Book Reviews


The study of Melville and theology still owes much to the scholarship of William Braswell, Nathalia Wright, Lawrance Thompson, and T. Walter Herbert. More recent studies by Ilana Pardes and Elisa New have shown, though, that there is still much to be said on the topic. Bradley A. Johnson’s The Characteristic Theology of Herman Melville: Aesthetics, Politics, Duplicity also situates itself within this discourse; however, Johnson approaches his study of Melville and religion through what he refers to as an author’s “characteristic aesthetics.” Essentially, Johnson, through quite an impressive breadth of philosophers, theorists, and critics such as Hegel, Žižek, and Sir Frank Kermode, argues that the act of writing is itself an aesthetical approach toward organizing one’s thoughts on theology. Through this insight, Johnson strives “to assess what [he regards as] the profoundly theological implications of conceiving modern subjectivity in the register of aesthetics.” The study of the relationship between aesthetics and theology that prescinds from this is fascinating at times. Yet there are also more than a few instances where one feels as if one were reading a book on theory first and foremost, with only a slight connection to the topic of Melville and theology.

Johnson’s study consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Although he touches upon numerous topics within the scope of aesthetics and theology, it is in his focus on beginnings and endings that his study finds a truly unique voice. In the opening chapter, Johnson uses the relationship between Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne to help fashion his argument on the potential problems that can occur when the boundaries between beginnings and endings become blurred beyond recognition. These blurred boundaries can hinder the creation of a unified, absolute identity of self. However, Johnson argues that the attainment of such an
absolute identity “is more often than not for Melville an irreducibly, and thus ironically, Sisyphean striving.” He concludes that, for Melville, “all self-presence is a presentation whose ‘subject’ is only ever ‘becoming.’” The argument proposed by Johnson is interesting, and Melville certainly shows signs in his personal letters and in his works of such a mindset. What is surprising, however, is the absence of some well-known words written in a letter by Melville to Hawthorne in 1851 that would have really driven Johnson’s point home. Melville asks Hawthorne, “Lord, when shall we be done growing?” It seems odd that Johnson would reference Melville and Hawthorne’s correspondence and not include these words, especially considering that they encapsulate the argument being presented so well. Indeed, Johnson’s argument is persuasive. Melville knew that one is never finished growing, especially in terms of one’s relationship with God. He may have never accepted Christ as his savior, but Melville continued to grapple with the question of faith to the very end of his life.

Although the overall argument is intriguing, Characteristic Theology proves itself to be somewhat of a fragmented study. Johnson exhibits, at times, a self-conscious awareness of the propensity of his use of the term “theology” to become so abstract that his initial definition must be re-established before he can continue. At the opening of the third chapter, for instance, Johnson admits, “…I hope it is not entirely surprising that I should freely confess now that while my inquiry is thoroughly theological in its scope, it is assuredly not so in its genre.” As this suggests, Melville’s quest for faith was not theological in the common understanding of the word; it was essentially a postmodern reflection on subjectivity and the self-creation of the modern Subject. Nonetheless, Johnson does his best to explain his use of the term theology in the third chapter. Using Thomas J.J. Altizer to clarify the term, he defines theology “not as a discipline, but a thinking that ‘truly re-thinks the deepest ground of theology, a re-thinking which is initially an unthinking of every established theological ground.’” By the time the reader has worked through the introduction and the first two chapters, it has become obvious that the book is only loosely connected to theology as it is commonly perceived.

Johnson’s choice to use Melville as the vehicle for conveying his argument is appropriate, and the connections he makes between the author and subjectivity make sense. However, by the end of the book, the reader questions the need for Melville at all. It is not that Melville is misappropriated or misrepresented by Johnson; the problem is that Melville comes in and out of the study at inopportune times. For example, at the close of the