

REVIEWS

ERIK INGVAR THURIN. *Whitman Between Impressionism and Expressionism: Language of the Body, Language of the Soul*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press. 1995. 211 pp.

The title of Erik Thurin's book suggests an interpretive homology: Whitman's poetry establishes a set of binary oppositions that approach the schematic, so that impressionism and the body are in homologous opposition to expressionism and the soul. But a key word in the title is, I believe, "between," for that word places Whitman on a threshold or in a liminal space, a space that is, among other things, both bodily impression and psychic expression. A second key word is the repeated "language," since it indicates the liminal space occupies a linguistic, textual, and aesthetic site.

These spatial metaphors further suggest the theoretical orientation of Thurin's short but densely packed argument. Thurin approaches Whitman through the binary oppositions of high structuralism—he notes that the "first impetus" for the book was a paper he wrote in 1966 (7)—and his thinking is as deeply influenced by structuralism as a comparable American scholar's would be by the New Criticism. Thus the book is organized along spatial coordinates. After a brief introduction (9-20), Part One presents five chapters of syntagmatic analysis Thurin calls "Dismantling the Sentence" (25-89). Part Two, "The Small Change of Grammar," presents five chapters of corresponding paradigmatic analysis (93-156). The "Conclusion" summarizes the linguistic analysis and assesses Whitman's fusion of impressionism and expressionism (157-169). The binary scheme extends yet further, as Thurin states in his introduction: "On the impressionist side, we have passive recording of sense data, mimetic 'objectivity,' refusal to inquire into the causes and logical relationships of things and events, fascination with surfaces, deliberate fragmentariness, stress on the moment, the angle of vision; on the expressionist side: active transformation of sense data, anti-mimetic subjectivity, searching for metaphysical depths and origins (as distinct from scientific causes), emphasis on the whole, the invisible, essences, the perennial" (13).

The structuralist approach, however dated it may seem, produces interesting insights because it enables Thurin to focus upon specific linguistic traits of Whitman's poetry. The allied approach one thinks of immediately, Russian Formalism, appears equally germane because of the concept of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization. Thus Thurin tends to foreground Whitman's stylistic estrangements, such as syntactic inversions, anacoluthon, ellipsis of

the predicate. Such foregroundings can produce intriguing insights, as in the discussion of nominalization and the accompanying reading of this phrase from "Song of Myself": "Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock" (723). Thurin notes that the line appears in the lengthy catalogue of Section 33, "in which most of the nouns are concrete. Whitman *could* have used such a noun in this case, too, writing, say 'Where the rattle-snake [*sic*] suns his long, flabby body on a rock.' He prefers to hypostatize one quality of the rattlesnake's body by means of the abstract noun *length* and making *flabby* modify this noun. In doing so, he in a sense makes not only the word *body* but the body itself disappear from sight, and it may thus be said in this and similar cases that he turns away from the 'objects' he professes to love" (95).

The nagging doubt remains, however, that such moments of aesthetic and interpretive insight emerge randomly and fitfully. Rather than emerging from a theoretical approach and deepening as the argument proceeds, Thurin's best discussions seem to come *ex nihilo*, glimmer briefly, and then disappear. The binary scheme prevents the argument from gathering momentum because each of the ten chapters is a brief, sketchy taxonomy of stylistic characteristics. Worse, the interpretive opposition of impressionism/expressionism repeatedly traps Thurin into useless classification. So, for instance, the interesting discussion of abstract nouns and that rattlesnake's "flabby length" devolves into a confusing paragraph on impressionist painting, the Goncourt brothers, expressionism, and Whitman's impressionism (95-96). In short, Thurin never effectively clarifies the interpretive opposition in order to show how Whitman's style creates the threshold effects of "betweenness." Finally, the linguistic focus is, for an American reader, too unrelenting and narrow. Although Thurin provides literary figures as points of comparison and contrast in order to measure Whitman's innovative style—Longfellow, Poe, and Tennyson are used most often—there is little or no cultural context in this study. The ahistorical manner is clear from the use of impressionism and expressionism, which function as Cartesian coordinates rather than as historical movements. Indeed, as I read this book I found myself thinking, "Your identity comes back in horror. Over Descartian vortices you hover." And that may be, ultimately, a measure of the distance between American and European literary/cultural studies.

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ROBERT BAIN, ed. *Whitman's and Dickinson's Contemporaries*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996. xxxvi + 555 pp.

PAUL KANE, ed. *Poetry of the American Renaissance: A Diverse Anthology from the Romantic Period*. New York: George Braziller, 1995. 383 pp.

These two anthologies respond to a growing need in American literature courses to offer more contextualization. In a time when fewer and fewer students are schooled in the once-canonical works of American literature, it is increasingly difficult to make young readers of American literature understand