

Prof. David Robbins, Ph.D., thesis opponent

B.A. thesis evaluation

Martin Sedláček

Interpreting Narrative Techniques in *Moby-Dick*

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This thesis significantly exceeds the requirements for a B.A. thesis and approaches more closely in content and level of analysis to an M.A. thesis. In recognition of and out of respect for that fact, I list here the following concerns, which I would have if this were an M.A. thesis:

1) In a consideration of a major contributor to, and a major work of, American Romanticism, it is a long jump from Friedrich Schlegel to Herman Melville. Melville needs to be viewed in the context of and under the direct influence of at least two prior and at least equally important contributors to the shaping and construction of the American Romantic tradition and to the uniquely American genre of the “romance”: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne. To the extent that Melville did not already know Emerson’s work, it was brought significantly to his attention by Hawthorne, whose detailed knowledge of Emerson’s project and whose powerful and direct influence upon Melville during the composition of *Moby-Dick* and afterward are beyond dispute. Among Hawthorne’s influences on Melville was his introduction to Melville of the “romance,” a species of literary work identified by Emerson in 1843 as embodying the aims outlined in his “American Scholar” address of 1837, which is generally considered the literary manifesto of American Romanticism. At the moment of his intersection with Melville in 1850, Hawthorne was immersed in the composition of his three “great” romances—*The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *The Blithedale Romance*—and issues connected with this composition provided much of the substance of Hawthorne’s literary intercourse with Melville. One of the central characteristics of the “romance,” as understood by Emerson and Hawthorne—as well as a central characteristic of all of Emerson’s writing—was an emphasis on developing the reader’s sense of her/his “freedom”/free will and autonomy through encouraging in him/her a habit of exercising “choice” in the interpretation and even the creation of meaning in the language and narrative content deployed in the work of the “romancer.”

2) The glancing reference to the performative strain in American culture and literature should be either explained and developed—including, it is to be hoped, by reference to Melville’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857)—or dropped from mention here, as should the even less supported (if by no means incorrect) association of Melville’s work (p. 53 of the thesis) with the moral/philosophical genealogy of American pragmatism. It is always problematical to include *apercus*, however true and/or insightful, in a work in which they cannot be given the explanatory and analytic attention they need and deserve.

3) One would like to see the invocation of Carolyn Porter’s very fruitful concept of “double-voiced discourse” (p. 55 of the thesis) related much more fully to the closely-related (if not identical) Emersonian/Hawthornian/Jamesian practice of “dissociative rhetoric” ubiquitously and characteristically deployed in the works of “American Renaissance” writers and of those in what Richard Poirier refers to as the “tribe of Waldo” (the “Emersonian” strain) in American literature, extending well beyond the chronological boundaries (whatever one understands those to be) of the “American Renaissance”—and certainly deep into the “Melvillean revival.” (p. 10 of the thesis).

As a bachelor's thesis, however, this outstanding work deserves to be adjudged "1, vyborne."

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne."

Signed:

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If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at [drobbins22@netzero.net](mailto:drobbins22@netzero.net).