

The Disappearance of Ik. Marvel

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On March 1, 1851, Philip Hone, one-time mayor of New York City and then its premier man-about-town, recorded his latest literary enthusiasm in the pages of his massive diary. It was a book called *Reveries of a Bachelor* “by a very clever, ingenious writer, under the assumed name of Ik. Marvel.”¹ The next year, in far-away Brazil, Robert C. Schenck, America’s Minister to Dom Pedro’s imperial court, hailed the author’s ensuing work, *Dream Life*, as “Not so powerfully sad and real as his ‘Reveries of a Bachelor’; but yet a most natural panorama of the path we travel,—an Epic of Life.”²

Two years later, in rural Ohio, an earnest young college student named James A. Garfield spent two edifying days reading *Dream Life* aloud with his circle of friends. “I know of no author living or dead,” he concluded, “that has gone deeper into the fountain of feeling, and touched more skillfully the springs of tenderness and sympathy in the human heart than has Donald G. Mitchell alias Ik. Marvel. I have determined to purchase all the books he may ever publish while I live.”³

Young Garfield’s resolve was shared by many of his countrymen. *Reveries of a Bachelor* sold a remarkable 14,000 copies in its first year in print and *Dream Life* was nearly as popular.⁴ Both catapulted their author into instant literary celebrity and, even though his subsequent works never recaptured the magic of these initial successes, the reading public maintained sufficient interest to induce C. Scribner’s Sons to bring out a fifteen-volume edition of *The Works of Donald G. Mitchell* as late as 1907.

After that, silence. Tastes change, and the once-popular Mitchell was first derided, then dismissed and, ultimately, forgotten. Yet he had, for a moment in

mid-century, touched some raw nerve of American sensibility. Mitchell's vogue coincided with one of those generational changing-of-the-guards that periodically alter the contours of American life. In politics, the cohort of leadership that had come of age during the War of 1812 passed from the scene around 1850. Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster and John Calhoun all died within a few years of the mid-century mark.

The emphasis was now on youth. *Reveries* and *Dream Life* both appeared during the heyday of that movement that boldly called itself Young America. "There is a new spirit abroad in the land, young, restless, vigorous and omnipotent," thundered its advocates in the *United States Journal*. "It is Young America, awakened to a sense of her own intellectual greatness by her soaring spirit."⁵

The specific political program of that movement—territorial expansion, aggressive nationalism, supreme confidence in material progress—was not reflected in Mitchell's studiously non-political musings; but the idea of Youth, dreaming its own dreams—even if those dreams were confined to what Jane Tompkins has called the "closet of the heart"⁶—animated Mitchell's work.

Not until the early twentieth century would there be a comparably self-conscious call to Youth, when a new generation of Americans—brash, radical and iconoclastic—would use the tools of Marxism and Modernism to attack their elders. Mitchell's death in 1908, therefore, coincided with the end of an era. The young were impatient with yesterday's pieties, as Randolph Bourne asserted in 1911 in his famous "The Two Generations":

We have retained from childhood the propensity to see through things, and to tell the truth with startling frankness. This must, of course, be very disconcerting to a generation, so much of whose activity seems to consist in glossing over the unpleasant things or hiding the blemishes on the fair face of civilization....our spiritual centre is rapidly shifting from the personal to the social in religion. Not personal salvation, but social.⁷

In such a literary environment, the gentle reveries of a young man of the 1850s could no longer find an audience.

Today, Mitchell's work is largely seen—when it is noticed at all—as part of a feminine movement of sentimentality that dominated popular literature in the last century. In his 1985 study of Mitchell, Wayne R. Kime attributes the obloquy to which Ik. Marvel has been subjected to "the modern distrust of sentimentality, and...the effective appeals they [his works] once made to a mass audience."⁸ At the present time, however, when such sentimentalists as Fanny Fern, Mrs. Sigourney and Susan Warner are being re-examined and the canon of American literature is under revision, the disappearance of Ik. Marvel from our history needs to be accounted for as well.



Donald Mitchell, alias Ik. Marvel, in 1851.

As a male author with strong sentimental appeal to both the women and men of his day, Mitchell should be of interest to the social historian and the student of our literature precisely because he violates the paradigm of female popularity so disparaged by Nathaniel Hawthorne and others; Hawthorne seemed to suggest that sentimental literature was not only produced by “scribbling women” but consumed primarily by women as well. Nina Baym reports that Mitchell, N.P. Willis and T.S. Arthur were the few male authors who enjoyed widespread

success with women readers before the Civil War, an accomplishment she attributes to their “anatomizing the male psyche for female readers.”⁹ On the other hand, it is the masculine response to Mitchell that offers a glimpse into precisely how the values of domesticity were shared by both sexes in the 1850s. Mitchell’s success may suggest that the natural readership for domestic or sentimental fiction was broader than young people and women, that men of that generation partook in their own ways in a literary culture that stressed family values and Christian rewards. Even after the Civil War, as Mitchell’s generation married and matured, succeeding generations of young men were re-engaged by Ik. Marvel’s sentimental dreams. Across from the Cult of True Womanhood stood Mitchell and his male entourage, bachelors sure of domestic comforts and anticipating their bestowal, but preferring for the moment to experience them vicariously.¹⁰

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Donald G. Mitchell had the rare good fortune to publish successful works in each of five decades of the nineteenth century. He also created *Harper’s* “Editor’s Easy Chair”—long occupied by George William Curtis—and edited *Hearth and Home* from 1868 to 1870. By 1900, one admirer reflected that Mitchell was indeed “the distinguished *litterateur* of New Haven.”¹¹ At a time when the United States was undergoing major transformations in industry, politics and social institutions, Mitchell devoted himself to literature and farming.

Born in 1822 in Norwich, Connecticut, to a distinguished New England clerical family, Mitchell spent many of his early years away at school.¹² His father died when he was nine, and later Mitchell was to lose his mother, brother and sister to tuberculosis. Winning honors at Yale, Mitchell toyed with studying the law after graduation but retired instead to a family farm near Salem, Connecticut. There he stayed for three years until his former guardian arranged for a position in the consular service. It was during Mitchell’s two years abroad that he first thought about writing, projecting a series of travel sketches. These sketches were produced under the pseudonym by which Mitchell was to be remembered, Ik. Marvel.

The author was soon well launched into his literary career, despite another try at the law. More sketches, fiction, and a report on the French insurrection of 1848 followed quickly. With the publication of *Reveries of a Bachelor* in 1850 and *Dream Life* in 1851, Mitchell became a major figure in American literature. The popularity of the books continued through Mitchell’s long life and was not surpassed by any of Mitchell’s additional fifteen volumes of work that included a novel, pastoral essays about his farm at Edgewood—bought after his marriage—and literary history. In *Reveries* Ik. Marvel sounded his key “tocsin of the soul,” which resonated throughout the remainder of his career.

Reveries of a Bachelor is a series of extended personal meditations on love, marriage and death, sub-titled “A Book of the Heart.” Each set of reveries is placed within a realistic setting: the Bachelor is before the fire of his country

home, or beside the grate in his city apartment. In both cases he draws inspiration from the flames before him. Another reverie is framed by a challenge from an older spinster aunt, who detests cigar smoking. If he cannot tell a tale to bring his cynical aunt to tears, the Bachelor offers, he will forswear smoking; if successful, however, the Bachelor will be permitted one cigar after dinner each evening, next to his aunt's favorite roses. The last reverie is triggered by the Bachelor's sale of his family estate. He sits within view of his grandfather's grave and creates a romantic story that not only has echoes of Mitchell's own life but is also told in the first person.

Through the first three reveries Mitchell's narrator addresses his protagonist as "you," and the text at one level is a commentary by the Bachelor dreamer on the inner thoughts and feelings of his own creation. The effect is sometimes avuncular and often self-deprecating:¹³

But courage is elastic; it is our pride. It recovers itself easier, thought I, than these embers will get into blaze again.

But courage, and patience, and faith, and hope have their limit. Blessed be the man who escapes such trial as will determine limit!

To a lone man it comes not near; for how can trial take hold where there is nothing by which to try?

A funeral? You reason with philosophy. A grave yard? You read Hervey and muse upon the wall. A friend dies? You sigh, you pat your dog—it is over. Losses? You retrench—you light your pipe—it is forgotten. Calumny? You laugh—you sleep. (42-3)

As in the passage above, the point of view and voice shift rapidly. Mitchell invites the reader to share both the reverie and his narrator's comment upon it. The reader becomes at one moment the subject, at another the observer, and at still another the observer's confidant. In Ik. Marvel's spell, the reader is merely a dreamer on the border of a fictional world:

Married or unmarried, young or old, poet or worker, you are still a dreamer, and will one time know, and feel, that your life is but a dream. Yet you call this fiction: you stave off the thoughts in print which come over you in Reverie. You will not admit to the eye what is true to the heart. Poor weakling, and worldling, you are not strong enough to face yourself! (*Dream Life* 23)

If the world of fiction is a type of the real (a figure that Mitchell often uses), then his readers found in his book both rich detail and strong experiences upon which

to meditate. *Reveries* has, at one end of the spectrum of response, comic notes like the following advice, offered to a heart-broken spurned lover:

...diet yourself; you can find greens at the up-town market; eat a little fish with your dinner; abstain from heating drinks; don't put too much butter to your cauliflower; read one of Jeremy Taylor's sermons, and translate all the quotations at sight; run carefully over that exquisite picture of Geo. Dandin in your Moliere, and my word for it, in a week you will be a sound man.
(76)

Mitchell's range is far wider than the comic, however. He manipulates the icons of sentiment to wring sympathy and tears from his readers. Within the four reveries are the deaths—with appropriate reflection and ceremony—of two sons, one daughter, a friend, sister, mother, father, wife, a favorite dog, and even the Bachelor himself, twice. Death is knitted to life in *Reveries* and is intimately connected to the aspirations of the dreamer. It is not just sentimental pathos that Mitchell explores; his interest within *Reveries* is to expose the link between emotion in fiction and real life. "What matters it pray," he asks, "if literally there was no wife, and no dead child...? Is not feeling, feeling; and heart, heart?" (55-6). The focus of the mortal drama within *Reveries* is therefore not the painful certitude of death but rather the comfort deriving from the truth of a Christian death.

The Fourth Reverie—marked as noted earlier by the narrator's shift to the first person—ends with the drowning of the two-year-old son of the now-happily-married Bachelor. The bereaved parents visit the child's grave. There, the narrator and his wife share not only the loss of their son but also the growth of their own love and faith; sentimental pathos is transformed into a spiritual force:

And her heart, and my heart, knit together by sorrow, as they had been knit by joy—a silver thread mingled with the gold—follow the dead one to the Land that is before us; until at last we come to reckon the boy, as living in the new home, which when this is old, shall be ours also. (297)

Reinforcing this acknowledgment that human love is immortal, the Bachelor states as he ends his book that he had "dreamed pleasant dreams that night;—for I dreamed that my Reverie was real."

The four reveries are themselves arranged according to natural metaphors that bridge the gap between the meditative and the real. For example, the First Reverie occurs during the Bachelor narrator's evening in front of a fireplace in his country home. The three sections of the reverie—"Smoke," "Blaze" and "Ashes"—correspond to the doubt, passion and bereavement of the narrator as he imagines various marital scenarios. At the same time, however, the narrator is

kicking the wood, listening through the walls of his parlor to the cries of his tenant farmer's infant, and describing his small room, "scarce twelve feet by ten, with a cosy looking fire-place—a heavy oak floor—a couple of arm chairs, and a brown table with carved lions' feet" (15). Later, in his city bachelor's apartment, he sits before the coal grate wearing slippers, "a Turkish loose dress, and Greek cap" (60). Mitchell's literary references range from Scripture in Greek to Lamartine in French, from Shakespeare to Bulwer. Mitchell offered his youthful readers not only a guide for their emotions but shopping and library catalogues as well. In fact, there is enough concrete detail in *Reveries* to reward the historian of social custom and interior decoration. If the phantasy life of the Bachelor is not real, he describes its furniture, its flowers, and its books well enough to permit his readers to construct his dwelling within their own parlors. Ik. Marvel's world is not purely one of sentimental idealization but is grounded in the gritty texture of a real world familiar to his readers, giving the sentimental excursions more impact. The success of *Reveries* may well have been as attributable to its apt descriptions of upper middle class life in New England and New York as to its witty and sentimental exploration of love.

A year later Mitchell returned to the formula that had worked so successfully. Sub-titled "A Fable of the Seasons," *Dream Life* is so similar in tone and style to its predecessor as to constitute a reworking rather than a sequel. Despite its focus on one character—which gives the book a surface unity lacking in *Reveries*—Mitchell's interest remains nostalgic descriptions and sentimental musings. Ultimately, he asserts, "Feeling, indeed, has a higher truth in it than circumstances" (15). Mitchell weaves the incidents of childhood into the memories and actions of maturity, sketching a fictional Clarence from his childhood play in the family attic to a closing tableau in which a small grandson is pressed at the moment of Clarence's death against his aged cheek like "a tender SPRING flower, upon the bosom of the dying WINTER" (286).

Although the hero's name is Clarence, he is almost always addressed as "You." Mitchell explains this strategy in an apostrophe to the reader.

It has very likely occurred to you, my reader, that I am playing the wanton in these sketches;—and am breaking through all the canons of the writers in making YOU my hero.

It is even so; for my work is a story of those vague feelings, doubts, passions, which belong more or less to every man of us all; and therefore it is, that I lay upon your shoulders the burden of these dreams. If this or that one, never belonged to your experience,—have patience for a while. I feel sure that others are coming, which will lie like a truth upon your heart; and draw you unwittingly —perhaps tearfully even—into the belief that YOU are indeed my hero. (120)



Domestic bliss as imagined by the dreamer. Frontispiece for 1851 *Dream Life*.

Mitchell may be sentimental but he is never fuzzy. For each season of life Mitchell describes the anxieties and pleasures of the middle class, but it is clear that his imagination and energy were linked to his own youth. Only twenty-nine and still unmarried, a successful and ambitious young man, Mitchell lavished two thirds of his book on the first two seasons and seemingly dashes through married love, the pleasures of parenting, and the loss of power and friendship in old age. Sixteen chapters are devoted to the dreams of childhood and youth, only eleven to manhood and old age. Filled with the enthusiasms of a young man equally at home in Europe or a New England farm or a New York City drawing room, *Dream Life* suffers, as does *Reveries*, more from an inability to understand full maturity than from an excess of sentiment. Mitchell understood his past better than he projected his future.

It is in incident and tone that *Dream Life* shows its author's age. Mitchell's pen in the work records the energy of a small-town church choir—the throat-clearing, the anxious wait for the droning sermon to end, even the would-be soprano who munches between hymns on a bunch of fennel. He catches the effects on a freshman Clarence of a too prolonged encounter with champagne and oysters. He notes the anxiety of a small schoolboy, who tingles with indignation when a classmate is birched.

The last two sections of *Dream Life*, on the other hand, are filled more often with fanciful incidents, not with realistic details of New England life. For example, Mitchell's dreamer foresees that Clarence's college friend, a dangerous sophisticate, may attempt later in life to steal Clarence's wife from him. Husband and wife are tearfully reunited, she "the same sweet angel, that has led you in the way of light; and who is still your blessing, and your pride" (252). The Dreams of Manhood and Age are dominated by a sentiment that is unrelieved by the wit or striking insight which characterize the earlier sections.

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On careful reading we were both surprised by the clarity and wit of the *Reveries of a Bachelor* and *Dream Life*, in spite of their often cloying sentiment. On their strength their author was once known as "the American Elia."¹⁴ Mitchell believed in 1883 that he himself had written "very much better books, every way, since that time" but acknowledged that his public favored the *Reveries*. Yet he defended the youthful "over-tenderness" of the book, concluding, "Whatever the astute critics may think, I do not...believe that the boisterous and scathing and rollicking humour of our times has blown all of pathos and all of the more delicate human sympathies into limbo."¹⁵ But it was exactly Mitchell's willingness to treat of pathos and delicacy seriously, and to hold out Christian comforts, that led to his dismissal by later readers.

After Mitchell's death, the few observers still commenting on him attributed his success to his overly feminine sentimentalism. A reviewer in Mencken's *American Mercury* noted vengefully in 1926 that Mitchell was surely an "ass," one who had "long outlived his usefulness...dragged on to eighty-six, not dying

until 1908."¹⁶ To the reviewer, Mitchell was an effete romanticizing Puritan: prudish, oblivious of the war and social trauma around him, and—perhaps most importantly—part of a flood of sentimental women writers responsible for the “mire of tears” that afflicted American literature until the end of the century.¹⁷ Several years later, Pattee called *Reveries* a minor classic, “oversentimental at times and completely in key with the feminine fifties.”¹⁸ James Hart thought that Mitchell’s success was due to the women “who wanted to be both mother and wife [to Mitchell] at the same time,” and who “over a long period required fifty pirated editions.”¹⁹

More recently, Foster claims that *Reveries* had a special appeal for young women because of its “wealth of sentimental observations”; but he also acknowledges that Mitchell’s work in some way expressed the values and customs of a whole class, men and women alike.²⁰ It is precisely for this representational quality that Lawrence Buell utilizes Mitchell’s work, illustrating that “Young Goodman Brown” and *Reveries* display the same elements of ironic self-consciousness. Buell contrasts the two, however, to demonstrate how, in his view, high art floats among the conventions it defies, even though in dialogue with them.²¹

Mitchell is placed squarely among the debilitating sentimentalists of the nineteenth century by Ann Douglas, who argues that he—like Washington Irving and George William Curtis—was forced by his profession to accept an inferior feminine position.²² From this disadvantaged point, according to Douglas, Mitchell behaved like the disestablished liberal clergy and women authors who jointly sought to influence American capitalism by creating sentimental, feminizing values in literature.²³

A one-sentence summary of Professor Douglas’s thesis does not do justice to her important work on the place of sentimentality in nineteenth-century American literature. Although we have several differences with her reading of Mitchell, it is her analysis of the male sentimental essayist that is most interesting from our point of view. Douglas finds masculine sadism rather than feminine sensitivity lurking beneath Mitchell’s seemingly gentle reveries. Unlike women authors, she argues, who employed suffering female tableaux for morally illustrative purposes—as with Stowe’s treatment of Little Eva’s redemptive death—the male sentimentalist imagined such scenes as a way of identifying at some deeper level with the male society that caused the woman’s pain.²⁴

Yet Mitchell’s obsessive concern with death does not necessarily require theories of vicarious, displaced sadism. It could as readily be accounted for by the losses suffered within his own family and his own chronic illness. His experience was hardly unique: contemporaries were haunted by visions of premature death. As Barbara Welter has observed, “all young people were cautioned to be prepared for sudden death.”²⁵ It was not uncommon for either sex to qualify predictions for the future with such statements as, “He will distinguish himself, if he lives.”²⁶ In such a milieu, a preoccupation with deathbeds was

neither perverse nor confined to men alone. Everyone dies in Mitchell's dream world: men and women, the grizzled and the callow, even beloved dogs.

However the feminist perspectives of our century may alter perception, it is clear that young women of the 1850s found *Reveries* both beautiful and inspiring. While it is possible that Mitchell's women readers voyeuristically enjoyed their view of the bachelor's intimate chambers, there was shared insight and sympathy as well. For example, Mitchell's influence on Emily Dickinson is well established. On October 9, 1851, she wrote to Susan Gilbert about Ik. Marvel,

Dont [sic] you hope he will live as long as you and I do—and keep on having dreams and writing them to us; what a charming old man he'll be.... We will be willing to die Susie—when such as *he* have gone, for there will be none to interpret these lives of our's [sic].²⁷

Richard Sewall's biography of Dickinson shows how for several years the young poet was deeply affected by her reading of *Reveries* and even the lesser *Dream Life*. To young people like her, Ik. Marvel was counselor, confessor and enunciator of the heart's secret matters, great and small. Dickinson marked her copies of *Reveries* carefully, and Sewall traces Mitchell's themes in such later poems as "There is a Zone..." and "Crisis is a Hair," both stemming from the middle 1860s. Mitchell's work may have affected almost all of Dickinson's relationships, Sewall believes, and may even have offered her a credo by which to live.²⁸

By April 2, 1853, Dickinson's father had pronounced *Reveries* "very ridiculous," reported Emily conspiratorially to her brother Austin.²⁹ But the opposition to Mitchell may have been intergenerational, not the result of masculine scepticism over the book's sentiment. After all, the copies of *Reveries* and *Dream Life* that were marked so carefully by Emily and which Sewall uses in his analysis belonged to the twenty-four-year-old Austin, not to Emily.³⁰

Despite the repeated assumption in our time that Mitchell's readers were women, all the evidence from the 1850s through the early years of this century suggests that many of Mitchell's most devoted readers were in fact young men. The enthusiasms of Garfield, Schenck and Hone cited at the beginning of this paper are not the only testimonials to Ik. Marvel's power to move men of action. A writer in *The Outlook* recalled that even in 1872 the two books of sentimental revery were to be found in every undergraduate's room. They were, he wrote thirty years later, "among the books to which one could safely make reference in an address to students with the assurance that his allusion would be understood."³¹ An *Atlantic* columnist remembered in 1906 that thirty years beforehand—when literature rather than athletics was at the heart of the university—*Reveries* was familiar to students everywhere.³²

Although Paul Elmer More suggested in a 1908 review of the Edgewood Edition of Mitchell's works that young men owned copies of *Reveries* and *Dream*

Life that were gifts from girl friends,³³ it is clear that men were directly affected by Ik. Marvel. Maitland Osborne remembered in 1899 his first encounter with Marvel on a rainy day in his own youth: “a new vista had opened...and the impetus of the high ideal that grew upon him [Maitland] as he read still lingers with him as a tender memory.”³⁴ William Dean Howells called Ik. Marvel, “graceful and gracious...dear to the old hearts that are still young...”³⁵ William Winter, the long-time drama critic for the *Tribune* reported that readers “possess, or ought to possess, a comprehension of their author, and loving those books [*Reveries* and *Dream Life*] they have learned him by heart.”³⁶ After all, suggested a reviewer in 1886, Mitchell’s advantage lay in the youth of his readership: “There is no audience which rewards a writer with keener attention...and it is part of the good fortune of the author...that his work remains in the minds of his readers among the most delightful associations of the most inspiring period of life.”³⁷

Nor were the men who were affected by the reveries unaware of the excesses in what Mitchell himself called their pathos and sympathy. Unhindered by the nostalgia of grown men remembering the enthusiasms of their college years, even many critics in the “Feminine” 1850s described *Reveries* and *Dream Life* with great accuracy. An 1854 review in *Littel’s Living Age* warned its readers that *Dream Life* will “tax your lachrymal glands to the utmost.”³⁸ Praising the book as an “alliance of sagacious raillery and pathetic sentiment,” the author complained that it seemed to be taking readers too far, with Marvel exhibiting “an almost wanton empiricism in matters of life and death.”³⁹

Even *Harper’s*, for which Mitchell was writing at the time, found limits to its praise. In 1851, it called *Reveries* one of the best books of the season, a book that was humorous as well as lachrymose. It found Mitchell’s adherence to nature almost Shakespearian and declared his treatment of the pathetic an “unerring test” of genius. Marvel had—using the recent California gold rush as a metaphor—“opened a new vein of gold in the literature of his country.”⁴⁰ When *Dream Life* appeared one year afterward, however, the critic found that although it was in the “same vein of meditative pathos, and quaint, gentle humor” as *Reveries* the sentiment ultimately may “pall upon the sense of a too luxurious indulgence.”⁴¹

The rival *Putnam’s Magazine*, edited by Charles F. Briggs, paid Mitchell the compliment of reviewing his work in its very first issue. Ironically from today’s perspective, the article on Mitchell began a series on American authors, the second and final installment of which featured Melville. While recognizing the virtues of the first two books of reveries, the *Putnam’s* reviewer urged Mitchell not to write a third, for “a song in the minor is delicious....But who would write a whole opera in such a key?”⁴² Of the two books, *Reveries* was the stronger; fragmentary and multi-faceted, its melancholy was “subdued and richly toned.”⁴³ And yet, observes the reviewer, there is a flatness in Mitchell’s sentiment and an easier trust in Christian reward than Hawthorne would tolerate.⁴⁴ Compared, therefore, with both Melville and Hawthorne, Mitchell needed to be read in a different way. The critic saw that Mitchell’s very popular books served a special purpose for Mitchell’s male readers.

Mr. Mitchell does not bear reading from cover to cover. The want of sustained interest in his books, and the fragmentary manner in which he arranges them, are indeed unfavorable to a continuous perusal. He is to be taken bit by bit. When you have been all day slaving at some hard, dry business, that chokes up all kindly sympathies...put on your dressing-gown, place a cup of delicate French chocolate on a table near you, and read the third chapter of *Reveries of a Bachelor*. When you have finished it, be sure your heart will be no longer arid....there is no dew so invigorating to our natures as that which we weep ourselves.⁴⁵

The warning to the reader contains within it three ideas of interest, vital judgments about Mitchell's work which his contemporaries recognized as faults but which they patiently held in abeyance while avidly reading his works. The first is that Mitchell's narrative form lacks a unity that compels sequential reading. The tension between *Reveries'* real and imaginary fictive worlds and its repetitive descents into pathos both work against the perception of an artistic whole. As essays and sketches, the reveries can be mined for commonplace books but not admired for their overall structure. The second insight of the *Putnam's* reviewer is that despite the pretense of indolence by the Bachelor he and his readers were both actively involved in business affairs. To dream is to withdraw from active urban life momentarily in order to rest or to restore oneself, perhaps by reading vicariously about a simpler life. Van Wyck Brooks observed much later that both of Mitchell's books appealed to this need:

One went to the city, accepted the ways of the world, made one's pile and married for advantage, while all the while, in one's heart of hearts, one clung to the simple, wholesome dreams of childhood....Ik Marvel's enormous vogue showed how many people desired in books the opposite of what they desired in life.⁴⁶

Finally, *Putnam's* saw that Mitchell's readers needed to be reassured that—in spite of the arid cold life they led daily—their wholesome memories of childhood would redeem them. Young James Garfield also put his finger on this major source of Mitchell's appeal. "He describes the feelings which I had in boyhood and youth," Garfield said of Mitchell, "and which I had supposed were peculiar to myself."⁴⁷ It is in this recognition of a redemptive innocence that the perspectives of Mitchell's women and men readers converged.

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What then is to be made of the curious shift in the literary fortunes of Donald Mitchell? When *Reveries* and *Dream Life* first appeared, they were instantly

successful; and their author remained a favorite of the public until his death. The passage of time, however, created new critical tastes that preferred the shocking image to the comfortable, and privileged the abstract and symbolic over the sentimental. Mitchell's faithful readers, on the other hand, both understood and cherished his use of the conventions of sentiment: the deathbed scene, the tearful return of the prodigal, the throbbing of young love. As Herbert Ross Brown once indicated, the formula for sentimental literature was grounded "upon a belief in the sentimental goodness and benevolence of man's original instinct."⁴⁸ In tears, the sentimental reader—woman or man—could find the solvent that freed benevolence from its suppressed workday role. Although Mitchell himself offered many examples of the moral utility of tears, he recognized—as some other sentimental authors did not—that salvation was not purchased by tears alone.

In *DreamLife*, for example, Clarence is called home because of his mother's death. Late at night, he compares his feelings when his younger brother had died to those stemming from the loss of his mother. Death, Mitchell observes, "is as grand to the man, as to the boy: its teachings are as deep for age, as for infancy." Clarence at first meditates, then prays. When he sleeps at last, Mitchell notes ruefully that Clarence is "like the rest of the world,—whose goodness lies chiefly in the occasional throbs of a better nature, which soon subside, and leave them upon the old level of *desire*."⁴⁹

Despite Mitchell's attempt to both use and counterpoint the conventions of sentiment, at one level, Kime is surely right in attributing the disappearance of Ik. Marvel to our distrust of sentimentality. From the level of canon formation, however, it is clear that Mitchell's fate is linked directly to the reputation of major women authors of his day, whose works are similarly sentimental. As such scholars as Jane Tompkins have ably argued, the tearful crises that filled the sentimental woman's novel are readable as signs of personal triumph for women, metaphors of the Christian notions of self-effacement and acceptance.⁵⁰ Like Mitchell, women authors looked for truth in the heart and found an expression of faith in tears, often building scenes in the same sort of claustrophobic private rooms that Mitchell puffed away in. But contrary to our historically conditioned expectations, men read him with enthusiasm and felt that he spoke to their hearts also.

If Mitchell is ever reinstated in some modest way to a position in our national literature, it will be because of the efforts of scholars—sparked by the Feminist Movement—to understand the cultural significance of sentimentality in our past. Having known all along that the true object of a bachelor's reverie is a good woman, Mitchell would have enjoyed the irony of his rescue.

Notes

1. Phillip Hone, *Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851*, Ed. Allan Nevins (1927. New York, 1969), II, 913.
2. Robert C. Schenck, Letter to "My Dear Sister" [Libby]. 28 June 1852. R.C. Schenck Papers. Miami University Library.
3. James A. Garfield, Diary, July 4, 1854. Garfield Papers, Library of Congress.
4. Waldo H. Dunn, *The Life of Donald G. Mitchell* (New York, 1922), 225-8.
5. Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1966), 54.
6. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York, 1985), 151.
7. Randolph S. Boume, "The Two Generations," *Youth and Life* (1913, Freeport, 1967), 47-8.
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