

Walt Whitman Quarterly Review

<http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr>

Beach, Christopher. *The Politics of Distinction*
[review]

M. Jimmie Killingsworth

Volume 15, Number 2

(Fall 1997)

pps. 122-126

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE:
Whitman and the Civil War

Stable URL: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol15/iss2/6>
ISSN 0737-0679

REVIEWS

CHRISTOPHER BEACH. *The Politics of Distinction: Whitman and the Discourses of Nineteenth-Century America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. xiv + 217 pp.

In this book, Christopher Beach confronts a key problem in Whitman studies: the gap between formal criticism on the one hand and sociopolitical or historical criticism on the other. Critics focusing on the language and style of *Leaves of Grass*—Carroll Hollis and James Warren, for example—tend to neglect social and political influences, while left-historicists like Betsy Erkkila and Wynn Thomas either lose sight of issues of form and style in their focus on sociopolitical contexts or fail to demonstrate adequately the connections between text and context. The problem is inevitable to some degree, simply a matter of selection and emphasis. No one study can do all things. However, as Beach shows in this tightly argued and stimulating book, we can do a better job of bringing formal and historical criticism together. Beach certainly has predecessors in this effort, from F. O. Matthiessen to David Reynolds (in *Beneath the American Renaissance*) and Michael Moon, all of whom he graciously acknowledges. (Indeed, it is refreshing to see that Beach is generous even to critics with whom he has disagreements, notably the historicists, among whom I count myself.) But neither Matthiessen and Reynolds in their struggles to tie formalism to literary history nor Moon with his profound sense of how social and political topics get undone and reformed in the poems achieves the clarity and forcefulness that Beach brings to his readings.

From the dialogic formalism of M. M. Bakhtin, the socially conscious semiology of Roland Barthes, and the revisionist cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu, Beach develops a flexible but powerful theoretical framework for balancing formal and sociopolitical concerns in analyzing the relationship of existing historical discourses and individual style. Better than anyone before him, Beach re-dramatizes the process by which Whitman brings to American literature an unprecedented variety of socially diverse registers from an astounding array of contemporaneous discourses—employing in his poems, for example, a far larger vocabulary than any of his nineteenth-century peers—but still manages to create a unique voice that resists reduction to the political positions or the social views of the “voices” that the poet claims to have “transfigured and clarified” in poems like “Song of Myself.” *Leaves of Grass*, like all good poetry, transforms elements from the “sociolect,” the received language of literary traditions and the many contexts of social life, into the “idiolect,” the poet’s own style, the language by which a writer pursues distinction. By his own testimony, the drive to distinction—the refusal to make “poems distilled from other poems,” to awaken “long dumb voices,” to speak for science and the slave as well as the professor and the inhabitant of the parlor—preoccupied Whitman throughout his career. What Beach brings home for the first time is the degree

to which the craving for distinction operates in the wild transformations of discourse that characterize the most memorable performances in *Leaves of Grass*. No writer of his time more successfully slipped free of the literary sociolect or drew more deeply from nonliterary resources than Whitman. As a result, no writer has a greater claim to distinction.

In his opening chapters, Beach argues that Whitman pursued not a radical politics but rather a radical poetics. What the poet himself called his “language experiment” appears, in Beach’s reading, “less as an antagonistic alternative to established discourses than as an attempt to catalogue, question, or destabilize the abundant forms of language he finds around him” (p. 15). His “radicalism lies not in the subversion of, or even the resistance to, normal language but in his capacity to resist closure of form, idea, or discourse” (p. 17). In an interesting account of Whitman’s differences from the most popular poets of his day—Longfellow, Whittier, and Bryant, for example, a contrast that is usefully developed throughout the book, along with comparisons to the usual cast of canonized English and American Romantics and Victorians—Beach demonstrates that Whitman’s openness to “normal language” runs parallel to his resistance of an elite language or conventional literary discourse: “Negotiating the tension between his desire to develop a distinctive style as a poet and his (seemingly contradictory) desire to merge with the American populace compelled him to embrace discourses that had previously been excluded from poetic writing” (p. 54). Beach reveals traces of the tensions between the desire for distinction and the desire for acceptance and the tensions among the various discourses *Leaves of Grass* absorbs in its treatment of three topics of deep sociopolitical significance, devoting a full chapter to each: race and slavery, urbanization, and the (sexual) body.

On the first issue, Beach argues that “Whitman’s political views concerning race and slavery”—conservative when compared to the radical abolitionist position—“were often in conflict with an ideal of democratic poetry, which demanded that he inhabit the subjectivity of each human being in the United States, including the slave”; but “Whitman was to prove radically innovative in his poetic use of slavery, far more so than those who took unequivocally abolitionist positions,” ultimately creating “a new poetic language for dealing with the inherent contradictions posed by slavery,” a language that not only honestly exposed but dramatized the failures of identity in a populace that allowed the institution of slavery to exist. In poems like “I Sing the Body Electric” with its heteroglossic presentation of the slave’s body at auction, presented from the perspective of the buyer and seller, and the attempt to create a space for black subjectivity and the lyric expression of pain in the “Lucifer” lines of the 1855 “Sleepers,” “the representation of slavery” is not, according to Beach, “part of a political program, not synonymous with any unified or historical discourse,” but rather “Whitman’s attempt to enter into the subjectivity of the slave, and to find a means of representing poetically the unassimilable, unapproachable, and virtually invisible discourse of this subjectivity.” Because of this impressive achievement, these poems constitute one of the poet’s “central contributions to nineteenth-century literature and culture in America” (pp. 100–101).

In the chapter on Whitman and the growth of the city, Beach argues that while Whitman is the only major poet of the nineteenth century commonly

associated with urban life, it is not as a city poet that he achieves his primary distinction. He first arrives at distinction as the celebrant of that “curiously liminal space,” the “open road”: “Rather than a regressive turn to the traditional dichotomies—city and country, urban and pastoral, prosaic and poetic, public and personal, sociolectic and idiolectic—the open road represents a new opposition in poetic discourse, one not merely between two types of environments and the linguistic structures needed to represent them, but between two opposing modes of sociopolitical experience” (p. 107). Ultimately his aim is toward the obliteration of the boundaries between public and private existence, the unleashing of a powerful “sympathy” upon the world of social distinctions. Beach follows the evolution of this drive and its metonymic association with the representation of place over several editions of *Leaves of Grass*. He traces Whitman’s development of a kind of documentary poetics, an “aesthetic of indifference” that illuminates but does not judge or form ideological associations with urban realities that are both encouraging in a general portrait of mankind and discouraging in opening the theater of human suffering to public scrutiny. Finally he shows the difficulty Whitman faces in sustaining over the years his claim to have obliterated personal distinction as a paradoxical means of achieving poetic distinction—a difficulty that in the poems of the city runs parallel to his refusal in the post-war years to write poems that followed up his earlier treatment of slavery with attempts to connect with an emerging African-American consciousness among the freed slaves. In his later poems that deal with urbanization, he drifts toward the “extremes of rejection or idealization” in portraying the city and its inhabitants, appearing at times unable to absorb, to stand “indifferently” within the whirl of an urban space that over the course of his lifetime had grown violent beyond the poet’s resources of identification and sympathy. In short, he had to face his own “inability to deal with the new urban environment” that evolved in the post-war years. Rapid urbanization appears to have become entangled in Whitman’s mind with the failure of *Leaves of Grass* to attract an appreciative audience, to be absorbed as lovingly as the poet had “absorbed his country,” as he put in the 1855 Preface (p. 149). Ultimately he found himself appealing to the future and to the forms of traditional “authorship” and social legitimacy. Part of what the poet had to confront in his disappointment was, in Beach’s highly suggestive terms, his inability to give full voice to the “normal” sociolect of his times and the final necessity of situating his idiolectic expression in relation to a more conventional, literary sociolect.

The best illustration Beach provides of the dialogic relationship between the sociolect and the idiolect in *Leaves of Grass* comes in the excellent chapter “Figuring the Body in *Leaves*: Whitman and the Discourse of Corporeality.” Here Beach explores how Whitman alternates between two poetic motives: a lyric drive (favoring the idiolect, which Barthes describes as allowing the body to “pass into” writing) that not only takes the (sexual) body as its topic of celebration but actually attempts to create “within the literary text a symbolic space in which the physical presence of the writer can come into direct contact with that of readers” (p. 153); and a political drive, Whitman’s attempt to “use the poem as a vehicle for effecting a change in sociocultural attitudes toward the body and sexuality” (p. 153). In Beach’s view, “Although it is at times highly idiolectic, Whitman’s poetic treatment of the body is not only a personal

or lyric one; it is also informed by current discourses of hygiene and medical science, and even more significantly by Whitman's desire to give voice to a social body as well as an individual body, to 'contain multitudes'" (p. 154). The idiolectic "presence of the poet's body" in the text can only be maintained in "seemingly crystalline form for a brief moment" before giving way to the demands of "the social world, the world of political contingencies and cultural meanings and distinctions" (p. 155). It gradually becomes clear that for the most part, the idiolect is little more than "a personalized reordering of the sociolect," though occasionally a dazzling reordering that totally transforms the sense of the original sources, as in the catalogue of body parts in the 1855 version of "I Sing the Body Electric," which Beach holds up for our admiration in a reading that supersedes all earlier attempts to grasp Whitman's considerable achievement in these lines; or Section 5 of "Song of Myself," which, in Beach's reading, provides us with an example of the "idiolectic taken to the ultimate extreme—a language only of the voice itself, a resonance without the sociocultural framework of words, music, rhyme, custom, or lecture": "the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice" (p. 159). The "final movement in Whitman's poetic struggle with distinction," then, is for Beach the poet's attempt to avoid "sociocultural distinction in the poems" by seeking to develop "an analogue in the effort to achieve solidarity—both personal and textual—with the somatic presence of all people" (p. 161). As with the treatments of slavery and urbanization, Beach finds Whitman unable to maintain the struggle and the energy of the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* as he proceeds toward an adjustment to a literary existence in his old age.

Beach follows the mainstream of historical and biographical Whitman criticism in the diachronic slant of his readings, adding new insights by illustrating the difficulty the poet had in sustaining the project embodied in those early editions, which essentially amounts to the effort to achieve poetic distinction by adopting a poetics that renounces sociocultural distinction. The analogue of this struggle may well be the experience of the sexual body itself, as Beach suggests. The body is the lowest common denominator of human experience, the most fundamental ground of rhetorical appeal (Marshall McLuhan said that advertising was the science of man embracing woman), but sex remains a way of slipping free of social control and hence a path to distinction: "Sexual attraction, it would seem, is ultimately a highly personal matter that resists the controlling influence of any social hegemony; sex itself is democratic" (p. 174).

For all its insights, Beach's work stops short of a full analysis of the processes by which the poet transforms sociolect into idiolect. The book ultimately leaves us with an image of Whitman whose main distinction was to have denatured sociopolitical discourse, as it were, tamed the radical in developing the poetic. Some of the arguments for this position could be stronger. Beach displays an occasional tendency to assert rather than demonstrate or prove, a tendency particularly evident in his claims about the "presence of the body" in the text, for example, claims that rely rather too heavily on the appeal to authority (to Barthes in this case). Moreover, Beach's method fails to account for the processes by which the idiolect is reabsorbed by the continuing evolution of the sociolect. How Whitman's transformations were received in his own day and in ours, what new transformations they in turn inspired, and how in their can-

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