

AMERICAN BEAUTY: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND THE MODERNIST WHITMAN. By Stephen Tapscott. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. 267 pp. \$27.50.

Since the early 1960's, many critics have pointed out connections between William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman. For instance, Benjamin T. Spencer has declared that the spirit of Whitman is pervasive in Williams: "In his structure and line, in his urban themes, in his epic impulse, in his reverence for the thing, in his gusto, in his dismissal of the academy, and in innumerable further ways." Joel Conarroe has asserted that both poets "are grandsons of Brueghel, celebrating the common man and finding vitality in the landscape of their native scene. Both devoted much of their creative lives to discovering new ways to break away from the stultifying domination of copied forms in order to record the unique American experience in American language." And James E. Breslin has argued that "to understand Williams fully we must see him, as he saw himself, as the heir and successor of Walt Whitman—as the modern poet who would complete the revolution in American poetry and sensibility that Whitman had begun." In *American Beauty*, Stephen Tapscott goes well beyond the observations of these and of other critics, providing the most thorough and most abundantly detailed study to date of the connections between Williams and Whitman. Although Tapscott concentrates on the complex pattern of Whitman's influence on Williams, he also considers the importance of Whitman's example for more than a dozen other modern poets, foreign as well as American.

Right at the outset, Professor Tapscott makes clear that Whitman's influence on Williams operated not through particular lines or poems, but through several internalized images. Early in his career (ca. 1914-1925), Williams conceived of Whitman as a "giant," a titanic pioneer whose significance resides in his themes, his "generous message." Later on (ca. 1939-1958), Williams understood Whitman as a "simple separate person," a figure whose value lies in his concern for the specificities of place, his "attentiveness to local details." In his image of Whitman as giant, Williams found useful an expansive and liberating tone. In his image of Whitman as separate citizen, he discovered an important attitude toward style—toward rhythm, syntax, "native" diction. Nevertheless, Williams came to regard both Whitmans as problematic and in need of translation. In other words, he felt that Whitman's achievements had to be adapted to new cultural circum-

stances; they had to be made viable in the context of modernist poetics. Thus, as can be seen especially in such Whitmanesque works as *Spring and All* (1923) and *Paterson* (1946-1958), Williams concerned himself with appropriating Whitman's breakthroughs, with extending and completing his predecessor's "invaluable but failed innovations."

Williams' employment of Whitman, Tapscott maintains, should be viewed "not only as formative in his own work but as representative of a pattern of modernist uses of Whitman." Thus in "Two Whitmans," perhaps the most provocative of the seven chapters in *American Beauty*, Tapscott explores what the "Whitmanian model" has meant to poets such as Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, Ruben Dario, Pablo Neruda, Federico Garcia Lorca, Octavio Paz, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. He concludes that Anglo-American modernists, as a rule, have responded to Whitman's "message" (i.e., to the role of the giant), whereas those modernists who write in languages other than English have tended to respond to the "simple separateness of Whitman's style" (i.e., to the role of the private citizen). With respect to Whitman's influence in the international arena, Tapscott adds that "the phase of colonial-linguistic rebelliousness that Whitman represents for the nineteenth-century United States makes him a formative analogue for other writers working through the transition from colonialism to emergent nationalism in other literatures."

American Beauty is a fine study, one that accomplishes at least three things. First, it increases our understanding of William Carlos Williams, not only through its discussions of Williams' use of his inheritance from Whitman but also through its readings of individual Williams poems. Praiseworthy are the explications of "Danse Russe," "St. Francis Einstein of the Daffodils," "The Red Wheelbarrow," "The Rose" (1939), "To a Solitary Disciple," and *Paterson*. Second, it contributes to our knowledge of modernist poetry in general, for it provides insights into the work of many of Williams' contemporaries. Finally, it heightens our appreciation for the achievement of Walt Whitman, as it reveals that his influence on twentieth-century poets has been, indeed, far-reaching and profound.

—Donald Kummings

