Abstracts

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Herman Melville:
A Writer and His Books

CHAIR: PETER NORBERG, SAINT JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY

From left to right: Ida Rothschild, Brian Yothers, Shelly Jarenski, Dennis Berthold, Peter Norberg. Photo courtesy of Wyn Kelley.

In 1868, as he began to read again the major poets of the British romantic tradition, Melville acquired a copy of Lady Jane Shelley's *Shelley Memorials* (Boston, Ticknor and Fields, 1859). Among the numerous passages he marked in this book is a description of reading in a letter from William Godwin to Percy Shelley that bears directly on Melville's own habits of reading and writing. Godwin wrote: "A true student is a man seated in his chair, and surrounded with a sort of intrenchment and breastwork of books. It is for

the boarding school misses to read one book at a time. Particularly when I am sifting out facts, either of science or history, I must place myself in the situation of a man making a book, rather than reading books. [. . .] True reading is investigation—not a passive reception of what our author gives us, but an active inquiry, appreciation, and digestion of his subject" (56).

Melville's attention was drawn to this passage less for its masculine bravado than for its careful correlation of reading and writing as inter-related, if not equivalent, activities. The books that he read and reread were integral to his creative output. He found in them inspiration, provocation, and often-times confirmation of his aesthetic ambitions and ideals. This panel examines how Melville's reading can deepen our understanding of his writings and his aesthetic, political, and theological concerns as an author. Dennis Berthold demonstrates how Melville's reading in art criticism influenced his conception of poetic form. Shelly Jarenski examines how nineteenth-century visual culture informed Melville's experimental narrative aesthetics in *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*. Ida Rothschild shows how Melville's appropriation of Shakespearean discourse in *Moby-Dick* reflects the use of allusions to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* by politicians and journalists in the late 1840s and early 1850s. And Brian Yothers explores how Melville's skeptical theology was informed by his reading of Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*. Together, these presentations exhibit how, from his major novels to his late poetry, Herman Melville's creative output was intimately related to the creative input he received from his sustained reading in literature, philosophy, aesthetics, and the politics of his day.

"Mute Marbles": Roman Aesthetics in the Poetry
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For reasons unknown, Robert Macpherson sent an inscribed copy of *Vatican Sculptures* to Melville in 1866, providing him with a little volume of 136 line drawings of statues from the Vatican Museum, which Melville visited in 1857 and described in his lecture, "Statues in Rome" (1857-58). This book repeatedly stimulated Melville's well-known visual imagination during the years when he was most absorbed with poetry and, combined with his prior knowledge of Roman art and politics, it offered him a primer on "Roman aesthetics," a stoic fusion of word and image into obstinate, defiant form that runs through his later poetry. This aesthetic transcends time, history, and ideological contradictions through force, grandeur, bulk, and strength, the outcome of wrestling with the "Angel, Art" that most critics see as central to

Melville's poetry. It stresses the sublime rather than the beautiful, and accounts for much of the rugged versification and jarring shifts of tone that characterizes his poetics.

Macpherson's influence is most evident in "After the Pleasure Party," in which a woman astronomer named Urania finds strength for her decision to pursue knowledge rather than love when she views a statue of Pallas Athena, a "helmeted woman" who combines physical with emotional and intellectual strength. *Vatican Sculptures* includes plates of both Urania and Pallas Athena, and the details in each engraving make it clear that these were the images Melville had in mind. Although Melville saw the "Minerva Medica" at the Villa Albani, and Howard Horsford illustrates it in the *Journals* (470), this is not the statue that inspired the poem. Rather than the dominating helmet of Macpherson's Athena, the Albani Athena wears an animal skin, variously described by art critics as lion, fox, wolf, and dog. Although Melville cites the Albani Athena in his lecture, when he wrote "After the Pleasure Party" he turned to Macpherson's Athena to convey the strength and indomitability of Roman forms that he associated with his courageous woman astronomer. Macpherson's Athena exudes power combined with grace, with her spear and helmet and a serpent coiled at her foot that demonstrate the "Roman spirit" far more powerfully than Horsford's illustration.

Specifying this source in Melville's books helps resolve the ambiguity of "After the Pleasure Party" by undermining the (presumably) male narrator's lament for Urania and replacing it with an image of female strength, courage, beauty, and grandeur, a feminine embodiment of the "Roman spirit" (NN Poems 408) that Melville admired all his life.

"Secret[s] published in a portrait":
Herman Melville's Disruptive Visual Aesthetics in *Pierre*
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I n *Pierre,* Herman Melville describes his narrative style: "This history goes forward and goes backward as occasion calls. Nimble center, circumference elastic you must have" (54). This description is apt for the uneven structure of the novel in which it appears, but it can also be applied to the bulk of Melville's prose fiction. For many readers, Melville's distinctive experimentation with, or perhaps ignorance of, narrative form is considered a problem with his writing. As part of a larger project on the intersection of narrative aesthetics, visual culture, and race in nineteenth-century American literature, this paper argues that Melville's rejection of linear narrative produces a

disruption of the traditional relationship readers anticipated with written texts. As such, his narrative aesthetic can be read as a strategic response—triggered by the challenge of the visual—to a national narrative increasingly concerned with establishing an American identity through myths of cultural domination.

In the early chapters of *Pierre* the struggle for control between the title character and his dark sister Isabel mirrors the historical battle for narrative control and significance that occurred between narrative and visual forms in the latter half of the nineteenth century after the discovery of photography. I argue that narrative forms themselves changed in response to a cultural fascination with visual representation. In Melville's work, this change in form is represented by a disruption of linearity that acts as a subversive, deconstructive, non-verbal communication with readers. Pierre's encounter with his father's portrait disrupts his sense of both personal and national identity, a rupture that he seeks to have sutured by Isabel's narration of her originary history. The tension created by Pierre's desire and Isabel's refusal to fill in disruptions with narration renders legible a national mythology, allowing readers to re-imagine the possibilities of nation formation, rather than concealing them with traditional narratives of self/other, normal/perverse, and national unity/heterogeneity. It also represents how writers sought to replace linguistic, narrative experiences with more immediate, visceral responses to their texts after the emergence of the daguerreotype changed cultural conceptions of aesthetic experience.

Seeking to particularize and historicize notions of the aesthetic by connecting an "artistic" choice, the formal structure of narrative, to specific changes in visual culture, this paper concentrates on the social and political effects of narrative to avoid using aesthetics as a category of value judgment.

Melville's Mousetrap:
Using Shakespeare to Unmask Democratic Nationalism in *Moby-Dick*
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Matthiessen argued that Melville used Shakespeare to demonstrate his transcendence of British literary tradition. My paper draws on largely untapped contemporary periodicals to provide a comprehensive historical context for Melville's pervasive invocation of Shakespeare. By examining how Shakespeare had been recast to play a leading role in the creation of an American exceptionalist identity, I demonstrate that Melville's use of Shakespeare is intended to connect the cultural and political development of the young nation to the literature of the larger world and the lessons

of the past—not to reject them. I argue that Melville's pointed inversion of the period's conventional treatment of Shakespeare illustrates his recognition of the self-serving rhetoric of expansionism, his discomfort with the constructs of Anglo-Saxon superiority, and his skepticism toward the political manipulation of "Providential" design. In short, Melville uses Shakespeare to critique the very nationalist mythology that Americans had been invoking "Shakespeare" to create for over half a century.

In aligning Ahab with contemporary representations of Macbeth, Melville references a prevalent social discourse that challenged conservative Democrats' manipulation of "Manifest Destiny." Ishmael's narrative, however, offers a thoughtful, new, "progressive" alternative. Melville crafts this charismatic voice by likening Ishmael to the common American vision of Hamlet. As a representative figure of measured action, Hamlet became a convenient champion for progressive Democrats who wished to distinguish themselves from their conservative counterparts; the character's refinement of thought and sentiment was inevitably juxtaposed to the wildness and rapidity of Macbeth's actions. But Ishmael's perspective finally functions as a narrative trap: despite his enthusiastic endorsements of equality, brotherhood and democracy, Ishmael exhibits an expansionist mentality and a covenanted psychology that render his perspective—in effect—no different from Ahab's. Melville's depiction of Ishmael exposes the essential contradiction underlying the New Democratic vision: even as they advocated for inclusive democracy and broad equality, they supported policies that were built on an assumption of predestined Anglo-Saxon supremacy. Melville's invocation of Shakespeare suggests that both Ahab and Ishmael, in their narcissistic exceptionalist notions, follow the same tragic cycles delineated by Shakespeare's protagonists. He thus crafts both Ahab and Ishmael to reflect the fundamental nationalist myth of American self-creation—only to finally expose such a conception as hollow and destructive.

"Crack'd Archangel": Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, the Bible, and Religious Difference in Melville's Fiction and Poetry
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We have long known that Melville read Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* with great interest, going so far as to refer to Browne as a "kind of crack'd Archangel" in a conversation with Evert Duyckinck, and Brian Foley has convincingly argued that Melville borrows heavily from Browne's prose style in both *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*. What is less widely recognized is the relation between the persona Browne adopts in *Religio*

Medici, Melville's deeply ambivalent marginal notations in his copy of *The New Testament and Psalms*, and Melville's adoption of formal and conceptual elements of Browne's work in his major fiction and poetry.

Drawing on my work on the notes and introduction to Melville's marginalia to his copy of *The New Testament and Psalms* for *Melville's Marginalia Online*, I argue that Melville's reading of the Bible exhibits the same oscillation between devotion and skepticism that is central to Browne's commentary on religious matters. Moreover, Melville's adoption of Browne's formal strategies in his prose and poetry, from *Mardi* to *Clarel*, is indicative of the congruence of Browne's efforts toward understanding religious difference in seventeenth-century England with Melville's own project of giving expression to the full range of religious difference in nineteenth-century America, and indeed in the "whole worshipping world."

Browne seeks in *Religio Medici* to define his own idiosyncratic views, situate them as part of Anglican orthodoxy, and allow for dialogue with the Catholic Church from which the Church of England had become separated. Melville's project is an expanded version of Browne's project. Melville's concern is to maintain productive dialogue not only between Protestantism and Catholicism in his work, but also between Christianity and the other major world religions, and among numerous varieties of Protestantism and of skepticism toward any revealed religion. I find evidence to support these claims in the patterns that emerge when we consider Melville's markings in his copy of *The New Testament and Psalms* as well as in the texts of *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Clarel*. The parallels between the method of Bible reading that Melville employs and Browne's methods of Biblical exegesis in *Religio Medici* reveal that Melville's fascination with Browne was not only that of a developing writer with a superb prose stylist, but also that of a spiritual seeker with a precursor and kindred spirit.