

## BOOK REVIEWS

Neal L. Tolchin

### *MOURNING, GENDER, AND CREATIVITY IN THE ART OF HERMAN MELVILLE*

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988. Pp. XVIII + 234, \$23.50

Reviewed by Marvin Fisher

Neal Tolchin has added significantly to what Melville scholars know about a segment of Melville's life and art, and has established the circumstances and consequences of Allan Melville's death as central influences in the formation and expression of his son's major fiction. Equally important as a formative (and traumatically inhibiting) influence was the way that his mother Maria Gansevoort Melville embodied and enforced the genteel and repressed manners of mourning in Victorian America—social rituals which produced psychological disease by blocking the expression of grief while prolonging the process of mourning. Tolchin's thesis, in its barest terms, is that Herman Melville in adolescence and in maturity, in life and in art, suffered the crippling constraints of his culture and expressed these conflicts in his writing without ever resolving or ridding himself of them. Thus psychological conflict empowers Melville's creativity but not without the stains, flaws, and deficiencies of personal and cultural malady.

As an argument, I find it reminiscent of a profoundly serious, provocative, and disturbing essay by Salvador Dali at least fifty years ago, on the paranoid theory of creativity. It makes a lot of sense but leaves the reader quite uneasy about the artist and the nature of art. It is also reminiscent of R.D. Laing's 1960s approach to schizophrenia as a psychological strategy for dealing with the conflict and conflict-producing imperatives of contemporary culture. In fact, Tolchin, who has drawn productively on psychological, sociological, and anthropological analyses of mourning, utilizes the term that psychiatrist Laing borrowed from anthropologist Gregory Bateson and popularized in his writings on the self and others—the "double bind," a term so widespread in its currency that Tolchin saw no need to acknowledge its origins.

In several ways this study of Melville's fiction combines older literary approaches with more contemporary concerns. The search for the origins of a writer's art in family biography seems very old fashioned; the analysis of imagery and ambiguity is somewhat newer criticism; the attempt to understand literary art by relating it to the culture in which it was produced is a still newer form of historicism; and the conceptual vocabulary of contemporary feminism, structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction is also present in Tolchin's critically eclectic book. Some readers will object to, be amused by, or otherwise marvel at the ingenuity of some of Tolchin's psychoanalytic analyses, particularly the onomastic exercise which makes the names of Melville's characters and places into a kind of Freudian "Scrabble" game played in an atmosphere of intensely subjective psychological projection. In this mode, the critic's imagination becomes its own verification and mere suggestion is treated as indisputable signification.

The specific works analyzed at length include *Typee*, *Mardi*, *Redburn*, *White-Jacket*, *Moby Dick*, and *Pierre*. Tolchin's thesis is most instrumentally useful in the discussion of *Redburn* and *Pierre*, both of which focus on a young protagonist whose idealized father had died in ignoble circumstances. With most of the other books the critic must strain to make peripheral reference to mourning into central significance. In this regard Tolchin might have produced a better book, certainly a more subtle one, by claiming less. His somewhat obsessive wielding of his thesis is an unfortunate carryover from the academic style of a doctoral dissertation and could have been remedied by more effective editing. The extensive and distinctly subdivided bibliography, however, is a more fortunate carryover, and Tolchin might have had to resist editorial efforts to trim and condense his listing of (1) pertinent Melville scholarship and criticism; (2) primary and secondary sources on mourning; (3) relevant works on cultural and social history; and (4) selected works of literary and of psychoanalytic theory.

Kathryn Hume

*PYNCHON'S MYTHOGRAPHY; AN APPROACH TO GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987. Pp. 262, \$19.95

Reviewed by Charles Clerc

My first encounter with the work of Kathryn Hume on Pynchon's fiction came in an essay she had done on "Orpheus and the Orphic Voice in *Gravity's Rainbow*." (The piece, coauthored with Thomas J. Knight, appeared in *Philological Quarterly* 3 [1985].) At the time I had no idea she was working on a book on Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, but I remember thinking how thoughtful and perceptive and graceful that essay turned out to be.

Those same qualities—but this time swept along by a vastly larger philosophical/critical position—distinguish her new book on Pynchon's mythography. The standard view of *Gravity's Rainbow* is that it is a postmodernist work: deconstructive, fragmentary, chaotic, inconsistent. Hume does not deny the novel's bent toward destabilization and disorientation, but at the same time she accepts the challenge of interpreting the novel by way of stabilizing mythographical schema. "The reader must learn to maintain simultaneously perspectives that at first seem contradictory—the postmodernist and the mythological—and must learn to integrate them" she says. Her approach accentuates the orderly, the structural, the patterned, the intelligible, and it emphasizes value and meaning. It underscores in an affirmative way the novel's traditional structures. It insists that sanity has as much place as paranoia. Thus, metaphorically speaking, it is akin to what a therapist does for a psychiatric patient. Finally, as she says, "myth turns chaos to cosmos" (xviii).

The method used by Hume is not unlike James Gleik's in his seminal *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Viking Press, 1987). Need we be reminded, Pynchon's advances in fiction are roughly analogous to the third great revolution in the physical sciences (after relativity and quantum theory): "Chaos