

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

5-2011

Review of Peter West's *Arbiters of Reality: Hawthorne, Melville, and the Rise of Mass Information Culture*

Sarah Wadsworth

Marquette University, sarah.wadsworth@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wadsworth, Sarah, "Review of Peter West's *Arbiters of Reality: Hawthorne, Melville, and the Rise of Mass Information Culture*" (2011). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 280.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/280

The publication of *Letters and Social Aims* and the two remaining volumes in the *Collected Works* will only stimulate further the already-robust Emerson Industry.

Wesley T. Mott
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

THE ARBITERS OF REALITY: HAWTHORNE, MELVILLE, AND THE RISE OF MASS INFORMATION CULTURE. By Peter West. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2008. xiv + 229 pp. \$44.95.

In "The Story Teller," one of the lost collections he assembled only to dismantle and publish piecemeal, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) devised an elaborate narrative frame in which an itinerant raconteur regales his listeners with stories produced in response to audience demand. In *The Arbiters of Reality: Hawthorne, Melville, and the Rise of Mass Information Culture*, Peter West begins his discussion of antebellum romance by peering inside the box-within-a-box structure of "The Story Teller" to disclose the author's mode of self-definition within a culture of commercial display and Barnumesque hype. The chapter offers a compelling reading of the remnants of "The Story Teller"; it also allows West to create a framing device of his own in which romance itself comes sharply into focus.

The six chapters of *The Arbiters of Reality* are divided equally between Hawthorne and Herman Melville (1819–91) and arranged in symmetrical concentric frames. In each half of the monograph, West presents a sequence of chapters that begins with a lesser-known text and gradually expands to encompass a broader historical context, increasingly substantial texts, and more sweeping implications about the literary artist's self-fashioning and ontological claims with respect to an unstable "reality" freshly marketed to the masses as the real deal. The effect of this double tripartite structure—comparable to "the layered narrative approach" (53) of "The Story Teller"—is to profile each author's engagement with changing notions of authenticity, reality, truth-telling, and the self within increasingly intricate frames of signification. Focusing by turns on the background, middle ground, and foreground (a relevant swath of cultural history, a well-selected swath of contemporaneous print culture, and the primary texts), *The Arbiters of Reality* offers an interpretation of antebellum romance that is at once detailed, nuanced, and expansive. Not only does it present insightful, well-informed readings of individual texts; *The Arbiters of Reality* achieves the far more ambitious goal of "recast[ing] the persistent American belief in a reality uncorrupted by commercialization as the powerful legacy of romanticism" (xi).

Exploiting what he identifies as "the shared logic of new historicism and romance" (94; see also 17), West performs a kind of literary archaeology in his reconstruction of "The Story Teller" that informs the study as a whole. West

excavates the broken shards of Hawthorne's lost collection and then pieces together the fragments on the basis of evidence culled from letters, journals, and the surviving stories themselves. Elsewhere in his book, West extends this practice of textual archaeology by reconstructing around texts that are, in themselves, intact, an elaborate peritext of cultural relics: newspaper articles, advertisements, popular books, letters, daguerreotypes, moving panoramas, telegraphic dispatches, and political propaganda. With a nimble handling of archival sources, West provides a rich, often unexpected, and always illuminating context to reveal how Hawthorne and Melville conceived of the art of romance as a mode of truth-telling grounded in an unmediated or "foundational" reality in contradistinction to a range of emerging popular forms that asserted their own claims to authenticity in an increasingly commercialized marketplace.

West's project is to examine "how Hawthorne and Melville defined themselves and their art against the informational practices of an emergent mass culture" and "imagined themselves . . . as 'arbiters of reality'—privileged seers who portrayed the antebellum commercial revolution as a threat to the very stability of truth" (x). West is to be commended for his refusal to take the comfortable, well-traveled path in this meticulous study. While acknowledging the contributions of new historicists who have positioned Hawthorne and Melville as astute cultural critics who managed to step outside their own historical frames, West argues that "Hawthorne's and Melville's shared sense of 'reality' as a word to be placed in scare quotes seems less a vehicle of social critique than a language for imagining and communicating a self beyond the threat of collective identity-making" (18). As West states in his introduction, his chapters "[approach] the deconstructive worldview of romance as both historical (shaped by particular discursive and material contexts) and rhetorical (employed by its practitioners as a means of negotiating such contexts)." In pursuing this double-edged strategy, he suggests, his work "offer[s] . . . an account of the romantic flight from contingency that has been informed by the insights and priorities of new historicism, a reading of antebellum literature and culture that sees the romancer's desire for a different kind of reality as a dream that was firmly grounded in place and time" (22). In its effort to accomplish this critical goal, *The Arbiters of Reality* does not disappoint.

West's section on Hawthorne begins by examining the journalistic treatment of a sensational 1830 Salem murder case and then contrasts the coverage of the crime in the press with Hawthorne's response, as reflected in his private correspondence. West then analyzes a little-known tale based on the incident to show how Hawthorne positioned his own mode of storytelling against the narrative logic of the emerging penny press. "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe" (1834) is, as West points out, the only tale in "The Story Teller" cycle that was published in its original narrative frame. The fact that the frame remains intact allows West to analyze closely Hawthorne's positioning of the story's teller as "both the producer and the peddler of his tales" (45) vis-à-vis the narrator-author, who remains safely outside the jostle and fray of the marketplace. West's larger analysis extends to such familiar tales as "Wakefield" (1835), "The Ambitious Guest" (1835), and "The Devil in Manuscript" (1835), and the section concludes with a careful reading of tropes of representation in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).

In the second half of the book, West complicates recent readings of Melville by demonstrating how his critique of popular culture functioned simultaneously as a form of self-invention. The section opens with a compelling reading of Melville's "Old Zack" articles (1847), a series of satirical sketches published anonymously during the administration of Zachary Taylor and the ramp-up to the Mexican War. "At a time when American journalism was churning out broad and consequential myths about American expansion, Mexican inferiority, and racial heterogeneity as a threat to national cohesiveness, all under the aegis of a technology-based claim to infallible and instantaneous communication," West argues, "Melville's parodic sketches exposed journalism as a carefully manufactured product that empowered such mythmaking" (96). In the subsequent two chapters—on *Typee* (1846) and "Benito Cereno" (1856)—West "reveal[s] that, as in the 'Old Zack' sketches, these works reflect Melville's particular subject position as a white male American author continually evading the authorial and communal identities foisted upon him by the mass marketplace" (128).

West's readings are substantial, original, surprising, and deep. Occasionally, the journey itself is more interesting than the destination. In the chapter on *Typee*, the conclusion seems visible from the outset, a limitation largely mitigated by the acumen of the twenty intervening pages. And in a few places, West's extrapolations recall Julian Hawthorne's reference to the great romancer's "power of making bricks without straw, and even without clay upon occasion" ("The Salem of Hawthorne," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 28.1 [1884]: 4). From Hawthorne's statement in his notebook that "[t]here is no such thing as a true portrait. . . . They are all delusions," West overreaches when he concludes that "to reject all portraits as 'delusions' is to redefine the human subject as that which no representation could ever contain" (71). Yet each chapter is replete with brilliantly historicized textual analysis so that what might otherwise seem a significant flaw in the argumentative fabric appears merely a distracting slub.

One of the satisfactions of *The Arbiters of Reality* is its tendency to give readers more than they bargained for. What the title, table of contents, and cover copy do not reveal is the impressive range and imaginativeness of West's textual juxtapositions: Hawthorne's "Story Teller" mingles with Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin; Clifford Pyncheon rubs shoulders with Ned Buntline; "Benito Cereno" stands alongside Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown (to say nothing of *Moby-Dick* [1851] and *The Confidence Man* [1857]). Topping it all off, West's "Coda" presents an engaging discussion in which Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) is cleverly enlisted to reveal the unexpected continuity between romance and realism: a much-needed corrective for the abrupt and artificial rupture that has become nearly axiomatic in the conventional two-semester anthology-driven delineation of American literary history. In the end, what appears on the outside to be a modest two-author study telescopes out to encompass much more. *The Arbiters of Reality* illuminates not only how Hawthorne and Melville engaged with the rapidly changing technologies and economies of representation in antebellum America but also the complex ways in which romance negotiates an unreal world where "authenticity" circulates as currency, information is manufactured for mass consumption, and reality itself is neatly packaged for a ready sale.

Sarah Wadsworth
Marquette University