

Bruce L. Grenberg

SOME OTHER WORLD TO FIND: QUEST AND NEGATION IN THE WORKS OF HERMAN MELVILLE

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989. Pp. viii + 240

Reviewed by Marvin Fisher

Bruce Grenberg has produced an admirably clear, compact, and coherent account of Melville's work from *Typee* to *Billy Budd*. Although he has broken no new ground, he has combined informed scholarship, critical sensitivity, and abundant common sense in his attempt to look at the "whole" Melville to identify and explain "the formative ideas," without even a nod in the direction of fleetingly fashionable literary theory. Any reader interested in Melville's writings could understand and benefit from Grenberg's book. Few university press books are as accessible.

The central argument can be summarized thusly. The first six books all deal with quests which separately and together "represent the goals of Enlightenment man and Romantic man" in order to verify "the idea of an ordered plenary universe or a universe that *can* be ordered and mastered by mind and will" (3). Each quest ends in failure or futility, "the light of aspirations constantly playing against the darkness of defeat" (3). Following *Moby-Dick*, Melville's work becomes a "fiction of total disillusionment," where "dreams exist only as illusions or, even worse, delusions," where "innocence and guilt, honesty and falsehood are mere 'perspectives' and Truth but a ragged edged sham" (5).

Grenberg is not concerned with Melville's relation to 19th century America or with the external events of Melville's life. His purpose rather is "to seize upon Melville's living, creative mind and imagination in the best record we have of them—his works" (213). Thus he is able to view Melville somewhat in the context of his American contemporaries, somewhat in the context of international romanticism, and as a precursor of 20th century modernism.

To his credit, Grenberg does not propagate the earnest young seeker view of *Redburn* but recognizes the story as a record of the protagonist's own failure. He views *White-Jacket* as more than a novel detailing the self's alienation in an unaccommodating and hierarchical world. Because the *Neversink* is an American ship, the perversions of power are contraventions of America's highest ideals. His analysis of *Moby-Dick* is less satisfying and more evasive: while presenting "a sustained and comprehensive depiction of humanity's tragic plight" (93), its meaning is that we can fully understand neither ourselves nor our world and are doomed to live in ignorance and to die in ignorance.

Pierre and the works that follow are the postmortem and extended epitaph to Melville's heroic vision and literary courage. *Pierre's* moral and artistic quest

leaves him "abandoned by God, shunned by society" (144), his talent crushed by ponderous indifference and vulgar profit seeking. "The Piazza" and "Encantadas" exemplify the failed quest, and *Clarel's* quest for spiritual meaning forces Christianity to the point of historical closure. Even *Billy Budd* is about how much we do not know and the impossibility of remedying that state.

Recognizing the critical debate and the political controversy swirling around Melville's last work, Grenberg sees "the narrator's irresolvable ambivalence" (199) as the source of the debate. He is a confidence man who does not merit our confidence. He cannot get inside what the author has called "an inside narrative" (194) and leaves us "to drown in a sea of endless self-confounding possibilities" (205) as we ponder the fate of innocence, the mystery of iniquity, and the quality of merciless justice.

After examining "the assumptions of romantic idealism, democratic optimism, national enthusiasm, and Christian assurance" (213), Melville could ascertain only the insubstantiality of each. The earnestness of his early quests grew nostalgic or embittered as his questers grew more constricted, disillusioned, and disoriented; in the end only his skepticism endured.

Frances Schlamowitz Grodzinsky
*THE GOLDEN SCAPEGOAT: PORTRAIT OF THE JEW
IN THE NOVELS OF BALZAC*
Troy: NY: Whitston, 1989. Pp. 91
Reviewed by Anthony R. Pugh

Frances Grodzinsky informs us that "few Balzacian scholars have acknowledged, let alone analyzed, the significance of Jews in Balzac's work" (11), and in this monograph, beautifully produced though not completely free of misprints, Ms. Grodzinsky sets out to fill this gap in our understanding of Balzac. After a historical survey of the fortunes of the literary Jew, much of the space is taken up with thorough analyses, divided among seven chapters, of a handful of major Jewish characters.

It emerges from this that Balzac came to see the strength of the Jew, who by his position as outsider in Christian society, has to develop certain character traits if he is to survive, and particularly if he is to conquer. The successful Jews have will, intelligence, and self-discipline; they are "authentic" in Sartre's sense of the word. The unsuccessful Jews are "inauthentic," and can be compared to the playboys who are not Jewish. Stated thus, the thesis could appear as a simple extension of views already well developed and well studied on the artist/genius or on the role of willpower in Balzac's writings. But by concentrating on Jews, Ms. Grodzinsky brings out very well the coherence of Balzac's concept of the Jewish people, to whom their status as outsiders create special challenges.

The strong Jewish characters, who triumph through their "power, wealth and skill" (63), finally attain tranquillity. They do so in defiance of normal standards and values (though, as Grodzinsky interestingly shows, they have mo-