

## REVIEW

Joseph G. Kronick. *American Poetics of History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984. xiii, 302 pp. \$30.00.

Mary Arensberg, Editor. *The American Sublime*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986. ix, 218 pp. \$34.50 (\$10.95 paper).

One measure of Walt Whitman's achievement is the ability of his work, both poetry and prose, to accept diverse critical approaches. And that ability teaches us, as readers, a "profound lesson of reception," as Whitman phrases it in "Song of the Open Road." The lesson is profound because it teaches in two directions at once: the text must "receive" various critical statements and approaches, and the reader must also "receive" these statements and approaches along with the text itself. Whitman's hospitable attitude is a lesson in itself, but it becomes particularly profound when we consider the variety of critical approaches developed in literature departments in the last twenty years. Though it may be tempting to reject critical revisions of Whitman's work as untrue or arbitrary, the reader who wishes to be true to the work must exercise a certain critical hospitality.

The hospitable attitude is crucial in reading Joseph Kronick's *American Poetics of History*. Kronick's argument inscribes itself within the tradition of Derridean deconstruction, and one of the trademarks of Derridean discourse is a playful circuitousness that to many readers may seem a willful obscurity. But Kronick can rightly appeal to Whitman as a model in this matter, since the poet defines poetic language, in "Slang in America," as "indirection," the desire "to escape bald literalism." The jargon and indirectness of argumentation can be frustrating, but one of the premises of Derridean discourse is that all language—critical as well as poetic—is essentially figural and indirect. In this regard we do well to remember the etymology of the word "discourse," which means "running to and fro" or "running two ways."

Kronick's method of running two ways is, once again, a trademark of deconstructive argumentation. So, for instance, in the chapter on "Whitman and Time" Kronick uses Paul Bové's hermeneutical approach, developed in *Destructive Poetics*, in order to displace it by "a rhetorical mode of reading suggested by Emerson's 'Quotation and Originality,' wherein the endlessness of interpretation is not attributed to a dialectical relation between error and truth but is the inevitable product of language itself. Whitman's texts are not a destruction of Emerson's but a troping of them—a doubling of an 'original' metaphoricity that denies the possibility of reading as that which permits the discovery of truth" (p. 99). Whitman's texts "double" Emerson's texts by both re-reading and re-writing Emerson, and Kronick implies that this inherent doubling of language involves us in an endless labyrinth of words, where no absolute truth can ever be discovered. In the parlance of post-Structuralist criticism, we must recognize the impossibility of a literary semantics or hermeneutics, in which the sign stands for some absolute meaning or signified; instead, we must recognize the possibility of a literary semiotics, in which the sign stands for another sign, forming an endless chain of signifiers and significations.

Kronick argues that Whitman creates just such a literary semiotics, "a semiotic model of time" (p. 102). In a compressed treatment of "Slang in America," for instance, Kronick demonstrates that Whitman interprets language as the repository of

history, and the demonstration relies upon the Derridean notion of an erasure of origins, of some primal, absolute signified. But Kronick builds his case by referring to the 1856 essay, "America's Mightiest Inheritance," rather than to the ostensible focus of his demonstration. This kind of movement will strike some readers as sloppy, or at least unclear, but Kronick is not tied to any assumptions of chronology or career; if history is essentially textual, the critic can read any text into any other. And though far too compressed, Kronick's argument concerning Whitman's view of language is eye-opening.

The most elaborate discussion of Whitman's "semiotic model of time" focuses upon "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (pp. 106–117). And once again, doubleness characterizes the argument, but in an extremely complicated form. Most fundamentally, Kronick wishes to argue that the poem presents two modes of writing/reading—anticipation and retrospection—which appear contradictory but which are equally necessary for the temporal dynamics of the text. But mixed in with this discussion are other doublings: metaphor and metonymy, prosopopoeia and apostrophe, speaker and reader. The first pair is familiar in deconstructive discussions, and the basic argument that the totalizing figure of metaphor tends to "deconstruct" as the fragmentary figure of metonymy is no less characteristic. The second pair is tantalizing, but Kronick never manages to distinguish between the two figures in a precise way, nor does he establish the importance of the two figures to the semiotic model of anticipation and retrospection. Instead, he borrows phrases from two of Paul de Man's essays (p. 107), and the borrowings blur the focus of the argument. The third pair is the most familiar to readers of Whitman, and the discussion is again more intriguing than conclusive or enlightening. Moreoever, the reading of the phrase "you dumb, beautiful ministers" betrays the writer's tendency to wrench the text rather inhospitably. Kronick's premise of an endless, circuitous chain of signifiers leads him, unfortunately, into a textual maze from which he never quite exits.

Kronick offers another development of Whitman's temporal rhetoric in "On the Border of History: Whitman and the American Sublime," published in *The American Sublime* (pp. 51–82). Although the discussion gestures at the theories of Burke and Kant, it centers upon the agonistic pair of Emerson and Bloom: "In Emerson's terms, as Harold Bloom would have it, the sublime is the confrontation of I and the abyss: 'There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius of each, but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts, —*I and the Abyss*'" (p. 54). Not surprisingly, Kronick revises Bloom's Emersonian dialectic in terms of language, so that "the I is the abyss, and the abyss is language." And this means that the American sublime "emerges in the recovery of history from the past, and it is as an inscription that history is possessed by the poet" (p. 58).

Kronick's argument concerning Whitman and the American sublime thus becomes a revision of the chapter on "Whitman and Time." The discussion moves from Bloom to "Slang in America," and from there to "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," and "Passage to India." Although the commentary is clearer than is the case in "Whitman and Time," it does not clarify the connection between the sublime and Whitman's rhetoric of history. Instead, the rhetoric of history displaces the sublime, just as, in Kronick's deconstruction, the text inevitably displaces the self. In this regard, Bloom's humanistic, gnostic reading of the American sublime appears preferable to Kronick's semiotics of reading.

The doubleness of language remains central in evaluating these two readings of

Whitman's semiotics. The theory of deconstruction is surely valuable in its focus upon the rhetoric of the text, but deconstructive practice offers an often curious mixture of blindness and insight. For readers unfamiliar with the theoretical underpinnings, Kronick's practice will seem more blind than insightful. But for those more familiar with the work of Derrida and de Man, the practice will seem *both* blind and insightful. In order to be truly hospitable, then, we should apply Whitman's "profound lesson" to literary theory itself.

*Washington and Lee University*

JAMES PERRIN WARREN