

Emerson (Everett). *The Authentic Mark Twain : A Literary Biography of Samuel L. Clemens.*

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to know God and the minds of other men. It would be impossible not to recognise how deeply Miss Dickinson was concerned with the same questions, how she doubted the data of her senses, how she met God with great irony of spirit, how she saw the look of agony on one dying as the only univocal gesture of communication of which man was capable. The notion, too, of 'nearness' is clearly relevant to the idea of the neighbour, just as her preoccupation with 'meeting' as having to do with apprehending the world and the other receives Mr Benfey's careful and precise attention.

If Mr Benfey's book is brief, too brief, Mr Shurr's is far too convinced to be truly convincing. *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* is little more than a sketchy, though often brilliant, introduction to the vast problems which it raises, and for every poem Mr Benfey has discussed, there must be ten demanding equal and equally fruitful attention. And although this reader may hesitate before some of the more extreme conclusions about Miss Dickinson's personal life suggested by Mr Shurr, his argument in general is compelling enough, for it brings a new unity of interpretation to a large and important part of Miss Dickinson's work.

And yet, she has eluded us again. Dressed in white, withdrawn into seclusion, her voice defies final description. She seems always just beyond the reader in a world of terrible struggle few of us will ever know. — A. J. FRY.

EMERSON (Everett). *The Authentic Mark Twain: A Literary Biography of Samuel L. Clemens*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984 ; one vol., XIII-330 pp., \$ 29.95. — As the subtitle of Emerson's study indicates, this book is intended to be a literary biography, to show, in other words, those forces in the author's life that shaped his writing. In this it differs from more comprehensive biographies, such as the one by Justin Kaplan (1966). However, Emerson's work only partly succeeds in achieving its aim. The defect from which it suffers is that it concentrates too heavily on the figure of Mark Twain, while ignoring most of what was happening in the micro- and macrocosms to which the author belonged. In this way the reader is unable to appreciate the full extent of Emerson's thesis that the "authentic Mark Twain" frequently had to give way under social pressures. Although Everett Emerson repeatedly stresses the deep effect adverse criticism had on Twain, he fails to characterize the intellectual climate of the author's age in any depth. This neglect is also apparent in the colourless depiction of Olivia Langdon Clemens, despite the major role Emerson assigns Twain's wife in the author's decision to write respectable works like *The Prince and the Pauper*, while refraining from the publication of more "vulgar" (i.e. humoristic) work.

The basic assumptions that underlie Emerson's critical observations are also rather questionable. The quality of Twain's work is almost exclusively expressed in terms of its degree of "authenticity", a hazy concept that Emerson associates with the author's youth, when Clemens was still "an irreverent skeptic, irrepressible, humorous, unpretentious but self-assured, and often victimized, usually by his own illusions" (p. x). Nowhere does Emerson defend his decision to take this aspect of Twain's nature as indicative of his most authentic self, and equally absent is any attempt at justifying the equation of biographical authenticity and literary excellence. When the biographer wonders : "Why is *Huckleberry Finn* far and away Mark Twain's greatest book ?" (p. 136), the reader who would expect a critical discussion of the merits that warrant this estimate will be disappointed. "One way of answering," Emerson says, "is that the writing of the book was a liberating experience for its author ... Through Huck the novelist who has been civilized escapes for a time to the river of his youth ..." (p. 136).

Clearly Emerson's biographical insights prejudice the critic's textual evaluations : as soon as Twain is perceived to free himself from society's pressures, for instance, by writing a book about Huck Finn, a "nonconformist, an outsider", the novelist has created a "thoroughly authentic" character. Thus Emerson would seem to take a quite pessimistic view of the artist's career as a frantic attempt to retrieve a native (or naive ?) authenticity lost among the more ugly aspects of reality, with little or no scope being left for experience, maturation, or change. Nevertheless, Emerson does manage to find several examples of that authenticity, even in Twain's later work.

Whether or not one accepts the critic's thesis that Twain is at his best when most authentic, Emerson's sympathetic account provides many valuable insights into the genesis and the nature of Twain's oeuvre. Especially strong in providing useful information on several unpublished texts, it is also refreshingly explicit in its discussion of the financial considerations that prompted Twain to strive for quantity, rather than quality, of output. Notwithstanding the somewhat biased approach, this is an interesting and well-written work. — G. BUELENS.

DAVIS (Sara deSaussure) and Philip D. BEIDLER, eds. *The Mythologizing of Mark Twain*. Alabama 35486, University of Alabama Press, 1984 ; one vol., XIX-186 pp. Price : \$ 20.00 cloth, \$ 9.95 paper. — This collection of essays presented at the "Eighth Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature" has been organized around the controlling metaphor of myth. Divided into three main groups, the papers purport to show how America mythologizes Twain, how Twain consciously contributed to this process, and finally how Twain himself gave shape to a mythic America. Not surprisingly, the contributions are of uneven quality.

The opening paper, for example, is a boring, detailed account of the phenomenon of collecting : who collects what, when and why ? The aim of the contribution is to broaden our understanding of the mystique surrounding ancient prints of (Mark Twain's) books.

An analysis of Norman Rockwell's illustrations to Twain's novels is more interesting, although it is curious that the only touchstone the critic applies is the accuracy of the correspondence between text and illustration. On the basis of some significant distinctions Allison Ensor accuses Rockwell of sentimentally misrepresenting Twain's books by selecting only "happy", humorous moments for illustration. Although there is some truth in this allegation, Ensor does not seem to notice that even in those so-called happy scenes there is a clear terrifying streak which Rockwell chooses to emphasize. The look on Tom's face while he gets a whipping, for instance, singles out the experience of the suffering child and not that of the hilarious crowd. Also, Ensor fails to note what struck me most about Rockwell's work : it is always so full of movement, dynamism. Couldn't this be an equally valid explanation of Rockwell's decision to select some scenes (the more dynamic ones) rather than others ?

Henry Nash Smith explores a well-known theme in Twain-scholarship : the extent to which during his lifetime Mark Twain was received by his audience as *either* a humorist *or* a serious artist. Smith convincingly shows how this two-pronged response was related to an inability to perceive Twain's true nature as one who *bridged* the realms of the high and the low style, by employing the expressive power of a written version of vernacular speech in his literary works.

In "A 'Talent for Posturing'", Louis Budd summarizes some of the points he makes in his *Our Mark Twain*, reviewed below.

Other interesting contributions include James M. Cox's "*Life on the Mississippi Revisited*" in which the author reviews his own position of fifteen years before, when he had criticized