

**Testimonies on Herman Melville:  
Review of Jay Parini, *The Passages of Herman Melville***

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**Jay Parini, *The Passages of Herman Melville***

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Jay Parini's novel of the life of the author of *Moby-Dick* (1851) is described on the dust-jacket as "stirring" and "mesmerising", providing for the first time a "clear view" of a great writer who, as a man, was both sympathetic and maddening. Parini's strategy to achieve this paradoxical effect is to write from several different, equally convincing perspectives, managing to reconcile the biographical pact with truthfulness and the flights of the imagination proper to the novelistic domain. The novel thus falls squarely into the category of neo-Victorian bio-fiction, which deals with real historical figures while inventing some of the contexts in which they find themselves and supplementing the facts already known about them.

As a successful poet, novelist and critic, Parini has experience in both fictional and non-fictional genres. Axinn Professor of English at Middlebury College, Vermont, and visiting Fellow at Christchurch College, Oxford, as well as a one-time Fellow at the University of London, he is the author of biographies of Robert Frost and John Steinbeck, while his studies of the lives of Walter Benjamin and Tolstoy have taken the form of novels instead. Much as Tracy Chevalier's *Burning Bright* (2007) concentrates on just over a year in the life of William Blake, Parini's *The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year* (1990) distils the life of another literary genius and contemporary of Herman Melville into the final year, 1910, of the writer's life.

Unlike the Tolstoy book, *The Passages of Herman Melville* covers the whole span of Melville's life, looking back to his birth into the Melvill

family in 1819 and closing with his death, aged 70, in 1889, in bed beside his wife Lizzie. Leitmotifs of creativity, madness and death, juxtaposed with ones of derogatory criticism, lack of recognition and artistic desperation, run through this novel, with Parini writing simultaneously as novelist and critic. The poem recited by the English officer Jack Chase, whom Melville met on board the American military vessel, the *United States*, is a parody of the children's poem 'Who Killed Cock Robin?' (p. 237), but also functions as a serious warning to be thick-skinned enough to take criticism of one's own work without bursting a blood vessel over it. Disappointing negative reviews dogged Melville, following his first successes, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), and understandably, he found it hardest to forgive those critics who were his friends and should have supported his work. The "ignominious death" referred to on the dust-jacket seems directed at Melville's apparent failure to produce any great works in the last years of his life. But in his dotage, Melville was no different from other great writers who were his contemporaries, such as Wordsworth or Tennyson, both of whom lived a decade longer filled with little poetic activity. Like Wordsworth and *The Prelude* (1850), Melville produced a work that became widely known only posthumously, namely *Billy Budd*, and certain others of his works, notably *Moby-Dick*, were revalued shortly before his death and afterwards.

"To describe *Wolf Hall* [...] as a historical novel is like calling *Moby-Dick* a book on fishing", says John Burnside on the Man Booker Prize winner for 2009 by Hilary Mantel, regarding the innovations in the genre of the historical novel (Burnside 2009). In these postmodern times, historiography, biography, and many bio-fictions share common ground: all attest to notions of truth without ever being able to truly achieve that elusive ideal. In recent decades it has been recognised that biography is hardly always synonymous with fact; indeed, as the genre has reached best-seller status in the hands of writers like Michael Holroyd and Richard Holmes, it has witnessed a growing rapprochement with fiction, just as fiction itself has often formed a symbiosis with factual life-writing. In Mantel's novel, Thomas Cromwell tells his own story, transformed from villain to hero, but Parini makes no such allowance for his subject, whose life-story is told by others rather than by himself in terms of a quasi 'posthumous autobiography'. There may be an element here on Parini's part of what David Ellis calls "the modern biographer's sceptical attitude to the subject's

own testimony” (Ellis 2000: 8), but Parini’s “Acknowledgments” (pp. 453-454) specifically stress that “This is a novel, not a literary biography” (p. 453). Parini has used the novel form to give free rein to his imagination, filling in the blank spaces of historical knowledge: “I made up many things [...] very little is known about Lizzie Melville, so I made her up” (pp. 453-454).

So the fictionally developed wife of Herman Melville offers us one of the text’s three perspectives. Lizzie’s voice provides a framework, a beginning and ending for the novel. In the first person, she speaks in alternating chapters from chapters 1 to 17. Accordingly, she has nine chapters, although at around a mere dozen pages per chapter, her ‘contribution’ comes to only a quarter of the whole book. Her accounts are not chronological but focus on various aspects of the couple’s marital and family life.

By contrast, the intervening sections are chronological and move inexorably from Melville’s first passage as “The Green Boy”, where he was “almost twenty” (p. 18) and making his first voyage on the *St Lawrence* to Liverpool and back in June 1839, to his last voyage to Bermuda in 1888, and eventually his passage into death. The word “passed” is used to refer to his father’s death when Herman was aged twelve (p. 19), thus the “passages” of the title refer to voyages, deaths (including the early deaths of his two sons), as well as the sense of passage or development from one state to another. The third-person omniscient perspective of these longer sections allows the reader not only to know what Melville was doing, for example, in the South Seas or in a cave in Palestine, but to enter into his discussions on literature with like-minded individuals and access his very thoughts on aesthetic matters. Thus these sections combine the chronological development of the events of his life with the growth of his mind or artistic persona and show how the adventures feed into whatever he wrote, in terms of both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’.

But perhaps the real alpha and omega framing device of the novel, the third perspective, is made up of the quotations or epigraphs which head each chapter, a favourite neo-Victorian exegetic and paratextual technique since at least John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969). They are mostly, but not all, from Melville’s own works. A quotation from *Pierre* (1852) heads the novel: “*Deep, deep, and still deep and deeper must we go, if we would find out the heart of a man; [...]*” (p. 1). Another comes at the

end of the last chapter: “*The most mighty of nature’s laws is this, that out of Death she brings Life*” (p. 451). Each epigraph is relevant to the chapter it introduces and, as they represent the distillation of the quintessence of Melville’s thinking in his great works, they tie in with the discussions of literature which we find in the chronological chapters. Here, Parini has used the works in a two-fold way to illuminate the life: as wisdom and as works-in-progress, both aspects hidden within the mind of the writer until translated into ideas and hence into words and verbal structures.

It is precisely this inner life which is the objective of biography, especially literary biography, for according to Paula Backscheider, the modern fascination with a writer’s psychology constitutes a large part of the genre’s appeal: “Because writers are believed to have secret, creative, even fantasy-rich imaginations, they seem to offer unusual opportunities to understand the interior, subjective life” (Backscheider 2001: 104) To see through the surfaces, which Leon Edel summed up as the rationalisations, the postures, the self-delusions and self-deceptions of biographers’ subjects (Edel 1984: 28-29), a biographer has less licence than the novelist to enter the mind. When the subject is a writer, the biographer has to contend, not only with the private documents, but also with the creative works, at the same time resisting the ‘biographical fallacy’ of working forward from the life to the work, or, with similar pitfalls, the opposite, the working back from writings to life by setting up equivalences between fictional characters and real life people. Ellis puts his finger on the problem:

All biography is a way of thinking about other people and that is a process virtually impossible in our culture without the use of expressions which imply knowledge of their states of mind. What makes literary biography unusual is the assumption of most of its authors that there is privileged access to those states through their subjects’ creative works. (Ellis 2000: 13)

Because Parini has cast his study as a novel and not as a biography, there can be no reproach concerning any licence in conjecturing what Melville’s thoughts and feelings might have been. Since Melville’s wife seems to have rarely been party to his thoughts, it makes sense to separate her accounts and the epigraphs, but nonetheless they are always interconnected. For example,

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it is telling that Lizzie should have referred to her husband's most intimate work as "that repulsive *Pierre*" (p. 6); thus she damns herself from the very beginning, and does so just when she thinks she is laying bare the truth, not about herself, but about her "shouting, sulking and drinking" famous husband (p. 7).

Parini's 'invention', Lizzie Melville, is far from a wooden character. She is either duplicitous, for in the same breath with which she criticises Herman, she says she found him "irresistible" and that she loved him "to the end" (pp. 8, 33), or, like the reader, she is in thrall to Herman Melville, recognising, at the same time, that he is or was infuriating in many ways. She begins by asserting her own rights and lamenting her deprivations: "I had become, in middle age in the midst of marriage to Herman Melville, a captive. And I wanted my freedom" (p. 3). Looking back to the early decades of their marriage, she admits that she thought she "had found my very own Charles Dickens" (p. 4). So one would expect her to feel privileged and grateful to share her life with an exceptional man. Yet far from being the Victorian wife cast as 'the angel in the house', she appears more like the New Woman, wanting her independence and own purpose in life.

It is worth noting at this point that the novel inevitably touches on themes dear to Victorian hearts, like the Woman Question or Evolution, and because Melville was born within a few months of Queen Victoria in 1819, most readers will likely consider Parini's novel 'neo-Victorian'. However, there are two problems with this in a strict sense: firstly, not everyone agrees that nineteenth-century American writers or events taking place in American territory as opposed to the British Commonwealth can be included under the umbrella of 'neo-Victorian'; and secondly, this novel is not so obviously neo-Victorian as those texts employing either a parallel contemporary story, such as A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), or else an evident contemporary perspective, like Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. However, I think that Parini does nod in the direction of the early twentieth century in important matters like the ongoing legacy of Melville, with references to Melville's future re-evaluation, and predictions and prognostications to that effect.

These provide scant comfort for Lizzie, though. She demands her independence because she is an educated woman and the daughter of the chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court (p. 6), but she can never

have her dream – not because she depends upon her husband, but because he depends upon her and her family's money. Nor is it just Herman who is saved time and again by loans from his father-in-law, Judge Shaw, but Lizzie further has to contend with Herman's mother and four sisters, who all come to live with them. On the mother-in-law, Lizzie could not be more damning, but also damns herself in her complacent sense of her own physical attractiveness in contrast to Herman's mother's "ugly moustache" (p. 54). She refuses to respond to the woman's apparent hatred of her with self-righteous moral superiority: "One should *not* respond in these situations." (p. 5, original emphasis). The first chapter ends with Herman striking Lizzie, who loses her footing and falls down the stairs (p. 14). Despite Herman's contrition, later, in her second instalment, she lets it slip that she had told the local priest that Herman had deliberately pushed her down the stairs (p. 62). In 'Dark Angel', chapter 12 from the alternate perspective, which focuses on Herman's infatuation with Nathaniel Hawthorne, Lizzie is described as "sullen, even morose", not speaking to her husband for extended periods (p. 268), and their marital relations are depicted as unsatisfactory (p. 275). For her own part, Lizzie jokingly celebrates her husband's sexual prowess: "In Herman's case, I doubted that he would *ever* relax about sexual matters. After death, he would rattle his coffin for some years. Woodlawn would tremble!" (216, original emphasis) Though never suggested outright, there exists the possibility that she suffered from post-natal depression; in any case, it is made clear that she never fitted in with the Melville clan.

If Parini gives Lizzie's first instalment dramatic impact with the domestic violence motif, her second instalment is no less dramatic and tragic as it ends with the suicide of their elder son Malcolm. This will come as a shock to any reader not acquainted with Melville's biography. Parini uses the event to deal with the subject of homoeroticism. As Lizzie enters Malcolm's bedroom to find his friend Bertie naked and asleep, she is totally unsuspecting (p. 109). She remains so even when Malcolm reads *Typee* and asks his mother about love and about his father, obviously in a quandary about his natural urges and about the conventions of the society of the day (p. 115).

In her accounts, Lizzie then returns to the 1840s, before she met Herman. Parini takes advantage to continue the discussion on literature, writers and their personae and the critics. Chapter 7 deals with the famous

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visit of Charles Dickens to New York in 1842, and Parini brings it to life by having Dickens visit the home of Lizzie's father, the eminent judge. Lizzie's false modesty belies the fact that she prides herself on her knowledge of literature: "Helen [Herman's sister] arrived a week early, her suitcase full of books and magazines. (She was my elder and her knowledge of literature was intimidating, although I managed to hold up my end of most conversations.)" (p. 163) Although everyone is charmed by the creator of *Little Nell*, Dickens's vanity and concern with copyright law lead to taunts and teasing. Lizzie's pointed comment, "It struck me that Mr Dickens had a finer turn of speech in his novels than in person" (p. 170), allows Parini to turn on the English writer the same spotlight he uses on Melville regarding the life-work interface of the artist.

Through Lizzie's recording of conversations between her husband as a young man and the editor Evert Duyckinck, we get to know Herman's views on the great American writers of the day, Longfellow, Emerson and Hawthorne, and learn of his admiration for the latter over and above the other two (p. 255). Lizzie's own preference for Catharine Maria Sedgewick rather than her own husband's work – "she knew how to catch and compel your interest in a short space. My husband had not always done that" (318) – reveals her inability to recognise qualities that later would be more valued, as her assessment of *Moby-Dick* likewise demonstrates. She suggests that Melville ruins "a straightforward adventure" yarn with "hundreds of pages of blather in the guise of metaphysics" and "endless facts", so as to produce an "encyclopedic" tome of "everything" possibly knowable "about whales and whaling, the science of cetology" (p. 320, original emphasis).

Nonetheless Lizzie recognises that her husband was a great raconteur, even if, in his enthusiasm, he would often spit food across the room (p. 321). Her conversation and turns of phrase are occasionally witty, perhaps in emulation of him, though Parini makes it sound as if it is second-hand humour, as in her aside, "Duyckinck himself was something of a gadfly and would attend the opening of an envelope if invited" (p. 386). Parini employs Lizzie's inveterate eavesdropping habit (p. 323) as a means of divulging secrets, which he cleverly connects to the theme of writing and criticism. In particular Lizzie dismisses as spurious adverse critiques of *Moby-Dick*, which harangue the novel for its lack of realism on the grounds that the sinking of the *Pequod* with all its crew would have left no one to tell the story (p. 332) – a dismissive view prompted by the failure to include the

epilogue in some published versions. If not always sympathetically portrayed, Lizzie is at least to be commended for overtly backing Herman in the face of the bad reviews: “Stand by your whale!” (p. 331) While she still disapproves of the incorporated research and technical detail, she does intuit that *Moby-Dick* has the power to assure Melville’s “immortal” reputation (p. 442).

Within the chronological, third-person omniscient sections of the “passages” of Melville’s life, Parini chooses not to deviate from the material available in biographies and the writer’s works themselves. As he states in the ‘Acknowledgements’: “if I say that Melville took a steamer to England in 1856, then he will have done so.” However, he continues: “But there are places where a conventional biographer cannot go, and for this we have fiction” (p. 453). The strands running through the material which Parini exploits for structural unity are unconventionality and madness; sexuality and trauma; story-telling and real life feeding into fiction, along with meditations on writing.

In line with nineteenth-century’s interests in ancestry, heredity, and origins, especially after Francis Galton’s work *Hereditary Genius* became popular in the 1870s, Parini has Herman carry out a self-assessment, in which he insists that “he was strong and intelligent, widely read, a descendant of important men and women who had helped to shape American history” (p. 179). But he is a descendant of theirs for better or worse. On the one hand, his unconventionality appears as an inherited strain of the “revolutionary vein” in his grandfather Thomas Melvill, who participated in the Boston Tea Party: “That single act defined a life, and the lives of those following in his steps, the sons and grandsons of Thomas Melvill” (p. 46) On the other hand, that same genetic line associates Melville with mental instability, his father having sunk into a kind of madness before his death, as Melville recalls when witnessing the suicide of a sailor dying of venereal disease on his first voyage (p. 45). The novel’s other cases of madness involve monomaniacal sea-captains, who were to feed into the portrait of Captain Ahab: Captain Pease of the *Acushnet* (p. 77); Captain Henry Ventom of the *Lucy Ann* (pp. 175-176); and Captain Sherman of the *Parker*, who fastened his boat to a whale and went down with it in one of the sea-stories of Pastor Samuel C. Damon in Oahu, Hawaii. The latter was careful to provide a survivor or two to tell the story: “This tale brought tears to the pastor’s eyes as he retold it for the umpteenth

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time, and the narrative sunk deep into Herman's memory. It was a kernel that, perhaps, would grow into a full-blown tree one day, even a forest" (p. 227).

If Malcolm's previously mentioned suicide is read as a reaction to rejection by his friend Bertie (p. 120), then again, the theme of homosexual love can be seen under the light of genetic pre-determinism, although this remains a thorny subject, even today. Melville's relations with Toby Greene are dealt with in the ironically entitled chapter 4 'The Voyage Out' and chapter 6 'Almost Paradise' and his love for John Troy in chapter 8 'Calabooza Nights'. As Herman thinks "The world was all before them", he sees himself and Troy as a new Adam and Eve emerging from paradise. But a union was not to be, as Troy embodied "English decency" in the form of reticence: "Troy was an Englishman who wished, in his own way, to cling to the conventions of male behaviour" (p. 204). Parini thus achieves a delicate neo-Victorian balance between nineteenth-century prejudice and prudery and twenty-first century recognition of homosexual rights. Herman witnesses the traumas of life at sea, the floggings and buggery, as well as consenting sexual relief. Jack Chase, the English officer on the *United States*, reconciles Herman to homoeroticism: "Believe me, there is neither male nor female in the heavens above" (p. 246).

It is the figure of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the "Dark Angel" of Chapter 12, who brings together the themes of male love and writing. In penning a review of Hawthorne's book of stories *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846) for Evert Duyckinck, Herman could not conceal his complete infatuation. This example shows how far removed we have become from the style of mid-nineteenth-century reviewing. Journal editors would hardly accept a review of Parini's work in which the reviewer declaimed: "To what infinite height of loving wonder and admiration I may yet be borne, when by repeatedly banquetting on these [Passages], I shall have thoroughly incorporated their whole stuff into my being – that, I can not tell" (p. 294).

I do admire Parini's novel, and this review may be called deficient for not finding much wrong with it. The discussions of literature-coming-into-being make the subject Melville of interest on an abstract level as well as on the literal basis of his amazing adventures. The purported escape from the cannibals on Nuku Hiva – where apparently just recently a German tourist was eaten by his guide (see Hall 2011) – is unequalled in excitement for Victorians and twenty-first century readers alike. But first came the

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boyhood reading, of Captain Marryat's *Mr Midshipman Easy* (1836); Richard Henry Dana Jr's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840); the story of the huge white bull-whale Mocha Dick in a recent copy of *Knickerbocker* (p. 69), and then the adventures themselves to be mulled over and transformed into art in his books:

Now, for the first time, Herman began to think about the nature of fiction, and how it so often depended upon, even hugged, reality, embracing true stories; but the author's mind was a crucible, a virtual try-pot. It rendered whatever happened into something utterly fresh and strange. At times, it echoed Truth back to itself in sharper, shapelier tones. Herman realized with a shudder of quiet pleasure that what occurred here, aboard the *Acushnet*, might find itself one day in a work of fiction by his own hand. He knew it would, and vowed to listen keenly, to watch and record in his journal whatever transpired, collecting snippets of conversation, images, phrases, ideas for tales, moods, inklings, omens. (pp. 75-76)

Parini makes much of the material, and in *Lizzie* has included an interesting, innovation though perhaps, as a subject in her own right, she never quite assumes the vibrancy of Melville, mainly serving to enable a fuller discovery of her husband rather than herself. Parini tantalises us with the use of nineteenth-century neologisms like "okay" (p. 335) or "flog" (to sell quickly and cheaply, p. 269), and literary puzzles like references to Shakespeare's *Dogberry* (p. 282) or Coleridge's "person from Porlock" (p. 303). He is not afraid to take on difficult questions related to art, such as whether genius in some sense excuses domestic violence or irresponsibility - a subject also broached in A.S. Byatt's part neo-Victorian *The Children's Book* (2009). In both books, the answer must be no, but in both cases, complex discussions scrutinise all sides of the situation. *Lizzie*, for instance, explains her husband's distant behaviour towards his children by saying that he loved them but could not express his emotion to them (p. 11). Melville the man is fleshed out in all his psychological complications, while his works are shown literally growing, using a Romantic organic metaphor of the transformation of the seed to tree to forest. Parini finally celebrates

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literary genius, in all its brilliance and shadows, as a marvellous “gift” to both the writer and the world:

Herman had never lost faith in *Moby-Dick* as a work of unusual depth and cadences, a poem in prose. It had come as a gift to him from a loud-voiced muse, and he had written it down as quickly as his lame hand could manage, working late into the night at Arrowhead. It might take a hundred years for readers to find their way to its pages, but they would arrive. (p. 426)

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Print this page. The Passages of Herman Melville, by Jay Parini, Canongate, RRP 17.99, 464 pages. The term "biofiction" was coined in the 1930s by a mediocre writer, Irving Stone, who had a brilliant idea. Why not, Stone thought, use fiction to fill in biography's gaps? Stone duly produced such pioneer "biofictionals" as *Lust for Life* (Van Gogh) and *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (Michelangelo). Melville's real life began when, like Ishmael, he answered the call of the sea and enrolled as a common sailor on the whaler *Acushnet*, in January 1841. He was crammed for months into the forecabin "one of the only places in America where different races, even blacks and Indians, mixed on equal terms. Sexual misconduct was rife. In 1849, Herman Melville sailed for Britain, leaving his young family behind in New York. His ostensible purpose was to gather material for a fiction based on the story of Israel Potter, a revolutionary soldier who became a "legend in his own time". But, as Jay Parini tells it in this fictional account of Melville's life, Potter proves too elusive, leaving Melville wondering whether he should simply make up his story "perhaps drawing on his subject's autobiography for inspiration." There are several moments like this in Jay Parini's novel, where sketches of Melville at work lead into explorations of Parini's own creative practice. Parini is a biographer and critic as well as a novelist, and he has made the biographical novel his own, through depictions of Leo Tolstoy and Walter Benjamin.