

REVIEWS

Paul Zweig. *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*. New York: Basic Books, 1984. xi, 372 pp. \$18.75.

This is a prose poem about Whitman, not a biography or critical study properly speaking. Restricting his focus more or less to the years commencing with Whitman's sojourn to New Orleans in 1848 and the beginning of the Civil War, Zweig gives us a stimulating if not altogether reliable portrait of the poet during his most important years. The author is particularly effective in sketching out the years of the early fiction and journalism to show the kind of "open road" Whitman followed to the 1855 *Leaves* and beyond. From a miserable beginning as the unloved son of a brooding father in a troubled home, Zweig's Whitman developed into a poet who strides "greedily from star to star, prancing like some cosmic Yankee peddler across geological ages and astronomical distances. . . ." Though at times misleading, such hyperboles capture the excitement that went into the poem which, Zweig suggests, then created or re-created the man. In fact, they capture it in the way only such a prose poem can do. Zweig's interesting study is an apostrophe to Whitman—in the tradition of William Douglas O'Connor's *The Good Gray Poet*, John Burroughs's *Walt Whitman as Poet and Person*, and Richard Maurice Bucke's *Walt Whitman* (all generally admired by Zweig).

For him as for his predecessors in the art of expressing the Whitman myth, the poet's achievement was something short of a miracle: "Here is the baffling, often irritating fact of Whitman's temperament," Zweig writes, "that he was a hack and yet also America's most original poet." Of course, Whitman was not a "hack" writer but from the beginning a shrewd journalist who could readily identify and exploit current interests, whether they lay with boarding house life and street scenes or with the journalistic fiction that appealed to the concern for domestic stability and its enemy alcoholism (so prevalent in the nineteenth century that it spawned a state-by-state prohibition movement, beginning with the Maine Law of 1851). This ability to sound the American theme and dream made Whitman not only "America's most original poet" but also America's first literary "confidence man." He was "furtive," as he later admitted, not only in the creation of his book but in the creation of the myth which both reveals and conceals his famous "foreground." That foreground remains elusive even after Zweig. Indeed, one wonders more about Zweig's own foreground with Whitman and the books that have been written about him. Perhaps because a good many recent (and not-so-recent) studies of Whitman are missing from his notes, there is a tone of hero-worship in this poetic narrative that suggests that the author never completely overcame his first, youthful impressions of the poet. Zweig, for example, accepts the myth that "Whitman stood completely outside the institution of literature," when in truth his literary associations went back to Poe's *Broadway Journal* and before. We are treated to such abstractions as the statement that Whitman "lived the nation's life before he had lived his own." His achievement in the 1855 *Leaves* is described in terms of "Samson pulling the house of literature down around his ears, yet singing in the ruins."

This is the stuff of myth which Whitman would have welcomed, since he posed as

just such a poet (“inflamed and carried away by his thought”) in the anonymous self-reviews of the first edition. It was the Emersonian myth of writing one’s “autobiography in colossal cipher,” and Whitman could package the product even better than his so-called “master.” In re-telling Whitman’s “story,” Zweig naturally enough has to manipulate the facts of the poet’s life as we know them from more reliable sources. As if to add domestic drama to a background that already holds enough, he suggests that most of the Whitman family problems were underway in the early 1850s (and before) when the poet was “simmering” toward his great book. The most glaring example is Zweig’s repeated assertion that the poet’s oldest brother Jesse exhibited signs of emotional instability as early as the 1840s. In fact, the evidence shows that such was not the case until the Civil War. Walter Whitman, Sr., is also pictured as taking years to die in the 1850s, when in fact we have no idea as to the details of his demise a week after the publication of *Leaves of Grass*. In such a biographical tapestry, the reader is eventually unsure of just when brother Andrew’s wife became a prostitute (of which there is little or no evidence, anyway) or just how old the retarded brother Edward was when Whitman was sorting out his life into the poem that would attempt to sort out the nation’s as well in the famous catalogs. We are too often reminded of Whitman’s anxiety about Edward’s welfare, told repeatedly that he left all his money to Edward (overlooking the detail that Edward died before the poet).

Such details are finally as unimportant to Zweig as they were to O’Connor, Burroughs, and Bucke. Rather, what matters in such an appreciation is the drama of the poet’s rise and fall. Zweig transcends the quotidian truth of his sources (as well as those that are not his sources) to give us an “insider’s” view of the poet—indeed, a poet’s view. The following, for example, presents Whitman’s famous “slough” in technicolor:

Although Whitman’s ‘voice’ still reached confidently for its lovers, the bearded listener at Pfaff’s felt separate, lonely. He was celebrated, yes, but Pfaff’s and its friendly crowd—the slightly shady ‘actresses,’ the acidly witty journalists and down-at-the-heels drinkers—were not America. At times, its underground vaults, for all their clinking and gaitly [sic], felt like a tomb. (p. 264)

Not since Cameron Rogers’s *The Magnificent Idler: The Story of Walt Whitman* (classified as fiction by the Library of Congress) have we had such high drama in the Whitman biography. Zweig’s book, it should go without saying, is a much more serious undertaking. Yet it is hard to accept its thesis, however attractive to us, when it also conceals so many minor errors and is so ignorant of recent developments in Whitman scholarship. Frank Sanborn becomes “Charles Sanborn,” Charles Dana (the *Tribune* editor who published Emerson’s letter) becomes “Henry A. Dana,” author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, T. W. Higginson becomes “T. W. Higgenbottom,” Roy Harvey Pearce (in the notes) becomes “Roy Harvey Pierce.” He is apparently unaware of Ellen O’Connor’s love letters to the poet (published in several places in recent years) and so thinks Whitman was completely unaware of the affections of his best friend’s wife. Indeed, he knows so little about O’Connor and his literary circle that he thinks he fought the Shakespeare-Bacon campaign “virtually alone in America.” Finally, his understanding of the Emerson-Whitman relationship

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.

Texas A & M University

JEROME LOVING

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