

Edgar A. Dryden. *Melville's Thematics of Form: The Great Art of Telling the Truth*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981 [©1968]. 240 pp.
Sharon Cameron. *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981. 176 pp.

Melville and Hawthorne are monumentally perplexing authors, the former as ostensibly complex as the latter is ostensibly simple. Yet they both invite *reading*. And they share a political concern, a metaphysical bent, and a psychological perspicuity. Further, while Hawthorne—as Melville says in a letter to Hawthorne himself—says “NO! in thunder,” Melville says NO! in lightning. And they both say it with Wakefieldian smiles on their faces. In short, both Melville and Hawthorne present readers with formidable challenges. What, then, is a reader to do? The two studies under consideration here provide strikingly different answers to this question. Dryden's book, is doctoral dissertation, which is being reissued in paperback now, thirteen years after it originally appeared, adopts a solidly traditional approach to Melville, while Cameron's book, new and the work of a newly established critic and teacher, adopts a flashily innovative approach. Yet both present themselves as philosophically grounded, specifically as dealing with problems of narrative or image within a post-Cartesian framework (Dryden, p. 6; Cameron, pp. 1, 132-133).

Dryden's *Melville's Thematics of Form* consists of an introductory chapter on “Metaphysics and the Art of the Novel,” a chapter on the early novels (*Typee*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, and *White Jacket*), a chapter on *Moby Dick*, a chapter on the latter novels (*Pierre* and *Israel Potter*), a chapter on the last novel (*The Confidence-Man*), and a brief epilogue on *Billy Budd*. It also contains a useful index.

Dryden's thesis is that the one aspect of a novel which is privileged, which is the key to the world of the novel as a whole, is the narrative technique (perspective/point of view): “The world is as it is seen. Point of view is at once a literary technique and a metaphysical principle.” Hence, in Melville's case, the predominance of first person narration betrays a subjectivistic and ultimately nihilistic teaching, a dangerous teaching which must be fictively presented by indirection through an ostensibly salutary surface, a notion which is implicit in Melville's essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (of which Dryden gives a partial but sensitive reading). And insofar as the fictive world is presented as fictive, as created, by Melville's narrators, “all of Melville's narrators are, in some way, portraits of the artist at work.”

In *Typee*, Melville uses the narration of Tommo to explore the distinction between teller and actor, between the ordered mediate recounting of things past and the chaotic direct experience of those same things. (*Omoo* is passingly mentioned as [84] a mere sequel to *Typee*—although if in Melville “no detail is inconsequential,” this dismissal is unintelligible.) *Mardi* thematically confronts the very nature of fiction, and “in no other book [of Melville] is it confronted as directly,” and Taji's unfulfillable quest adumbrates the insufficiency of fictionalizing/dreaming and the ineradicable impulse to do so anyway, a theme which is mirrored in *Redburn's* discovery of the inadequacy of guidebooks. As Dryden makes his case, at this point in Melville's writing career, *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* are already on the horizon. Melville's early thinking culminates in *White Jacket*, a book whose surface call to social reform masks its underlying theme that all reform is impossible. Fiction, then, is a cosmic con game, which Melville is not yet ready to present baldly.

In *Moby Dick*, Dryden must *ex hypothesi* concentrate his analysis on Ishmael, the embodiment of self-conscious and self-reflexive (because non-referential) fictive creation, i.e., of “artistic narcissism.” In *Pierre* and *Israel Potter*, Melville re-examines the

relationship between art and life by focusing on his own American social, literary, and historical roots. This re-examination is signaled by the abandonment of the first person narrative and the concomitant progressive distancing of narrator from subject matter, a movement designed to avoid the necessity to lie. The attempt fails, so that in *The Confidence-Man*, the lie becomes the principle of intelligibility itself, i.e., the book "presents a world where the real and fictitious are indistinguishable and interchangeable." As a result, according to Dryden, Melville despaired of ever telling the truth, and so he stopped writing for over thirty. Even when he began again in *Billy Budd*, he wrote a regressive book, a pre-world-as-masquerade book, a book like *Benito Cereno*.

Dryden's book has many weaknesses, not the least of which is the author's failure to consider (even to mention) the enormous body of poetry (including the epic *Clarel*) which Melville wrote between *The Confidence-Man* and *Billy Budd*. Nonetheless, it is an extremely helpful summary of and introduction to the novels, a good place to begin, but only a beginning. And it is lucid—although sometimes to the point of over-simplicity.

The same cannot be said of Sharon Cameron's *The Corporeal Self*, which seems neither lucid nor coherent. And while she accuses other critics of a normalizing of a literary work which eventuates in a failure to comprehend it, she seems to eccentricize to such an extent that obfuscation prevails. *The Corporeal Self* consists of a brief introduction, a chapter on *Moby Dick*, and a chapter on Hawthorne's tales. It does not contain an index, although an index of at least titles and proper names seems called for, especially for the Hawthorne chapter.

Cameron focuses her study on the problem of identity, a key post-Cartesian perplexity, and she offers what she calls a "revisionary notion of identity," although the meaning of the term "revisionary"—despite the density of its occurrences (pp. 1 thrice, 2 twice, 3, 18, 30, 55; cf. pp. 3, 31, 55, 56)—is never quite clear, shifting (cf. pp. 1-2) from literary versus philosophical through synthesizing versus antithesizing and essential versus superficial to metaliterary versus literary. And she complains that previous readings of *Moby Dick* and Hawthorne's tales treat them as works whose central concerns are respectively hermeneutics and allegory, saying that "if most criticism thus far has addressed itself to problems of interpretation, this is because it has followed the directives of the specific works," while it has ignored the brute metaphoric data through which the works proceed, more specifically "the bodily dismemberments." It seems a perverse act on the part of a critic to complain that criticism follows where the work leads. And to forget that the use of bodily metaphor to wrestle with problems of identity is as old and as natural as the hills of which both Hawthorne and Melville are so fond—one need think only of Oedipus, Samson, Socrates, Dante, Dr. Faustus, King Lear, and Gulliver (to name but a few)—seems to be the most radical kind of tunnel vision. In addition, Cameron's discussion of the problem of identity is weakened less by its brevity than by the fact that her knowledge of what she calls the philosophical tradition is derived more from secondary and tertiary sources than from primary sources, notwithstanding the gratuitous citations from Santayana's *Skepticism and Animal Faith*, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (pp. 32-33), and Descartes' *Meditations VI* (pp. 132-133), none of which is as unambiguous in context as it is presented here, and all of which seem to be little more than *argumenta ad auctoritatem*. Further, to name as central to the modern problematics of identity Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Wittgenstein, all of whom use corporeal examples and images (including dismemberments, phantom limbs, etc.), and then to claim that "American works seem preoccupied with questions of identity conceived in corporeal terms" (p. 3) is clearly contradictory.

Of course, one may bemoan—as Cameron does in the chapter on “Identity and Disembodiment in *Moby Dick*”—the failure of readers to leave the exoteric teaching of the book behind and to discern its esoteric teaching, but still one must respect the attempt to grapple with the work as a whole, the attempt to survey the forest even at the cost of the trees. But this failure is not eradicated, the problem is not solved, by isolating one aspect of the work to the exclusion of others, by committing the synecdochic fallacy of making the tree the forest, which is precisely what Cameron does. Consequently, in her reading of *Moby Dick*, Ahab and Pip become the arbiters of the book’s meaning, which produces an understanding which in its demotion of Ishmael’s ostensible centrality is at best partial. And as though she senses that the reader will not see the connection between her analysis and the book in question, she parenthesizes such remarks as “my way of putting it is expressive of Melville’s attitude” (p. 26) and “my verbs are not arbitrary” (p. 27). And if Melville is incapable of the “discrete creation of character” (p. 44), who isn’t?

In the chapter “The Self in Itself: Hawthorne’s Constructions of the Human,” Cameron claims that Hawthorne’s allegories are essentially predicated on bodily dismemberment and mutilation, and that this eventuates in a new kind of allegory in which the carrier of meaning and its presumed meaning are severed from each other. Hence, “Hawthorne’s allegorical tales splinter the self, try to reduce it to pure essence.” Here again the conclusions about the difference between the allegorical tradition and Hawthorne seem based on secondary and tertiary sources rather than on primary sources, and whether a close reading of, say, Dante or Chaucer or Spenser or Bunyan would support these conclusions is questionable.

The Hawthorne tales which she discusses at length are (in descending order of the space allotted to them): “Ethan Brand,” “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” “Roger Malvin’s Burial,” “The Ambitious Guest,” “Wake-[86]field,” “The Wedding-Knell,” and “The Devil in Manuscript.” The tales which she discusses briefly are “Egotism; Or the Bosom-Serpent,” “The Intelligence-Office,” “Sylph Etherege,” and “The Old Apple-Dealer.” [In addition, she digresses through Melville’s “I and My Chimney,” in which she fails to consider either the phallic or the literary—the consultant’s name is “Scribe”—dimensions of the tale.] Finally, she punctuates here discussion by passing references to a dozen and a half other tales and to the novels.

In the tales, Hawthorne “queries the meaning of allegory itself.” He “both allegorizes his subjects and is simultaneously critical of characters who attempt allegorizations,” and hence “the question for Hawthorne . . . is how literal and figural, part and whole, are to be construed when they are relational rather than equative.” When one is confronted with statements such as these, one expects to hear the laughter of Ethan Brand resounding about one. Indeed, one may be tempted to say of Cameron’s book as a whole what is said of the stray dog in “Ethan Brand”: “The . . . great, elderly dog—who seemed to be his own master, as no person in the company laid claim to him— . . . this grave and venerable quadruped, of his own mere notion, and without the slightest suggestion from anybody else, began to run round after its tail, which, to heighten the absurdity of the proceeding, was a great deal shorter than it should have been.” Certainly, the brevity of Cameron’s concluding discussion (a page and a half) supports such a characterization, as does the humorlessness with which the book as a whole is written, a terrible lapse in a discussion of writers as richly humorous as Hawthorne (as James was perhaps the first to point out) and Melville are.

Clearly, criticism of Hawthorne and Melville still has a long way to go

Robert Zaslavsky
Bryn Mawr College