

TIMOTHY SWEET. *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. xiv + 240 pp.

Increasingly in recent years, criticism has been insisting that American literature is a House of Representations, where the debate is always and inevitably ideological and political. Authors have often come to seem little more than representatives of various political and social concerns, writing speeches disguised as poetry and fiction. Many critics now define their job as an act of translating the poetry and fiction back into political rhetoric. In the process, some of our authors have come to seem like single-issue candidates, and their work sounds more and more partisan.

Our literature, then, has been turned into an arena analogous to the political one: the House of Representations is simply another version of the House of Representatives, where we can trace the same ideological battles, the same racist assumptions, the same sexist biases, the same unquestioning acceptance of capitalist and imperialist goals. Both Houses—the political one and the literary one—are supposedly democratic institutions that nonetheless are overwhelmingly dominated by white males, and so what ends up getting represented in either arena is predictably supportive of a dominant ideology. Whatever challenges to that ideology that take place within the defined arena are neatly contained within a small spectrum of possible alternatives, for truly revolutionary rhetoric is silenced in these Houses. To hear the extreme voices in our political history, the radical possibilities, we must go outside the House of Representatives in order to find the marginalized people who are, by definition, not represented; the same now seems to apply to literary history, where the “major authors”—that is, those who are white and male—cannot, by definition, represent the marginalized people except in distorted ways. Our major authors—so says the dominant critical ideology of our time—could only see women and minorities through the warped lenses of prevailing ideological assumptions about their inferiority, weakness, difference, etc.

Timothy Sweet’s rigorous and theoretically informed study distorts or illuminates Whitman (it depends on your perspective) by viewing him through this now fashionable critical ideology. Not surprisingly, Whitman emerges as a social conservative, out to preserve the ideology of Unionism, with all of its attendant ideological baggage (capitalism, incorporation, war, patriotic death, American imperialism). Whitman’s ideal of adhesive love is unveiled as a desperate attempt to cling to his ideology of Unionism in the face of the massive human butchery that threatened to undo his necessary faith that the War had meaning. In his revisionary reading of *Memoranda during the War*, Sweet insists that Whitman struggles “to marginalize death and evade the explicit representation of suffering” so that he can portray “the renewed ideological power of the pastoral conception of nature.” The pastoral mode—here defined as an ideology that seeks to evade history in favor of universal and homogenizing readings of the world—offers Whitman, Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, George Barnard, and Herman Melville a way to “encode the Northern Unionist ideology at a crucial historical moment” by eliciting an aesthetic that “located value in the subordination of parts to the unity of the whole.” The tradition of the picturesque with its emphasis on an idealized landscape served as a foun-

dation for “a totalizing, organicist aesthetic” which, when joined with “a totalizing, conservative political ideology,” allowed these artists to mount a barrage of representational texts in support of Unionism.

Whitman, Brady, and the artists of the Union were never out to *present* the Civil War, Sweet argues, only to *represent* it in the service of the dominant ideology. They set out to transform “traces of violence” (wounds, corpses, destroyed cities) into “signs legitimating the Union.” For Sweet, then, “Whitman, saturated in the dominant ideology of his time, mobilized an organicist poetics to heal or hide the wounds of the Civil War and to idealize the conservation of the Union effected by the war.” Whitman’s statement that “The real war will never get into the books” is translated by Sweet into a kind of confession: Whitman had an investment in *preventing* the “real war” from being represented so that his rendering of a cleansed, pastoral, and meaningful war could become the accepted version for the nation. When Whitman said that “Future years will never know the seething hell . . . of the Secession War, and it is best they should not,” Sweet italicizes the final clause and argues that “if we knew the ‘interiors’ of the war we would criticize its prosecution, weighing the ends against the means.” Whitman, by this reasoning, turns out to have been in collusion with the political forces that were in the business of blinding the masses to the raw meaninglessness of the violence.

Sweet’s first two chapters (well over one-third of the entire book) are on Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* and *Memoranda during the War*. Some of the best insights in the book occur in the first chapter, where Sweet examines Whitman’s “four topoi of the Unionist rhetoric which legitimated the prosecution of the Civil War.” Sweet offers detailed readings of the imagery in *Drum-Taps* that sustains Whitman’s Unionist insistences: the way he washes away individual suffering and loss by subsuming them in tropes of “the body politic”; the way he acknowledges death in terms of ritual sacrifice so that dead soldiers become meaningful symbolic victims; the way he employs economic metaphors to endorse the value of exchanging lives for ideology; and the way he turns to the trope of adhesiveness in order to gather death and suffering into a unifying pastoral embrace. Sweet offers some incisive analysis of Whitman’s unifying and cleansing imagery, and even if one finally disagrees with Sweet’s assertion that “Whitman is thoroughly representative of the ideology that legitimated the war,” there is no denying that the tropes Sweet discusses are central to Whitman’s structuring of wartime experience. Sweet is particularly insightful about Whitman’s unwavering allegiance to the representation of America as one body and his refusal to consider the possibility that the country might conceive of itself as two entities—a conception that would undermine everything Whitman had to say about the significance of the war.

In his analysis of *Memoranda*, Sweet continues to track Whitman’s “pastoral evasion of history,” arguing that Whitman studiously avoids representing soldiers’ corpses so that he can effect a “recovery of pastoralism and with it a nationalist ideology appropriate to reconciliation.” Faced with a pastoral landscape ruined by violence, Whitman seeks in his own memoranda to silence the signs of violence, keeping the “real war” out of the “the books” so that what he called “the sovereign Union” would be allowed to emerge, sanctioned and unsullied, from the evaded bloodshed. In Sweet’s reading, even “When Lilacs

Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is simply an exercise in evasion, offering "the eternal stability of the pastoral landscapes" as the "structure of recuperation" and the "sign of Union" that all but obliterates the violent facts of Lincoln's death and of Civil War horrors. In accomplishing this restabilizing of national tropes, Whitman "mobilizes" the same "pastoral aesthetic" that Lincoln himself employed in his call for a "national homestead" that "demands union, and abhors separation."

Sweet's interpretation of Whitman is best heard in the context of Betsy Erkkila's, M. Wynn Thomas's, and Kerry Larson's studies of Whitman's political responses to the Civil War (*Whitman the Political Poet* [1988], *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* [1987], and *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* [1988]). It is a sign of Sweet's training and intent that he does not cite any of these works, even though they are extremely relevant to the cultural investigation that he has undertaken. Their more intensive analyses of Whitman serve to temper Sweet's sweeping ideological indictment: Erkkila demonstrates how Whitman's 1867 *Leaves*, for example, embodies the very fragmentation that Sweet believes Whitman could never face; Thomas reveals the intense struggles that Whitman underwent as he sought to transform himself into a veteran of the War and to absorb the very horror that Sweet says the poet turned away from; and Larson explicates the deep ambivalence at the heart of Whitman, showing how he finally is the mediator between secession and union, not the easy apologist for union. Sweet's book is grounded in representational theory (especially Hanna Pitkin and Elaine Scarry) and not in Whitman scholarship; consequently, we get a fresh application of theory to Whitman, but the resultant insights would have been more valuable had they been developed in the context of a wider understanding of Whitman's response to the Civil War.

Most of the rest of Sweet's book is an examination of how Civil War photographers were engaged in their own evasions of "the real war." As practitioners of the new art/technology that supposedly guaranteed accuracy of representation, these photographers nonetheless framed, altered, and captioned their subjects in such a way that the ideology of Unionism was endorsed by their photographs. These apparently "objective" modes of representation, then, allowed for the most subtle and subversive embodiments of ideology precisely because they were perceived to be beyond bias. Sweet argues that even the photographs of the battlefield dead were framed and posed and captioned in ways that rendered death harmless and restorative. There are some fine insights here, though Sweet's choice of photographs is highly selective (there are many exceptions to his generalizations about the nature of Civil War photos), and he ends up covering much of the same ground that Alan Trachtenberg covered so masterfully in *Reading American Photographs* (1989). Sweet's book concludes with a chapter on Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, viewed as an ambiguous text that both affirms and challenges the ideology of Unionism and the pastoral evasions of Whitman and the photographers. In an epilogue, Sweet suggests that Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead" serves as a modern confirmation that the pastoral resolution of the Civil War has disintegrated, and that our continuing sense of the dissonance between nature and civilization had its origins in the Civil War.