

REVIEW

Sacvan Bercovitch, editor. *Reconstructing American Literary History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986. (Harvard English Studies, 13). xii, 351 pp.

The rhetoric that accompanies this collection of essays is stirring; the reader is promised no less than "a wide-ranging reevaluation of American literature" throughout its history, from a predominantly new-historicist perspective. What is offered is in fact far less radical than that promise. Although feminism is listed as one of the "current varieties" of literary theory, all of which lie in the direction of incorporating history as a "central category of aesthetic criticism," only three of the twelve authors are women, and only one of the twelve essays deals with a woman in anything other than a cursory manner. The woman in question is Emily Dickinson, not Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Willa Cather, or Margaret Fuller, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, let alone Emma Goldman. Some things are forever.

One would expect new-historicist criticism to be fully aware of the politics of textuality, to be alert to the ways in which cultural and social power is described and enacted in its textual products. Few of these essays manage anything like that. Sandra Gilbert's essay, "The American Sexual Politics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson," is one of the most disappointing. Gilbert is best known for her collaborative work with Susan Gubar on the female tradition. That work has been enormously empowering for a younger generation of scholars and critics, but it is far removed from the main emphases of contemporary new historicism or post-structuralism. As she makes clear here, Gilbert is a neo-Freudian of the Bloom school (at least when it comes to reading male authors) and a believer in Nancy Chodorow's theories of "distinctive (gender-based) psychosexual needs." Whitman is therefore above all a man, and a man in battle with his fathers, and Dickinson a woman with "the fluidity, even the indefinability, of her selfhood—her femininity." Neither one exists in any recognizable time, but only that eternity of psychodrama where nothing ever changes, but is always re-enacted.

Gilbert's essay obviously arises out of her interest in Dickinson, to which any concern with Whitman is peripheral. Her work shows this in several ways, including her choice of Whitman texts (the Norton edition, which makes historical argument difficult) and her use of Whitman criticism (she relies almost exclusively on Stephen Black). Her argument is in effect that Dickinson is more radical than Whitman because of her refusal to use the generic models on which Whitman relied. Gilbert's case here seems to me tenuous at best. In the first place, it is not at all clear to me that Dickinson did not use traditional genres: she certainly employed traditional forms such as hymn meter or the riddle, and she certainly imitated many of the conventions of metaphysical verse. Gilbert can only make her position stand by totally divorcing form from genre, and thus arguing that Dickinson is radical because she writes no epics or odes; Whitman, one might reply, wrote no elaborate conceits. In many ways, Dickinson is far more conservative than Whitman: in her use of traditional stanzaic structure, of metrical lines, and of rhyme (in each case the practice is modified rather than abandoned). But it is unfortunate that one must feel the need to argue for the greater accomplishment of Whitman or Dickinson: both surely contributed to the emergence of modernism in America, and in ways that have little to do with gender. Many great modernists, such as Crane, were devotees of both.

Gilbert omits consideration of what one would expect to be the two central concerns of contemporary historicist criticism: history and politics on the one hand, and textuality on the other. Her reading of Whitman gives us no sense that anything is happening outside the poems – not an argument over slavery or a Civil War, not eugenics or the emergence of a gay male subculture. Whitman’s admittedly troubling “A Woman Waits for Me” is thus quoted without any reference to the politics of sexuality that might inform it. How does Whitman’s sense of his own sexuality relate to that of the culture? How does his conception of himself as the seedsman and progenitor relate to concepts of physical health and breeding? Whitman’s celebration of male sexuality can only be read in terms of the nineteenth-century debate over sexuality, where it seems more transgressive than imitative. Gilbert almost entirely ignores the post-Civil War poems, despite their strong sense of error, and their attempt to locate male friendship in a socially sanctioned place of national healing. Instead she glances at “Lilacs” which she sees, following Black, as evidence of an “increasingly imperilled masculinity.” Oddly enough, the author of *The Madwoman in the Attic* does not suggest any usefulness in reading the poem’s reliance on “genre” as a positive sense of sharing in a homoerotic tradition of the pastoral elegy; for her it is a sign of a greater “spermatic” (masculinist – she attributes Emerson’s meaning of this term to Whitman) language. Throughout her essay the sense of Whitman as a gay poet, or even as a poet with a gay audience, is demeaned. Here too she seems to be arguing from her knowledge of Dickinson (where the suggestions of lesbianism remain just that) to Whitman (where the case for a homosexual identity seems largely beyond question). Both Whitman and Dickinson, according to Gilbert, experiment “with a kind of equivocal sexuality,” but questions of their “alleged homosexuality or lesbianism” remain “vexed.” So too Whitman’s English gay followers – major figures in the turn-of-the-century gay movement such as Symonds or Edward Carpenter – are merely “problematically sexed.”

If these questions are “vexed,” it is largely because Gilbert does not explore them at a level of textuality. Her own discomfort with this approach is rendered visible in her treatment of contemporary French theorists such as H  l  ne Cixous or Luce Irigaray; their comments are relegated to footnotes, and their ideas are never incorporated into the text, where they would no doubt play too volatile a role. For however much such writers insist upon the idea of an “  criture f  minine,” it is equally clear that such writing may also be created by men (as in their frequent example of Genet). Whitman frequently provides a perfect example indeed of such “  criture,” one that is playful, sensuous, and non-productive: a language of *jouissance*. One might consider, for instance, Whitman’s “spermatic” language in Section 29 of “Song of Myself” – “Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward” – in which the loss of self is seen as a gain of vision, and the shower of sperm is a destruction of the isolated self and its transformation in a multiplying force of polyvalence (“branch[ing] boundlessly . . . until it becomes omnific, / And until one and all shall delight us, and we them”). It is precisely Whitman’s poetic practice that makes him such a force toward sexual/linguistic change. His ideas were those of his time; his language was, at its best, daring, innovative, open-ended, and tactile. It begs to be taken as something ever-remakeable, eternally malleable in the hands of its lover/readers. In its refusal of closure, in its denial of textual authority, it is the deconstructive text *avant la lettre*.

My point is not to refute Gilbert by claiming for Whitman the priority that she would claim for Dickinson. It is first to suggest that a truly new critical practice must

be alert to the power of language and willing to explore the links between a text and its place of production. This means in terms of Whitman criticism that we must see Whitman in terms of nineteenth-century phrenology, moral reform, masturbation crusades, popular science, eugenics, and the like, and also in the context of an emerging sense of homosexual identity. It also means that we must move from looking at what the text says to *how* it says it, recognizing that the distinction itself is a false one since meaning inheres in the text's own shape, tensions, and rhythms. If we are to understand Whitman's "sexual poetics," we must look at the sexuality *of* the poems. We must also look honestly at the problems that Whitman poses for the feminist reader. The problem that Gilbert implicitly poses is a real one: it is, in effect, the question, can a feminist read Whitman? There is considerable reason to believe she can. Certainly several feminist critics, such as Diane Middlebrook, have shown the very real connections between feminist poetic practice and the model of Whitman. To read Whitman as a feminist we must explore the possibility that it is his language, his refusal of the limitations of abstract order, his repetitiveness, his enthusiasm, his accumulateness that make him most feminine and most available for recuperation. There is a Whitman out there still waiting to be read; he can still "pour the stuff to start sons and daughters," by offering a language of bliss.

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