

## REVIEW

Robert Shulman. *Social Criticism and Nineteenth-Century American Fictions*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987. 326 pp. \$30.00.

Donald E. Pease. *Visionary Compacts*. Madison, Wisconsin, and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987. 303 pp. \$15.50, Paper.

Russell Reising concluded his recent book, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature*, with a forthright criticism of the way in which American texts have traditionally been treated. "Theorists of American literature have tended to ignore the social foundation of American writing. Without roots in the actual social fabric of American life their theories can only give a partial sense of American literature." No better example could be found of what we stand to gain from setting important texts in their full historical context than Robert Shulman's *Social Criticisms and Nineteenth-Century American Fictions*. It is unquestionably a superb, sophisticated, pioneering study that should put paid to the idea that American writers have been primarily architects of a world elsewhere.

Professor Shulman examines the way in which social change, powered by changes in the capitalist economy, registers as alterations in the deep structure of consciousness that are subtly captured in the form and the content of literary works. In order to conduct his examination he needs and uses the analytic terms developed by Marxist critics from Marx himself through Lukacs and Gramsci to the late Raymond Williams. His study therefore contains key references to emergent, residual and dominant cultures, the concept of hegemony, the reifying of economic processes, the divided selves that are a symptom of alienation and the fetishism of commodities that characterizes the consumer stage of capitalism. These initially forbidding terms prove in critical practice to be immensely user-friendly. Shulman employs them quite brilliantly to produce penetrating insights into the secret correspondence between the inner life of American market-society and the fictional life of literary texts. The result is an outstanding analysis of the social psychology of nineteenth-century America.

His book is subdivided into three parts, respectively entitled "Community and Fragmentation in America," "The Impact of Social Change" and "Styles of American Individualism." *Bartleby*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Conjure Woman* and *Billy Budd* are the texts studied in the first section. Professor Shulman shows how in each case an authoritative example of the state of consciousness that had recently come to dominate society (the lawyer in *Bartleby*, Captain Vere in *Billy Budd*, etc.) is contrasted with an individual who, in however rudimentary a fashion, points in the direction of an alternative, altogether richer experience of life (Bartleby himself, Jim, Uncle Julius, etc.). However, even the latter cannot avoid being deeply conditioned and internally marked by the new, alienating society in which he lives. And so Billy Budd, for instance, "uncritically accepts" the very system of values the inhumanity of which has been accidentally exposed by his actions.

Shulman is exceptionally well informed about the socio-economic changes that oc-

curred in nineteenth-century America. He is able to comprehend both the general character of these changes and the significance of specific dramatic events, such as the Haymarket Riot, that were triggered off by them. In the second section of his book he shows how these external changes are registered in the literature of the period at the deep level of "internal difference, where the meanings are." The high-point of this section is his treatment of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" as a profoundly ambivalent response to an age of violent social transition; and his arresting account of the way *A Connecticut Yankee* "portrays the new society of stock speculation, technology, advertising and war."

The concluding section deals with works by a host of writers, including Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Howells, Wharton and Dreiser. These show how the strain between the actual possessive individualism of the American marketplace and the felt potential of individual human lives, manifests itself in the writers of the period as "conflict internalized within themselves and their works." From Poe's fantasies in "Hop-Frog" of violent revenge on his tormentingly demanding public, through the attack mounted by Melville on his ruthlessly predatory society in Fleece's sermon to the sharks, and on to Dreiser's exposure of "the dynamics of desire" in *Sister Carrie*, nineteenth-century writers simultaneously exemplified, exposed and condemned the values that ruled the American world of their time.

Whitman's poetry is considered in two separate sections of the book and is therefore dealt with under two different headings. First, Shulman discusses "Cohesive Alternatives and the Fear of Isolation: Early Whitman and Market-Society Change." Fundamental to his understanding of the early poetry is his view of the new market-society that was coming into being at the very time Whitman was writing. This society was energized by a competitive individualism that was inimical to the experience of social belonging, and it promoted a possessive attitude towards every feature of the human and natural environment. Shulman then shows how Whitman uses his poetry to redefine the American self, by re-experiencing it through an entirely different order of relationships. "There Was a Child Went Forth" dramatizes the way a child develops through the generous interaction between it and its life-giving surroundings. Shulman speaks eloquently of the "radical visions of the poem—its quiet, basic insistence on equality and relation." At the same time he shrewdly notes the telling absence of any interrelation between the people in the poem, except for the links arbitrarily provided by the child's act of serial observation. Whitman, he concludes, shared in his society's inability to imagine a community. Instead he tried, in his poetry, to find his own unorthodox means of interconnecting people, and in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" he uses sexual and spiritual love as his fusing element.

When Shulman returns to Whitman in a later section, it is in order to concentrate on the way "Song of Myself" is used "to body forth a stance, a style of being." His sensitively argued case is that in this his greatest poem, "Whitman offers precisely what the Protestant Etiquette suppresses: pleasure, instinctual gratification and self-assertion, the outpouring of erotic feelings and the barbaric yawp." The poem is seen as governed in every one of its aspects by the ebullient spirit of Whitman's loyal American opposition to the new capitalist society. The alternative version of individualism offered by the poem does away with the separation of the acquisitive human subject from the objects of its voracious desire in the surrounding environment. By the same token, Whitman refused to construct a text that pandered to contemporary market taste and was suitable for easy consumption. "Song of Myself" was intended

to initiate in the reader a counter-cultural process of self-discovery that involved personal redefinition and entailed social reformation.

Shulman also notes that the innumerable persons so vividly caught in the very act of working in "Song of Myself" are not mechanically laboring but are seen to be expressing themselves in and through their work. Moreover they are as frequently observed at play as at work, because "Whitman's America also emerges from and is intuitively responsive to communal folkways, to the energy and camaraderie of blackguards and roughs, to the games and festivities of urban and rural workers." Here Shulman comes closest to developing his earlier insight that Whitman's poetic imagination was not only an expression of his unique personal genius but also a product of the social under-group from which he came and with which he continued to identify himself throughout his life. His family belonged after all to that "unofficial" America to which Professor Shulman refers. It was therefore through his family background that Whitman was most easily and naturally able to penetrate, as Professor Shulman puts it, "to the residual and oppositional sources of energy" in a rapidly advancing American society. If there is a slight weakness in Shulman's magnificent study, it is perhaps that he fails to make it entirely clear that Whitman's social outlook itself had very specific social origins. But this is to carp. The great strength of his study is that it relates the work of so many of the great figures in nineteenth-century American literature so tellingly to the socio-economic life of the times in which they lived, thus demonstrating that literary structures are also, as Raymond Williams put it, structures of feeling, structures indeed of social consciousness. Whitman's is therefore only one of the many cases studied, and within the inevitable limits of his chosen method of extensive comparative study, Shulman has produced a reading of the poetry that is as compelling as it is convincing.

"History," said Raymond Williams, "must be taken at its full weight before there can be any significant subject known as literary history." The relative lack of such weight in *Visionary Compacts*, by Donald Pease, left this particular reader feeling decidedly light-headed at times, although the central thesis of the book is substantial enough. Professor Pease takes issue with what he calls the "Revolutionary mythos," the structuring principle that governs so much American writing about American writing. Contrary to received critical opinion, the classic texts of the American Renaissance do not, he argues, urge a philosophy of permanent revolution based on the example supposedly set by those Founding Fathers whose actions were the very dissidence of dissent, as Burke famously put it. By the middle of the nineteenth-century, this dissenting tradition was posing a serious threat to the Union. It seemed to sanction secession, it was used to license an extreme individualism that threatened to atomize society, and it produced a multitude of competing political factions. According to Pease, the writers of the American Renaissance responded to the threat of this tradition by constructing "visionary compacts. . . . Instead of corroborating the Revolutionary mythos which would have justified a civil war, they restored the terms constitutive of the nation's civil covenant, terms of agreement every American citizen could acknowledge as binding." To demonstrate this, he concentrates on the work of Hawthorne, Whitman, Poe, Emerson and Melville.

In addition to highlighting one of the most important (and neglected) problems of mid-nineteenth-century America, this reading of the American Renaissance reflects a central preoccupation of our own period, as can be seen from remarks recently made by David Marquand in the *London Observer*: "In the English-speaking world at any

rate, the most serious threats to individuality come from the erosion of community, not from the excesses of collectivism. . . . The question that matters now is how to maintain the ties of community in the face of a debased definition of individualism, how to reassert man's social nature against the onward march of the yuppie." The similarity between this and Pease's account of the westward march of the Jacksonian yuppie is particularly worth noting, since he sees the nineteenth-century studies of his eminent scholarly predecessors (Matthiessen, Lewis, Chase, Feidelson, etc.) as products of their specific twentieth-century political situation. Their de-politicization of American Renaissance texts should, he claims, be understood as an expression of "the cold-war consensus" formed at a time when the open society needed to resolve all its internal ideological differences into social harmony. At the same time, recent experience of the evils of totalitarianism led cultural critics to mistrust all forms of collective life and to lay stress on the primacy of the individual.

Pease's study is exhilarating and exasperating by turns. His book is a formidable forest of generalizations where his mind can blithely disport itself, like an agile squirrel, at tree-top level, rarely descending to the ground of specific texts and contexts. A plodding reader may therefore find it difficult to see the wood for the trees. The section on Emerson is particularly resistant to pedestrian analysis, and parts of the sections on Poe and Melville are pretty impenetrable. But there are also many verbal clearings where one can see and appreciate what Professor Pease is about, although even then one is sometimes afraid of barking up the wrong tree. His comments on Hawthorne's use of allegory and "twice-told tales" to establish a sense of shared social reality both within the Puritan community and between the Puritan past and the present are particularly valuable. He shows how Hawthorne's allegories can be regarded not as exercises in skeptical relativism but as ways of "turning persons toward one another's understanding." And he explains how "in writing twice-told tales, Hawthorne put himself at the disposal of what we have called a collective memory, in order to provide his present culture with an appreciation of those reserves culture needs to survive."

In the kind of book written by Pease it is never easy to distinguish genuine subtlety from mere ingenuity. The chapter on Whitman in *Visionary Compacts* seems, however, to be admirably full of the former, with the possible exception of a short but rather bewildering section on Todorov's analysis of the Aztec language. Pease is primarily interested in the strategies adopted by Whitman to prevent the break-up of the Union and the breakdown of American society into a collection of competing individuals. In particular, since the secessionists had already easily adapted the founding fathers' proclamation of liberty to their own anti-Unionist ends, Whitman had to look for an alternative, nationally binding concept of American freedom. He found it in the concept of "natural law" that derived from his belief that America had emerged out of Europe through an irreversible process of evolutionary development, during which the old world of carefully policed cultures had been replaced by a spontaneously self-regulating society, full of natural harmony and natural freedoms. This society had long been dreamt of in Europe, but had at last become reality in the United States; and in their innermost, frequently suppressed, selves, all Americans had an intimate knowledge of this reality. Whitman's aim was therefore to put Americans back in touch with their natural, ultimately undeniable impulses and to release the truths that, he was convinced, his countrymen would immediately recognize as being entirely "self-evident"—thus rendering superfluous all the partisan

arguments that currently divided his beloved Union.

"Revolution is diminutive of its character, and it rises into a REGENERATION OF MAN." Paine's description of the French Revolution exactly fits Whitman's conception of the making of modern America. For him, America was man regenerated, born again in the very image of nature and as the fulfillment of the dreams of the past which had only been imperfectly understood even by the founding fathers. Whitman opposed his celebration of the "common self" to Jackson's politically divisive flattery of "the common man." In America the whole diverse society was a manifestation of the limitless human potential naturally contained in each and every person. Accordingly, the relationship of the individual to the mass was the relationship of one's actual self to one's multiple other possible selves. Therefore self-realization consisted of the expansive self-discovery that came through identification with the mass. Pease is at his impressive best when he demonstrates how this philosophy translates into the grammar and syntax of the "speech floods" of Whitman's poetry.

Although the differences between them are manifold and manifest, these two books by Shulman and Pease do have one very significant feature in common. They both set out to remedy a lack in recent American criticism—what the latter calls "the elision of [social and political] context" and the former refers to as the practice of "treating the self in isolation from the socially complex processes of identity formation." "Critics," Shulman continues, "participate in the privatizing tendencies of the dominant society. Multiplied by the thousands of essays on American works similarly abstracted from the American market society, Whitman's critics define a recognizable tendency. The received criticism of American literature is not so much denatured as it is politically sanitized." Whatever one's response to their accusation, these two critics establish beyond all doubt that Whitman is one of those writers whose work benefits immensely from being re-viewed in a sophisticated social perspective.

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