

Correspondence

Mr. Brian Way writes:

As a rule I do not feel there is much to be gained by authors' replying to unfavourable reviews, but David Corker's notice of my *Herman Melville: "Moby-Dick"* in the April 1980 *Journal* (14, 168–69), goes so far beyond the bounds of fair comment and critical disagreement that some response is necessary. Every statement that he makes about the content of my book is in fact either inaccurate or false. It is, for example, untrue that my approach is "thoroughly Anglicized." I have tried instead to avoid the simplifications of either an exclusively American or a purely English view of Melville's work: Shakespeare and the King James Bible are an integral part of American as well as English culture, and, in any case, I deal fully with such specifically American questions as Melville's literary relationship with Hawthorne, the links between his thought and that of Emerson and Thoreau, and the way in which his work reflects the political and economic life of his time.

Corker is still more at sea when he accuses me of imposing a simple and dogmatic allegorical interpretation upon *Moby-Dick*. This is a truly extraordinary mis-reading of my argument, since I put forward a directly contrary view of the novel throughout my book, and devote two whole chapters (which Corker entirely ignores) to presenting a view of the form, language and meaning of *Moby-Dick* which is the complete antithesis of allegorical interpretation. This is precisely what I object to in Corker's review – not that he attacks what I actually say (which he is of course entitled to do) but that he erects a fantasy of his own making and then attacks that. The root of the trouble seems to lie in his uncontrollable prejudice against F. R. Leavis, and his unwarranted assumption that my book represents a Leavisite approach to *Moby-Dick*. Leavis would scarcely have concurred with my opinion that *Moby-Dick* is one of the greatest works of world literature, and the qualities which I admire most in it are ones which he habitually distrusted. Even if this were not so, Leavis isn't exactly a negligible critic, and a book which followed in his track would need to be argued with, not dismissed with a cheap sneer. But Corker, confronted with a book which he takes to be Leavisite, appears to be capable of about the same degree of finesse and rationality as the Reverend Ian Paisley on the subject of the Pope.

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BRIAN WAY

Dr. David Corker replies:

My apologies to Brian Way for dragging the red herring of the term "Leavisite" into the discussion. This was a clumsy shorthand term to define Way's rhetoric

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and his belief that the deepest values of the text are “the bond of a common humanity” and a “reverence for life.” His critical stance includes such Leavis-like features as the hypostatization of “humanity” and “life” as sources and standards of value, the insistence that it is the mark of a fully realized fictional character that we are able to treat him as a human being, and the belief that great literature explores the universal moral predicament of mankind. To reduce the work critically to a moral evaluation of the main characters and to assume that there is some message or instruction which the book intends to give seems to me to falsify a number of relationships.

Firstly, Melville’s overturning of Calvinist and Christian pieties as explored by Lawrance Thompson in *Melville’s Quarrel with God*, and T. Walter Herbert’s *Moby-Dick and Calvinism*, shows us that Melville was trapped in an opposition to contemporary orthodoxy, and his terms were defined by such an argument, that is, negatively. This can also be seen in his attitudes to Transcendentalism and Romanticism, which he developed in *Mardi* and *Pierre* as well as in *Moby-Dick*, and where he appears to have taken a similar approach to Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*. No assertions or verities surface in these conflicts which work primarily as critiques of dominant belief systems.

The case is the same if we take the second relationship, that pertaining between the text and the literary traditions out of which it is constituted. To take one example, Olson’s comments upon Ahab in *Call Me Ishmael*, developed by many other critics, reveal this figure as existing at the juncture of many different models: the Shakespearian tragic hero, Moses, Faust, Prometheus, Osiris and the New England patriarch. As a result, the interplay between Ahab and the equally complex Ishmael does not define a moral dilemma of choosing sides but a dramatic process of many dimensions, positive, negative, personal, mythical, cultural, historical. To reduce these to an “egotistical will” or “monomania” is to rip quotations from the drama, and to substitute fragments for the whole.

Thirdly, the status of the text is that of a thing made of words, not a sign with, as its referent, a shared normative reality, since there is no referent for a fiction. Significance emerges from the text’s flouting of genre boundaries, its alarming and its grotesque use of Biblical, Elizabethan and baroque language. To look for a grand simplicity is to end up with banality.

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