaways.” This is the Melville extolled by James, who so recognised in Melville a fellow traveler and citizen of the world that he provided the following dedication to his book: “For my son, Nob, who will be 21 year old in 1970, by which time I hope he and his generation will have left behind them forever all the problems of nationality.” Clearly such problems persist, not least of which is the view that a postnational writer be circumscribed by a particularly nationalist tradition of literary studies. Melville is not the American Marx, discovering a uniquely American basis for cultural and political theory; like Marx – a German-born thinker working in London, a scholar of the classics, an expert on French political theory and British economic thought, a writer who urged “workers of the world” to unite – Melville established a view of the world not tied to nations or nationalism, but rooted in the historical materialism of men at work.

However, despite these criticisms, Goldner’s *Herman Melville* deserves praise for its bold argument and fascinating juxtapositions of various thinkers in relation to Melville’s *oeuvre*. I believe Goldner’s is a worthy contribution to Melville Studies, American Studies, and Marxist literary criticism, and it should provoke further thought in years to come. Goldner’s recasting of the old Ishmael vs. Ahab arguments in terms of the far more interesting Queequeg vs. Bourgeoisie antagonism is itself worth thinking about, and I look forward to seeing what directions such future work may lead.

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<sup>17</sup> Melville 1970, p. 13; Melville 1969, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup> Melville 1988, p.126; Goldner accidentally inserts the word “as” between “seem” and “detestable,” thus making it seem as though Melville were comparing men to joint-stock companies and nations, rather than showing how men are debased (detestable) when *part of* joint-stock companies and nations.



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