

M. Wynn Thomas. *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.

At first glance, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* seems a strange, even awkward title. But in the course of this impressive study it becomes clear that the title is apt and meaningful. On one level, as Whitman himself indicated, "lunar light" refers to the *reflected* light in *Leaves of Grass* — reflected, that is, from immediate social and economic circumstances. On another level, as Wynn Thomas seems to be suggesting, it underscores the beautifying, improving light cast by Whitman's best poetry over the often sordid social landscape of nineteenth-century America during a period of rapid industrialization and then the Civil War. Lastly, "lunar" describes the arc of Whitman's literary career, at first waxing to full-moon splendor and then waning notably as Whitman's imagination was disrupted by the harsh social realities it confronted.

Wynn Thomas discusses with greater subtlety than previous scholars the socioeconomic backgrounds of the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass* and the initially invigorating but finally deleterious effect of the Civil War upon his poetry. Using a gently Marxist approach informed by the findings of recent historians of nineteenth-century America, Thomas argues convincingly that Whitman, faced with the threat of ascendant capitalism, tried in his early poetry to recover the pristine virtues of bygone artisan labor and the preurban beauties of nature. Thomas shows that the early *Leaves of Grass* was a transforming social document which assimilated many economic and political phenomena of its day but determinedly pointed them toward the universals of nature and the kosmos.

The Civil War, Thomas argues, was, paradoxically enough, an event of apparent promise for Whitman, since it seemed to offer an explosive purgation of the poisonous social ills Whitman had tried to counteract in his poetry. *Drum Taps*, in Thomas' reading, becomes another "lunar" document, reflecting all the ravages of war but also emitting a purifying light of its own, underscoring heroism and humanity on both sides of the great conflict. This meliorating function of Whitman's poetry, however, eventually collapsed as a result of Whitman's anguished response to the terrifying realities of the war

and the squalid social conditions of post-war America, as discussed in Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*. In the end, Whitman was divided between unrealistic dreams of the future and nightmarish memories of the past. Vacillating between myth and memory, he lost his poetic self-confidence and triumphed only occasionally in his later poetry.

There are some minor flaws in this book. Thomas relies too heavily on secondary historical accounts of nineteenth-century America, especially those of Sean Wilentz, Edward Pessen, and Barbara Novak; one wishes that Thomas had done a bit more research of his own into nineteenth-century primary documents. Also, the book is somewhat limited in scope, focusing on social and economic themes while saying little about philosophical, religious, and sexual dimensions of *Leaves of Grass*.

Despite these drawbacks, Thomas should be commended for a fine job. His historical approach yields valuable rereadings of such well known poems as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "Song of the Broad-Axe." Thomas makes good use of Whitman's prose writings and occasionally complements his socioeconomic interpretations with intriguing discussions of links between *Leaves of Grass* and nineteenth-century painting. He also makes acute (if undeveloped) comparisons between Whitman and foreign authors, particularly the British Romantics. This book is a welcome addition to Whitman scholarship.

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*Walt Whitman: Modern Critical Views*. Edited by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers. 1985. 177 pp. \$17.95.

Professor Bloom's collection of critical essays on Whitman is by my count the ninth anthology of previously published Whitman criticism. The first was Roy Harvey Pearce's *Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1962) and the most recent prior to Bloom's edition was James Woodress's *Critical Essays on Walt Whitman* (1983). In