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Brian Higgins and Herschel Parker. *Reading Melville's Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2006. 224p.

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While Hermann Melville's place in the canon of American literature remains secure and uncontested, largely due to the magnitude of *Moby-Dick*, his novel *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* which followed it has suffered critical neglect and remained in the shadow of the great novel ever since its publication in 1852. Both *Moby-Dick*, edited by Harrison Hayford and Herschel Parker, and *The Confidence-Man*, edited by Herschel Parker, have appeared in the Norton Critical Edition series. Random House has brought out his earlier work *Typee* in 2001. In 2006, *Benito Cereno*, edited by Wyn Kelley, appeared in the Bedford/St. Martin College Edition. Even the unfinished *Billy Budd*, published in the last years of the author, has received serious critical attention. Written during Melville's retirement, between 1885 and 1891, the *Billy Budd* manuscript was discovered among Melville's papers during the "Melville Revival" of the 1920s. The first American edition, edited by Raymond Weaver, was published in 1924, but revised editions of the text have appeared since then: Weaver's second edition (1928), the "literal text" of F. Barron Freeman (1948), and Hayford and Sealts' double texts. In contrast, *Pierre* appeared in 1971, edited by Harrison Hayford, Herschel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, and published by the Northwest University Press and the Newberry Library in the fifth volume of *The Writings of Herman Melville*. In 1995, HarperCollins brought out the novel individually, edited by Herschel Parker.

*Reading Melville's Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, edited by Brian Higgins and Herschel Parker, and published by the LSU Press, is therefore a welcome contribution to the revival of this important work in Melville's oeuvre. As the editors point out, *Pierre* "has a storied place in the history of American publishing." Melville began work on this "follow-up" to *Moby-Dick*, they tell us, in October 1851, assuming that the novel would enjoy a smooth ride in the wake of the reputation of the earlier novel, or even surpass it, and rescue him from his financial troubles. However, the critical response from the publishers was catastrophic. His American publisher, Harper & Brothers, showed no interest in the manuscript, but agreed to bring it out to help the financially strapped author. The royalty Melville had to accept was less than half of what he had received for earlier works, but he added passages that blamed the publishing industry.

The first American edition of *Pierre*, published by Harper & Brothers, appeared in New York in August 1852, and, bound and distributed by Sampson Low, Son &

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Co., in London in November 1952. A second American edition of approximately 260 copies was printed in 1855 after a fire at the Harpers' warehouse destroyed most of the remaining first edition stock. Melville had originally discussed the publication of *Pierre* with Richard Bentley, his British publisher; after the lackluster reception of *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, however, Bentley refused to publish anything by Melville unless the author permitted him to "make or have made by a judicious literary friend such alterations as are absolutely necessary to *Pierre* being properly appreciated [in Great Britain]." Melville refused, and there was no separate British edition of *Pierre*. Sampson, Low, Son & Co. simply bound copies of the book from imported American sheets and distributed them under its imprint.

Because of the controversial issues Melville addressed in this book—incest, morality, and the American publishing establishment, to name a few—the book received negative reviews in America, some reviewers even calling the author insane. The book sold poorly, and the combination of publishing failure and critical hostility likely caused Melville to suffer a breakdown. It certainly affected his approach to writing, causing him to turn to short magazine articles. During the rest of the nineteenth century, the book was called Melville's "late miserable abortion," and characterized as "repulsive, insane and unreadable" (vii). In *Reading Melville's Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*, Higgins and Parker explore in depth the reasons for this "flawed but revealing" book and its devastating reception. They locate the cause in the author's "hastily written and awkwardly inserted additions" to the "brilliantly achieved" text of the earlier, shorter edition.

*Reading Melville's Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* is in eight chapters: the introductory chapter "Toward a Kraken Book" is followed by four chapters of textual analysis: "This dream-house of the earth" (Books I and II); "The flowing river in the cave of man" (Books III-V); "The manly enthusiast cause" (Books VI-XII); and "The Pamphlet and the City: the Kraken Ending" (Books XIII-XXVI). These chapters are followed by three more: "Cobbling the Harper *Pierre*," which provides details of the author's contract negotiations with Harper & Brothers in late 1851 and early 1852; "Aftermath," which offers details of Melville's frantic work on expanding the manuscript under the stress of family and financial problems; and "Faltering Recognition," which synthesizes the critical reception of the novel.

The result is a brilliantly sympathetic, but textually defensible, study of the failures of a master. The documentary evidence and textual scholarship that Higgins and Parker bring to this study are exemplary, as expected, for they quote copiously from manuscripts, composition documents and notes, letters, and related correspondence, for example, between Melville and Bentley dated 16 April 1852. The editors conclude by returning to their own survey of scholarship and criticism on *Pierre* in "Prospects

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for *Criticism on Pierre*” (1983), where they had called for “an approach which seeks to show the aesthetic implications of textual and biographical evidence and to write criticism in the light shed by such evidence” (211), and asking the reader to suspend for some time the New Critical obsession with the finished text and appreciate the reflections of the author’s life in the production of *Pierre*.

*Reading Melville’s Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* will undoubtedly open the eyes and minds of current and future Melville scholars to the history behind this novel, its genesis and transformation, and vindicate Melville’s reputation. ✱