canon and method

SOCIAL CRITICISM & NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN FICTIONS. By Robert Shulman. University of Missouri Press. 1987. $30.00 BENEATH THE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville. By David S. Reynolds. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1988. $35.00.

Two of the most pertinent issues in current studies of American literary culture are treated in this pair of stimulating and important books. The first is revising the canon of received texts and privileged classics and, in this instance, getting beyond the nineteenth-century imaginations of chiefly white, middle class, educated Eastern males. The second challenge is how to reconstitute socio-literary studies in a post-modernist climate which, as Shulman observes, "emphasizes a coterie of initiated readers, avoids social and psychological content, and stresses instead the autonomy of the word and the work as its own subject" (218-9). Shulman and Reynolds confront both challenges and, in complementary fasion, offer valuable reconsiderations of familiar American works. Each volume deserves careful reading and thoughtful responses from Americanists of diverse ideological and academic allegiances. However, neither Reynolds' "reconstructive criticism" nor Shulman's brand of Gramsci-Raymond Williams "social criticism" quite resolves the questions raised about literary text, social and cultural context, and appropriate theory.

Respecting the canon, Reynolds makes the most valiant attempt. Nonetheless, his book's dust-jacket betrays his priorities. Though the subtitle promises (and amply delivers) a study of popular or Subversive literature flourishing "beneath" the American Renaissance, the principal focus is reflected in the photographed faces of Emerson, Thoreau, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman and Dickinson. Shulman's theme is at once wider and more sharply focused on responses by representative authors to the changing market society of nineteenth-century America and its ruling and subordinate classes. But his cast of representatives is surprisingly uninclusive. Capitalism and its price-tag are refracted through the literary lenses of Franklin's Autobiography, Hawthorne's "My Kinsman Major Molineux" and other tales, Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," *Billy Budd* and *Moby-Dick*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *The Financier*, Wharton's *House of Mirth*. "I concentrated on mainstream writers not because I am indifferent to the need to rethink the established canon but because I want to assume and not have to demonstrate the value of the works I consider," he remarks with a logic appealing more to classroom teachers than to serious scholars. Reynolds makes a more extended argument in favor of major texts, though one hardly without problems. In his scale of values, literariness (as opposed to popularity or social representativeness) is "distinguished by special density and by demonstrable artistry of language and structure" and "is an intrinsic quality of certain works" (7). His picture of antebellum culture is, therefore, inclusive but hierarchical. His impressive survey of popular literary forms and texts known and used by the major writers includes sermons, sensational novels, newspapers and magazines, crime pamphlets, almanacs, plays,

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cartoons, women's "literature of misery," verse, even Barnum's circus. From Emerson's early essays to *The Confidence Man* and the later poems of Whitman and Dickinson, the invigorating presence of popular culture is traced through the thematic concerns shared by pedestrian and major writers. These preoccupations are: religion and the relativization of values, the multi-branched tree of social reform, sensationalism and the liberation of sexuality from post-Puritan shackles, women's agenda, and American humor, backwoods and urban. Each social concern is brought to full artistic expression in exemplary texts displaying qualities long familiar to New Critics. "Sensational themes were not repressed or wished away," Reynolds asserts. "Because they were a crucial element of the American culture the major authors were trying to represent, they were boldly assimilated in a variety of ways. They were, however, purposely removed from the neutral and chaotic realm to which they were debased in many of their popular manifestations. In numerous literary works they gained a depth, an intensity, and, sometimes, even a beauty that was almost wholly lacking in popular sensationalism. While the major works were more dense and ambiguous than the lesser ones, they were at the same time more suggestive and controlled. It is this ability of literary texts to absorb the subversive images of its contemporary culture but at the same time to redirect these elements towards the suggestive and genuinely human that accounts for their universality and enduring appeal" (226).

High literature thus balances—and, ideologically speaking, often defuses—the explosive polarities of a culture. Reynolds writes sympathetically and shrewdly about a range of popular modes and models, some of which, like Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *The Linwoods* or John Neal's *Logan*, are deemed most worthy of being canonized. Yet despite the richness of the popular material here assembled, the critic cannot break with the Matthiessen tradition. "The problem of revising the canon can be best resolved if we respect the decision of time by preserving the already recognized classics but leave ourselves open for the possible rediscovery of other classics" (566). Reynolds is never seriously interested in reader response or sales figures or political relevance as factors in determining classic status. Indeed, a literary classic can scarcely be a popular success. Of Uncle Tom's Cabin he observes, "An important mixed text, it misses literary status because its warring elements do not fuse to create metaphysical ambiguity or multilayered symbols as they do in the major literature of the period" (77). Unless the Conventional, the Subversive and the Romantic adventure elements of popular expression are transformed, a literary work cannot arise. Ultimately, therefore, literature and society are separated by the very activity of curbing and reexpressing the society's raw, violent forces. Reynolds has significantly widened the base of Matthiessen's American Renaissance but no one new is permitted to scale the mountain to join the presiding elders who reign in undisturbed, mainly masculine splendor.

Can Shulman's "social criticism" provide the inclusive cultural theory missing in Reynolds' literary history? No clear answer can be returned, inasmuch as his post-Marxist critique of "the political psychology of American capitalism as it emerges in the works of our major nineteenth-century writers" does not tap the range of social or artistic consciousness identified by Reynolds and others. Like Reynolds, Shulman offers many fresh readings of Hawthorne, Melville, Poe and Whitman. Moreover, the two critics' differences seldom cancel each other out. In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," for example, Shulman reads a prophetic parable of the divided society and divided selves which Wall Street capitalism has already created in American consciounsess before the Civil War. "The bleak comedy of 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' emerges from this socially rooted doubleness," he asserts, adding that

> Bartleby's civil disobedience, his passive resistance . . . is a rebellion against the dominant assumptions of capitalism. As the lawyer helps us see, Bartleby's rebellion is rooted in the Enlightenment commitment to the unalienable right to life and in the Christian desire for a transcendent relation with God beyond the confining walls of the market society and of the earth itself. In the context of the emerging capitalism of Jacksonian America, these versions of both the Enlightenment and the Christian are what Raymond Wiliams calls residual elements, cultural forces that are no longer dominant but are nonetheless available within selves and society. The division within the lawyer's consciousness shows the same elements in conflict, not as external powers but as internal forces (16).

Reynolds' angle of vision is narrower, more strictly literary. He traces to George Foster's popular novel New York in Slices (1849) the source of Melville's Wall Street as a totally dehumanizing environment. "None of the elements of 'Bartleby, the Scrivener,' therefore, were new to American fiction," he concludes, "—they were a direct inheritance from the dark city-mysteries fiction of the late 1840s. What is new about Melville's story is its formal innovations: the skillful use of the flawed narrator; the symbolic setting; the psychological and metaphysical suggestions . . . Furthermore, Bartleby embodies all the ambiguities of the likable criminal" (296).

These summaries do not do justice to each author's full text. (Indeed, Reynolds is often repetitiously detailed in exploring the same text from different thematic angles.) Schulman chooses, perhaps too carefully, the texts to illustrate his doctrines: capitalism's effects on consciousness via the fracturing of individual and community; possessive individualism; commodification and consumerism, racism as a substitute solidarity. Why he prefers hegemonic or genteel voices to express these tensions instead of at least an occasional demotic one is never plausibly argued. For both Shulman and Reynolds, racism is the demonic underside of American antebellum culture. Yet the plight of the black oppressed is seldom directly heard. In Shulman's case, Chestnutt is a genteel mulatto writing long after, and obliquely, about slavery. Ditto, the special dilemmas of women, whose voice is only the aristocratic Edith Wharton's. Reynolds could provide a plethora of choices, though even his inclusive history never mentions W. W. Brown's *Clotel* or Martin Delaney's *Blake*, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* gets one paragraph.

Both of these suggestive works provide fresh perspectives on traditional texts and long-canonized careers, and it is a sign of their vitality that their respective arguments illuminate each other's insights and oversights.

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