

onization they became the object of re-radicalization—all of these processes are part of the full story of the formal as well as the historical growth of *Leaves of Grass*. In concentrating on the author's side of the author-text-reader matrix, Beach essentially falls back into the formalist position and distances himself from the historicist rather than fully reconciling the two positions in the way that the book seems to promise at first. But again, no one book can do everything. And Beach takes great strides in relating formal and historicist criticism, a project well worth pursuing in further scholarship.

Texas A&M University

M. JIMMIE KILLINGSWORTH

ROBERT LEIGH DAVIS. *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997. x + 190 pp.

The thesis of Robert Leigh Davis's study is that Whitman's hospital work during the Civil War presented him with the best realization of his democratic ideals. America was a house divided, politically, racially, and sexually polarized. The democratic hopes Whitman felt in 1855, the visions of spiritual-political unity and guiltless, free-ranging sexuality motivating the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, had been exploded by sectarian hatreds, negrophobia, market capitalism, and an increasingly normative heterosexuality. American bodies and minds were pigeonholed into decisive binary opposites of white-black, North-South, male-female, pro-slavery-anti-slavery: "In politics, economics, race, gender, and literature—the lines were being drawn" (4). In 1862, an American had to be one or the other, and whatever one was, the other *was* the other.

Such contraries belied the fluid and evolving community of bodies and souls that Whitman regarded as the foundation of democracy. But while the nation at large suffered absolute closures and fixities of identities and opinions, one arena maintained a liberal, "liminal," intermediary environment of human action: the hospital. As Whitman experienced it, the hospital was a "medium world," a place where political debates were suspended, where binaries like life and death often blended indeterminately, where Whitman in his role of "wound-dresser" could wander from body to body in an "erotic mobility uncontained by prescriptive boundaries" (15). Whitman's medical writings recall young men in varying states of consciousness, their bodies tortured by bullet wounds, infections, and the surgeon's blade, their desires mediated by the nurse-poet come to write letters for them, bring them small gifts, kiss them. The hospital is an in-between world, where patients' political commitments and social identities matter not. Instead, individuals' lives slide into a delirious death or enter into the "liminality of convalescence" (8), and the bonds Whitman forms with them possess a charged, ambivalent eroticism.

It is a mistake, Davis argues, to see Whitman's hospital work simply as the sublimation of homosexual desire. Rather, it signifies the redemption of American democracy, an emotional "analogue for a democratic political process" (8). Davis summarizes that Whitman

construes as a restorative political value the incompleteness and uncertainty of the suffering body, a body subject to constant change and rendering provisional the conditions of its care. Whitman promotes this incompleteness as an analogue for the desirable instability of the democratic state. Like the makeshift hospitals in which he worked and wrote during the war, democratic government is itself provisional, necessarily subject to the uncertainty of a body politic never wholly comprehended by its own representative figures. (8)

Because the political import of Whitman's hospital work lies in its shadowy uncertainties and fluid realities, Davis characterizes Whitman's hospital reminiscences as a "romance." Whitman's undoing of objectifications of persons and his skepticism toward antebellum truths accords with an "epistemology of the romance" (see 11-12), wherein certainty collapses and the mind roams in a shadowy world of changing perspectives and slippery facts, dimly aware of a mysterious reality or truth not yet brought to light. In his hospital descriptions, Whitman often affirms what cannot be said, what remains concealed: the "associations never to be possibly said or sung" (24), the "Untold and Unwritten History of the War" (27), "deep things, unreckoned by current print or speech" (26), the inarticulate human stories that die forever with every patient's death. That romance threshold of representation is where and how Whitman overcomes the political, social, and sexual fixations of his time, the "binary deadlock of the Civil War" (44). As Whitman watches one rebel prisoner die, hearing to his indistinct mutterings and lightly touching his forehead, an unspoken sympathy arises and displaces "the surface of social discord . . . an inner restlessness worrying both nation and poet" (73).

The mystery behind the men, the suspense Whitman feels in the presence of it, loosens the stranglehold America's either/or political situation has upon its citizens. This is why, Davis next argues, Whitman's hospital work is a "closet romance": "the suspense of Whitman's text is not only democratic and convalescent: it is also homosexual" (34). In the hospitals, the fluid identities of the soldiers and the emotional mobility of the nurse-poet produce a reality felt but not labelled, experienced but not classified. Whitman can only indicate it by faint clues and indirections, a species, Davis says, of "gay representation" (see 38-39). The hospital becomes a "homosexual community" wherein Whitman can learn "how to live a gay life in the midst of misunderstanding and misrepresentation" (41).

Roughly speaking, this is the argument of Davis's study. In the course of backing his assertions in the 138 pages making up the text proper, Davis invokes material from nursing manuals and narratives, Civil War stories, sentimental novels, contemporary literary and gender theory, and the writings of Richard Selzer. The Whitman texts Davis focusses on are *Drum-Taps*, *Memo-randa During the War*, and the hospital journalism and correspondence. The subject matter is interesting and Davis's ideas are intriguing. Unfortunately, however, in the execution of the argument, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* suffers from several logical and structural flaws.

A major structural weakness of Davis's presentation lies in the way the commentary jumps somewhat casually from topic to topic. For example, Chapter Two of the book, "'On Both Sides of the Line': The Liminality of Civil War Nursing," rambles through several texts and discussions and never really gets

down to describing Whitman's hospital work and writing. Given the historical and biographical nature of Davis's thesis, readers expect a sustained, detailed account of Whitman's hospital experience and why he wrote about it the way he did. But in this chapter, we have instead: the quotation and discussion of Sharon Olds's poem "Nurse Whitman" (43-45); a summary of popular hospital literature, with emphasis on Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*, Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*, and S. Emma E. Edmonds's *Nurse and Spy: or Unsexed, the Female Soldier* (45-60); a brief citation and comment on Whitman's "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" (54); an aside on Bakhtin (55); a short citation and comment on "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest" (61), "First, O Songs" (62-64), and "Come Up From the Fields, Father" (65-68); an aside on Faulkner (68); citations from critics Alan Trachtenberg and Roger Gilbert; and an analysis of the multiple references of the word "tympanum" (70-71; more on this later). It is unclear how these texts bear directly upon Whitman's specific hospital experience and how he idealized it. The nursing texts speak informatively about mid-century hospital rites, but their relation to a figure as atypical as Whitman, whose "nursing" hardly accorded with standard practices, remains uncertain. The poems Davis chooses to analyze say little or nothing about the hospital. "Give Me" and "First O Songs" have no hospital references. "A March" refers to "a large old church . . . 'tis now an impromptu hospital" and "Come Up" refers to a "son" in a "*cavalry skirmish, taken to hospital.*" That is all.

This is not to say that these materials are irrelevant or insignificant. Rather, their relevance to Whitman's understanding of the hospital as the site of ideal democratic process remains undetermined. Similar discrepancies between materials and thesis occur numerous times in the text. At one point, Davis offers a nice formulation of Whitman's hospital conception: "This is clearly Whitman's intention in reducing the massive scale of the Civil War down to the narrower limits of the Washington hospital, and in reconceiving the epistemological and political issues of disunion in terms of a subjective encounter with the suffering soldier" (76). But this statement appears in the middle of a six-page discussion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead of a description of Whitman's "reducing" and "reconceiving" strategies, we have a meandering commentary on Stowe's sentimentality. Davis justifies that attention to Stowe by stating that it offers analogies for Whitman's hospital writing: "Whitman's sympathy replaces the fugitive slave [of Stowe's narrative] with the fugitive soldier" (80); "Crossing through Whitman's narrative are ghost soldiers who have lost the identifying signs of family, rank, background, and name: phantom children, who are, like the slaves in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, outcasts from a familiar world" (81). But are Stowe's dramatizations necessary to the understanding of Whitman's hospital work? Rather than searching for analogies for Whitman's sympathies, Davis would have substantiated his thesis more effectively by providing fuller representations of the sympathy itself.

Another flaw in Davis's argument lies in the faulty analyses he applies to his materials. Sometimes, the fault rests in a simple misconstruction of the quoted material. For example, Davis cites Lincoln: "In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time" (quoted p. 6). Davis follows with, "It is precisely this simultaneous opposition—this

ability to be both 'for and against the same thing at the same time'—that Whitman emphasizes in his war writings as an alternative concept of Union." Now, what is the relation between Lincoln's assertion and Davis's? Lincoln says that not even God can be for *and* against. Davis says that Whitman emphasizes precisely this "ability." Lincoln says no such ability exists. So why quote him? For contrast? If so, then we need some explanation of the contrast, not a simple contrary statement.

Another example of faulty analysis takes place in the "tympanum" reference in "First, O Songs," noted above. The pertinent lines in the poem refer to a New York street parade of soldiers:

First, O songs, for a prelude,
Lightly strike on the stretch'd tympanum, pride and joy in my city,
How she led the rest to arms—how she gave the cue

...
How you sprang! how you threw off the costumes of peace with indifferent hand;
How your soft opera-music changed, and the drum and fife were heard in their stead.
... (quoted on page 62)

Davis calls the "stretch'd tympanum" a "curiously doubled and resonating figure. . . . Whitman's most important sign of poetic mediation in *Drum-Taps*" (63). This is because, Davis posits with the help of Derrida, the tympanum "resists exclusive attachments by referring, simultaneously, to both sides of an opposition." As part of the inner ear and part of a military drum, the tympanum is both private and public, part of the body human and the body politic. It thereby "resonates between exclusive categories" (63). Added to that feature is the tympanum's architectural reference: the part of a pediment that connects *and* separates three cornices. Finally, "tympanum" has another reference, this one from printing. In a printing press, the tympan is a frame covered with silk or parchment and set inside a frisket where sheets of paper lie.

To Davis, this "overlapping of discursive realms in Whitman's use of the word (architecture, anatomy, percussion, printing)" (70) marks a strategic moment in Whitman's poetic and democratic program. Democratically, the tympanum calls people to the parade, bringing all classes of individuals together and thus working to dismantle social hierarchies. Poetically, the tympanum brings several disparate meanings together and thus works to disturb linguistic classifications. Put simply, the "symbolic mobility of the tympanum denies closure," and so as the parade begins the tympanum commences its liberatory work: the "city is literally unsettled by the strikes of the tympanum, which enact the defeat . . . of social and linguistic fixity" (64).

This is quite a semantic burden to place on a single word in a single line of verse. Because "tympanum" has multiple references, it breaks apart the prescriptive categories of Civil War America. The word dwells in possibility, a much more democratic semantic condition than the unconditional either/or terms of the contemporary scene. "Tympanum" can mean *a*, *b*, *c*, or *d*, "simultaneously," and hence the "social and linguistic fixities" oppressing the city no longer hold.

The problem with this reading is that just because "tympanum" *can* mean a drum, an ear, a stone setting, or a printing tool does not suggest that it does

mean all those things in each instance of its use. Davis rightfully alludes to Whitman's "use of the term," signalling Davis's awareness of a term's pragmatics, that is, the contexts of its utterance which delimit its meaning. But if we examine the context of "First, O Songs," we plainly see that the term signifies only one thing: the parade drum. That is the only reference for the word in the given line. In no way can the line "Lightly strike on the stretch'd tympanum" refer to the other dictionary definitions. The significance of that reference may be political, social, etc., but the reference itself is single. The linguistic "unsettling" Davis affirms here never happens.

Davis commits these kinds of errors numerous times in the book. Quoting a phrase from a poem on the Union army's return from the war—"as I glance at the faces, studying the masks"—Davis comments, "Like Hawthorne's minister or Alcott's soldiers, these heroes return if not in drag at least in costume" (54). How we move from "masks" to "costume" and near-"drag" remains unclear. Earlier, Davis asserts that "Whitman's romance of medicine corresponds with a romance of democracy, and his writings engage the meaning of political representation at its most urgent level: the representation of the physical body" (31). Where is the evidence that the most urgent meaning of political representation lies in the representation of the physical body? The sentences before and after this one say nothing to substantiate the assertion. Whitman does not articulate this idea, and certainly the majority of his contemporaries would have found representations of political interests or spiritual concerns to have greater urgency than the representation of physical bodies. What are readers supposed to do with such sweeping, but unsupported claims?

It is unfortunate that Davis did not clean up these structural and inferential mistakes in the revision and review process, for the basic hospital thesis merits serious consideration. Simply as a supposition, the hospital as a site of liminal identities and otherworldly imaginings explains much of Whitman's curious and quietly intense hospital writings. In doing so, *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* opens up a new area of research for Whitman studies. Despite its occasional lapses in argumentation, Davis's study is an important addition to the field and should spawn several ventures into Whitman's post-Fifties poetic and social labors.

Emory University

MARK BAUERLEIN

GARY SCHMIDGALL. *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life*. New York: Dutton, 1997. xxxv + 428 pp.

Gary Schmidgall's inept study is a great disappointment, given the need for an accomplished exploration of this subject. Exhibiting little knowledge of, or respect for, cultural context, the author facilely projects his own late-twentieth century presumptions and expectations of what it means to be gay onto Whitman's nineteenth-century corpus. The result—a sort of retro-gay caricature—is a poor portrait of Walt Whitman as a man who loved men.

With a nod to the poem "By Blue Ontario's Shore," the book is largely preoccupied with the question, "Where was Whitman inclined to plunge his own