



**Grossman, Jay. Reconstituting the American Renaissance:  
Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation [review]**

Mark Maslan

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on a Sunday, and the *Eagle* was not published on Sundays. Furthermore, "Government," July 27, 1847, listed in *GF* 1:51-53 but not *Journalism* 2, is not found in the *Eagle* for this date. "Altruism," December 23, 1846 [*GF* 2:359], is correctly printed as "Ultraism" in *Journalism* 2.

Texas A&M University

JEROME LOVING

JAY GROSSMAN. *Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 261 pp.

Since the 1980s, Whitman criticism has been largely occupied with trying to understand how *Leaves of Grass* is informed by the social and political life of the antebellum period. Four themes have dominated this endeavor: sexuality, slavery, disunion, and the relationship between literary and political representation. Jay Grossman's awkwardly titled new book focuses mainly on the last of these themes, but it touches on all of them, and it therefore bears the burden of distinguishing itself from much of the important Whitman scholarship of the last two decades. There are two options for the critic in this situation—one methodological, the other contextual. One must either challenge the approach of previous studies and present a new, corrective one in its place or provide a new context in which to examine the established themes. Grossman does issue a methodological challenge, but his target, Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, is an old one. When he opposes himself to "the standard model derived from Matthiessen in which the abundance of the Renaissance springs, Athena-like, out of the head of an Emerson-Zeus" (5) or promises "to interrogate the . . . standing of [Matthiessen's] representative figures" (25), he is following a script that dates back at least to 1985, when Jonathan Arac and Donald Pease published critiques of Matthiessen in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*. By now, attacking Matthiessen has become a gesture of New Americanist solidarity rather than a mark of iconoclasm. What matters is where Grossman stands in relation to his more recent predecessors.

Grossman's stronger claim to originality is of the contextual variety. Whereas Allen Grossman and Kerry Larson interpreted Whitman's challenge to representative institutions in light of the constitutional crises of the 1850s, his book traces it back to the anti-Federalist rhetoric of the ratification debates. As Grossman puts it, "*Reconstituting* argues that . . . writings by Emerson and Whitman . . . have their origins in facets of the Constitutional settlement that have never wholly ceased reverberating through American literary history" (15). This is not an entirely new idea—Larson's important book, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*, considers the analogy between the Constitution and *Leaves of Grass* at length—but in Grossman's hands it becomes a rationale for detailed cross-century comparison of a kind that is new to Whitman studies. Of course, this comparison brings its own challenges—formal as well as historical—and when Grossman moves from the *Federalist* in chapter one to Emerson and Whitman in chapter two, he raises a host of questions about the political thought of the intervening seventy-odd years that are simply beyond the scope of a book about Emerson and Whitman. The greater challenge arises, however, from Grossman's decision to devote a full chapter to the ratification

debates in the first place—a decision presumably based on his desire not only to provide historical context for what follows but to produce a freestanding analysis of the material. Here Grossman disappoints. His portrayal of the Federalists as counter-revolutionaries seeking to disenfranchise the common people through political representation is dated and unconvincing. Relying heavily on a view of the Constitution that originates in Charles Beard's largely discredited *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913), he omits to mention the contrary views of recent constitutional scholars such as Douglass Adair and Bruce Ackerman. Moreover, he equates the representational system established in the Constitution with the so-called virtual representation that Parliament claimed to provide to the colonies *in place of* elected representatives: "the Constitution makes a virtue out of the very representative virtuality that the colonists had decried as British parliamentary tyranny" (9), he writes. In other words, Grossman claims that having the right to vote under the Constitution is the same as not having it under British colonialism. As a consequence, one cannot help feeling that when it comes to constitutional history and scholarship, Grossman is out of his depth.

The three chapters that follow seek echoes of the conflict between Federalism and its opponents in the writings of Emerson and Whitman as well as the relationship between the two. In Grossman's eyes, Emerson is a latter-day Federalist who sees literature as a way "to refine and enlarge the public views" (to borrow the language of the *Federalist*) whereas Whitman is a Jeffersonian who rejects the idea that public views *need* refinement. Grossman finds this conflict at work in the two writers' attitudes toward the body, suggesting that "Emerson's rejection of the display of the body" in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* "may have its discursive analogues in the disembodied virtuality of the Philadelphia plan, in which the embodied particularity of 'the people' conveniently dissolves through the mechanism of representative filtration" (83). Likewise, he contrasts Emerson's view of poetry "as a transcription of celestial music" with what he believes is Whitman's view of it "as a trade, a form of embodied labor" (110), arguing that "Emerson retained [from his ministry] a foundational belief in his own elevated status as truth-giver to the masses" (137), whereas Whitman sought to efface his own presence in favor of his working-class constituency: "politically, Whitman's vision . . . may be staging in the catalogs a mode of virtual representation in which, by means of *his* virtual absence . . . those working men . . . is [sic] not lost" (141). For Grossman, the writers' contrasting approaches to the common people reflect their different class loyalties—Emerson's to the "Boston cultural aristocracy" (122), and Whitman's to the laborers of Brooklyn and New York.

Grossman's emphasis on the class differences between these two writers provides an important corrective to the traditional view of their relationship, which acknowledges their disagreement about the body but otherwise emphasizes their similarities, especially on poetics. But in complicating our understanding of the link between Emerson and Whitman, he sometimes simplifies their writings. In other words, he tends to locate the contradictions inherent in the concept of representativeness in the relationship between the two writers rather than the writings of either. He observes, for example, that "for his commemorative lectures on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Whitman made himself over into an embodiment of corporate memory, a representa-

tive, as in *Leaves of Grass*, figuratively encompassing the whole nation" (151). Yet the belief that the poet "apprises us not of his own wealth, but of the commonwealth" is Emersonian, and the assumption of that role is no less complex or ambiguous in Whitman's case than in Emerson's. Indeed, what makes Whitman's claim to be representative any less dubious than that of the "chosen body of citizens" Madison envisions in the *Federalist* no. 10? Oddly enough, Grossman does not raise this question; one must look to other critics, such as Kerry Larson, for an exploration of the ambiguities of Whitman's claim to representative status. Grossman's discussion of the relation between literary and political representation in Whitman is thus rather flat, even as his discussion of the connection between Whitman and Emerson is unusually rich.

The final chapter of *Reconstituting the American Renaissance* concerns the centrality of slavery to the treatment of the body in Emerson and Whitman. It suggests, in effect, that Whitman's greater respect for the body entails a greater sympathy for the slave as well. This chapter is also Grossman's most literary, containing as it does readings of Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric," the twenty-eight bathers and Negro driver passages in "Song of Myself," "From Pent-up Aching Rivers," *Franklin Evans*, and the early poem, "The Mississippi at Midnight," as well as Emerson's "Experience." (Whitman's poetry is almost entirely absent from the previous chapters.) These readings are purely thematic, and Grossman sometimes exaggerates the presence of slavery in a poem in order to make the material fit the theme. Informed readers will be surprised to find the addressee of "Pent-up Aching Rivers," a "Children of Adam" poem, characterized as a male slave, just as they will be to discover that "The Mississippi at Midnight" is a dramatic monologue spoken by a fugitive slave. And they are likely to consider Grossman's reading of Emerson's devastating description of the trauma of losing his son positively bizarre. "I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me," Emerson writes two years after Waldo's death in "Experience." In Grossman's view, this passage "may even offer a glimmer, in an unintended way, of the capitalist, plantation practices in which white slave-masters fathered, owned, and sold their own slave-children as moveable chattel quantifiable on estate inventories" (199-200).

It is hard to understand why Grossman feels compelled to offer such tenuous readings when Whitman and Emerson provide so much material directly about slavery to work with. But it may be because he limits his readings exclusively to what the texts are about instead of attending equally to their representational strategies. The possibility that a text's ideological freight might reside as much in how it is constructed as in what it says seems not to have occurred to him. The result is a tendency to shoehorn the desired theme into the text at hand.

Grossman's discussion of the social gulf dividing Whitman and Emerson constitutes a genuine contribution to our understanding of that important relationship. Readers searching for insight into the other topics that the book addresses will probably want to look elsewhere.