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National Security Letters: C. L. R. James, Melville, and the State

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Abstract: In the early 1950s, at the height of America’s McCarthyite witch hunts and anti-communist hysteria, Trinidad-born C. L. R. James, who had been living in the United States illegally since 1938, was arrested and held for deportation on the basis of his Marxist philosophy and activism. While imprisoned on Ellis Island, he drafted the text of *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, a book that is equal parts literary criticism and argument for the very Americanness of James’s revolutionary thought. This essay examines the discussions within James’s revolutionary organization surrounding the composition of that work, and the centrality of Melville to their visions of a revolutionary America.

Keywords: C. L. R. James, Herman Melville, radical politics in America, the McCarthy Era

CLC: G05 Document code: A Article ID: 2096-4374(2017)06-0072-09

It is haunted by both the black writing of America’s literature and the red record of our political past. We first see Hester Prynne on the threshold of this very portal, stepping forth “as if by her own free will” (56). Hawthorne writes of the town scaffold, scene of the unfolding of so much of his tale, as “a portion of a penal machine” long held to be an effectual “agent in the promotion of good citizenship” (59).

Readers of *The Scarlet Letter* begin by locating themselves among the good citizens of New England, placed on the grassy plot before this door in Prison Lane. They quickly find themselves asking just what sort of citizenship has been effectuated by the agents of Hester Prynne’s inquisition; what sort of citizenry is constituted within the reading of Hawthorne’s book? C. L. R. James puts a similar set of questions to us in his book *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*. What sort of citizen might Melville’s Ahab make among us? What modes of citizenship are activated in the reading of *Moby Dick*, and who is this C. L. R. James to stand before us at the prison door and ask such questions? James remarks that had Ahab appeared at mid-twentieth century asking his odd questions about ownership, “he would not only be blackballed from any kind of job by every employer in the country, but he would be rigorously investigated by the F. B. I.” (2). James’s book was published to little notice in 1953. That same year
marked the appearance of a little-marked book of poetry written by Melvin B. Tolson, the only American writer ever to serve as the Poet Laureate of another nation. Tolson's book was, despite a preface by no less an establishment figure than Allen Tate, virtually blackballed from any kind of canonicity by the critics in this country, perhaps in part because of doubts Tolson had raised within his poem about whether “the white book’s colophon / is Truth’s” (172). In his Libretto for the Republic of Liberia, Tolson recalls Hester Prynne’s passage through the antique portal of the American penal machine. Rather than the red “A,” Tolson writes the “black flower T” into American letters (172). He who doubts the white book’s purchase on universal truth was himself inscribed by the mechanisms of the penal colony with the black flower of truth that blooms in the doorway of citizenship. It is a moment of redoubled irony. Tolson wrote a Libretto for a colony, a nation founded by the foundlings America left on Africa’s doorstep, black people who, because they were free, were not allowed to be at home in the land of the free; Africans from America who were denied citizenship within the republic of their birth.

The publication of Tolson’s audacious Libretto attracted scant attention in 1953, nor was much notice given in that year to Mariners, Renegades and Castaways, a book that emanated from Ellis Island’s detention center under the hand of a colleague of Tolson’s, C. L. R. James. James’s book did find few readers. In February of 1953, an excited Charles Olson wrote to Robert Creeley upon receiving an unsolicited copy of James’s book in the mail: “a crazy book for a crazy man came in here, surprise, yesterday” (Maud 249). Copies had also been sent to every member of congress, to seemingly less immediate response. Tolson had been linked with C. L. R. James in a prospective publishing project organized by Richard Wright that also included St. Clair Drake and Ralph Ellison. That black brain trust had not succeeded in finding the funding typically accorded and expulsion, and thus the role it was to play in James’s incarceration with deportation at the peak of post-war America’s anti-Communist hysteria. In the final chapter of the book he began on Ellis Island, James declares “the reader of this book knows what I think of Communists” (133). It is certainly the case that anyone reading Mariners, Renegades and Castaways will come to learn of James’s unstinting hostility to the Communist International and its party apparatus. Most readers, however, would have learned of that opposition after James had already been expelled. Still, there remained a significant class of readers who knew well James’s anti-Communist philosophy prior to his imprisonment. James remarks in Mariners that “The Department of Immigration knew my attitude to Communists” (James, Mariners 133). His
evidence for this is the evidence that the government entered against him before the judge, the copy of his 1937 World Revolution, a book which was, as The Manchester Guardian had noted, “fiercely partisan” in its attacks upon Communist orthodoxy (164). Indeed, Mariners quotes from reviews of James’s books that had appeared in the New York Times, Saturday Review of Literature and the The New Republic in the course of his analysis of the incongruities of the government’s case against him. Then, as now, the Department of Justice paid little attention to the views of such critics.

On June 11, 1952, James had been ordered by the government to surrender himself on Ellis Island on the grounds of his long-expired visitor’s visa. James conceded that he was legally deportable and the office of the Attorney General conceded that James, now wedded to an American citizen and the father of a natural-born American, was eligible to be considered for discretionary relief. The Attorney General cited two facts in using his discretionary powers to deny any such relief: the provisions of the McCarran act and James’s earlier authorship of World Revolution (Blackman 1). As James’s attorney pointed out, the McCarran Act was passed months after James’s hearing, seemingly rendering its application to James’s case a blatant violation of the constitutional prohibition on ex post facto enactments. Further, James’s attorney held, the McCarran act was specifically directed against the Communist parties and their allied organizations, the very targets of the McCarran act and James’s earlier authorship of World Revolution cited against James in the denial of relief.

In the Fall of 1952, a colleague of James’s, Saul Blackman, wrote to the NAACP soliciting that organization’s support in the struggle with the federal government. Walter White, then head of the NAACP, wrote in turn to Thurgood Marshall for legal advice on the matter, mentioning that he had requested a copy of World Revolution (White 9/12/52). This request elicited a letter from James himself, laboriously handwritten from the wards of a Marine hospital where he was being treated for severe ulcer attacks during his detention. In this letter James tells White, “I was never at any time a member of the Communist Party, and a great deal of my time was spent in attacking them” (Letter to Walter White 9/23/52), and he characterizes his English translation of Boris Souverain’s Life of Stalin as “still the bible of every anti-Stalinist.” Obviously aware of Walter White’s strong anti-Communist position, James is careful in his correspondence to soft-pedal the truly revolutionary nature of his past and present work. This makes for sometimes painful reading in retrospect, as we see James appearing to deny the potential political efficacy of his own labors. He goes so far as to tell White that he would get rid of every copy of World Revolution that he could because he no longer believes in it. In reflecting on this text, it is imperative that we register the plain fact that James’s rejection of that earlier book is made on the basis of its grounding in the methodology and outlook of Trotsky. By 1952, James had made a thorough break with Trotskyism and its belief in the Soviet Union as any sort of workers’ state, albeit decayed. This much he also communicates to White. What remains a part of James’s politics even after his split from Trotsky, as he reiterates to White, is his denunciation of “Russia root and branch as the greatest barbarism the world has ever known.” While James now denigrates the theoretical basis of his earlier writing, he continues his critical analyses of “the totalitarian conception of the plan and the elite,” which are subjects, Saul Blackman assures Walter White in his letter of September 17, James shall address “even more sharply and precisely” (Blackman 3) in the book that James is then working on, even while imprisoned, Mariners, Renegades and Castaways.

White, who was interested in James’s case because it laid bare the racistal and xenophobic biases at the heart of the McCarran Act, sounds almost relieved in the end to follow Thurgood Marshall’s advice and leave leadership in the James matter to the ACLU. In December, White inquires of Marshall whether the NAACP might make a contribution, “even if only a token one,” to James’s defense fund. As the NAACP moves on to the matter of Brown v Board of Education, a case they had begun working on the previous year, White is relieved of further obligation to engage in a critical reading of World Revolution. One has to wonder if White was fully appreciative of James’s distinctions between his current and earlier political philosophies, though it is evident that White and others saw the injustice of the treatment James met at the hands of the Justice Department. The Department of Justice for its part evidenced no appreciation whatsoever of the ironies implicit in its invocation after the fact of an anti-Communist statute to deport a noted anti-Communist. According to James, though, his persecutors recognized that there was a problem with their jerry-rigged opinion. In the final chapter to Mariners, James, ever the aesthetic critic, turns his literary attention from Melville to the text of the decision rejecting his appeal. “Conscious that something was wrong,” James argues, “the writer
of the rejection sought to cover it by his astounding argument that though I might be only a writer, the great revolutionary organizations had been founded by writers’” (165). This is ludicrous as legal argument (rather like arguing that the Equal Protection clause requires that ballots not be counted), and yet James must have found a certain perverse satisfaction in being awarded by the Department of Justice the status he had denied himself in his letter to Walter White. In that letter, and in his book, James pointed out that his radical group in England had never numbered more than a few dozen associates, and he labels as ridiculous the idea that he had been a “dangerous agitator.” In *Mariners* James adds: “I was then as I am now, essentially a writer.” (162) The Department of Justice agrees in denying the appeal of his deportation orders. James is essentially a writer. Revolutionary organizations have often been founded by writers. The danger that James represents to the authorities in America in the early 1950s has nothing really to do with the number of activists in his organization, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, it has to do explicitly with his writing and speaking. The potential dangers posed by the author of *A History of Negro Revolt* are such that those close readers of his early texts, the F.B.I., the Department of Justice and the Immigration Service, practice the radical critique of excision and expulsion. James, like Ahab, would be blackballed.

In a footnote to the final chapter of *Mariners*, James practices a close reading of the text of authority that has been brought to bear upon him. James has just argued that the policy in place at Justice aims at “the extermination of the alien pest.” He then adds:

> The authorities on Ellis Island insist on the word “detainees” instead of prisoners. After my own experiences and what I have seen, it would be a mockery for me to assist them in still more deceiving the American people. Under that administration the people on the island are prisoners (151).

Perhaps most significant in the rhetoric of this footnote is its opposition between the authorities who imprison people on Ellis Island and the American people, who must not be deceived. The same authorities who refuse to acknowledge the import of distinctions between Communism and the anti-Stalinist Marxists who oppose it, insist upon an empty distinction between prisoners and people who have simply been detained. This officious administration of duplicitous language fairly leaps from James’s note as an instance of the very totalitarian concept of the plan and the elite that James denounces in Communism and that he critiques throughout *Mariners*. In the McCarran Act James sees an ex post facto “attempt to change the laws to correspond to the administrative policy” (151). He anticipates that such attempts may purchase short-term success, but, he urges, “you cannot reverse the whole historical past and traditions of a people by packaged legislation and loud propaganda” (151). This lesson he learns lingering among the American people; he learns it in his application to the novels of Melville. It is in this learning that he believes he has “become a part of the American people” (167), and *Mariners* is his formal application for the citizenship denied him by a penal machine then, as now, dedicated to the “promotion of good citizenship” among us by those who would seize upon the apparatus of justice to elect themselves and to impose the order of their chosen reading upon the sometimes chaotic expressions of our popular will.

II

Everybody seeks to appropriate Melville.

*(James, *Letter to William Gorman* 12/17/50)*

The minutes of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, that small band of radical activists and intellectuals gathered around C. L. R James and Raya Dunayevskaya, report the expected heated debates over the true nature of the Soviet Union, the revolutionary significance of Eastern European resistance to Stalinism, the traps of vanguardist thinking, and the perennial questions of American revolutionary potential. Perhaps less anticipated by later scholars might be the discovery in the Johnson-Forest archives of equally heated, and equally lengthy debates about Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Dostoevsky and, most of all, Melville. Because James’s book on Melville, *Mariners. Renegades and Castaways*, has been so infrequently available in its complete form, and because his volume on *American Civilization* was only published after his death, few contemporary readers have appreciated the full breadth of James’s concerns with the literary, nor has the extent of his political group’s engagement with the literary been adequately acknowledged. It is easy enough to understand the Johnson-Forest group’s adversarial positions with regard to such better-known “New York Intellectuals” as Irving Howe. More difficult, it would seem, is the contemplation of the image of
this dedicated cohort of ex-Trotskyist activists hotly debating critical positions on Herman Melville.

As is now widely known, James came to believe that Melville was the most significant Western author after Shakespeare, that Melville’s texts signaled the evolution of a New World society that remained poorly comprehended even a century after the appearance of *Moby Dick*. What has not been more generally known is the breath-taking extent of James’s involvement with Melville’s texts during his American sojourn. With the eventual release of *American Civilization* it is now evident to all that the furious pace of work kept up by James in the 1930s, a burst of research, discussion, and writing that produced *Black Jacobins, A History of Negro Revolt* and *World Revolution* in the space of just a few years, continued unabated after James illegally extended his stay in the United States. This American work has been harder to get a sense of because little of it was published in readily available books and nearly all of it was written under pseudonyms. But with the evidence of *American Civilization* before us now can see that during the same years that James and his collaborators undertook the intensive explorations of Hegelian philosophy that led to James’s remarkable *Notes on Dialectics*, they were also commencing a thorough cultural critique of American society, a critique in which the writings of Melville played a dominant role. A sense of the excitement with which the group approached their Melville discussions is conveyed in a 1944 letter James wrote to Constance Webb, who was later to become his wife. Speaking of his reading in *Moby Dick*, James tells Webb:

> There are many pages, many, in that book which are among the most amazing I have ever read. They kept me and have kept me in a state of almost continuous excitement. Have you read the book? If not, put it on your list soon. You can have my copy if you wish and can stand my markings. I saw it in an old furniture store and bought it for 25 cents. I am convinced now that as the history of America must be studied around the Civil War-leading up to it and from it, so American literature revolves around Melville and Whitman.

> So today when Rae left I couldn’t take it anymore and went to the library a few blocks away and got 6 books, 4 on American literature, to read about Melville... if you think you will be, or are interested in Melville, then some time or other we’ll go into him. I have to study him (*Special Delivery* 67).

> Interesting enough is the thought of someone so emotionally driven by reading and discussion that he feels compelled to rush to a library and secure volumes of literary critique. It is still more intriguing to learn that just as James came to view the political currents swirling around the Civil War, and particularly the activities and writings of the Abolitionists, as holding a key to the understanding of modern American civilization, so also did he come to read Melville as the author who most paradigmatically confronted the emerging structures of the new society and wrote the most encompassing epitaph for the old. The public record of James’s American years, as little-known as it has been, bears witness to James’s remarkable response to Melville. Newspaper notices and pamphlets indicate that Melville was frequently the primary topic of the public lectures that James gave in cities across the United States. The publication of *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* in the early Fifties showed that James continued his engagement with Melville through the period of his incarceration on Ellis Island while fighting deportation, and the circulation of one version of *American Civilization* has made available at last James’s late-Forties critiques of Whitman and Melville. The scattered archives of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, though, show that the engagement with Melville was a collaborative effort and that it lasted for at least a decade.

As had been his practice in the writing of *Notes on Dialectics*, James circulated carbons of his drafts on Melville for criticism and for instigating further work within the group. One manuscript dated September 11, 1950, is a set of rough notes for group discussion leading to a possible Melville book. The discussion notes are extraordinarily wide-ranging and appear not only to outline several of the arguments that would appear in *Mariners* but also to point in the direction of additional publications that the activists were considering. Some of the discussion reflects issues taken up in different versions of *American Civilization* that the group worked on over a period of years; other elements seem aimed at a never-completed critical project James had hoped to place with a commercial publisher intended for a broad, popular audience. That James viewed this literary activity as integral to the explicitly political aims of his organization is clear from his comments contrasting the work at hand to similar work done by American Communists. In an undated and untitled document from this discussion period James observes that:

> The Stalinists spend an immense amount
of time and energy upon the “Marxist” analysis of literature. It is part of their total conception. They doctor it to suit themselves. They fight their enemies. They corrupt the proletariat. They collect writers and sympathizers. They must be fought. But I am not doing that or preparing that here. I am doing something entirely different. I am clarifying our theory for ourselves and hewing a channel to the proletariat (Untitled 5).

Melville might seem to some an odd site for hewing a channel to the proletariat. But the members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency did not share the vanguardists’ opinions of the intellectual capacities (not to mention attention spans) of the masses. As Johnny Zupan wrote to James in September of 1950, “The problem is not at all what the workers will understand, but rather what they’ll read” (Zuppan 1), and as James observed the reading habits of Americans in the post-war boom years of paperbacks and pamphlets, “the [proletariat] is reading now-everything” (Untitled 6). James had sketched out a publication plan for his group that, though never completed, is impressive in its ambitions. “A volume on Melville,” he said to his comrades, “another on Negroes and the Civil War, a good pamphlet on the Abolitionists, and the whole American development is open for anyone to read. But to do this demands integration in our heads. Let us never forget our function. It is not to tell workers that the greedy capitalist makes profits. It is to give him a total theoretical conception” (Untitled 6).

The literati of the Communist apparatus were not the only antagonists lined up in James’s sights. While his letter to Constance Webb does not identify the authors of the books he rushed to the library to get, clearly he had found them wanting. James’s tone when he touches upon the extant criticism has that same contentious note we find in similar correspondence from Charles Olson during the same years. In a November 1950 letter James remarks: “Some, a few, of the bourgeois writers know that Melville’s discovery was, as Hawthorne put it, that from the very gate of heaven there is a road to the pit” (11/2/50, 1). James’s studies of Melville ended by drawing him into contention with the broader literary culture of his time. In a 1953 letter to Grace Lee Boggs he notes her recognition that “Leavis is a serious man. In fact he is a very fine critic of the traditional school and aware of the modern world… You can’t kick him around, altho you can destroy him” (11/20/53, 1). In October of 1953, James declares to Boggs:

Criticism must begin with the problems and trends of the present generation; with the interests, concerns, hopes, joys, perils of contemporary humanity; the great masses of the people, for today they are civilization. Not to sell to them, not to educate them, but for the critic, for criticism to save itself. I. A. Richards and the others have been merely working out techniques...My business is to challenge directly the whole English critical school or schools. (10/18/53 1)

Some of what criticism needs to save itself from comes into view in this same letter. “Psychoanalysts?” James asks. “They dominated the Melville school in the U.S. But Leyda warned me that I paid too much attention to them” (10/18/53, 1). This latter reference is, of course, to Jay Leyda, noted for his contributions to Dickinson scholarship as well as for his work on Melville. Elsewhere, James warns his readers:

I propose to give unmitigated blows at all attempts to evoke Ahab into a romantic figure, one of those who often appear in our history, non conformistetc (Elizabeth Janeway). She is a very intelligent person which is why I propose to demolish all this tripe. Ahab is a profoundly social figure. So is Pierre. (Untitled 4)

Finally, James promises, “I am not ending the criticism of Melville. I am beginning it” (11/3/53, 2).

As always, James constantly brings into his discussions the material context of the correspondence itself. In the same way that Marineres builds itself around the circumstance of James’s confinement, the Melville letters are intimately interwoven with the details of the daily lives of the Johnson-Forest group. To William Gorman, James writes in December of 1950: “I have just reread your letter, and, sitting in a lawyer’s office waiting for him, I am scribbling—one does the best [one] can, any way one can” (12/17/50, 4). James here becomes James the Scrivener, writing against the dead wall confinement of the lawyer’s quarters. In a long and more-than-usually reflective missive, James begins a section by observing:

This is a curious letter isn’t it? I began with some ideas that were disconnected but which I felt sure were connected … Usually I would write like this section by section taking the points as they come and then when they
have all knit together sit down and write it all out with a beginning, a middle and an end. That I did in Nevada; and I have promised myself that if and when I am sent to Ellis Island I shall celebrate and confound the bourgeoisie by a solid piece of work. But I am working in scraps, and am getting the things down as they come. (Untitled 12)

Also similar to James’s correspondence surrounding *Notes on Dialectics* is his pattern of challenging his comrades to a greater debate. While the entire organization participated in these discussions of Melville’s significance to an understanding of American civilization, James’s most frequent and steady correspondents on this subject were William Gorman and Grace Lee Boggs. In one letter to Gorman, James registers his disappointment that he has received so few criticisms from his colleagues. “It seems,” he comments, “the comrades are all inhibited about literary criticism, but it is precisely that we are going to break down” (9/29/50, 1). The give and take that is recorded in the letters shows us a small group of dedicated radical thinkers coming to grips with one another as they struggle with Melville. At one point James implores Gorman: “Above all, attack me William. I loved your last letter above all because it said ‘You wrote some wonderful stuff on Ahab’ and then dismissed it” (12/17/50, 11), and there is indeed evidence that Gorman disagreed openly and often with the founder of his political group. Like many in the organization, Gorman wondered about the suitability of James’s inclusion in *Mariners* of an account of his imprisonment. James insisted finally on adding the personal material to his meditations on *Moby Dick* because he recognized that his own political experience of America was revelatory of the modernity that Melville had envisioned. Additionally, he saw it as relevant to the larger audience and broader goals to which he aspired. He told Grace Lee Boggs in 1953: “People want this interpretation of literature and the modern world... [William Gorman] told me I had ruined the Melville by attaching it to the case. He wants American publication, I am aiming at American, French and later Italian and Spanish and German and Japanese. All of them. Zulu if possible. It may take time” (10/18/53 4). James invited Gorman and Boggs to attack his positions, yet he was even more grateful for their positive contributions to the project. It is to Gorman that James credits his movement toward an understanding of *Pierre* as an existential figure. In fact, one valuable revelation of the correspondence is the extent and quality of the discussions of *Pierre*, a novel about which James was somewhat dismissive in *Mariners*. Beyond arguing theses with his correspondents, James was busily marshaling their forces and dividing up the critical and historical tasks to be accomplished. For several years he prodded Gorman to produce a book for the group dealing with the Abolitionists and the Civil War. While Gorman did deliver a successful series of popular lectures on the subject, however, he never did manage to bring these into a book, and this remained one of James’s great disappointments. Grace Lee Boggs, on the other hand, produced reams of useful critique, some in response to James’s suggestions and some on topics entirely of her own selection. The scale of James’s expectations of this remarkable thinker and writer is measurable in a November 1953 letter James writes in response to her recent contributions. In a cover note, James pleads: “Please do Kant-Schelling-Hegel for Marlowe, Jonson and Shakespeare and Co. And don’t be tender in your criticism, you and [William]. Go at it, write in attack, do and say what you like, what you think must go in” (11/3/53 1). As if this weren’t enough of an assignment, James goes on to tell Grace Boggs:

I got your notes on Stroheim. But no more notes. Aristotle, Hegel, Coleridge; and the modern aesthetic. Melville (tho do not mention him) and film and mass audience. Positive and negative on each; then Bateson and Leavis, Eliot and Richards, Stalinists and psychos. Then Milton. (11/3/53 2)

James even sets his comrades to work developing particular portions of his evolving theses on Melville. Following his reading of Melville’s own correspondence, James addresses himself to Gorman:

In a letter [Melville] says that as soon as men talk of God, Nature, they have prepared the rope which will hang them ... Here it seems to me we have him at his most profound. When man created these entities he built up barriers between himself and complete mastery of them. Man’s existence had to include these in itself. “Take God out of the dictionary and you will have him in the street,” he adds. I believe and I think Grace should work on this, [Melville] was very close to recognizing that the barriers to man’s full humanity were of his own creation. (11/2/50 3)
This correspondence, then, is the epistolary seminar out of which the now-published volumes American Civilization and Mariners, Renegades and Castaways were written in the years 1946 to 1954. In retrospect we can see that these two books, as eccentric and informative as they are, represent only a segment of a much larger critical-historical project, never completed, that derived its understanding of the crises faced by late twentieth century America from an analysis of the political forces set in motion in the middle of the nineteenth century, and with access to the complete record of the correspondence we now can see that Melville was at the very center of the cultural work conducted by James and his associates. For James’s group, America in the nineteenth century was a society in which the very conception of nature was radically transmuted. Where the seventeenth century had come to view nature as an objective arena in which man acts and observes, Melville inhabited an era in which nature “engages productive man in an adventure,” a time when nature was seen as “transformed by social man and social nature rather than nature as a given environment” (9/11/50 6) (The Johnson-Forest Tendency 6). Further, the James group arrived at an understanding of Melville as the one writer who above all others had discerned the complete reconstitution of human relationships, and of humanity’s relationship to the material world. Several years prior to his Ellis Island interlude, James set this thesis in outline form for the members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency:

Melville’s early writings are dealing with the gradual recognition that the ideas of Rousseau, democracy, pursuit of liberty and happiness etc. are no longer tenable. Melville saw the mechanization. He saw the mechanization in the ships. And in [“Taurus of Maids”] and Bell Tower he shows … how sensitive he was to it. And in Israel Potter how there was individual freedom in the past...He saw the mechanization and his problem was what was to be done about it. (1/18/50 3)

James believed that Melville was finally unable to supply an answer to this last question. James also held to the belief that those who would seek an answer might well begin their search among the shards and drafts of drafts left to us by Melville. Melville, James argued, did not really have an audience by the time he completed Moby Dick, not an audience in the sense that Shakespeare had one. For James, always attentive to the social contexts of writing, Shakespeare is someone you cannot “separate from his company and his audience. Poor Melville had no audience” (Untitled 3). C. L. R. James, who was to undergo his own moment of tragic isolation when sent to Ellis Island and cut off from his daily contention with his colleagues, had already seen in Herman Melville the type of the twentieth century isolate. But James believed whole-heartedly that an audience eager to learn of the questions (if not the lessons) of Melville had come into being in the streets and in the workplaces of America. If, as Grace Lee Boggs read them, there were passages in Melville’s White Jacket that “could have been written by Wendell Phillips” (1), James increasingly came to hope for some melding of the intellectual insight and aesthetic accomplishment of Melville with the Abolitionists’ ability to transform themselves from an audience into an active social force. And James plainly had hopes at mid-century that the writings and actions of his own group might be of use to such a self-organizing audience.

But time and the McCarthy era United States Government intervened, and the larger projects were left undone, leaving we who come after with two astonishing books and hundreds of pages of intriguing manuscripts. In this, James resembles Melville. Where Melville had complained in his letters that time and dollars damned him, James writes to his comrades at mid-century something that remained true for each of us among his readers as the twentieth century clocked its close and the millennium approached: “I am anxious to get back to Melville, altho time throttles me” (12/17/50 1).

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