

# MELVILLE, BEAUTY, AND AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES: AN AESTHETICS IN ALL THINGS

**Cody Marris** (author)

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 148, ISBN: 9780192871725

Reviewed by Pilar Martínez Benedí

In my experience in the classroom teaching American literature to undergraduates, I have often noticed a disarming disinterest in the beauty or aesthetic dimensions of the literary text among some students. Of course, there are exceptions. But many of them will promptly declare that they do or do not like a certain work, at the same time dismissing the aesthetic pleasure of reading in favor of the text's aboutness. I was reminded of my students' (dis)inclination when reading Cody Marris's remarks about the New Critics' weariness of the aesthetic experience, or their repudiation of "how a text makes you feel" in the interest of "objective criticism" (18), in *Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies*. Marris defies the New Critics' (and my students') stance, as he explicitly sets out to "think about," or to "reclaim," beauty (v, 17) in an author who, as Alex Calder once wrote, "has written more badly than most [of his contemporaries]" (11).

This is one of the reasons why Marris's latest book is provocatively unconventional. With a certain pride, Marris concedes that his stance is rather "minoritarian" (17) in American literary studies (yet throughout its pages he slyly shows that he's in illustrious company. Another reason is its (apparent) un-timeliness. "Is it appropriate to think about beauty at such an ugly time?" (v), he wonders in the first paragraph of the Preface, aptly titled "Beauty in a Time of Pain." Marris is here thinking about the COVID pandemic (in the middle of which he wrote most of the book), yet the question resonates insistently also in our ugly world today, COVID aside: are there not more urgent issues—political, ideological, social—to think about, and reclaim, nowadays? Yet what *Melville, Beauty, and American Studies* does so well is precisely to valorize the links between beauty and suffering, between the aesthetic and the

philosophical—the far-reaching use of beauty, in sum, as the book’s subtitle, “An Aesthetics in All Things,” suggests. Finally, the book is also unconventional in its object of analysis or corpus of choice. Of all the immensity of Melville’s oeuvre, Marris picks out a peculiar and uneven triad: two poetry collections, *Timoleon* and *Weeds and Wildings*, along with his “mighty book,” *Moby-Dick*, thus bringing together, on quite an equal footing, Melville’s most famous masterpiece (and one of the perpetual candidates for the title of “the Great American Novel”) and two of his lesser known and, by Marris’s own admission, “relatively unbeloved [works] even among Melvilleans” (107). Marris attempts to account for this curious choice, as well as for the visible absence of chronological or cultural-historical preoccupations, in the valuable “Postscript,” which nicely attends to the latter part of the title (“American Literary Studies”), as it situates itself among recent intellectual work (from Bruno Latour to Rita Felski) that abandons suspicious or symptomatic readings to advocate for a more hopeful and positive engagement with the literary text. Earlier in the book, Marris blithely declares that he considers *Timoleon*, *Weeds and Wildings*, and *Moby-Dick* “to be among Melville’s very best [...] finely crafted, ingeniously conceived, and acutely aware of beauty’s role in everyday life” (17), in some way anticipating the book’s overall commitment to aesthetic experience. Marris is unashamed to talk about beauty and one of the virtues of his book lies in the natural, effortless interweaving of sophisticated intellectual reasoning with personal preference and pleasure.

To be sure, the book is not merely an aesthetic evaluation of Melville’s writing and works. Rather, Marris takes up the task of presenting Melville, an author better known as a “writer of the sublime” and of the ugly (5), as instead “persistently interested in beauty as both an idea and an experience” (5). Such interest, then, according to Marris, is at once theoretical/ontological—what *is* beauty—and experiential/aesthetic—what are the *effects* of beauty. For Melville, indeed, (and this is one of Marris’s main concerns throughout his book), “philosophy and aesthetics are inextricably linked,” both are ways of knowing, of apprehending the world. And they are co-dependent (13). An exploration of Melville’s engagement with beauty must of course take into account his fascination with the visual arts, and particularly with classical art—Greece, Rome, and Egypt, their

sculpture and architecture, as well as their representation in engravings and painting. Yet Marrs seems much more deeply invested in showing his readers how, for Melville, beauty is everywhere, an essential part of our relational sphere. Melville's philosophico-aesthetic sense of beauty, Marrs suggests, is co-extensive with "all animated nature" (13). Defined and characterized by mutuality and relationality, beauty defies the human/non-human divide. And, in this sense, Marrs's study is in fluid conversation with recent scholarship on Melville and new materialism and/or impersonality (the work of Branka Arsić, Sharon Cameron, Michael Jonik, or Tom Nurmi come to mind), that tends to dissolve the boundaries of the self and emphasize the entanglements of the human with all kinds of natural forces. "Beauty for Melville," writes Marr, "is not a rarefied essence but a common force that tends to appear when one least expects it" (44). Throughout the pages of this engaging book, Marrs lauds and recuperates Melville's care for the "materiality of beauty" (51). Its strong philosophical background notwithstanding, Marrs's book approaches beauty (following Melville's lead) at a sensory and intuitive, as opposed to a cognitive or logical, level. "This is where beauty comes to play," he writes, "by arousing the senses and revealing the copious ways in which we are constituted by other modes of life" (14).

If the introduction aptly resolves the above theoretical and methodological questions, Marrs devotes three separate chapters to exploring what he calls "Melville's philosophico-aesthetic modes," to be understood as "style[s] of thinking" or "pattern[s] of expression" that allow him to try out and measure "the artistic, ethical, and intellectual worth of various ideas" (15). Marrs pairs each of these modes with one single work: although, he concedes, Melville's modes do frequently coexist and overlap, "each work possesses a distinct philosophico-aesthetic architecture" (27). Chapter 1 analyzes "Ancient Beauty in *Timoleon*," a mode that allows him to recuperate the lost sense of beauty's radical ubiquity. Through the poems' engagement with ancient art, Marrs suggests, Melville views beauty as inherent in nature's shapes, as mixed rather than pure, as the natural extension of earthly life. Chapter 2 moves from ancient to floral beauty in *Weeds and Wildings*, a work that concentrates not on the exceptional, but on the common. Starting from the smallness of floral beauty ("Melville finds beauty as well

as pleasure in the repetition of the common,” 60), Marrs reads *Weeds and Wildings* as a democratization of experience. “The poems indicate,” he writes, “that nearly every organism, from birds and moles to grass and flowers, experience beauty” (60). The conception of the self as fluid and the connections between beauty and suffering are read against Melville’s late engagement with Buddhism and the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. This is a surprising, rich, and stimulating chapter. The third chapter reads *Moby-Dick* as an example of appalling beauty—but Marrs eschews the predictable focus on the majestic, stunning beauty of the whale (and its tail), to bring attention to the power of beauty to dissolve the self, to distribute personhood, to allow one to merge into the object of admiration. In *Moby-Dick*, Marrs suggests, Melville envisions a “social, ego-less quality of beauty” (83), to which Ahab is violently averse, and to which Ishmael is conversely receptive, as his relationship with Queequeg shows.

*Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies* courageously invites us to rethink the value of the aesthetic dimension of literature, so often overshadowed by cultural and ideological considerations. If “literature is broadly understood to be significant to the extent that it yields knowledge about the history of a certain society” (108), Marrs’s book reassesses the role of beauty in transmitting that knowledge—a teaching that I struggle to pass on to my students. Early in the book, Marrs aligns himself with Christopher Castiglia in calling for “a literary criticism based on hope and possibility rather than disenchantment” (23). Seizing on beauty as one of the modalities of hope, Marrs’s volume celebrates the guiltless pleasure of reading literature, even in ugly times.

#### WORKS CITED

Calder, Alex. 2011. “Blubber: Melville’s Bad Writing.” In *Melville and Aesthetics*, edited by Sam Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn, 11-31. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

**Pilar Martínez Benedí** teaches American Literature at the University of L’Aquila. In 2018 she published *The Insuperability of Sensation: Indagini letterarie tra mente, corpo e affect*. Her work has appeared in academic journals such as *Critique*, *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, *Textual Practice*, *African-American Review*, and in the edited collections *Ahab Unbound. Melville and the Materialist Turn*; *The Wiley New Companion to Herman Melville* and the *Oxford Handbook to Walt Whitman*. Her co-authored book

| *Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies*

with Ralph Savarese, *Melville and Neurodiversity, or Why Hunt Difference with Harpoons*, is forthcoming in September 2024. E-mail address: [mariapilar.martinezbenedi@univaq.it](mailto:mariapilar.martinezbenedi@univaq.it)