

THE UNWRITTEN WAR: AMERICAN WRITERS AND THE CIVIL WAR by Daniel Aaron. N. Y.: Random House, 1973.

In *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War*, Daniel Aaron asks why the American Civil War failed to produce an American epic or even "the great War book." Aaron is not alone in contemplating the question. As early as 1862 Northern intellectuals had predicted that the War would produce a literature which at last would represent a "truly national expression." Apologists for both North and South actively invoked Miltonic tropes and arguments in the early years of the contest, but following 1865, Aaron notes that the most talented writers of the generation which came of age during the War conscientiously avoided the subject. The works which did take on the War remained defenses of either the North or South. For Aaron, Walt Whitman has been proved right in saying, "The real war will never get in the books."

Aaron offers compelling explanations for this literary reticence. Ignoring more than overturning the traditional argument that a female post-war reading public prevented writers from presenting the gruesome realities of the battlefield, Aaron centers his argument on the issues of race and the social and political transformation of the Union effected by the War. Aaron sees the distancing or ignoring of the war by many writers as the result of "emotional resistance" to the issues of race and racism which the war brought to the forefront. Ironically, however, the Union victory and the abolition of slavery allowed writers to forget the question of race because it was no longer a vivid, institutionalized embarrassment. The question of what role a large free black population should play in the Union proved much more complex than judging the evils of slavery. The sign of this discomfort for Aaron is the near-disappearance of the figure of the black person from post-war literature.

. . . without the Negro, there would have been no Civil War, yet he figured only peripherally in the war literature. Often presented sympathetically (which ordinarily meant sentimentally and patronizingly), he remained even in the midst of well wishers an object of contempt or dread, or an uncomfortable reminder of abandoned obligations, or a pestiferous shadow, emblematic of guilt and retribution.

(p. xviii)

Aaron sees Herman Melville as exemplifying this idea. Whereas *Moby Dick* (1851) can be seen as a portent of the war in its concern with racial issues. "Negroes are virtually absent from *Battle Pieces*. . . . The War is a white man's tragedy" (p. 90).

Central as well to the failure of American writers to fully realize the War in their writing was a belief by the end of the war that the North as well as the South had been destroyed. Many who cherished the "founders' dream" saw the ideal of a rural, egalitarian society swept away by a mechanized mass society and ruthless capitalism. Many Northerners, in the years following the war, found themselves in increasing sympathy with the rebel figure as they became further alienated from an imperial United States.

No writer was as committed to the Union, politically and imaginatively, as Walt Whitman. Aaron groups Whitman with Hawthorne and Melville as writers who had done their best work before the war and clung to the "founders' dream" while pondering its darker meaning. Of the three, Aaron sees only Whitman as managing to incorporate the war into a visionary prospect of America, but ultimately the war "quieted his bluster, weakened his confidence for all his protestations to the contrary, and darkened the democratic vistas that had once seemed so cloudless and blue" (p. 40). Aaron does not consider *Drum Taps* in detail, but comments generally that it was an artistic gamble which failed to pay off. In writing about the war, Whitman's task was not, as it had been in earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass*, to rouse the feelings of Americans but to control and understand the overwhelming emotions of the war. The restrained, controlled versifying of *Drum Taps* which resulted represented a move away from Whitman's greatest strengths as a poet.

Aaron spends most of his attention considering the figure of the "Wound-Dresser" as Whitman's imaginative mastering of the war. Aaron suggests that the image of the "Wound-Dresser" may represent a conscious bid on Whitman's part for a more acceptable public persona than that of the "roughneck and celebrator of illicit passions." In his sympathy for the individual soldier, whether Northern or Southern, Whitman became as never before the poet of the common man. The work in the hospitals proved emotionally satisfying as well, Aaron contends, because it allowed Whitman to sublimate his homosexual impulses into "the matronly father" caring for the boys of America. I question Aaron's reading of this point, however. It seems to rely on

stereotypes of the closet homosexual deriving his pleasure from the affectionate fondling of little boys.

Aaron sees Whitman's interest in "the Negro" as secondary and not figuring in his plan for America's place in history.

. . . it is as mistaken to confuse Whitman's prose opinion of the Negro and the poetic *use* he made of him in *Leaves of Grass* as it is to identify his anti-slavery position with abolitionism (p. 60).

Aaron emphasizes the racist attitudes Whitman displayed in his correspondence, but inexplicably does not test his thesis by looking at the "use" Whitman made of "the Negro" in earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass* and *Drum Taps*. None of his references to Whitman's comments on blacks come from *Specimen Days*; how did blacks figure (or not figure) in these remembrances?

The methodological unevenness of Aaron's chapter on Whitman is symptomatic of the book as a whole. Aaron covers an enormous amount of ground, more than twenty writers, from Emerson to Faulkner, in detail. His concern with the conscious and unconscious psychological responses of American writers to the war leads him to range freely between their published works, memoirs, and correspondence. While this does give in most cases a full view of a writer's statements on the war, Aaron does not offer any standards for judging why in the case of Melville it is most enlightening to concentrate on *Battle Pieces* but in Whitman's case the correspondence and *Specimen Days* are of greater interest than the poetry about the war.

A more basic question regarding Aaron's project concerns the definition of this epic or masterpiece the war should have produced. The appropriateness of the epic form to express the American experience has been questioned since the Revolution. More importantly, Aaron seems to expect the great work to be born of the war to be literally about the war. He gives no detailed consideration to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It is unclear whether Aaron is looking for *Paradise Lost* or *The Naked and the Dead* and how this may have precluded him from finding the masterpiece he expected.

— Katherine Kinney