



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Herman Melville: A Biography. Vol. 2: 1851-1891 by Hershel Parker

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emphasis twenty years ago in *Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time* (1979) by paying special attention to the early journals, and it has since been continued in studies by Evelyn Barish and Mary Kupiec Cayton. As in Field's book, so in this larger critical trend, the middle term tends to drop out as we ask how, before the fact, American social conditions licensed such a career and how, after the fact, the career reacted on American society—not forgetting to inquire, in all this attention to the career, how much money Emerson made between times.

Field's subtitled thesis, squarely the subject of the last chapter, emerges slowly in the first four, which trace Emerson's alleged disengagement from Boston Brahminism and his embrace of a democratic polity and style. Turn-of-the-century Federalism and later Brahminism are presented as virtually equivalent, though the latter is more often understood as the culture that new money put together during Emerson's lifetime and as having essentially nothing to do with descent, as in Emerson's case, from the clergy of small-town New England. The Brahminism that Emerson rejected was neither a personal inheritance nor a Puritan entitlement, but more especially, to Emerson's sense, an eclipse of talent (as in the scandalous use that money made of such men as Daniel Webster) that typically issued in a conservative reliance on public institutions and masculine careers at the expense of private judgment and art.

Lecturing was Emerson's main contact with the democratic masses and was thus a counter to "the snobbish elitism of his erstwhile Brahmin colleagues" (p. 142). By emphasizing the aggressive cultural intervening to which Emerson was so energetically given, year after year, from Maine to Minnesota, Field shrewdly resists the stereotype of the aloof and speculative "Sage of Concord." Field's Emerson gains the public ear by asserting the value of the individual (particularly the American individual, for he insists on Emerson's nationalism), thereby making democracy credible, and yet, in the next chapter, on slavery, the popular attention that Emerson earned is pathetically squandered: "he never became that great American intellectual who

elaborated a genuinely multiracial vision of the United States" (p. 198). And this was because he was, after all, "a scholar and teacher merely" (p. 197). Is that not a strange thing for a university professor to say?

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Herman Melville: A Biography. Vol. 2: 1851–1891. By Hershel Parker. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xx, 997 pp. \$45.00, ISBN 0-8018-6892-0.)

In this concluding section of his massive two-volume Melville biography, Hershel Parker traces the novelist's life from its creative acme, in the early 1850s, to his death four decades later. The career arc Parker describes is familiar enough. Melville's masterpieces, particularly *Moby-Dick* (1851), were widely attacked by reviewers and misunderstood by his family; as a result, Melville groped for a suitable artistic medium, committing himself mainly to poetry after his major fiction was undervalued. He braved fits of melancholy until he began to get some positive responses shortly before his death.

Although this overall life pattern is well known, many of the facts Parker provides are not. The great merit of this biography is that its exhaustive research yields a wealth of fresh information about Melville's life.

Parker gives us Melville at ground level. He makes us feel the wounding assaults that came all too regularly from family members and reviewers. I was fascinated by the accounts of Melville's brother-in-law, Lemuel Shaw Jr., a snide oaf incognizant of the novelist's greatness. The breadth of critics' disparagement of Melville also intrigued me. Most Melvilleans are aware of the major trashings of his work, but Parker unearths a huge amount of additional, previously overlooked criticism. He also records the positive, if usually shallow, praise Melville received in a large number of unfamiliar publications. Parker reveals that the support received from his father-in-law, Lemuel Shaw Sr., was far more than financial: Shaw, we learn, was virtually alone among the novelist's family in recognizing his genius.

A shortcoming of Parker's approach is that he focuses almost entirely on Melville's literary and familial contexts to the exclusion of social and cultural ones. He does not say much about the great events that were going around Melville: the slavery crisis, the throes of American capitalism, the Civil War, Reconstruction and its collapse.

But taken on its own terms—as a straightforward biography—Parker's book has a lot to offer. We see in rich detail the comings and goings of Melville and his family, the vagaries of his literary reputation, and his shifting moods. Although Parker does not mention many other Melville critics, he provides shrewd and informative biographical readings of Melville's works, especially *Pierre* (1852), *The Confidence-Man* (1857), and *Clarel* (1876).

Because Parker wants to register every known life fact of Melville and his family through a linear retelling of their daily activities, truly momentous issues (such as the reception of *Moby-Dick*) are sometimes squeezed between masses of quotidian trivia. There are a number of confusingly prosaic passages such as this one about Melville's family:

While Augusta was at the Manor House, Maria and Kate were at Arrowhead from December through March. In March Maria went to New York, and Helen and Kate were both at Arrowhead with Lizzie and Herman. In April Maria and Kate went to Lansingburgh; Kate, at least, was there late in June. (pp. 148–49)

Although Parker's style is refreshingly jargon-free, his paragraphs tend to be long and over-stuffed.

Still, Parker should be congratulated for his heroic research. For scholars who want to know what Melville and his immediate circle were doing at every important moment of their lives, or how Melville's works relate to his personal experience, this book is a must.

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Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography. By William Lee Miller. (New York: Knopf, 2002. xvi, 515 pp. \$30.00, ISBN 0-375-40158-X.)

Lincoln's Virtues is an ambitious and elegant intellectual biography of Abraham Lincoln that succeeds admirably in uncovering the "moral meaning" of his life while enhancing "our understanding of Lincoln as a real human being in a real world" (pp. xii–xiii). William Lee Miller challenges a rising tide of cynicism about Lincoln's motives and methods by dissecting the political, social, and intellectual foundations that underlay his key moral judgments. Miller applies Max Weber's distinction between an "ethics of responsibility," which denies the existence of pure and absolute alternatives, and a contrasting "ethics of abstract purity," devoted to idealism and even perfection (p. 197).

In Miller's estimation, Lincoln was morally as well as intellectually self-educated and developed an intuitive "ethic of responsibility" that recognized the limitations of American society and government. Lincoln eschewed perfection as impossible, proposing "our most intelligent judgment of the consequences" (p. 212) as the best that society can achieve. He therefore framed—and defended—his moral judgments on a foundation of intellect rather than faith. In his youth, Miller demonstrates, Lincoln struggled with essential Christian doctrines, eventually accepting and even celebrating them on the basis of reason rather than belief. The same ethic led Lincoln to reject evangelical religion for assuming too much personal freedom independent of social institutions—the "real world." Similarly, he never viewed his own moral judgments as absolutes nor imposed them on others.

Many of Lincoln's detractors, however, drew on faith rather than reason to support an "ethic of purity" instead. A realist, Lincoln considered purity unachievable, because no individual can ever act alone. "We can succeed only by concert," he reasoned as president. "It is not 'can *any* of us *imagine* better?' but 'can we *all* do better?'" (p. 224). While recognizing that collective restraint, however, Lincoln brilliantly perceived the ethical possibilities of popular government and patiently led the nation toward a politics of morality, founded not on faith or perfectionism, but on reason in its best and fullest sense. Just as Lincoln viewed