William E. Engel

EARLY MODERN POETICS IN MELVILLE AND POE: MEMORY, MELANCHOLY, AND THE EMBLEMATIC TRADITION


Reviewed by Brian Yothers

Seventeenth-century British literature has a way of appearing unbidden between the lines of nineteenth-century American literature. Americanists who study Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne frequently meet references to such seventeenth-century prose stylists as Browne, Burton, and Bacon. The seemingly improbable influence of George Herbert on Emerson has likewise long been known to Americanists, though less often discussed than it deserves. William E. Engel's new study makes some bold claims for the importance of seventeenth-century literature to the innovations wrought by Melville and Poe, and the claims are buttressed by his own status as a prolific and respected scholar of seventeenth-century British literature as well as by his thorough engagement with the history of critical work on Melville and Poe. Moreover, though critics have long recognized that Melville in particular modeled his writing on seventeenth-century literary forms (see especially F. O. Matthiessen's American Renaissance [1941] and Brian Foley's "Herman Melville and the Example of Sir Thomas Browne" [1984], Engel treats formal and conceptual echoes of the seventeenth-century baroque in an exceptionally thoroughgoing and suggestive way.
According to Engel, Poe and Melville are linked to seventeenth-century British literature chiefly by the formal and rhetorical device of chiasmus, both as a verbal structure and a concept. In several earlier studies, most recently *Chiastic Designs in English Literature from Sidney to Shakespeare* (2009), Engel has convincingly shown that chiasmus, a "crossing" or repetition involving reverse parallelism (e.g. bold in speech, in action slow) is crucial to the Early Modern British tradition. In the present book, Engel finds that chiasmus vitally informs the work of two of America's most formally innovative writers, Melville and Poe. Linking their use of chiasmus with its status as a mnemonic device in Early Modern literature and in the Renaissance Art of Memory, he likewise links it to the thematic focus on memory and melancholy that both authors share with their seventeenth-century predecessors. Agreeably enough, the links are forged well. Though Engel uses a highly technical vocabulary drawn from the classical rhetoric of the Early Modern period, he defines his rhetorical terms clearly and concisely, and thus makes his account surprisingly readable.

Dividing his study into a diptych, a structure (he notes) that Poe and Melville shared with their seventeenth-century predecessors, Engel gives the first half to Melville and the second to Poe. He starts with Melville's *The Encantadas*, a collection of ten sketches of the Galapagos Islands that was published in installments in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1854 and given its final form in the *Piazza Tales* in 1856. Instead of ranging broadly throughout Melville's career, Engel sometimes notes how *The Encantadas* can illuminate our reading of *Moby-Dick*, but he chiefly concentrates on the sketches themselves. While
easily ignored in discussions of Melville's work, their formal and thematic emphases make them--as Engel rightly observes--highly characteristic of Melville's artistic methods and obsessions.

Engel ties *The Encantadas* to several overlapping traditions: the visual and literary category of the baroque, visual and verbal representations of melancholy, and the use of emblems and rhetorical structures to bind memory and melancholy. He is particularly useful in showing how Melville's writing reflects the baroque allegorical tradition of representing memory and loss analyzed by Walter Benjamin. Just as Robert Burton appropriates early classical traditions in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, as Engel notes, Melville borrows from both Burton and the baroque. Likewise, Engel argues, the later sketches of *The Encantadas* chiastically mirror the earlier ones, thus creating a literary hall of intra- and extra-textual mirrors. And on a small scale, Engel points out, Melville's language "recalls Milton's strategy of yoking antitheses to conjure paradoxes that partake at once of the poetic and philosophical registers of thought" (34).

Along with Burton, Engel presents Milton as a preeminent artistic model for Melville. Through adroit, revelatory close readings of *Paradise Lost* and *The Encantadas*, Engel shows that Melville used the visible structures described in *Paradise Lost*--such as the prison prepared for Satan--as a model for his own work. He also skillfully argues that Melville's study of Milton might have shaped his tendencies towards Arminianism (named for the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius), which defied orthodox Calvinist predestinarianism by asserting that
divine foreknowledge can be reconciled with human free will. Engel is less persuasive in arguing that Melville's Arminian tendencies also reflect his upbringing in the Dutch Reformed Church, for as American church historians such as Nathan O. Hatch (in *The Democratization of American Christianity* [1989]) have explained, Arminianism was the default mode in American religious culture during the nineteenth century. Engel might also have noted that Melville's marginalia to Milton, as detailed in Robin Grey's edition, highlight Milton's heterodox, even irreligious, sentiments, and taking his cue from Shelley, Melville also marked Shelley's claim that Milton's Satan was morally superior to his God.

Minor quibbles aside, Engel's reading of Melville's debts to Milton is highly suggestive and supplements the work of Grey and others whom Engel cites. Some of Engel's most compelling insights, however, entail the use of visual art in the works of both Melville and Poe, and in this respect his work dovetails beautifully with important recent developments in the study of both authors. Besides finding echoes of Burton's *Anatomy* in Melville and of Francis Quarles's poetry in Poe, he sees analogies to the fiction of Melville and Poe in the art of seventeenth century painters, particularly Albrecht Durer, Hans Holbein the Younger, and Salvator Rosa, who, as Engel indicates, provides the first half of the pseudonym--Salvator Tarnmoor--that Melville uses for the narrator of *The Encantadas*. While reading these sketches as a nineteenth-century "anatomy of melancholy" geographically expressed, Engel also finds that the eclectic set of
images drawn together here corresponds to Durer's *Melencolia* (ca. 1514) just below.

Engel thus supplements some of the most important work done by Melville scholars in the last two decades. Robert K. Wallace, Christopher Sten, Dennis Berthold, Douglas Robillard, Hsuan L. Hsu, Elizabeth Schulz, and Andrew Delbanco have all found in Melville's prose and poetry corollaries to the visual arts that illuminate both the formal and thematic properties of his work. Engel not only links Melville to seventeenth-century art but also compellingly shows how *The Encantadas* embodies Melville's urge to describe works of art more generally.

In turning to Poe, whose pictorial powers have long been recognized, Engel's account of "The Raven" helps explains why Poe's work has inspired so much visual art. "The Raven" is Engel's chief object of inquiry in the second part of his diptych, but to shed light on Poe's use of chiasmus and doubling in the poem, he also considers "William Wilson" and what he calls the "William Wilson effect," the structural doubling used in both the Wilson story and the less well-known "The Domain of Arnheim." According to Engel, the chief seventeenth-century inspiration for "The Raven" is the poetry of Francis Quarles,
to whom Poe actually attributed his poem in the first printed version. Though Quarles is far less well-known than the poets Engel links to Melville, especially Milton, the connections he draws are no less suggestive, and perhaps more extensive. By invoking Quarles, Engel suggests, Poe situated himself "squarely within the ludic 'tradition of paradox' that is at the heart of baroque aesthetics" (79). In his intricate and precise reading of "The Raven," Engel links paradox, baroque visual aesthetics, and memory. Displaying a command of early modern thought that few other Americanists could match, Engel's virtuoso analysis of "The Raven" shows how it masterfully incorporates visual, aural, and conceptual chiasmus in a Pythagorean numerological pattern. Systematically working his way through its structural and conceptual uses of chiasmus, Engel highlights the parallels between sound and sense that Poe cherished as both a poet and theorist of poetics. Engel thus uncovers fascinating and evocative connections between the Pythagorean theory of numbers and Poe's cosmology. He also finely ties "The Raven" to "The Philosophy of Composition," which Poe ostensibly wrote to explain how he wrote the poem. By juxtaposing the poem and the essay as parallel performances that each exemplify chiasmus and doubling, Engel shows how the essay functions not only as a parody or a manual for creating art, but also as a work of art itself.

As suggestive as he is on chiastic structures and numerological Pythagoreanism, Engel still leaves room for speculation on the import of the devices he identifies so well. While linking Poe to Sir Francis Bacon, who enters Poe's work more often than Melville's, Engel also persuasively ties Poe's well-
known fondness for cryptograms and hidden codes with the Early Modern Art of Memory and its own tradition of coded meaning. These submerged structures, Engel suggests, may prefigure the visionary universe imagined in Poe's *Eureka*. Teasing out these implications fully, however, goes beyond the scope and the structure of Engel's book, which thus opens the door for further scholarship.

Engel's readings of "The Raven" and *The Encantadas* persistently show that American literature ineluctably participates in world literature, Anglophone and otherwise. Both Melville and Poe, he decisively demonstrates, owed substantial debts to their seventeenth-century forebears, and these debts spring from deeper roots in the classical and biblical literary traditions. This book, then, prompts us to consider more of how and why nineteenth-century American literature so often evokes seventeenth-century British texts. Why did writers such as Melville and Poe mine those texts for inspiration? Perhaps because the correspondences between seventeenth-century Britain and nineteenth-century America seem particularly rich: rapid social, cultural, economic, and religious change; global contraction driven by exploration and technology alike; and the emergence of a powerfully felt sense of nationhood. Here again, Engel's work illuminates possible future lines of inquiry for Poe and Melville scholars.

Rather than taking American nationalism as the key to American literature, Engel's treatment of both Melville and Poe suggests what can be learned from considering the larger history of literature on which Poe and Melville drew. By showing how much Poe and Melville absorbed from the literature of seventeenth-century England, Engel advances our understanding of
how these two major nineteenth-century writers fit together, as well as of how they re-created the literature that came before them.

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