

BOOK REVIEWS

Herman Melville. *Israel Potter*. Ed. y trad. Manuel Broncano. Madrid: Cátedra, 2008. ISBN 987-84-376-2428-0. 324 págs. 10 euros.

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Herman Melville seems to be the great survivor among the “dead white males” of US literature. After his rescue from obscurity in the 1920s, interest in his works has been unabated both at the academic and the popular level, as is evident from the unremitting flow of criticism, but also from the continuing apparition of reeditions and translations of his work in a variety of formats which range from thoroughly documented scholarly editions to cheap popular versions. Even *Israel Potter*, one of Melville’s less-known works, has merited three translations into Spanish since the 1970s, the most recent in a small, “alternative” Seville press, El Mono Azul, in 2006. However, none of these previous translations provide the critical background which is one, but not the only, reason, that renders Prof. Broncano’s necessary and welcome.

Manuel Broncano, full professor at the University of León, is an expert on US literature who has translated and edited other classic American authors, including Charlotte Lennox, Edgar Allan Poe, Willa Cather and Flannery O’Connor –some of them, like the present work, for Cátedra’s prestigious collection “Letras Universales,”– and he goes far beyond “the call of duty” in his excellent introduction to this novel. Broncano inserts *Israel Potter* within a broad and thoroughly documented context in American literature, tracing the ways in which the story interacts with American themes and genres, from captivity narratives and jeremiads to the popular “dark adventure” pattern of Melville’s own time. His account of Melville’s life and works, which again pays great attention to the interactions of this writer –and voracious reader– with the literary and intellectual trends of the nineteenth century, could stand on its own as a complete and concise summary and introduction for any course on the author. Broncano then centres on the writing of *Israel Potter* itself, providing a full account of its original publication –typically, in installments in *Putnam’s* magazine–, as well as of Melville’s

financial agreements with the publisher's, and of the early reception of the work, which is most informative as to the conditions of the literary market in mid-nineteenth century America and which contributes to the effort made by many modern critics such as David Reynolds to insert the outstanding "exceptions" famously identified by F.O. Matthiessen more accurately in the real conditions of their period. Broncano's critical analysis of the novel traces its manifold sources, from the pamphlet by Henry Trumbull (supposedly a transcription of Israel Potter's own autobiography) to the many texts which are present by allusion and implication; these include, but are not reduced to, the Bible, the Odyssey, Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard* almanacks, Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," and possibly *Don Quixote* and *Lazarillo de Tormes*. By uncovering this wealth of intertextuality even in an apparently "commercial" story, defined by Melville himself as straight adventure (Letter to his editor George P. Putnam, qtd. Broncano 62), this analysis links Melville's work even more firmly with the modernist and postmodernist trends which it has been proved to anticipate. At the same time, this in-depth analysis is eminently readable, due to a flexible, elegant and convincing style that guides the reader through the complexities of the argumentation. My only, and minor, complaint regards a couple of carelessnesses that could have been eliminated in the editing process: Mary Rowlandson's dead child is a daughter, not a son, and the protagonist of Miller's *Salesman* has unfortunately slipped out as Billy Loman.

As to the text itself, on rereading *Israel Potter* in Broncano's translation I was impressed by the quality of the narrative itself, which is often presented by critics as a merely perfunctory work, one more of Melville's attempts to re-take the adventure story formula that had proved comparatively profitable in his career. However, for a text written by a man who would shortly fall into a deep depression, and who had already produced such "black" works as "Bartleby the Scrivener," *Israel Potter* is surprisingly energetic, full of humor and adventure, in spite of its bleak vision of American history and its rewards for its faceless heroes. It is a novel that could be enjoyed by a non-specialist reader, the kind that might like Frank O'Brien's *Master and Commander*, and Broncano's version does much to open up this possibility to Spanish readers. The translation is excellent, faithfully reproducing the cadence of Melville's voice, with a vocabulary as rich and precise as the occasion requires, and a language and rhythm guided, like Melville's own, by playfulness and pleasure. In addition, the footnotes give just the required amount of information, providing the average reader with succinct accounts of the biblical and mythological references that Melville's audience might have taken for granted but that are no longer part of most people's common knowledge, yet without ever "talking down" (my favorite example of this condescending tone is from an anthology of Spanish renaissance poetry in which a footnote paraphrased a crystal-clear image by saying "that is, that her hair was blond"). For the more specialized reader—Melville expert, US literature scholar or student—the notes on more obscure references are precise and informative and go beyond their merely explanatory function in providing a glimpse of Melville's

voracious curiosity and broadness of allusion, somewhat moderated here by the popular reader he presupposes. In some cases, a few lines more in a note open up a sudden insight into less well-remembered aspects of Melville's age, like the inclusion of the anti-Catholic text on Wren's column commemorating the Great Fire of London (310). In addition, the text is very carefully edited, and (with one minor exception: the lack of correspondence between footnote 48 and the text it supposedly refers to) practically free from typographical errors, something that can no longer be taken for granted even in highly reputed publishers such as Cátedra or Penguin.

All in all, then, this is a book well worth recommending, both to specialists and to the general public: a fluid, brilliant, accurate translation and a scholarly edition and introduction that give evidence of the vitality and quality of present-day American Studies in Spain.