

is so shallow that he accepts uncritically the story (concocted in Ralph L. Rusk's biography of Emerson) of Whitman's taking the New Englander to "a noisy fire-engine society."

Zweig's study is Whitman at 36,000 feet, one that soars over many of the facts in its flight of the self to advance the myth of that greater poetic self in the nineteenth century. Unreliable as it is in so many particulars and its use of source material, it is nevertheless a well-written assessment of a poet who—in the words of Harold Bloom (reviewing Zweig's book)—"is so important to us, so crucial to an American mythology, so absolutely central to our literary culture, that we need to go on trying to bring his life and work together." Surely, Zweig has made an original contribution to that mythology, if not to the biography of the man behind it.

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Hyatt H. Waggoner. *American Visionary Poetry*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982. xii, 226 pp. \$14.95.

In the early years of the twentieth century, when Alfred Stieglitz and others were attempting to turn photography into an art, there was lots of talk about the photographer as the true artist, who, with his camera at the ready, had always to be alert to the materials of the visible world: "I simply react to the moment," said Stieglitz; "I am the moment." The photographer claimed to be the true *seer*, and his influence has been widely felt on American poetry, a testimony to Emerson's belief that the American poet must be a "Seer" before he can be a "Sayer." Hyatt Waggoner tunes the much-abused word, *visionary*, toward this definition—the poetry of *seeing*, or poetry that results from "the act of seeing" (p. 3). He sets out to trace an American tradition of visionary poetry—poetry generated in a moment of perception of the real world, and sustained by seeing "better, deeper, truer" into the reality, "with the consequent discovery of patterns of meaning and value not easily perceived by most of us most of the time" (p. 5). It is poetry that joins "*sight*" and "*insight*," and slights neither one. The tradition of course is Whitmanian; in Waggoner's rendering, it excludes Dickinson ("too cerebral to be a visionary; she analyzes and dissects" [p. 6]), Stevens (his poetry is "not about the world but about ways of looking at the world" [p. 6]), Eliot (where "belief seems central and in control" [p. 7]), and Frost (who sees only darkness when viewing the real world, and finds "comfort only in the thought that mind could do without any visible support from nature" [p. 215]). The poetry Waggoner deals with is positive, and "seems counter to the poetry of alienation"; it is an earthy poetry, and "runs counter to any sort of poetic 'idealism' that would make whatever is valuable in the world a by-product of our minds" (p. 7). Less purely descriptive than imagist poetry, more grounded in the real world than meditative poetry, visionary poetry exists on the melting edge between "perception and interpretation" (p. 12). Waggoner claims he is deriving much of his definition from the work of scientists in "vision laboratories" whose experiments demonstrate that sight is an act of cognition, not a simple act of absorption. We construct what we see, but what we see *is* already there: we all see it differently, and our visionary poets see it best, most imaginatively, most suggestively. Waggoner also uses Alfred North

Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (and his "organismic philosophy of becoming" [p. 65]) as a kind of backdrop for his discussions.

None of this seems remarkably fresh or original, of course, and Waggoner's purpose seems not so much to announce a new tradition as to realign an old one, scrape away the accretions of abstractions around the word *visionary*, reclaim visionary poetry as the work of the eye and mind, not of the mind's eye. The more abstract visionary poets, Waggoner posits, derive from Blake and point to Stevens; Waggoner's visionaries derive from early Wordsworth and early Whitman and point toward Williams.

This book can be seen as a kind of appendix to Waggoner's *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (originally published in 1968, and recently reprinted in an expanded version). The actual appendix to *that* book, in fact (called "A Note on Whitman's Mysticism"), where Waggoner argued for a *via negativa* (a mysticism that "sees through" fact to beauty and mystery), can be read as the germ of *American Visionary Poetry*. In *American Poets*, the tradition was centered on Emerson, and American poetry in general "tested the temporal and secular by the strength of the eternal" (p. xv). But "vision" was a critical concern in that book, too; in writing of Poe, Waggoner defined "mystical experience" as "attaining unusual vision, a sudden deepening and sharpening of perception . . ." (p. 133). And in writing of Whitman, Waggoner noted: "To elicit the unseen or hidden values, he relies on imagination, which is able to see fact as symbol. . . . Before the poet can be a true Namer, he must be a true Seer. The value of his vision to us lies in the veracity of its report" (p. 160). In *American Poets*, these ideas were firmly grounded in Emerson, but in *American Visionary Poetry*, Whitman is clearly the new center, and with Whitman comes a greater emphasis on the temporal order as the source of poetry.

For Waggoner, then, Whitman was the great visionary, even though he wrote all of his visionary poems by 1860, certainly by 1865, at which point his poetry diminished from sight-generated work to belief-generated prophecy. No surprisingly original readings of the poetry follow from this scheme. Too often, in fact, the book becomes little more than a catalogue of moments of "attentive, receptive, literal *seeing*" and a continual reaffirmation of how these moments lead to more heightened visionary perception. Waggoner sees Whitman's best poetry as denying both extreme subjectivity (the world turned to self) and extreme objectivity (the self turned to world); the best poems grow rather out of the tension, the influx and efflux. True enough, but this is more a critical commonplace than the critical battle that Waggoner suggests. "Out of the Cradle," which Waggoner sees as Whitman's greatest poem, extends the sense of "visionary" from simply visually oriented poetry to poetry emerging from all the senses, "body-feeling" (p. 54). "I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" becomes a statement that "abstract knowledge is unimportant until it is personally experienced as vision" (p. 58); the poem is not a repudiation of "objective knowledge in favor of pure subjectivity" (as Waggoner characterizes the standard interpretation of this poem). "Passage to India" is a failed visionary poem, leaping from "sight to vision" without adequate preparation, evanescing into abstract prayer. By this time, Whitman had lost the sense that the real world and his mundane experience were charged with intrinsic meaning and were worth his poetic attentiveness.

Waggoner's chapters on the poets who follow Whitman vary in effectiveness; given the theme of "vision," most of the comments on the poets are fairly predictable. Hart

Crane seems to serve Waggoner as a negative exemplum, a poet who tried to be visionary but who, except for a few early exceptions in "Voyages," fell back on myths and heightened metaphors that carried him away from true seeing, more toward Blake than Whitman. Disenchanted with the real world, cast out from faith, Crane blinded himself with abstractions, soaked his words in ambiguity. William Carlos Williams is the opposite: the poet who claims objectivity, finds no ideas but in things, but who nonetheless sees the deeper significance of these things he so closely observes in the world; like Whitman, he looks lovingly at the commonplace and finds poetry there. Like Whitman, too, Williams in his old age turns away from sight-generated poetry toward memory, abstraction, doctrine, but at his best (as in *Desert Music*), Waggoner admits, Williams is the true modernist visionary. Theodore Roethke—"in some important ways more truly Whitman's heir than Williams was without knowing it, or Hart Crane, who aspired to be" (p. 115)—wrote significant visionary poems in his "Greenhouse" sequence and especially in his "North American Sequence" where "geographic journey and the metaphoric journey of self-discovery and self-transcendence are never separated" (p. 133), and where the poet acts out Evelyn Underhill's five stages of mystical experience. A. R. Ammons at his best—early in his career and again recently in *A Coast of Trees*—is the poet versed in the laws and language of science, seeking out the suggestive line between the unseen and the seen; but in the early 1970s, he gave up his faith in the subjective, and his poetry became starkly intellectual, reflecting a world stripped of radiance. For Waggoner, though, the true contemporary heir of Whitman is David Waggoner, a naturalist religious visionary who writes a realistically charged poetry of "looking down before he looks up" (p. 188), and reveals "a world of facts that do not exclude transcendence" (p. 197).

A brief "Prospects" chapter dismisses from Waggoner's company of visionary poets many contemporary poets commonly tied to the Whitman tradition: Allen Ginsberg is too much the prophet, Charles Olson too much the abstract theorist, Robert Bly too much lost in "the depths of the psyche" (p. 203). Waggoner embraces, very briefly, Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, Robert Pack, William Everson, and a few others into the visionary company, and ends with a proselytizing call "to avoid solipsism, nihilism, [and] despair" (p. 207).

Because of the narrowness of its focus, *American Visionary Poets* is often repetitive, and its discussions of poetic careers and of individual poems are reductive. But at its best, Waggoner's book offers a useful meditation on Whitman's musing in the 1855 Preface: "Who know the curious mystery of the eyesight?" The tension between and the commerce between eyesight and mystery form the field of Waggoner's concerns, and he wanders that field with a confidence he has earned.