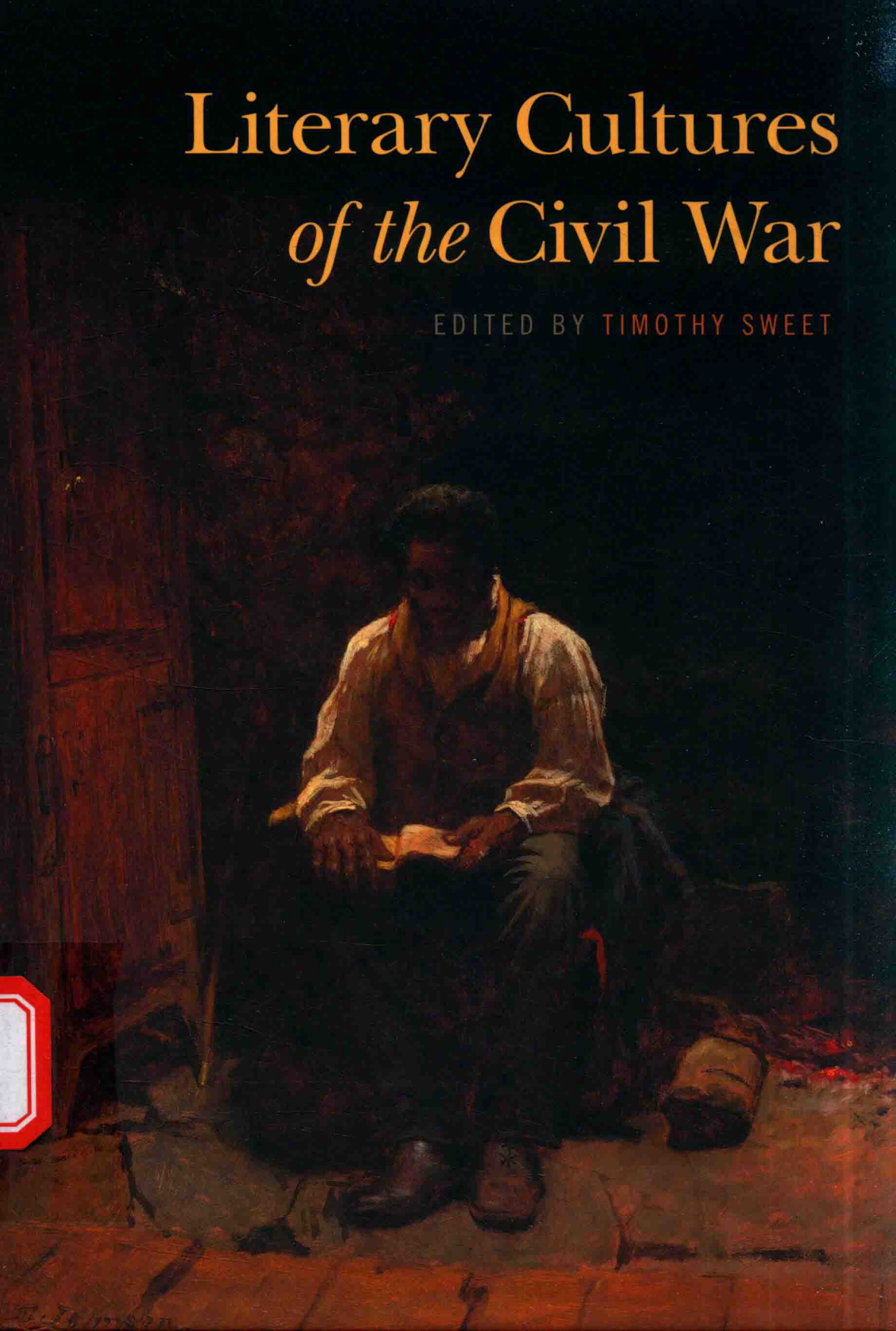


Literary Cultures *of the Civil War*

EDITED BY TIMOTHY SWEET



T. Johnson

LITERARY
CULTURES
of the
CIVIL WAR

Edited by
TIMOTHY SWEET

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LITERARY
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Introduction

Shaping the Civil War Canon

TIMOTHY SWEET

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, the venerable literary historian Fred Lewis Pattee proclaimed a new definition of American literature. No longer should the antebellum flowering of New England's literary culture be regarded as our "National Period," Pattee argued, "for national it certainly was not." Rather, "our first really national period" originated "shortly after the close of the Civil War with those new forces and new ideals and broadened views that grew out of that mighty struggle." American writers finally ceased to imitate European predecessors, declared "literary independence," and "looked to their own land for materials and inspiration," especially to the West, to produce "autochthonic" works.¹ Deploying the central trope of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, *autochthones*, to characterize a new birth of American literature, Pattee seems to have taken Lincoln's nationalizing political program as forecasting an analogous literary program.²

Beyond a mention of the Gettysburg Address and a quick dismissal of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* as "manufactured realism," Pattee said little about the literature of the war itself (397). However, one book did claim his attention: Walt Whitman's *Drum-Taps*. Pattee argued that the war changed the nationalist project of America's most important poet, who transmitted its influence to subsequent writers: "Henceforth the poet will sing of Men—men not as magnificent bodies, but as triumphant souls. *Drum-Taps* fairly quivers and sobs and shouts with new life. America has risen at last—one feels it in every line. The book gives more of the actual soul of the great conflict and the new spirit

that arose from it than any other book ever written" (175). Unsurprisingly, Pattee's literary history omitted any mention of African American writers while relegating the question of race to the postwar development of the "darky" character type in southern regionalist literature (83). Thus, Pattee enacted by means of exclusion David Blight's familiar thesis that by the fiftieth anniversary, reconciliationism—here taking the form of a nationally unifying, westward-looking declaration of American literary independence—had eclipsed the war's emancipationist promise.³

Even so, Pattee's partial account suggests in retrospect that the war's literary canon would emerge, albeit gradually, from a central preoccupation with national identity ("soul" or "spirit," as both Pattee and Whitman would have put it) and a claim that literature has privileged access to that identity. The repressed emancipationist promise would return, and subsequent critics would focus on body as well as "spirit" in relation to the newly reconfigured nation-state. These critics would elaborate related analytical categories such as violence, affect, and citizenship, as well as the central category of nationhood, while claiming a larger role for literature as not merely representing but actively shaping these categories.

Literary Cultures of the Civil War makes the most of that larger role. This collection of essays delivers on Pattee's promise by returning to the unsettled moment when the memory of the war was not yet overwritten by topoi that would later come to dominate, such as the Lost Cause, the romance of reunion, and the reconciliation of veterans. These essays address texts produced by writers who lived through the war and wrote about it before the end of Reconstruction, well before second-generation works such as *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). To explore the ground of alternative memories, the essays in this book engage with the diversity of literary cultures—ensembles of discourses, conventions, and practices shaping and shaped by verbal production—that existed in the postwar United States. Such ensembles, often regionally or locally differentiated, include Euroamerican and African American vernacular oral cultures, manuscript journals and letters, and print cultures structured by newspapers, magazines, or books; overlapping discourses of politics, protest, domesticity, and sentiment; unsettled literary nationalism and emergent literary regionalism; and vernacular and elite aesthetic traditions. While most of the essays address a given text as participating in more than one of these ensembles, they fall into three groups that would have surprised Pattee and the critics who followed him: African American literary cultures, poetics of war, and mediations of nation and region. Tracing the emergence of these concerns from the crucial centennial moment of canon formation through the sesquicentennial will be the project of this introduction.

The Centennial Moment

As Blight and others have observed, centennial reflections of the Civil War were informed by two contexts: the civil rights movement and the Cold War.⁴ Civil rights activism had resurrected the war's emancipationist promise, while Cold War politics had reconfigured the terms of reunion.⁵ In a 1961 review-essay on the Civil War's literary canon for the *Reporter*, Alfred Kazin addressed civil rights by asserting, against a prominent line of popular historiography exemplified by Bruce Catton's work, that slavery was central and that the war had been inevitable. Kazin characterized the body of writing on slavery, North and South, as exhibiting a unified literary style grounded in reference to Revolutionary era patriotism and gaining affect through "the extraordinary hold of the images and rhythms of the King James Bible."⁶ The assurance of divine mandate in both pro- and antislavery discourse brought about an ideological hardening, in which Kazin also found a modern (Cold War) analog in Marx's theory of class conflict, as contrasted with the values of "classical" politics and "loyalty to the commonwealth" (37). As a Cold War liberal, Kazin valued those few writers whom he saw as standing outside of ideological polarization and asserting humanism against totalitarianism: Lincoln for his capacity to deploy biblical rhetoric without being blinded by it; Mary Chesnut for her ability to articulate "the complex human relationships of slavery" with "humor, detachment, and patience"; Walt Whitman for the experiential truth of *Specimen Days* and some of his "impressionistic" *Drum-Taps* poems; Herman Melville for the "stoic and classical distrust of human nature" evident in *Battle-Pieces* (37, 38, 42).

That same year, Robert Penn Warren opened a book-length reflection on the war by citing two "clear and objective facts": the cause of slavery, "which looms up mountainously and cannot be talked away," and the Unionist result.⁷ Warren observed the ways in which cause and result remained intertwined in the present, remarking on the North's abandonment of the war's emancipationist potential and discussing African American writers' critiques of the North's redemptivist history of the war, from W. E. B. Du Bois through civil rights activist and journalist Carl Rowan. Yet in the Cold War context, Warren was equally interested in the legacy of Unionism.⁸ Warren argued that the Civil War had created a climate favorable to the development of pragmatism, which was modeled by Lincoln and later elaborated on in the jurisprudence of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and the philosophy of William James. Warren offered pragmatist philosophy as an antidote to the Cold War's ideological hardening by pointing the question of the Civil War's inevitability toward the present moment: "does the naked geo-political confrontation with Russia doom us to the struggle? . . . Or can we learn that we can make, or at least have a hand in the making of, our future?"

(101-2). Warren's concluding meditation on the war as a "tragedy" in the classical sense returned him to the question of inevitability and thus, by way of the cathartic potential of the Gettysburg Address, to Melville's tragic reading of the war in *Battle-Pieces*.⁹ Warren argued that the nation had not been instructed by the war's "catharsis of pity and terror," as Melville had hoped: "We have not yet created a union which is, in the deepest sense, a community" (107). Differentiating Melville's pragmatic Unionism from Whitman's unattainable "mystic" Unionism, Warren argued that Melville's "tragic insight" consisted in "the necessity for action in the face of the difficulty of knowing truth."¹⁰

Where Kazin's and Warren's assessments of the war's literary legacy were selective, Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* attempted to be exhaustive. A staunch critic of Cold War militarism, Wilson compared Lincoln's historical role to Lenin's, positing that both leaders suffered untimely removal from office with negative consequences for the state. Beyond this analogy, whose limits Wilson fully realized, the Cold War frame motivated a critique of the state as a mechanism for organizing instinctual aggression. Wilson granted Warren's characterization of the two structures of feeling—or as Wilson put it, "two fraudulent traditions"—that resulted from the war: the "Great Alibi" that enabled southerners to blame every ill on the war and the northern exceptionalist "Treasury of Virtue" that had been adopted as a unifying rhetoric to "carry along into all our subsequent wars."¹¹ As Wilson framed the Civil War, its literature demonstrated "how automatically, on both sides of the contest, . . . a divided and arguing public may be converted into a national near-unanimity, a flood of energy which will carry the young to destruction" (xxxii).

In practice, Wilson's literary canon was not so narrow as his opening critique suggested. If he denigrated most war poetry, including Melville's, as mere "patriotic journalism," he valued instances of psychological realism (for example, some of Whitman's poems), as did his Cold War ideological antagonist Kazin (470). Wilson praised *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a complex and sectionally balanced critique plausibly demonstrating that "the national ideal is in danger," before he criticized it as an example of the "Northern myth" that organized so much writing, according to which the Union cause was God's cause and Lincoln a "martyred Messiah" (8, 98). He concluded with a survey of postwar southern regionalism (Albion Tourgée, George W. Cable, Kate Chopin, Thomas Nelson Page) followed by an account of the war's literary and philosophical legacy in realism and pragmatism. In contrast to the "verbose untidy" style of Cooper or the static style of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, Wilson traced two opposing tendencies in American prose formed from opposing responses to the war (636). On one hand, "a lack of confidence, a diffidence and a mechanism of self-defense" became manifest in a literature of "ambiguity, prolixity, [and] irony," especially by noncombatants such

as Henry Adams and Henry James (654). On the other hand, the war's lesson of "efficiency" gave rise to the "lucidity, precision, [and] terseness" of Lincoln's speeches and the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant and Thomas Wentworth Higginson (649). Ambrose Bierce developed this new "firmer and quicker" style in short stories that "make us feel the indignity and absurdity of war" (638, 619). Yet the most important "precursor of realism" to emerge from the war, Wilson argued, was John W. De Forest's novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, which he recognized as influencing Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, among others (670, 684). Despite De Forest's accomplishments as a realist, however, Wilson criticized his contempt for the South and his unquestioning promotion of the Union cause.

Wilson found literary realism's philosophical analogue in pragmatism, a product of the war that Kazin noted implicitly and Warren discussed explicitly. Thus, Wilson closed *Patriotic Gore* with a nod toward William James, followed by an extensive account of the career of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. If the ideological conclusion of the eight-hundred-page survey could be brought down to one point, it might be Wilson's skeptical account of Holmes's pragmatic belief in "the general validity of any corpus of law as the expression of the dominant will of any considerable social group"; or, to put it bluntly, "what is left, without God's direction, is simply a conflict of forces, in which the party that wins rules" (766, 762).¹²

Daniel Aaron's *The Unwritten War*, which was invited for the Civil War Centennial Commission series called the Impact of the War though not completed until 1973, followed Warren and Wilson in defining grand fictions that northerners and southerners used to organize their understandings of the conflict. Where Warren referred to "tragedy" and Wilson to "myth" (in the sense of false consciousness), Aaron used the term "epic" to evoke a missing "literary masterpiece" that critics as early as 1862 had hoped the war would inspire.¹³ Aaron suggested that a federal epic might have begun with Daniel Webster's apostasy in defending the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 and might have continued through a providentially directed chastisement of North and South for the crimes of materialism and slavery, a progress that would depict Lincoln as both an Abraham who guided the nation to safety and a messiah who died to redeem its suffering. But for Aaron, writers north and south were unable to produce a work on this moral scale. They failed "to say something revealing about the meaning . . . of the War," Aaron argued, because of their "emotional resistance" to the sociopolitical fact of race; thus, while "the Negro" was central to the war, "yet he figured only peripherally in the War literature" (xxii).

Aspiring to the breadth of Wilson's survey, Aaron began by charting the polarization of the 1850s, which he argued nevertheless left writers conceptually

unprepared for war. The few who refused partisan rhetoric included Hawthorne, a “lonely dissent[er]” from the Unionist program; Whitman, a healer who translated soldiers’ suffering into poetry and conceived of Lincoln as “the blessed offering” in a “national fertility rite”; and Melville, a poet of “paradoxes, ironies, and conflicts” who “tells of a dearly bought national ‘enlightenment’ acquired in the glare of bursting bombs—and not retained” (39, 53, 88, 90). Of the generation of northerners young enough to enlist, Aaron observed that “the four most talented”—Henry Adams, William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain—refused combat and looked back with “nostalgia for what the War destroyed or made obsolete” (92). Combatants such as De Forest and Bierce showed the “hard reality” of war based on personal experience but without engaging the larger ideological frame (92). Although no southerner accomplished an epic account of the war, Aaron argued, a few wrote “unrhetorically and with some detachment.” These included Henry Timrod, a noncombatant who nevertheless was “‘educated’ by events in the Melvillean sense”; David Hunter Strother (“Porte Crayon”), a Union veteran whose unpublished diaries contained scenes “that out-horror Bierce” and whose views on race underwent a conversion after hearing Frederick Douglass speak in 1864; George Washington Cable, a Confederate veteran who came to criticize Lost Cause ideology and the postwar disenfranchisement of African Americans; and especially Mary Chesnut, whom social conventions likely prevented from “turn[ing] to novel-writing” (228, 234, 250, 251).

Describing the literary response to the war as largely unified, North versus South, the centennial critics structured their interpretations in terms of the dynamic of reunion, though not in the form of Pattee’s forgetful reconciliationism. Kazin mapped the legacy of the slavery debates onto civil rights activism while valuing writers such as Whitman, Melville, and Chesnut, who seem to have stood outside of such polarization, and Lincoln, who attempted to resolve it while maintaining a moral compass. The southerner Warren felt more deeply than the New Yorker Kazin the legacy of slavery and imagined that critical reflection on Cold War politics might prompt the kind of self-aware pragmatism he found in Melville. Wilson, on the other hand, saw too much national unity in Cold War America, a kind of groupthink that so many Civil War writers had represented for their respective sides. If Wilson, like Warren, embraced pragmatism, it was in ironic rather than tragic form—and with Holmes rather than Melville as its paradigmatic figure. Even more than Kazin, however, Wilson imagined that writers could stand outside of ideology. Aaron too imagined such a dispassionate standpoint from which writers could have developed a critical perspective on the postwar question of race. Valuing many of the same figures as did his precursors (Whitman, Melville, Chesnut) and for

similar reasons (objectivity, irony, detachment), Aaron brought his assessment of Civil War literature up through the centennial era, pausing to explore Crane's late nineteenth-century depoliticization of the war in *The Red Badge of Courage* before turning to William Faulkner, an author who was finally able "to read the War's meaning . . . in the consciousness of a people" (311).

Postcentennial Interventions

The Unwritten War marked a turn from public-sphere criticism to academic criticism.¹⁴ Yet key themes persisted. As the Cold War waned, politically motivated criticism came to focus on the national security state, with its investment in the management of bodies.¹⁵ Where the Cold War context encouraged centennial critics to embrace or ironically acknowledge pragmatism as the war's largest cultural result, postcentennial critics showed relatively little interest in the political genesis of pragmatism. The centennial critics' other motivating context, the civil rights movement, continued to march under the more inclusive banner of social justice. In these new contexts, critics intervened either skeptically, by interrogating the relation of bodies to the state, or optimistically, by resurrecting the war's emancipationist legacy and, in some cases, extending that legacy to read gender into the discussions surrounding the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Tempered by a poststructuralist suspicion of foundational narratives, this new work deepened the investigations of violence, citizenship, and nationhood begun by the centennial critics while expanding the survey of literary cultures begun especially by Wilson and Aaron.

The first significant postcentennial studies focused on violence. Shira Wolosky brought Emily Dickinson into the war's canon, revising the received image of Dickinson as a self-enclosed eccentric to argue that she responded profoundly to the war's violence as a theodicean problem.¹⁶ The meaning of death in war was similarly the central focus of my comparative study of Whitman's and Melville's poetry and battlefield photography, *Traces of War*, which took as its point of departure Elaine Scarry's account of the relation between violence and language.¹⁷ According to Scarry, the wounds and deaths of war are "broken away from the body and relocated elsewhere" by means of language in the process of instantiating the victor's "ideas" and "beliefs."¹⁸ This process of instantiation is often complex and, especially in the case of the Civil War, the specification of the victor's beliefs was controversial: Was the war really about slavery or the federal union or both? Was it consistently so over time, and for whom? In this context, the Whitman of realistic observation, valued by Kazin and Wilson, receded in favor of the Whitman who questions the possibility of representation—"the real war will never get in the books," as he famously wrote in *Specimen Days*—while

nevertheless attempting to transact national reunion through mourning.¹⁹ Melville was seen as struggling critically with this process, especially with the demands that the state made on the bodies of the soldiers who were, at the same time, supposed to be citizens. Subsequent studies (discussed below) picked up the connection between literature and photography, including Elizabeth Young's "Verbal Battlefields," an analysis of Alexander Gardner's captions for his 1866 *Photographic Sketch Book* of the war.²⁰ James Dawes extended the investigation of the split between object and representational medium in *The Language of War*, juxtaposing the "emancipatory" model favored by Scarry, in which language and violence are mutually exclusive, with a poststructuralist model in which language and violence are mutually constitutive. After reading Sherman's and Grant's memoirs to exemplify his claim that "counting is the epistemology of war," Dawes presented Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*, which develops a sentimental discourse of individual sympathy, as a counterpoint to the nationalizing tendencies of Whitman's poetics of naming, counting, and cataloging.²¹

Subsequent studies along this line of inquiry focused increasingly on the body as a site of meaning production. Franny Nudelman's *John Brown's Body* extended the analysis from the bodies of soldiers (battlefield photography, Whitman's *Drum-Taps* and *Specimen Days*) to the bodies of slaves (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*, "Benito Cereno") and the body of John Brown (the eponymous soldiers' marching song, Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Melville's "The Portent").²² Interrogating the means by which nationalist culture abstracts the effects of violence, Nudelman connected the literature of the war per se to antebellum cultural contexts via three discursive regimes: sentiment, science, and punishment. Science, particularly medical discourse, also provided the context for Lisa Long's *Rehabilitating Bodies*, which argued that the understanding of "invisible wounds" associated with the Civil War—phantom limb pain, neurasthenia, hysteria, and similar maladies—was shaped by the sexism and racism of nineteenth-century medical discourse.²³ Readings of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's best-selling novel *The Gates Ajar* helped consolidate these texts' new canonical status. Notable also was Long's attention to "The Case of George Dedlow," a bizarre story of a quadruple amputee written by Silas Weir Mitchell.²⁴ Medical imagery composed just one part of the archive of Shirley Samuels's wide-ranging study of American iconography, *Facing America*.²⁵ Samuels argued that photography, which came of age during the war, marked a significant divide in iconographic form. Close attention to faces particularly revealed the anxieties over race, gender, and sexuality structuring familiar icons (Washington embracing Lincoln in heaven, Jefferson Davis wearing a dress) as well as less familiar but no less iconic images (medical photographs of soldier amputees, or a portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln's modiste, Elizabeth

Keckley). This context enabled productive new readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Whitman's writings on Lincoln, and Keckley's 1868 memoir, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Drew Gilpin Faust's comprehensive history of death in the Civil War, *This Republic of Suffering*, returned the focus to the soldier's body. Arguing that massive wartime losses exacerbated an antebellum crisis of belief, Faust used literary texts to index two kinds of personal response: those who found consolation in the Christian concepts of immortality and heaven, as exemplified in popular ballads and newspaper verse, and those who refused consolation and focused on death as loss, such as Melville and Bierce. Especially consoling, argued Faust, was a Swedenborgian image of heaven as a perfected earth where family relations persisted, as presented for example in Phelps's *Gates Ajar*.²⁶

Another postcentennial line of inquiry took as its organizing categories the configurations of citizenship and nationhood, beyond (as Warren put it) Whitman's mystic Unionism or Melville's pragmatic Unionism. The first such was Kathleen Diffley's *Where My Heart Is Turning Ever*, which investigated the ways in which popular fiction engaged with the issues surrounding the war's great legal result, constitutional reform.²⁷ Working with an archive of more than three hundred magazine stories about the war published from 1861 through 1876, Diffley identified three genres, each paired with a constitutional amendment: the Thirteenth with "Old Homestead" stories such as Mark Twain's "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word and I Heard It," which strains to incorporate freedpeople into a national domestic narrative; the Fourteenth with romances such as John W. De Forest's "Parole D'Honneur" or anti-romances such as Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Rodman the Keeper," in which gender provides the ground for negotiating race and class; and the Fifteenth with adventure stories such as Rebecca Harding Davis's "How the Widow Crossed the Lines," often with female protagonists whose exploits questioned the formal exclusion of women from citizenship. After Diffley's canon-expanding project, Deak Nabers returned to old-canon authors in *Victory of Law*, which took as its organizing context the due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. Starting from the premise that literature and law can both enact ideas of freedom, Nabers argued that Thoreau's antislavery writings, Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, and Whitman's *Drum-Taps* paralleled constitutional debate and that the Fourteenth Amendment itself was in some sense a "poetic achievement."²⁸

Other studies explored questions of nationhood and citizenship through the cultural work of particular literary forms such as romance fiction, lyric poetry, or epic. Nina Silber's *The Romance of Reunion* charted the postwar emergence of the subgenre of reconciliation fiction, which targeted a northern readership in allegorizing the power relations of national reunion as marital union between