

BOOK REVIEWS

John B. Williams

White Fire: The Influence of Emerson on Melville

Long Beach: California State University Press, 1991. Pp. xiv + 208. \$37.50

Reviewed by Marvin Fisher

The title of John Williams's book signifies that sparks of Emersonian thought ignited the tinder of Melville's art. With no record of any Emerson-Melville acquaintanceship or exchange—as existed between Hawthorne and Melville or Emerson and Whitman—Williams's task is more difficult than most studies of literary influence or reaction. "White fire" also implies a degree of incendiary incandescence against which Whitman's "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil" seems rather tepid. Because this book promises so much, interested readers will be disappointed by what it delivers.

Williams is interested (1) in finding possible links to Emerson in Melville's early works, when Melville's knowledge of Emerson was most tenuous; (2) in assessing the influence on Melville's works of the late 1840s and early 1850s after he encountered Emerson's ideas, attended at least one of his lectures, and might also have read discussions of Emerson; and (3) in demonstrating the culmination of Emerson's influence in Melville's final work, *Billy Budd*. The conventional view, embodied in significant works by Matthiessen, Feidelson, Levin, and others, distances Melville from Emerson in regard to "the power of blackness," the posture of dissent, and reliance on irony. In his desire to correct this perceived imbalance, Williams reasonably posed three underlying questions:

1. What was Emerson saying when Melville's mind and art were most actively developing (1845-1856)?
2. How much of Emerson's message did Melville know?
3. What creative use did Melville make of Emerson's ideas and images?

These constitute a reasonable approach to a potentially valuable inquiry, even though it downplays the significance of Emerson's major works of 1836 to 1838 and emphasizes the darkening views and diminished confidence in essays and lectures of Emerson's mid-life period. It is reasonable to examine Emerson's unpublished lectures of 1848-1850 and the reactions to those lectures in the Boston and New York press. And it makes good sense to analyze Melville's output, item by item, for evidence of this influence. But some of that "evidence" leaves this juror unconvinced and makes the case for claiming Emersonian influence a very shaky construct.

Williams claims that Melville "began thinking of the central images of *Moby-Dick* upon hearing Emerson lecture" in 1849 and that "Melville paid Emerson the highest kind of compliment by borrowing from him." The first assertion announces

discovery of telling evidence; the second is a conclusion following indisputable evidence. Of the evidence presented, the strongest traces metaphors of diving deep for thinking deeply and comparisons of poets to whales in fragmentary notes that Emerson drew on for lectures between 1848 and 1850. More tenuous is the identification of Emerson's reference to "a crack in nature" as the source of the livid scar rumored to run the length of Ahab's frame crown to sole. Proof? Hardly.

German transcendental philosophy is another common link, and Williams provides a compact summary of its impact on Emerson. Melville's acquaintance with the Germans and their English promulgators, Coleridge and Carlyle, was much slighter. What little he knew, however, stemmed not from Emerson, but from George J. Adler, a sometime NYU professor of German and an amiable and informed conversationalist and drinking companion during Melville's 1849 trip to England.

Readers familiar with Emerson's career know that his early optimism had by mid-century yielded to a sense of tragic limitation, that his transparent eyeball had been fitted for lenses of personality and circumstance, and that partiality and point of view had sectioned off the holistic landscape. Emerson's question "What is life, but the angle of vision?" would have made a fine motto for Melville's *Piazza Tales* (1856), but there is no evidence of direct influence. Melville's first book, *Typee* (1846), focused on primitivism and the degrading effects of civilization and on the relation of the individual to social convention in both primitive and civilized societies. These are important themes to Emerson in the 1830s, but the evidence of influence is not even circumstantial when one considers the prominence of these themes in international romanticism. In similar fashion any evidence that both Emerson and Melville used "instinct" or "intuition" as positive concepts becomes evidence of influence. The search for such evidence produces a bland misreading of *Redburn*, where the protagonist's mental and moral flaws should seem an indictment of the American character. According to Williams, *Redburn* "retains his integrity and establishes himself as a good shipmate, loyal friend, and sensitive observer of the human condition." To argue that "Redburn evolves in the Emersonian mold of "The American Scholar" suggests an angle of vision that screens off irony.

Williams's reading of *White-Jacket* assesses the heavy costs of rigid forms and social conformity, familiar Emersonian targets, but misses the important connection between Melville's tag names, which reduce individuals to a facet of their occupations, and the alienating effects of vocation in "The American Scholar." Both *White-Jacket* and *Redburn* contain blatantly optimistic and patriotic passages on American possibility and fulfillment which could have been used to argue Emersonian influence through parody. "The American Scholar" and "Hawthorne and His Mosses" contain pleas for greater recognition of American cultural attainments but again Melville's tone grows so strident that it becomes hyperbole, if not parody.

All too often, however, the bad evidence seems to drive out the good, and fleeting coincidence is treated as conclusive proof. Emerson wrote an essay on "Friendship," and his comments on the subject are used to gloss the friendship of Ishmael and Queequeg, thereby proving Emerson's influence. Mark Winsome in

The Confidence-Man is probably a caricature of Emerson, but Amasa Delano in "Benito Cereno," despite his naive optimism, is not. I am more troubled, however, at this cultural juncture and after recent experience in California, at Williams's viewing Babo as an embodiment of diabolism.

The interpretation of Melville's final work, *Billy Budd*, is supposed to drive home the conclusion that Emerson's influence on Melville was profound and enduring. Instead the assertion that Billy is "the ideal of a pure Transcendentalist"—although he lacks the intelligence to grasp the symbolic importance of language or action—is critical nonsense. A book that refers to Allan Melvill as "Allen" and to Mary Melville as "Aunt May" needs an informed copy editor and then some.

Denis Hollier, ed.

A New History of French Literature

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pp. xxv + 1150. \$49.95

Reviewed by Anthony R. Pugh

Since its publication in 1989, this *New History* has received wide critical acclaim. It should be accorded the status of a standard reference work, required reading for anyone involved with French literature, although it does not do away entirely with the need to consult the more traditional kinds of History.

Its provocative title is fully justified. This is a comprehensive survey of the literary culture of France from the death of Roland in 778 to the five-hundredth program of "Apostrophes" in 1985, undertaken in a very different spirit from the traditional manual. Instead of the systematic subdivisions of genres and political self-contained units to which we are accustomed, we get a series of short but concentrated essays which take as their starting point a significant date (the essays all have a year, or a year and a month, as their title), and explore various implications of the event. The choice of dates shows remarkable imagination, often picking on very minor events which prove to be really illuminating. Some things get lost in the process (French-Canadian writing surely deserves more than one essay of just four pages), but the number of new insights is extraordinary. The emphasis is less on the publication of classic texts, than on the social context, or the intellectual climate, or the prevalent sensibility.

New too (at least for a work of synthesis) is the contemporary flavor of the interpretative approaches employed. Most of the contributors write in a way that would not have been possible twenty years ago, keenly aware of the cultural situation and the deficiencies of the accepted norms that are being analyzed. At the same time the contributors seem to have moved beyond the doctrinaire assertions that were common until quite recently (the shrill and strident tone of some of the feminist essays being a notable and irritating exception), and recaptured the urbanity of a much earlier tradition of critical discourse. The volume though long and (as I know through having carried it around Paris for two successive summers) heavy, is always readable and stimulating. It is indeed a remarkable triumph