

John F. Birk 2000: *Tracing the Round: The Astrological Framework of Moby-Dick*. London: Minerva. 360 pp.

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Recent criticism of Herman Melville has tended to focus on the relationship between his work and mid-nineteenth-century North American culture and society, pointing out the close connection between text and context. For example, scholars have stressed the presence of elements from African and African-American cultures in Melville's fiction, his engagement with British culture, the links of *Moby-Dick* with the religious controversies of Melville's time or even with a Boston murder trial presided over by Melville's father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw. In contrast, Birk's study is concerned with the structure of *Moby-Dick* and the grouping of its chapters, which takes us back to earlier stages in the criticism of this novel. Birk contextualizes his analysis by relating it to both early and recent studies that also tackle the structural organization of *Moby-Dick*, from James Dean Young's "The Nine Gams of the *Pequod*" (1953) to Elizabeth A. Schultz's *Unpainted to the Last: Moby-Dick and Twentieth-Century American Art* (1995). Significantly, Birk supports the pertinence of his approach with a quotation from the latter: "Schultz has emphasized how Ishmael's narrative 'occurs in the context of his descriptions of space—global and cosmic, it moves through space'" (19). Thus, whereas most present-day critics of *Moby-Dick* analyse this novel in connection with Melville's contemporaneous culture, Birk uses the much wider context suggested by Schultz—the cosmos—to approach the text.

In the Preface to *Tracing the Round*, Birk wonders that the structure of *Moby-Dick* should have eluded scrutiny for a century and a half, if, as he claims, it simply follows the stars, the usual method of navigation of 19th-century mariners. However, as he remarks, it is more surprising that his study should have provoked scepticism and irritation rather than approval among certain Melvilleans: "Too often originality is a sin. Speculation meets disdain," he complains. As a challenge to his critics, Birk invites the reader to have a look at some negative critical responses to his essay (included in Appendix A), read his study and then go back to Appendix A. Birk proves to be not only self-confident but also original in more ways than one, since he brings to his analysis this unexpected metatextual touch.

It is Birk's contention that the twelve signs of the zodiac are the fundamental architectural principle underlying *Moby-Dick*. He notes the cyclical nature of this novel, its grouping of chapters and the *Pequod's* cruise of exactly one year. Basing his analysis on previous approaches to *Moby Dick's* elusive structure, Birk concludes that Melville hid away from the ordinary reader, "the superficial skimmer of pages" (Melville 1994: 2210), the real governing design of his masterpiece.

The first two chapters of the volume (Part One) are devoted to discussing the premises of the main analysis. In chapter 1 ("Probing the Whale"), Birk sums up the evolution of critical interpretations of *Moby Dick's* structure—from its publication in 1851 to the decade of the 1990s—emphasizing the elements perceived as being common to many of them: a series of blocks, pairings, opposition and a cyclical journey, which will be used as a point of reference in later chapters. On the other hand, Birk emphasizes Melville's knowledge of astrology and alludes to a variety of astrological references included in the writer's previous works in support of his thesis. Chapter 2 ("Framing the Whale") reviews the fundamentals of astrology—definition of the concept, description of the characteristics

of each zodiacal sign—and concentrates on its ascendancy during three historical periods: ancient Egypt, the Elizabethan age and the American Renaissance, which are in turn related to specific passages in Melville's works.

Part Two ("Through the Zodiac") constitutes the longest section of the book and the core of the study; it follows a systematic structure, relating the diverse features of the zodiac signs to the *Moby-Dick* chapters. Thus, the first block of the novel (chapters 1 to 25) is analysed in the light of the first two signs of the zodiac: Aries and Taurus. In this case, Birk examines the way the properties of these signs govern events in this section of the novel. If Aries, the fiery ram/sheep, a sign of fire, signifies a coming-into-being, an assertion of self, and ruled by Mars, symbolizes ambition, enterprise and war, these characteristics are said to be reflected in the first 25 *Moby-Dick* chapters, as Birk argues with a display of quotes and examples.

Similarly, allusion is made to the different anatomical parts of the body ruled by the astrological signs: if Virgo and Libra, for instance, represent the bowels, the bowels seem to be particularly emphasized in the Virgo-Libra block (chapters 71–92) more than anywhere else in *Moby-Dick*. It is worth remarking that in this succession of blocks, Leo is the only sign to stand in isolation, represented by just one chapter, "The Sphynx." Leo is introduced as the sign "of not only kings but Melville himself born August 1, 1819" (106). Given these royal, exclusive features, it is appropriate that this sign should be presented unpaired. In contrast, the last three signs of the zodiac, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces are grouped together, forming the closing section of the novel (chapters 127–35).

Whereas Part Two links the progression of *Moby-Dick*'s chapters to the signs of the zodiac, Part Three ("Illumination Inward") sets out to demonstrate the correspondence between the main characters of the novel and the twelve zodiac signs. In fact, Birk goes beyond depicting these parallels, since he maintains that the characters' behaviour fully responds to their astrological sign. Even though each of the characters has at least one opportunity to surmount such influences and act with common sense or free will, they do not: Birk argues that it is this failure to react that allows "the hegemony of fate through the wrath of the whale" (190), which constitutes the great tragedy of the novel.

Captain Ahab, "a warlike figure steeped in ambition" (231) and driven by martian energies, is related to Aries, whereas the whale—a central character in the drama—is seen as an embodiment of Taurus, the second sign of the zodiac that struggles with Aries for zodiacal supremacy: Birk notes that in ancient zodiacs it was Taurus—not Aries—that started the year. In turn, Ishmael, taken as a spokesman for Melville, is accorded the latter's sign: Leo. Part Three ends with the study of Melville's own astrological chart, which is included "at the risk of offending any resolute New Critics" (270). In these pages, Birk looks for more evidence in support of his astrological approach by highlighting, for instance, the recurrence of August in some important events of Melville's life, such as his birth, marriage and the completion of *Moby-Dick*'s drafts.

Part Four analyses the presence in *Moby-Dick* of all the constellations known in Melville's time and discusses the reasons why the writer adopted a zodiacal framework for that novel. Among them, Birk selects Melville's reverence for myth-making, his liking for arcane allusions and hidden meanings, and, last but not least, his admiration for Hawthorne and his "power of blackness" (1994: 2204), which in Birk's opinion, points to Hawthorne's and Melville's common interest in astrology and the black arts. We should

recall that Hawthorne was born in Salem, “the town of witches” (339), and that the association between witches and astrology is well known. The volume ends with an extensive bibliography (352–60) preceded by a series of Appendixes that range from 19th-century Almanacs to lists of constellations and navigational stars, including also the sample of critical responses mentioned above. (The book also includes a variety of maps and illustrations interspersed throughout the chapters.)

As this summary tries to point out, *Tracing the Round* offers an original reading of *Moby-Dick*, in which the author shows his knowledge of astrology and great enthusiasm for his peculiar approach and discoveries. As an assessment of the study, I should say that the volume itself provides valid critical response: on the one hand, the reader is made aware of the “spirit of energetic originality and adventurous, ‘cutting-in’ speculation” that the author encourages in the Preface. On the other, while I agree with the statements on the book’s cover, which introduce the text as “an analytical instrument of remarkable power and insight” (Marvin Fisher, Former President of the Melville Society of America), I also share some of the opinions conveyed in the Appendix: that the author is eager to provide “any astrological source or literary interpretation so long as it reinforces his thesis” (344) and that “the result is a work that is less a discourse than a compilation” (343), so the reading of its pages frequently becomes tedious due to the steady accumulation of quotes and data. All in all, the book—even if heavy reading—should be known by those concerned with the study of *Moby-Dick* and will be especially appreciated by those Melvilleans interested in astrology.

Works Cited

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