

Laurie Robertson-Lorant

*Melville: A Biography*

New York: Clarkson Potter, 1996. Pp. xxvi+710. \$40.00

Reviewed by Marvin Fisher

Scholarly attention to the circumstances of Melville's life and the development of his art began in 1921 with Raymond Weaver's *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic*. Published thirty years after Melville's death, Weaver's biography launched the Melville revival. Laurie Robertson-Lorant's readable and informative volume ambitiously attempts to integrate all that can be ascertained and some of what can be surmised about his life, his family circumstances, his travels, the social and political character of the times he lived through, and the meanings (then and now) of the fiction and poetry he wrote during a forty-five-year span. Robertson-Lorant and others have demonstrated that Melville never really stopped writing; he merely ceased to be a writer in the public eye before the end of the 1850s. Since prominent obituaries noted the demise of "Henry" Melville and "Hiram" Melville in 1891, it appears that the period of his neglect was closer to seventy-five years than to thirty years, before the "revival" turned a nearly forgotten literary commodity into a steadily increasing growth stock.

In the three years following publication of his biography, Weaver edited a sixteen-volume edition of Melville's works, including the previously unpublished *Billy Budd* (1924). In 1929 the multifaceted Lewis Mumford published an appreciative account of Melville's life and work, emphasizing the moral and spiritual concerns and the developing tragic sense evident in his existence and central to his expression. A decade later, Jean Simon produced the first sustained work of European biographical and critical scholarship on Melville. By the 1950s, Jay Leyda's *The Melville Log* was linked to Leon Howard's biography and coincided with Newton Arvin's 1951 volume. Eleanor Melville Metcalf had greater access to family letters, diaries, and recollections for her 1953 portrayal of her grandfather as son, father, and husband. Edwin H. Miller's 1975 study pursued psychological/sexual aspects of Melville's mind and art, radiating from a considerably narrowed view of Melville's more complex personal relationship to Hawthorne. It also added a level of legitimacy to even more pathographical studies of the 1980s and 1990s. To her great credit Laurie Robertson-Lorant reintroduces us to a more human and humane Herman Melville, not without faults as a father and husband, nor unaware of flaws in his society. Excessively dependent for a time on alcohol, he overcame addiction or affliction and restored a measure of love to a threatened marriage. His tenderest, most loving love poetry came late in his life, the poems' sincerity marked by their degree of affection rather than infatuation. Nevertheless, our current obsession with issues of gender and identity compelled Robertson-Lorant to add an obligatory afterword on Melville's sexuality. She does so with regret that dignifying such gossip and conjecture inevitably distracts from the far more important literary qualities of this extraordinary writer's work.

Twenty-five years ago Robertson-Lorant wrote an impressive doctoral dissertation on the subject of Melville and race. It was a critical milestone in the liberal rehabilitation of Melville, and Robertson-Lorant maintains her earlier perspective without, however, screening out or blocking evidence to the contrary. That perspective may be labeled feminine, even feminist, but it is clearly not committed to exposing or magnifying "dysfunctional" attributes of her subject. She can be very persuasive in arguing that Melville in his full maturity embodied a breadth of humanity that embraced both the masculine and feminine values of an individual or an institution. Perhaps a refinement of Hawthorne's dialectic of head and heart, she demonstrates how *Billy Budd* hinges on the systemic incompatibility of legal necessity on the one hand and morality and mercy on the other. In a man-of-war world the maintenance of discipline represents rationality and reliance on the head; whereas the heart, basically sentimental and irrational, represents "the feminine in man," and in the world as Melville knew it, the heart "must be ruled out." A generation ago, scholarly fashion encouraged biographical studies entitled "The Art and Mind of ..."; Robertson-Lorant has given us "The Heart and Mind of Herman Melville."

Valuable for its genealogical information and description of family relationships, for its summary accounts of the significance of Melville's apprentice works, for sounding the depths of *Moby Dick* (1851) or admirably explicating the ambiguities of *Pierre*, Robertson-Lorant's *Melville: A Biography* excels in conveying an understanding of *Clarel's* spiritual wasteland and of the lesser known poems that were the avocational by-product of Melville's day job as a customs inspector. This book should find a place on the shelf of the scholar as well as that of the general reader.

Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds.  
*Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*  
Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Pp. 581. \$59.95 \$22.95  
Reviewed by George R. McMurray

The term "magical realism" has been tossed about rather freely in recent decades, especially since the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). During much of this time some scholars refused to use the term because it had not been properly defined. In more recent years, however, more serious studies have been published on magical realism, one of several examples being María-Elena Angulo's *Magic Realism: Social Context and Discourse* (1995). The present volume, containing essays by scholars with different points of view, is far more extensive than any of the others I have seen on the subject.

In their introduction, the editors explain one of their basic tenets: that magical realism is by no means limited to Latin American literature, but rather