

John Sutherland in the *London Review of Books* early this year in his article “Who owns John Sutherland?” The concerns he raised about the ownership of knowledge and the correspondence which ensued in subsequent issues are certainly worth heeding.

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***Melville's Anatomies*, by Samuel Otter. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1999.**

With Melville we need all the help we can get. Samuel Otter's *Melville's Anatomies* doesn't exactly open new windows onto the texts (Michael Rogin and others have been there before him, showing ways to understand Melville's anatomising of his society). But it does give us some different views from the windows, and in so doing enlarges our picture of Melville as one of the deepest and most committed scrutineers of nineteenth-century life. Focusing on *Typee* (1846), *White-Jacket* (1850), *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852), Otter anatomises Melville's anatomising of “the disorders of antebellum eyes” (206). He teases out of Melville's texts ways in which they illuminate, talk back to and ultimately, as he sees it, become overwhelmed by what Philip K. Fisher calls the “hard facts” of American national identity: race and dispossession (*Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*, 1987). As Melville through his texts seeks an understanding of the relationship between personal and national identity he is, like his narrator Pierre, ultimately confounded by his own practice.

Apart from the extraordinary amount of cultural detail Otter presents, his picture enlarges our view because it goes beyond the “quarrel with fiction” thesis to show us a Melville whose practice of writing, like that of his narrator and character Pierre, can be seen as “complicit” in the cultural heritage he shares with his readers (259). Otter has been concerned to counter a view of Melville's work that “can peel the popular from the profound and the disturbing from the exhilarating” (243). Joining Jane Tompkins and other new historicist scholars of American literature who have brought the “popular” out of its canonical invisibility and helped us to see the canonical texts of American literature as part of the intricate web of a culture, Otter goes further than most—where Melville is concerned—to show him at work not in the distanced dialogue with popular conceptions that seems safe to a twentieth-century audience but “strain[ing] and tear[ing] the fabric” out of which his work is inescapably made (243). Otter has taught me a valuable lesson: not to feel I always somehow have to “rescue” Melville at awkward (to me) moments.

Otter's thesis about Melville is worth attention. There are some refreshingly new insights here. But I sometimes feel, with new historicist criticism, that the material with which the texts under discussion are set in dialogue runs away with the game. This is the book to read on the texts surrounding *Typee* (taking the Pacific and its writers seriously) and on the connections between *White-Jacket* and the discourse of slavery. The discussion of antebellum ethnology in the US in relation to *Moby-Dick* is extraordinarily interesting, this section meriting a book in its own right. But only with the *Pierre* chapters, which relate to this text both to the American landscape tradition and to the sentimental novels of Donald Grant Mitchell and Fanny Fern, did I feel that

the material through which Otter is attempting to outline the “structures of feeling” (he uses Raymond Williams’s phrase) in which Melville’s texts operate did not overpower the discussion. It’s a hard call to get the balance right. Fiction is not phrenology or tract or journal. And even though Melville challenges genre boundaries he is nevertheless at work with words. Otter is aware that “Melville’s ideological inquiries are linked with his verbal practice”(259). There is no doubt that a profound knowledge of the texts inspires this work. Yet there is something one-sided and occasionally dogmatic about the readings of Melville’s texts. In *Subversive Genealogy* (1983) Michael Rogin manages to show us a new view of Melville’s texts as enmeshed in the political fabric of his time while still allowing the texts to breathe—to be many things to many readers. New historical criticism, like any criticism, is spoiled by dogma. While Otter’s account invigorates Melville criticism with the new spaces it opens up it occasionally smacks of old “key to all mythologies” criticism. It’s a bit disappointing to find a smart contemporary critic saying “Melville sets it as his task in *Moby-Dick* to” Excuse me. I’ve just drummed intentionality out of my students. How do you know what Melville set it as his task to do? Out of exuberance a key becomes *the* key.

Another old-fashioned gesture that might have been investigated rather than repeated in *Melville’s Anatomies* is the trajectory of Melville’s “career”; that *Pierre* “concludes the first phase of Melville’s career” is the principal argument for stopping there (174). “Something happened” is the old story and another excuse for not looking too much at what Melville did in his later years. So Otter misses his great possibility for a conclusion with the mark on the old sailor’s body in “Daniel Orme” (“or me”?), a story fragment found in the cake box with *Billy Budd* after Melville’s death; or he misses a great conclusion giving the long epic poem *Clarel* its due by highlighting its summations of some of the questions with which Melville had struggled earlier—a gesture that could point the way for other scholars and get us out of the tired old frame of a biography with a climax, a decline and an acceptable coda (*Billy Budd*). *Pierre* does mark a turning point but I feel that the end of Otter’s inquiry should not be to explain what may very well be a false premise. In his conclusion Otter invokes one of the late works—the poem “Timoleon”—as setting up an opposition between “the risks of exorbitance” and the “abstract yearnings and classic lines of ‘the Attic landscape’” (261). Has all this then been about the interest of the baroque over the classic, of the “hashes and botches” over the studied poetic work of the later years (Melville spent thirty years writing one of the longest narrative poems in English)? Well, because this is a fine and interesting book and will I’m sure be of great use to Melville readers and to those who are still filling in their maps of nineteenth-century American society, I’ll choose to ignore the conclusion and think it’s about more than that and wait for someone to pay some serious attention to what Melville did after *Pierre*.

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