

BOOK REVIEWS

Robert K. Wallace

Melville and Turner: Spheres of Love and Fright

Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992. Pp. xx + 643. \$75.00

Reviewed by Marvin Fisher

Melville and Turner is the third of Robert K. Wallace's major cross-disciplinary studies published in the past decade, the earlier works being *Jane Austen and Mozart* (1983) and *Emily Brontë and Beethoven* (1986). With 175 plates (twelve in color) and with most of them placed where they effectively reinforce the text, this is easily one of the most lavishly illustrated studies of intellectual influence and literary style. Given its considerable length, it will challenge the attention span of both art historians and literary historians. If they read only the first half, however, they will have gained the best that this ambitious book has to offer.

As one who has devoted much time to the study and teaching of Melville's writings and who has a more than passing acquaintance with Turner's works, I was genuinely excited by Wallace's evidence of Melville's interest in painting and art criticism and their telling effect on his own writing. Even before he experienced Turner's works at first hand, Melville encountered aesthetic controversy and cultural debate in the art criticism of William Hazlitt, John Ruskin, Charles Eastlake, and W.M. Thackeray. By 1848, Melville had read the first two volumes of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, which elevated Turner to major status and which may well have initiated Melville's interest in coming as close as he could to owning a Turner work. At the time of Melville's death in 1891, his collection of graphics from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries included more than twenty engravings from Turner's paintings. Turner was a generation older than Melville, old enough to have been his father, a metaphorical role that Wallace casts him in.

In 1845, as Melville began to record his South Sea experiences, Turner exhibited two paintings of sperm whales at London's Royal Academy. By the time of *Typee's* publication in 1846, Turner had two more whaling oils ready for exhibit. Turner died in late 1851, two months after *Moby-Dick* was published in London as *The Whale*. Despite the fact that Melville and Turner had a number of friends in common, it is not likely that Turner's numerous physical afflictions enabled him to note the appearance of a book whose title and content would otherwise have attracted him. On the other hand, Wallace argues persuasively that Melville's self-education, which Melville dated from his twenty-fifth year (1844), drew heavily upon his painterly interests and particularly on lessons he learned from reading about and later experiencing the work of Turner.

Melville's first books amply demonstrate the visual qualities of his imagination, but in a manner that Wallace terms "linear, picturesque, often topographical" (77). With the publication of *Mardi* (1849) and *Moby-Dick*, Melville's landscapes

depict "a visual world reaching toward the vortex, the sublime, and the visionary" (77). This stylistic shift compresses into three years the changes Turner took three decades to accomplish. In each case the artist and the writer moved from linear, literal representation toward polychromatic experimentation and metaphysical signification, and each developed a visual and verbal "aesthetic of the indistinct."

The catalytic elements in Melville's stylistic transformation were Hazlitt's 1845 and 1846 editions of *Table Talk* and the first two volumes of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, published in London in 1843 and 1846 and in New York (by Wiley and Putnam, publishers of *Typee*) in 1847 and 1848. Not only did Melville make extensive use of the library of his friend and mentor, Evert Duyckinck, editor at Wiley Putnam and founder of the weekly *Literary World*, he also used the card of his father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw, to withdraw from the Boston Atheneum the second volume of *Modern Painters*, Eastlake's *Materials for a History of Oil Painting*, Du Fresnoy's *Art of Painting*, and Hazlitt's *Table Talk*. Never have I seen Merton Sealts' diligent investigations of *Melville's Reading* put to better use than in Wallace's admirable, aesthetic, deductive detections.

In working with a Ruskin, Eastlake, or Hazlitt text and matching them passage after passage with sections from *Mardi*, Wallace constructs a very persuasive tally—enough to convince even the most skeptical jury of readers. But when the match involves a Turner painting as the visual text and a passage from *Moby-Dick* or from a Melville poem as the verbal text, the results are more mixed and often far less convincing. In some of the more strained comparisons and allegations of influence, Wallace's imagination becomes its own verification, and his ability to conceive a connection becomes the method of establishing a connection. The argument of the last half of the book is that the lesson of "Turner's powerful aesthetic of the indistinct allowed Ishmael to articulate Melville's precise sense of the meaning of the whale" (1). Thus to understand Turner's work as Melville understood it provides the key to *Moby-Dick's* mystic meanings. To sift through Turner's works for a glossary of style becomes the means of defining Melville's vocabulary and interpreting his way with words. In regard to this part of Wallace's case, even the most sympathetic jury of readers remains unconvinced, and instead of concentrating on the strongest elements of evidence, Wallace marshals conjectures and speculations into a seemingly endless procession of assertions, many so tenuous and dubious that they threaten to dispel the exciting contributions of the first 300 pages. He could have proved more by including less.

Melville had opportunities to view Turner works at first hand in 1849 in his visits to the National Gallery and to Greenwich Hospital. Wallace tries in the latter part of the book to suggest various means and occasions that might have provided access to Turner's private gallery on Queen Anne Street; but if any such visit had occurred, it would have been mentioned in Melville's journal. Wallace found only a single pre-*Moby-Dick* reference to Turner—an annotation on the title page of Beale's *Natural History of the Sperm Whale* (1839). Made in 1850, Melville's pencilled note read, "Turner's pictures of whalers were suggested by this book." The journal of his 1856-57 visit to England and the Mediterranean, however, contains more specific and appreciative mention of Turner works, and the link between Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* and Melville's "The Temeraire"

in *Battlepieces* is indisputable in thematic similarity, specifically the ambiguity and indignity of technological progress.

It may well be that Ruskin was a more central and influential agent in this intellectual and aesthetic transaction than was Turner and that Ruskin's role in persuading Melville to transform *Mardi* from a Polynesian adventure into a cosmic allegory of moral, philosophical, and political significance was even more important than Ruskin's role in awakening Melville's interest in Turner. Ruskin's *Modern Painters* was a major work of critical irreverence that elevated Turner's achievement to Olympian heights and established a new canon of contemporaries in place of a continuing and unassailable reverence for old masters. Duyckinck aspired to make *Literary World* fulfill a similarly iconoclastic role, and Melville's two-part unconventional and anonymous contribution, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," sharpened Duyckinck's aim and did for Hawthorne what Ruskin had done for Turner. He leveled the literary old masters and their numerous imitators and worshippers, elevated Hawthorne to new eminence, and insouciantly claimed his own place in this select circle. Wallace has convinced me that Melville meant to extend membership to Ruskin and Turner as well, "for genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round."

Rudolf Bader

The Visitable Past: Images of Europe in Anglo-Australian Literature

Bern: Peter Lang, 1992. Pp. 345

Reviewed by Derek Wright

The subject of Rudolf Bader's book is the continuous intertextual dialogue between British and Anglo-Australian literatures. Employing "imagological" methodologies taken from comparative literature, Bader explores the cultural tensions between Anglocentric and nationalist attitudes which are inherent in Australian writing and proceeds to analyze the literary images which have grown directly out of these tensions.

It is not possible, Bader argues, for a literature in English to be separated from the properties of the English literary tradition. Rather, it is the bipolarity between acceptance and rejection of the mother country that gives Australian literature its distinctive and definitive character. The Australianness of Anglo-Australian literature, Bader contends, is to be found in the dialogue between derivation and deviation from British models, in the tension between the mere transplantation and the deeper transformation of these models, and in a complex cultural dependency which is finally no more shameful or inferior than Shakespeare's dependence upon the Italian Renaissance. These bipolarities are as evident in Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (Australian in its subject matter, English in its literary origins) as they are in the paradoxes and "equivocations" of Patrick White's fiction, in which it is often difficult to locate images in contexts that can be defined exclusively as British, European, or Australian. Bader maintains an incisive critical