“Knowledge is a Lamp to Lighten His Path”: Investigating Melville’s Marginalia to Schopenhauer

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Abstract
Herman Melville’s self-education, extensive library, and voracious close reading, including his inscription of markings and annotations within these books, has been documented and known for decades. However, scholarly treatment of this marginalia varies in its extensiveness. Scholarship specific to Melville’s final months of dedicated reading and markings in his seven volumes of German Pessimist philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer is both sporadic and underdeveloped. Encoding in Extensible Markup Language (XML) of marginalia to these volumes has allowed for the parsing of marginalia data through data visualization in the form of frequency tables, graphs, and word clouds. Analysis of parsed and visualized data alongside crafted prose presents new opportunities for understanding larger marking patterns across volumes as well as close inspection of recurrent themes across marginalia and prose. This approach shines new light on philosophical overlap and contrasts present in the prose Melville composed concurrently to his reading, yet left unfinished upon his death: Billy Budd, a Sailor.

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Understanding the Human Condition

In the final months of his life, Herman Melville studied the works of German Pessimist Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, inscribing markings, or marginalia, within the copies of the books he owned. Visualizations of encoded marginalia provide new and unique insight into Melville’s late reading and thought.

- Sporadic and Underdeveloped Scholarly Treatment of Marginalia
- “Distant” and “Close” reading of marked evidence
- Most Frequently Occurring Terms (Fig. 1a and 1b). “Life” “Man” “World” and Related Terms
- The high-frequency terms refer to universal or general truths and observations on mankind. Their prominence in the marginalia reflect Melville’s lifelong fascination with the human condition.

Jan 6

The Isolated Genius

Marked passages relating to intellect and genius span Melville’s marginalia to Schopenhauer and involve a number of different convictions:

- Experience and Reflection as Teachers
- Superior Intellect Isolates
- Intellectual Stratification

By depicting Captain Vere in stark contrast to “minds less stored than his and less earnest” who deem him “lacking in the companionable quality, a dry and bookish gentleman,” Melville’s choice in language and narrative parallel markings in Fig. 2, 4, 5, and throughout the volumes. It is Vere’s genius, superior intellect informed by experience, underlies his social isolation.

Critical treatment is often occupied with the question of irony in Melville’s portrayal of Vere. As Wenke articulates, Melville “complicated Vere in such a way that some persons can reasonably take the same character... and draw radically antagonistic conclusions” (85). Melville’s marginalia to Schopenhauer provide insight into Vere’s character and Melville’s preoccupation with the interplay between knowledge, experience, and isolation. Melville’s markings, like those in Fig. 2 and 3, reflect his development and characterization of Vere’s character as “having a marked leaning towards everything intellectual” and “seen much service, been in many various engagements;” narratively exploring Schopenhauer’s ideas.

Corresponding Content and Late Revisions in Billy Budd, Sailor

He loved books, never going to sea without a newly replenished library, compact but of the best. The isolated leisure, in some cases so wearisome, falling at intervals to commanders even during a war-cruise, never was tedious to Captain Vere...his bias was toward those books to which every serious mind of superior order occupying any active post of authority in the world naturally inclines” (Fig.6).

“In this line of reading he found confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts—confirmation which he had vainly sought in social converse, so that as touching most fundamental topics, there had got to be established in him some positive convictions, which he foretell would abide in him essentially unmodified so long as his intellectual part remained unimpaired” (Fig.7).

– (Chapter 7 Billy Budd, Sailor)