Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance (review)

Steven Hamelman

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gress envisioned it, Melville imagined himself as a spokesman for America, pleading with the lawmakers to do the right thing by the South. This prose document (to be labelled "Supplement" and to be published as the close of *Battle-Pieces*) was probably one of the most intelligent and compassionate utterances to emerge in *postbellum* America. It was couched in the language of a professional writer; it contained the sentiments of a genuine statesman. Garner summarizes Melville's *cri de coeur*: "He wished for an America purified by her pain, her triumph subdued by prudence gained from her experience, her power dedicated, and her hope grown wise" (p. 448).

In the context of the Great Rebellion, this was Melville's finest hour. *The Civil War World of Herman Melville* is heavy with American literary deities; the presiding deity is the towering figure of Herman Melville. Although he was a non-combatant, he anguished over the war—and the peace—in a way not one of the others did. The Civil War was truly his.

Northeastern University Gerald R. Griffin

Bryant, John. *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance.* New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993. 312 pp. Cloth: $45.00.

The thesis of *Melville and Repose* would be easier to define and grasp were it not for the long string of associated terms, all requiring a good deal of explication and exemplification in their own right, upon which it relies. Professor Bryant concentrates, first, "on a long-standing cultural 'debate' between integrative and subversive modes of amiable humor and . . . the rhetoric of deceit." He states that "the problem for writers of the American Renaissance was how to resolve this comic debate by incorporating humor and satire in ways that would satisfy artistic and social needs." Bryant highlights Melville's singular "aesthetics of repose" (essentially, a sophisticated kind of corrective humor tempered by genial ease) in order to demonstrate that "America required a subordination of satire to humor for its comic and political survival," and that "to achieve [this] repose Melville experimented with various narrative strategies shifting from *Typee* to *Moby-Dick* to *The Confidence-Man*" (p. viii).

Bryant substantiates his "unorthodox claims" (p. viii) through the use of neologistic phrases (and the concepts underlying them) like "pluralistic historicism" and "the fallacy of parallel developments." He also identifies various "rhetorics" (of deceit, of geniality) and taxonomic terms (such as the Cosmopolitan Ideal) and types (the False Misanthropist, the False Genialist, and the Genial Misanthrope). Generally abstract, yet appearing in a constant

parade before the reader, such terms and categories tend to blur Bryant's critical distinctions rather than clarify them, mainly because he splits his hairs so finely and then asks the reader to accept conclusions like this: "[Ahab] seems a self-parody in the later chapters, a con man who cons himself and a misanthropist who willfully resists the persistent hand of Pip, the mad clown of genial cosmopolitanism" (p. 208). As if anticipating the reader's difficulty in absorbing his unique yet diffuse thesis and its special vocabulary, Bryant belabors his discussion to the extent that—for generalists at least—his study becomes less and less readable as it advances toward his analyses, in the second half, of Melville's comic strategies. Unfortunately, we must wait too long and digest too much before reaching the close readings that Bryant's main title promises us.

Indeed, the text's structure suggests that Bryant, wanting to write two studies but not having enough material for either one, combined them. True, Chapter 1, "A Great Intellect in Repose," focuses on Melville and on the oxymoron characterizing his comic art, "tense repose"—"tense because of its probing toward Being and yet reposeful because of its containment of our anguish over the futility of that quest" (p. 9). In these early pages Bryant contextualizes his sense of "the ontological status of humor" (p. 5) in Melville's day. Bryant's commentary on the picturesque and "the notion of geniality" (p. 20) results in a refinement of his double-edged thesis: one, that "the growth of America's comic sensibility is grounded in the possibility that wit, irony, and satire can be contained within a benevolent voice of humor" (p. 28); and two, that Melville's aesthetics of repose compelled him to experiment, as he participated in the "debate over how humor and satire could best serve the republic," with the conflicting forms of genial and subversive laughter found in "tall tales and literary confidence games" (p. 27).

Bryant's survey of the national picture consumes nearly half the monograph. Discussion of the British tradition, with sources in Shaftesbury and Hazlitt, leads quickly to insightful pages on Evert Duyckinck, Emerson, William Gilmore Simms, and William A. Jones (whose approaches to humor are too varied to summarize here). A chapter on Irving, one of Melville's key models, is followed by one which provides "a veracious history of comic lying encompassing humanistic, utilitarian, and amiable perspectives," all of which bear fruit in Melville's mission to "genially dupe us into deep thought" (p. 72).

Despite (or because of) one's impatience to arrive at the heart of the matter—evidence of Melville's tense repose in *Typee, Moby-Dick,* and *The Confidence-Man*—and one's increasing sense that Bryant's pluralistic historicism works better in theory than in practice, it is a relief to reach his brilliant deconstructions of Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." These readings are digressive (Poe's "barbed humor" [p. 88] has little place in Bryant's view of Melville), but at least they are digressions of a scintillant kind.

Before beginning Part II, "Rhetoric and Repose" in Melville, Bryant

dwells on the Cosmopolite, another significant (and many-sided) persona who, along with the Con Man, figures prominently in Melville's fiction. Bryant's scrutiny of the three test novels reflects his mastery of a subject that requires a synthesis of innovative jargon with its implications in the canon of an author who apparently wished "to push personality out of his voice, to lift expression beyond the impulses of geniality and demonism, beyond humor and tragedy, toward the voicelessness of the impersonal void" (p. 229).

Bryant's learning is impressive, and his ability to delineate a vital strand in Melville's art is admirable. Nevertheless, his monograph sometimes rambles, and the litany of bold-faced chapter sections and the trail of italicized sub-headings indicate just how hard he must work at explaining his numerous abstractions. Still no one will dispute Bryant's expertise in literary history and his creative readings. Students of Melville (or of American humor) may profit from Bryant's ambition to fuse author, text, culture, and history. Generalists, already hard-pressed to keep pace with the spate of critical studies published daily, would be wise to extract the articles, or the material most relevant to their interests, embedded in *Melville and Repose.* If successful they will learn much about American humor and culture during the mid-nineteenth century.

Coastal Carolina University Steven Hamelman

Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson*: Race, Conflict, and Culture.* Ed. Susan Gillman and Forrest G. Robinson. Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1990. Paper: $18.95.

A white-skinned man dons blackface and women's clothing to rob (and murder); he subsequently discovers, through the new science of fingerprinting, that he is really a descendent of Africans and a slave who was exchanged in infancy with his young master. Valet de Chambre (or Chambers), alias Tom Driscoll, seems almost tailor-made for a 1990s audience. Hence the recently increased interest in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, a text that turns race and gender misapprehension in a mid-nineteenth-century Southern town into a complicated spoof of the "fiction of law and custom" in the United States. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which depicts the custom of race and, in general, identity within legal and scientific discourses, lends itself readily to the kind of new historicist readings that Susan Gillman and Forest Robinson have collected in *Mark Twain's* Pudd'nhead Wilson*: Race, Conflict, and Culture.* The contributors include teachers of political science and anthropology as well as literature and American Studies, and their readings of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* presume what Gillman and Robinson call "the textualization of such cultural categories as race, class, and gender" (p. ix).