Melville and/as Myth

The artist is capable of myth when men are capable of reverence. It is simply a question of the dimension that men are prepared to give to their lives

Charles Olson,
«The Mystery of What Happens When It Happens»

These are not easy times for academic publishing, at least in the humanities. As university studies are increasingly oriented toward the working place and ever less toward the development of critical thinking, so also the disciplines where critical thinking has traditionally been most cultivated and encouraged are the ones least qualified, according to the emerging utilitarian criteria, to be financed. I speak of Italy. There is less demand, in the intellectual “market place,” for research, reflection, and critical response that deals with, let alone challenges, the underlying motivations of policy, on all levels. Unable to defend themselves in the logic of cost accounting, the humanities risk being ghettoized academically, like an old, unproductive relative, living on in a small, upper room to haunt the market-oriented university laboratory and showplace. Although in Italy, in spite of the rapid privatization of various state economic holdings, most of the existing universities are public, which is to say state owned and, arguably, subject to a modicum of democratic control, they cannot help being more and more influenced by managerial logic and criteria. The recent introduction of “credits,” based on the American university system, is only one of the more evident manifestations of the cultural bookkeeping that permits the Italian university system to — as current political jargon has it — enter into Europe.

But I was speaking of academic publishing, and my purpose, as guest editor, was simply to apologize to the contributors to this issue for the delay in bringing their work to light. Igittur, too, has had to cut back to a sole issue per annum, and this took
place between the time when I launched a call for papers on
“Melville and/as myth,” to which a number of scholars
generously responded with proposals, and the deadline for
acceptance. My morose reflection on the fate of the humanities
has perhaps been moved by what I consider the high quality of
the essays submitted, as well as by the strictures upon this fine
scholarly journal.

A call for papers is a net cast. Ours was cast through Ishmail,
the e-mail list devoted to Melville studies, as well as through
pertinent internet sites and the bulletin of AISNA (Associazione
Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani), and I thank them for their
hospitality. The result is the issue you have before you, which I
am proud to present. Proud because of the quality of the
“catch,” clearly, but also because the issue is — how to say? —
ecumenical: the authors are four women and two men, from five
different countries. They range from graduate students to
mature Melvilleans. This is because our choice of what to
publish was uninfluenced by any consideration except
pertinence to the theme — Melville and/as myth — and the
intrinsic value of the contributions.

Allow me to introduce the authors.

Laurie Robertson-Lorant, teacher of English and American
Literature and holder of a chair in Creative Writing at St. Mark’s
School in Southborough, Massachusetts, is a scholar who has
written extensively on Melville. Her Melville persona poems
are striking for the sensitivity with which she seeks to feel her
way into her subject matter. Besides being good in themselves,
they help us to understand the strategy she pursues in her
biography of Melville, reviewed in the «Letture» (readings)
section of the present issue. She relives the Melville myth by
means of a meticulous study of and reflection on the prime
sources. Here, from her assiduous readings and pondering, she
offers some convincing and well-crafted poetic recreations of
biographical might-have-beens, that the scientific confines of
her biographical study necessarily excluded.

When I cast this net, I secretly hoped to snare John Gretchko,
given his long-standing interest in Melville’s concern with
myth. The author of two books on Melville, Melvillean
Ambiguities (1990) and Melvillean Loomings (1992), Gretchko
is a well-known presence in Melville studies, somewhere off-
center with respect to traditional, discipline-oriented academics.
He delves with a canny sense of orientation among arcane
Melville sources. His astronomical reading of two characters in *Moby-Dick* is both engaging and convincing, and, above all, highly original.

At the outset, I had no intention of including three essays on *Pierre*, but there is a great deal of interest around for this romance. Linnie Blake is a Lecturer in American Writing at The Manchester Metropolitan University in England, and as a scholar pursues all sorts of interests besides Melville. Here she deals, in a sensitive, historically well-grounded essay, with the nature myth in *Pierre*.

The second essay on *Pierre* is by Jochen Brandt, a German university student of United States literature at the University of Hamburg, as well as a free-lance writer for the newspapers. Here he takes up the role of fate in *Pierre*, succeeding fully in his ambition to bring new light to bear on this problematic romance.

And the third essay is by Susanne Huber, who, at the time of submission, was a graduate student in the English Department of the University of Zurich. Her doctoral thesis addresses questions of genre in Shakespeare. Her research interests are literary theory and psychoanalysis, which provide her with interpretative tools that she applies in her essay here, a probing, well-calibrated study of the presence of the Oedipal myth in *Pierre*.

Inger H. Dalsgaard, Assistant Professor of American Studies at the Department of English, University of Aarhus, Denmark, has written on Mary Shelley and Thomas Pynchon, as well as Melville. In addition to these authors, her research and teaching interests include science and technology. Evidence of both these interests are to be found in her essay on “Tartarus of Maids,” which situates Melville’s tale very convincingly in its historical context, especially with regard to the ideological constructs regarding women in the New-England factory system and their real conditions.

Annalisa Goldoni teaches American Literature at the Gabriele D’Annunzio University, Pescara, Italy. She has published in the field of romanticism (C. B. Brown, Melville, Poe) and on contemporary poetry and theater. She has translated R. Creeley, R. Duncan, G. Bowering. Her main interests are space, physicality, and non-verbal communication. Among her recent publications: *Dante: ‘For use, now’* (2000), co-edited with Andrea Mariani, and, forthcoming, the Proceedings of a Seminar.
on censorship, *Le lettere rubate*, co-edited with Carlo Martinez. The unpublished texts by Charles Olson — “The Mystery of What Happens When it Happens” (an essay) and “Portrait” (a single-page project for a never-written book — will be of great interest to both Melville and Olson scholars.

The issue closes with three reviews and a report on recent and future Melville events. The first is actually a long review article, dealing with books on Melville published between 1993 and 1999. Although it is not customary to review books that are not fresh off the presses, the present choice may be justified by the fact that these ones, to my knowledge, have not been reviewed in Italy. The second review is a brief presentation of the new journal of Melville studies, *Leviathan*. The third is a problematic discussion by Ludovico Isoldo of a no-less problematic book by Francis Shor on radical and reform politics around the turn of the 20th century.

I am very grateful to the director and the editors of *Igitur* for inviting me to look after this monographic issue.

**GORDON POOLE**