

man and of his work in a fashion that is profoundly satisfying because it is so generously comprehensive in scope as to be able to render the completeness of a life.

Professor Erkkila both begins and ends her study with a reminder that the work of literary critics, as well as of poets, is subject to the influence of politics. And in identifying herself as a child of the Vietnam era, she prompts the further thought that maybe reactionary Reaganomics has made necessary and thus made possible the recovery in and for present-day America of the radical element in Whitman's politics and poetics. For certain, Whitman isn't Bushed yet, as Professor Erkkila has shown in what is an exemplary account for our time of Whitman the political poet.

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DAVID S. REYNOLDS. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Knopf, 1988. 625 pp.

JEFFREY STEELE. *The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. 218 pp.

These new books by David Reynolds and Jeffrey Steele have in common the aim of extending the critical project that began with F. O. Matthiessen, the quest to understand the flowering of American literary art at the midpoint of the nineteenth century. Reynolds' book is the one most likely to affect the scholarly community by providing a lasting set of research problems, even though his argument will already be familiar to students of Whitman's and Emerson's comments on the age: the soil of American high culture had been prepared and deeply tilled by a lively and diverse popular culture heretofore insufficiently acknowledged in the scholarly literature. Reynolds' massive research effort and the expansiveness with which he develops his thesis are likely to overshadow the products of other recent scholars whose claims are more modestly offered. In the spirit of democracy invoked by Reynolds himself, then, let us begin with the other book.

Jeffrey Steele's *The Representation of the Self in the American Renaissance* employs what will no doubt be a common strategy for academic writers over the next few years, reading canonical writers in light of recent theoretical developments. Beginning with Matthiessen's insight into "the link between Emerson's figure of the orator and his myth of the unconscious," Steele argues that "we must amplify Matthiessen's discussion with a body of theoretical knowledge developed since his time—contemporary theories of reader response and reception aesthetics"—in order to grasp "the relationship between Emerson's psychological mythmaking and his presentation of a transfigured 'voice' that his audience is motivated to internalize" (2-3). Steele's brand of psychological criticism transforms the discussion of the work of art as a product of the artist's struggles in ego-formation—the kind of biographical or genetic discussion that has dominated Whitman studies in the past—by decentering it, replacing the

interest in the artist as a productive force with an interest in the exchange between artist and reader, thus recognizing anew the *rhetorical* aims of literary writing. The purpose of the literary artist, according to this view, is to create the "intersubjective space" of the phenomenologists and to populate that mythical location with the transformed selves of author and reader.

This way of reading seems particularly well suited to transcendental writers like Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, and Fuller. In fact, it draws upon their own aesthetics, in a move that Steele shares with Reynolds, an openness to the critical theories and reading habits of the age under investigation. Scholars who have been disenchanted with the condescension of the New Criticism with its intentional fallacy, Freudian criticism with its notion of artistic performance as neurosis, and ideological criticism with its claims of "false consciousness" will find this retracting of critical distance refreshing. Steele works with the conflict between transcendentalist and anti-transcendentalist writers, claiming that methods based upon a synthesis of reader-response aesthetics, hermeneutic theory, phenomenology, and Jungian psychology have greatest relevance for readings of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, and Fuller, while "the fields of deconstructive criticism and Freudian psychology provide critical models needed to analyze Poe's, Hawthorne's, and Melville's demystifications of Transcendentalist patterns of identification" (172). If indeed "the nineteenth-century debate over the nature of the self is reenacted by the later controversy in philosophy and literary theory," then "the literary and theoretical dialogues should be mutually illuminating" (173).

They should be perhaps, but in Steele's reading of "Song of Myself," they are not. Too much of the commentary is given over to repeating in new terms critical commonplaces about Whitman's poems—that, for example, his view of the unconscious is rooted deeply in physical life, in contrast to Emerson's view of the unconscious, which is more soulful and metaphysical; or that Whitman's "I" is generic, a representative of the liberating potential within all people. For students of Whitman, I hope Steele's challenge to "find a model of the text that illuminates both its psychological rhythm and its rhetorical power" and his complaint that "most readings of the poem have emphasized the former at the expense of the latter" (71) will be heeded in spite of the weaknesses in the reading he himself offers.

David Reynolds is another scholar interested in accommodating the old to the new. Can scholars do otherwise in a field so well tilled as the American Renaissance? But *Beneath the American Renaissance* emerges from the crowd as a major new contribution to American literary scholarship and to new historicist criticism in general. Reynolds' broad and deep reading in the major and the minor writings published in the first half of the nineteenth century serves as the basis for a convincing demonstration that the canonical writers whose major works appeared "suddenly" in the 1850s drew strongly upon themes and styles that had been widely nurtured by writers and valued by readers of a popular literature published for decades before *Leaves of Grass*, *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Scarlet Letter* appeared. Reynolds aims to revise the old critical view that the major writers were alienated rebels in conflict with a stifling conventional culture. He argues that an entire class of books—books on religion, politics, sexuality, abolition, reform literature of all kinds, as well as sensation-

alist novels, journalism, and humor—prepared the way for the premodernist assault on conventional culture by cultivating what he calls the “subversive imagination,” an impulse as devoted to resisting conventional literature as Jacksonian democracy was devoted to resisting conventional republican values. Many of these books—the writings of radical democrats, early feminists, and labor radicals—were openly critical of the established social order, though most were not revolutionary but *subversive*; their primary rhetorical strategy was to develop a style by which to undermine contemporary moral, political, or religious values while remaining safely within the genres and popularly condoned literary structures of the day. Thus, a book on sexual reform or even physiology could indulge in voyeuristic delight. Or an anti-slavery novel could appeal to the reader’s sadistic imagination. Or a romantic novelist could dwell upon the beauties of a young heroine’s exposed breast as long as an overall moral intention was ostensibly asserted in the workings of the plot.

Reynolds borrows this argument directly from the conventional critics of the mid-nineteenth century, who often complained about the immorality of moral reform literature. Moreover, this line of reasoning has certainly not been neglected by recent scholars, even though Reynolds would have us believe otherwise; he routinely sets up his chapters by announcing the originality of his own view and castigating others for their short-sighted convictions about Victorian prudery and the conventionalism of nineteenth-century popular culture. Social historians since the 1970s (I’m thinking particularly of Peter Gay, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Vern Bullough, and Hal Sears, none of whom Reynolds mentions) as well as gay and feminist critics have preceded him in reading the popular and subversive writings of the day and have surpassed him in their coverage of unpublished writings. Nevertheless, Reynolds is right to stress his thesis for an audience of literary critics still devoted to hermetic readings and still focused on a closed canon of literary masterpieces.

Reynolds is not, however, a popular culturist out to upset our notions of canonicity. On the contrary, he maintains that, though the major writers were grounded in what Whitman referred to (ironically?) as the well-manured soil of popular literature, they nevertheless transcended popular culture. How? Mainly through technical expertise. Though Reynolds accepts the poststructuralist doctrine of the “open text” (particularly as developed by Barthes), he also imports from formalist critical theory the notion of *literariness*, the claim that high literature rises above historical realities through style, that whereas ordinary writing is purposeful, instrumental, and referential, literary writing strives for self-referentiality and the free play of language—or, in old fashioned terms, art for art’s sake. So, according to Reynolds’ reading, the subversive popular writers began the work of prying signifiers loose from conventionally designated signifieds, but remained culture-bound in their preoccupation with morals and politics. The great litterateurs of the period, by first opening themselves to a dialogical interchange with the popular culture, perfected the liberation of signifiers and thereby created an art with universal and timeless appeal.

This theory, as an embellishment of the literary/historical categories of conventional and subversive, proves useful in three ways. First, it allows Reynolds to preserve the distinction between high culture and popular culture, to read major authors as ultrasubversive and very nearly nihilistic in their

devaluing of morals, religion, and politics and their corresponding valorization of artistic discourse: witness Melville's progress from *White Jacket* through *Mardi* to *Moby-Dick*, for example. Second, the theory provides a means of accounting for artistic successes and failures in major authors: Hawthorne's failure to achieve high art in *The Marble Faun*, for example, is seen as the result of his backsliding away from the complexity of the early novels toward the sensationalistic themes and characters of subversive popular novels. Third, the theory accounts for paradoxes within the work of major writers: Whitman's conventional journalism, subversive popular fiction, and artistic and ultra-subversive poetry are thematically related but represent varying applications of transformative style.

Though I admire the scholarly and theoretical intensity of Reynolds' provocative study, I have reservations about the success of his merger of theory and practice. For one thing, he presses his thesis a little too hard, for there are some notable instances where the major writers were thematically and politically as well as stylistically innovative. Above all, there is the case of "Calamus." As Robert Martin, Joseph Cady, and Michael Lynch have demonstrated convincingly in separate studies, Whitman transformed the phrenological concept of adhesiveness and the generic "friendship tradition" of male-male love into a profoundly political tradition of pre-homosexual consciousness that eventually gave rise to gay political and artistic sensibility as we know it today. Before Whitman's time, there was homosexual behavior but no homosexual consciousness—and certainly no gay literature, not even among purveyors of the subversive imagination. Faced with this lack of sources, Reynolds becomes embarrassingly evasive on the question of "Calamus" and on related thematic concerns in Melville and Dickinson.

Moreover, for a historical study, Reynolds' portrait of Whitman's art is naively static. "If Whitman became slightly more conservative as the decades passed," Reynolds writes in a simplistically understated account of the difference between Whitman's revolutionary poetry of the 1850s and the writings of his old age, "if he willingly exchanged the role of America's brash literary bohemian for that of the Good Gray Poet, it is in part because reform rhetoric had carried him too far." Too far for whom? we may well ask: "Whitman was certainly no nihilist, nor was he at heart a political activist" (111). I think Reynolds is forced to this kind of equivocation because a theory of literariness based upon stylistic innovation can in no way account for either shifts in personal passion or historical influences upon literary production that originate outside the sealed "intertextual space" of literary history.

The formalist theory fails Reynolds in a yet more damaging way. There are in this book no particularly distinguished stylistic or linguistic analyses. An index of this weakness is the overuse of adjectives like "zestful" and "vibrant" that amount to empty compliments in descriptions of literary style. Reynolds' great power is thematic criticism, and the great contribution of *Beneath the American Renaissance* is that it provides one of the best old-fashioned source studies ever written in American literature. The theoretical current of our age runs against thematics and against traditional literary history. Reynolds' at-

tempt to accommodate his work to theoretical trends—despite the smooth writing and seamless organization of the book—only weakens what would have been an impressive scholarly performance by traditional standards.

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WALT WHITMAN. *Vlati trave [Leaves of Grass] / Respondez!*, ed. and trans. Hamdija Demirović. Sarajevo: Svjetlost [State publishing house], 1988. 189 pp.

This volume—with poems, prose writings, and criticism translated into Cerbo-Croatian—approaches Whitman's career from several angles. Demirović introduces his expert translation of some sixty poems from *Leaves of Grass* with an essay, "The Poet of Love of Life" (5–15), which traces Whitman's influence on William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, and other poets. His discussion of Whitman's career is handled well, but elsewhere Demirović tries to cover too much ground in so short an essay on Whitman's influence. Often he is elliptical. One would like to hear more about Whitman and these authors.

The supporting apparatus is comprehensive. A brief selection of Whitman's prose writings, "Walt Whitman Speaking" (173–175), includes one of his anonymous reviews of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. This is followed by a selection of excerpts, "Critics on Whitman" (176–182), and includes the text of Emerson's letter to Whitman on the first edition, with additional commentary by Algernon Swinburne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Jay Chapman, George Santayana, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Amy Lowell, F. O. Matthiessen, and Randall Jarrell. A final section, "Whitman in Our Country" (183–185), offers brief commentaries on Whitman's career by Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić, Antun Branko Šimić, and Moroslav Krleža. There is also a suggestive concluding note by Mirodrag Pavlović on Whitman's "apocalyptic vision" in "Respondez!" (184–185), a poem that Whitman dropped from the final 1881 edition.

Selections are given from such long poems as "Song of Myself," "Starting from Paumanok," "I Sing the Body Electric," "The Sleepers" (two lines), and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." However, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is given complete, as are such poems as "This Compost," "To a Common Prostitute," "Miracles," and "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Peculiarly, Demirović does not include even a sampling of "Passage to India." Otherwise he draws on the full range of Whitman's poetry from 1855 to 1881, and he concludes with several selections from the 1891 *Annex Good-Bye My Fancy*. Such important clusters as *Children of Adam*, *Calamus*, and *Drum-Taps* are well represented. Demirović's notes to the poems are knowledgeable and concise.

This is an attractive volume, bound in pressed white boards, with a reproduction of a Salvador Dali painting on the front cover: a black child on a beach, gazing upward. This volume is also a testimony to the quality of secondary