

cal—dimension of the founders' federalism, to postcolonial New York's relations with other states as well as with the new "empire."

But this is undoubtedly asking too much. Hulsebosch's brilliant book will have a profound impact on our understanding of the American Revolution and the early history of state-making in the federal republic. Other scholars, inspired by Hulsebosch's example, can explain the coming of the Civil War.

Peter S. Onuf
University of Virginia

Mitchell Meltzer, *Secular Revelations: The Constitution of the United States and Classic American Literature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. Pp. 192. \$39.95 (ISBN 0-674-01912-1).

This slim volume, comprising an introduction and thirteen brief chapters (many under ten pages), purports to do no less than to establish the Constitution's formative influence on the literature of the American Renaissance. In contrast to the exhaustive interpretive energy that has been invested in the Constitution over the past two centuries, Meltzer finds "a striking paucity of literary critical reference to America's founding document" (5). Seeking to redress that apparent lack, Meltzer examines how the Constitution's paradoxically revelatory secular authority resurfaces formally and thematically in the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. Key to the "constitutional poetics" evinced by such classic American literature, Meltzer contends, is a "self-constituting" tendency that perpetually recreates a vatic representation of "We the People"—that self-authorized yet transcendent, diverse yet unified entity—even as it similarly reconstitutes established literary forms such as the essay, the poem, and the novel.

To appreciate the saliency of Meltzer's insight regarding the cultural tensions unleashed by the Constitution's contradictory "secular revelation," one need only turn to Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798): set on the outskirts of Philadelphia on the eve of the Revolution, the novel's gothic plot turns on murderous disembodied voices vocalizing divine injunction, patriarchal authority, or democratic disorder—or, quite possibly, all three at once. Yet, although the first third of *Secular Revelations* reconstructs the contexts for the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, the study casts only a brief glance at *Wieland* and its early national counterparts. Instead, eschewing the historicist "shell game of literary valuation" that has engendered critical reassessment of cultural production in the early republic (59), Meltzer reserves more sustained scrutiny for the celebrated later period christened the "American Renaissance" by F. O. Matthiessen in his 1941 study of that name. Drawing on Robert Ferguson's influential *Law and Letters in American Culture* (Harvard, 1984), Meltzer argues that only *after* the nineteenth-century disaggregation of law and literature did the Constitution emerge "as a latent, formative influence" on the nation's nascent belletristic tradition (64). The exact nature and impact of that influence finally remains unclear, however, due to

the relative meagerness of Meltzer's literary sample and the brevity of the textual analysis (much of which necessarily negotiates previous readings of such canonical works).

Ultimately, though, what is needed here is not more sustained development of the study's central insights but more thorough secondary research. Meltzer is careful to disavow any attempt to analyze "the explicit constitutional views" of the authors under consideration or, for that matter, "their direct or symbolic references to the Constitution in their works" (94). Nevertheless, it seems fair to ask whether the constitutional poetics ascribed to Emerson, Whitman, and Melville would have intersected with, paralleled, or veered completely away from the contemporaneous popular constitutionalism so vividly described by Larry D. Kramer in *The People Themselves: Popular Constitutionalism and Judicial Review* (Oxford, 2004).

Even more perplexing is the absence of any reference to the important scholarship addressing many of the literary critical questions raised here. As suggested by his somewhat old-fashioned use of "American Renaissance" and "classic American literature" as critical categories, Meltzer seeks to distance himself from "trend of literary criticism in recent decades to interrogate any text that promises even the remotest relation to literature—particularly a text susceptible to political interpretation—and make it part of the increasingly capacious canon" (5). Fair enough. But distaste for cultural studies and historicist methodologies and discomfort with an insufficiently literary, excessively inclusive canon should prompt agonistic engagement with the key critical works—not excuse their tacit neglect.

For, methodology and politics aside, *Secular Revelations* picks up many important strands in what is actually a quite rich scholarship on American literature and the Constitution. A decade ago, for example, Priscilla Wald's *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Duke, 1996) examined the formal consequences of attempts by Melville, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and Gertrude Stein to constitute "We the People" in narratives that offered alternatives to the official story represented by the Constitution and other foundational texts. How, one wonders, does Meltzer's account of the formal implications of constitutional poetics in American Renaissance authors advance or challenge Wald's work? Similarly, like Paul Downes in *Democracy, Revolution, and Monarchism in Early American Literature* (Cambridge, 2002), Meltzer probes how the secrecy of the Constitutional convention might have informed literary articulations of the American subject; how, then, do the antebellum and early national versions of this phenomenon differ? Along with Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Charles Chesnut, Emerson and Melville are central to Gregg D. Crane's analysis of morality and citizenship in nineteenth-century literary constitutionalism; how do Meltzer's readings tally with Crane's? Whatever the literary merits of the particular works discussed in these monographs, surely such important critical analyses of nineteenth-century constitutionalism—as well as the very nature of that constitutionalism itself—deserve recognition in a study like this one.

Jeannine Marie DeLombard
University of Toronto