

ANALYSIS

Mardi, and a Voyage Thither (1849)

Herman Melville

(1819-1891)

“The encyclopedic subject of this large-scale exploration is what he referred to, in a letter to Hawthorne, as that ‘great allegory, the world.’ Under the guise of a South Sea archipelago, *Mardi* stands for the world, verbalized in the fictitious language that Melville invented along with the chartless geography of his imaginary voyage. His microcosm is neither an ideal commonwealth like Utopia nor yet an antipodal looking-glass kingdom like Erewhon; nor does it, like the countries of *Gulliver’s Travels*, cast back the reflection of irony.

Melville’s recent reading, avid but unassimilated, provided a ballast which well nigh sank his ambitious undertaking. The result is not continuously readable, though it abounds in episodes and insights which would be the making of a lesser writer, and at least deserve to be canonized as purple passages. The difficulty is that, once he leaves the literal plane, Melville is caught between an allegory which is too narrowly topical in its allusiveness and a symbolism so transcendental that it bodies forth no more than a ‘spirit’s phantom’s phantom.’ Inevitably, ‘the mystery of mysteries is still a mystery’....

If *Mardi* does not reach its symbolic Ultimate, it faces an allegorical Penultimate, surveying the nations in critical panorama and directing its sharpest criticisms at Melville’s own nation, Vivenza. Through a series of political cartoons and editorial comments, he demonstrates that freedom is not the same in theory as in practice. His observations on equality might be summed up by rephrasing George Orwell: some men are less equal than others. Those exceptions belong to the tribe of Hamo; and on the issue of Negro slavery Melville is an outspoken and bitter critic.... But the social commentary is recklessly outdistanced by the philosophical inquiry. King Media and his attendants, philosopher, historian, and poet, seem to stand for the mind and its traditional faculties, reason, memory, and imagination. All their travels seem to convey them ‘from dark to dark.’ Their guide, at one juncture, is a blind man who tells them: ‘I brood and grope in blackness’....

He sails onward, conceding that the itinerary is endless, but pausing to emphasize two incidental relationships which will lend it a pattern by their recurrence. The first is his version of that eternally feminine polarity which...Henry Adams would hail as the Virgin and Venus. Greeted as a sun-god by the Mardians, his spokesman Taji pursues the albino beauty Yillah, she of ‘the snow-white skin, blue firmament eyes, and Golconda locks.’ He in turn is pursued by the dark vampire Hautia, heralded by three hooded damsels, ‘deep brunettes,’ avengers.... Taji’s metaphysical quest becomes a domestic flight; Yillah, the fair heroine, eludes him and fades away; while the menacing Hautia, in her snaky bower, all but immolates him.

The second theme is even more recurrent; and though it is not as conspicuous in *Mardi* as elsewhere, it is fully articulated in the chapter describing Taji’s favorite companion, the Viking Jarl. Melville describes their relationship as...‘chummying.’ Each of Melville’s sailor heroes has a bosom friend or alter ego, a roommate approached through connubial metaphors. The first of them, the boyish Toby, who disappears from *Typee*, actually turned up to corroborate Melville’s book. His place is taken, in *Omoo*, by a more weathered figure, the bookish and independent Dr. Long Ghost. There too the native, Poky, in accordance with Polynesian custom, woos the somewhat unwilling narrator. The culminating friendship, celebrated as if it were a marriage, is between Ishmael and Queequeg, and there the theme of brotherhood converges with the embodiment of blackness.”

Harry Levin

The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville
(Knopf/Vintage 1960) 175-77

“Melville entertained questions of ethics and metaphysics, politics and culture, sin and guilt, innocence and experience. The complexity of the novel’s content, in fact, destroys all pretensions to literary form. Originally a narrative of adventure, *Mardi* became an allegory of mind. The most important sections of *Mardi* recount a symbolic quest for Absolute Truth, as undertaken by five men: Taji, the young monomaniacal hero [prefiguring Ahab]; Babbalanja, a philosopher; Yoomy, a poet; Mohi, a historian; and King Media, a man of common sense. On King Media’s boat, they sail through the island archipelagoes of Mardi (the World), stopping at various countries, including Vivenza (the United States), where Melville criticizes the institution of slavery and the tendency to mobocracy.

In their travels Taji, who most nearly represents Melville, kills a South Sea Islander priest, Aleema, in order to rescue Yillah, a beautiful young white woman of seemingly prelapsarian innocence. But Yillah disappears, and in seeking her, Taji undertakes a double quest: for Final Truth and for Lost Innocence. At the same time that Taji seeks Yillah or Innocent Love, he is sought by Hautia, the incarnation of sophisticated sexuality, who speaks in the language of flowers. Hautia also represents retribution for sin, and haunts Taji for murdering the priest. Thus Taji becomes both pursuer and pursued. He is last seen alone, sailing his craft on desperate seas. For Melville *Mardi* was a preparation for future work, which, after *Mardi*, took on new dimensions. For the first time he presented a questing hero, an analysis of metaphysical problems, and a book more important on the symbolic than on the realistic levels, in these respects anticipating *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 702

“*Mardi* is a curious book which begins as a conventional adventure tale and then abruptly shifts into the realm of fantasy and allegory and depicts the imaginary voyage of a company of boon companions in search of truth, happiness, and experience in the fantasy world of Mardi. The story is an odd and not entirely successful amalgam of Rabelesian extravaganzas, mildly Swiftian satire and Melvillian jocosity. All the high spirits notwithstanding, there is no doubt that the book has a serious intent. This we see in the character of Taji, a distant prefiguration of the Ishmael of *Moby-Dick*, and his perplexed pursuit of certainty. At the end the world of Mardi seems to the hero to be characterized by unreason and ambiguity, and he sails off alone in an open boat over dangerous seas in search of other worlds.”

Richard Chase
Major Writers of America I
(Harcourt 1962) 884-85

“*Mardi, and a Voyage Thither* (1849) is generally considered an abortive allegory, most interesting as a kind of exercise in preparation for writing *Moby-Dick*.... There is, at the beginning, the tale of adventure which seems a continuation of the author’s previous books [*Typee* and *Omoo*]. There is the comic interlude on the abandoned ship, the *Parki*, with its gentle satire on marriage and women. There is the romantic encounter with Yillah, reminiscent of innumerable German mystical romances. There is Queen Hautia and the flower symbolism straight out of the ‘flower books’ of Melville’s day. Following Yillah’s disappearance, there begins the endless quest, like the quest for the Holy Grail in many medieval romances. As the Yillah-seekers visit island after island in mythical Mardi, there seems to emerge some strange hybrid descended from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and Rabelais’ *Gargantua* which is, ultimately, none of these but something new and peculiarly Melvillian....

The question of *Mardi*’s meaning remains yet to be settled....the symbolism of the elusive maiden, Yillah, the significance of the society of Alma in Serenia, the morality of Taji both in the early capture of Yillah and the final rejection of Serenia. When at the conclusion of the work Taji sails on in made pursuit of the lost Yillah, his purpose and fate have remained largely a mystery among the critics.... One element running consistently through the interpretations of *Mardi* is the identification of Melville with Taji.... There seems to be general agreement that Babbalanja is the vehicle for Melville’s attitudes throughout *Mardi*—up to the end. If so, why should Melville capriciously drop Babbalanja and turn to Taji as the vessel of his profound and ultimate meaning?... Babbalanja the philosopher...emerges as the deepest diver and the book’s one wholly unmasked man....

Taji, demi-god of one of the Mardi islands. But when we first meet Taji, he is a common seaman aboard the whaler *Arcturion* secretly choosing a comrade and making plans for deserting ship.... He escapes with Jarl the Viking in one of the whaling boats... Their first major encounter is with what appears to be an abandoned ship, but they soon discover the sole occupants to be two South Sea Islanders, Samoa and Annatoo, a kind of comic Adam and Eve.... A group of natives are carrying on a raft a beautiful maiden named Yillah to a religious ceremony in which she is to be sacrificed. In the heat of his indignation, Taji slays the old priest standing guard over her tent and saves Yillah from the tribal slaying. There begin simultaneously Taji's deepest sense of sin...and his highest feeling of bliss.... In killing the priest Aleema and stealing Yillah, Taji performs the ritualistic act of initiation into evil, the old, old act of Adam's eating the apple.... One day Yillah disappears from the bower in Odo to which Taji has taken her on a kind of Eden honeymoon.... Taji sets out on an endless search for Yillah....

Taji's search for Yillah is man's yearning for a lost innocence, for a transcendent ideal, for the transfigured past, for absolute perfection, for total happiness, for a good unalloyed with evil—albeit unattainable in this world.... He lost Yillah but gained the king, Media (also a demi-god), as a companion in his search. Three 'ordinary' humans are selected to accompany the 'demi-gods' as attendants: Braid-Beard, the historian or chronicler; Babbalanja, the philosopher and mystic; and Yoomy, the minstrel or poet.... Each nook and cranny of Mardi arouses their frequently prolonged comment. The three canoes bearing this fantastic group make the grand tour of Mardi, touching all islands where the elusive Yillah may be found. But there are long stretches of the book when Yillah...is totally forgotten. Island follows island in a phantasmagorical, dreamlike sequence of several hundred pages, in which allegory slides into satire, satire slips into allegory. In Mardi the entire world wears a mask and things are never what they seem. It is the constant act of the Yillah-seekers to look behind the mask to discover things as they are....

Suddenly the geography becomes familiar and the satire is carefully aimed as Taji and his companions visit Dominora (England), Kalleedoni (Scotland), Verdanna (Ireland), Porpheero (Europe), and, finally, Vivenza (the United States), everywhere uncovering the motives beneath the pretenses and the truths behind the lies.... The voyage in search of Yillah turns out to be a voyage unmasking the world.... As the travelers draw near the shores of Vivenza, they observe a huge inscription chiseled on an arch: 'In this republican land all men are born free and equal.' Upon closer scrutiny they discover a minute inscription in the nature of a postscript: 'Except the tribe of Hamo.' [blacks]

This striking difference between appearance and reality in Vivenza is typical of all Mardi.... The 'grand error' of Vivenza is 'the conceit that Mardi is now in the last scene of the last act of her drama; and that all preceding events were ordained to bring about the catastrophe you believe to be at hand—a universal and permanent republic.' All who believe such things 'are fools, and not wise'; for 'every age thinks its erections will forever endure,' but Oro (God) decrees 'vicissitudes'.... No political system, monarchy or republic, and no social condition, slavery or freedom, will eradicate the evil in man.... Taji's Yillah cannot be found wherever evil exists; and since evil is universal, a condition of existence, Yillah can never be discovered—indeed, does not exist. As Babbalanja finally tells Taji, 'She is a phantom that but mocks thee'....

When, at the end of the quest of Yillah, the seekers have reached Serenia, it is Babbalanja's vision...which divulges them meaning of existence on that unique island. Serenia is the true land of Alma (Christ) and contrasts vividly with the island which claims Alma—Maramma.... As Serenia takes a candid view of man, so it makes no claims of perfection for its society.... 'It is imperfect; and long must so remain. But we make not the miserable many support the happy few. Nor by annulling reason's laws, seek to breed equality.... Mardian happiness is but exemption from great woes.... The Society is characterized by its avoidance of masquerade, by its cultivation of simplicity.... The conviction of religious faith in Serenia is exceeded only by its tolerance of the views of others. Life in Serenia is not, like life in Typee Valley, deprived of intellectual content and lived solely on the level of instinct. There is provision for philosophical disagreement....

James E. Miller, Jr.
A Reader's Guide to Herman Melville
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1962) 36-53

“Critics in England assaulted the book, and it was apparent that it was a failure. *Mardi* began as one thing and turned into another; it began as another Polynesian adventure in the manner of *Omoo*—one hundred pages of pleasant picaresque episodes—and then shifted direction completely, to become a complicated and all-inclusive allegory of the world itself, a murky allegory in which a lovelorn hero persists (his friends assisting) in the pursuit of the beautiful Yillah throughout the pseudo-Polynesian islands. For the student of history *Mardi* is a mirror of the western world in mid-century, but as literature *Mardi* failed because of its ‘bold aim.’ Melville had overreached; he had taken on a bigger job than his creative powers could at that moment live up to. This admitted, *Mardi* remains a fascinating failure, not a book for the novice in literary studies but one that is fine for later rummaging. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s statement about *Mardi* remained its most just criticism: ‘*Mardi* is a rich book, with depth here and there that compels a man to swim for his life. It is so good that one scarcely pardons the writer for not having brooded over it, so as to make it a great deal better.’”

Howard P. Vincent
Guide to Herman Melville
(Charles E. Merrill 1969) 15

“The true significance of *Mardi* is that it is the first draft of all his subsequent works.... Every unkind thing that has been said about *Mardi* is more or less true. It is the loosest and baggiest of prose monsters, a book that changes direction freely on its way it knows not where, its ramblings held together only by the flimsy framework of a quest for an insubstantial maiden that would itself be completely forgotten if a boatload of phantom damsels did not appear every eighty pages or so to pelt the quester with symbolic flowers. The style of the book, with its addiction to bombast and the more mechanical sorts of poetic effects, is usually something to be endured, not enjoyed. Its metaphysical soarings, in which philosophical commonplaces are delivered as if they were newly discovered truths, are often enough to make a lover of Melville the deep diver blush...

Its more embarrassing passages of poetry and philosophy are products not of a simple stylistic or intellectual deficiency—the author of *Mardi* is obviously equipped to do many sorts of things well—but of the fact that Melville is straining after effects that are so grand in them, and so far beyond what he has the powers to achieve. What is remarkable about *Mardi* is not its specific virtues or defects but the boldness of its endeavour.... If Lombardo expresses Melville’s thoughts...the value of *Mardi* for its author lies not in what is but in what his composition of it could bring into being—his own mature creative self. Melville consistently thinks of *Mardi* in terms of a future attainment that it points toward....

As Melville’s letters lead us to expect, the opening of *Mardi* does bear a direct resemblance to *Typee* and *Omoo*. Here again a sailor-narrator tells how he came to jump ship, with a companion, in search of adventure.... The narrator shares Melville’s aversion to dull commonplaces, his adventure, like his creator’s, defines itself as an imaginative flight into a romance world of expanded possibility. What follows from this opening is a voyage not to strange lands but into strangeness itself. The narrative mode of *Mardi*’s opening phase has less in common with that of *Typee* than with that of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which uses the format of the nautical adventure story to lead the reader on a magical mystery tour.

The narrator’s jumping ship, like Pym’s running away from home, is presented not just as a rejection of a settled way of life but as a rejection of ordinary reality. His desertion is not just a lark but a knowing act of ‘moral dereliction’ that is also an act of suicide, leaving him feeling like ‘his own ghost unlawfully tenanted a defunct carcass’; like Pym denying his identity to his grandfather and descending into the coffin-like enclosure in the ship’s hold, this narrator’s adventure begins with a conscious rejection of the moral obligations of ordinary life and a willed dying to his own ordinary self. The chapters that follow, describing life on the ocean in an open boat and the sense of immobility and unreality induced by the calm, do not function simply as accounts of actual experience; like Pym’s minute dissection of his feelings in the wildly accelerating boat or in the dark confinement of the hold, these are records of an extreme dislocation in the experience of space and time...

Similarly the chapters on sharks, swordfish, and marine phosphorescence are not merely informative; like Pym’s discussions of the Galapagos turtle or the nests of penguins, they evoke a vision of nature as full

of strange and alien forms.... The same patterns govern the actions of these books on their progress into strangeness. One of these patterns is the repeated overthrow of figures of authority. The narrator of *Mardi* gains through desertion the freedom from his captain's control that Pym gains through a mutinous rising of the crew of the *Grampus*. The massacre of the officers of the *Parki* by savages who have cunningly concealed their diabolical malice exactly repeats the fate of the captain and crew of Poe's ship *Jane Guy*. Another is a pattern of violation of taboos and sacred interdicts...the means by which the adventurer breaks into forbidden territory...the opening up before him of Mardi, the world beyond for which he sought....

In *Mardi* Melville meets metaphysics and succumbs to its charms. The symposium format enables him to stage his first comedy of thought, to play with intellectual puzzles and explore the paradoxes of intellectual positions. The figure of Babbalanja embodies for the first time in Melville's fiction an obsession with cosmic riddles and a resolution to uncover 'that which is beneath the seeming.' Certainly one of the main functions of the anatomy form that he adopts midway through the book is that it permits him to speculate, with varying degrees of seriousness, on questions like what man is, what truth is, and what happens after death.... He keeps returning to subjects like the relation of belief to truth, considering it once in terms of religious belief, another time in terms of storytelling, another time in terms of our knowledge of the physical world—he never stops to treat it systematically, but with each return to it he extends the range of its implications....

The undecipherable hieroglyph has yet to become his preferred figure for cosmic mystery that invites but perpetually thwarts the human effort to solve it. Describing a calm at sea in chapter 16 of *Mardi* Melville images a process by which the totality of elements fuse with one another to produce a nothingness, a 'blank,' a 'vacuum,' 'colorless, 'gray chaos in conception.' We are on the verge, here, of *Moby-Dick*'s 'colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink'; all that is missing is a perception of the metaphysical condition such a fusion could symbolize. With these images as with his philosophical throwaways Melville produces out of nowhere something that will be saturated with significance in his future work, but that has yet to acquire that significance....

King Uhia, a moody aspirer who lunges through the present toward future achievements and who feels intolerably confined by the limits reality imposes on his will, clearly prefigures Captain Ahab.... *Mardi* is the form in which the Genius of Poetry in Melville worked out its own salvation. Its spirited performance is the necessary prelude to the mature career of an author who always gained in power by exercising his power—who grew imaginative by exerting his invention, who grew profound by diving after deep thoughts, and who grew creative by engaging in the act of creation."

Richard H. Brodhead
"Mardi: Creating the Creative"
New Perspectives on Melville, ed. Faith Pullin
(Edinburgh U 1978)

"The long lists of adventure figures in *Mardi* show Melville joining the competition for the new market of sensation lovers created by the yellow novelists.... One effect of yellow fiction was to break down firm moral categories by valorizing both the heroic and the villainous, both the pious and the impious.... Of all the Mardian voyagers, Yoomy is the most closely associated with popular literature.... In Yoomy, Melville represents the outwardly benign but internally contradictory, ambiguous American popular culture that by the late 1840s was manufacturing morality and sensationalism with blithe disregard for established moral standards.... The term 'Island of Rogues,' Mohi emphasizes, has come to mean nothing since the criminals seem as good or better than average Mardians. The arbitrariness of definitions of roguery leads Mohi to make the declaration that 'words are but algebraic signs. Conveying no meaning except what you please.' This sentiment is echoed later by the philosopher Babbalanja, who says that 'truth is in things, and not in words: truth is voiceless.' Probing the linguistic implications of his culture's paradoxes, Melville has begun to move toward a perception of the relativity of language."

David S. Reynolds
*Beneath the American Renaissance:
The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*
(Harvard 1989) 281-84

Michael Hollister (2015)