



# Tapscott, Stephen. American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman [review]

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## REVIEW

Stephen Tapscott. *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. xii, 267 pp. \$27.50 cloth, \$12.50 paper.

To begin with a caveat: Stephen Tapscott's book is really two books, and the more modest is by far the better. Although Whitman plays a role in both "books," Tapscott's "essential topic" is "a reading of Williams as a crucially inventive—and representative—artistic figure of his time: a subtle and intelligent writer whose work is sometimes underestimated, ironically, because of the obvious joy of its surface" (p. 8). Tapscott's interest in Whitman is subordinate to this end. It would not be fair to say that he simply uses Whitman as Williams himself used Whitman to define his own poetic purposes. Nevertheless, what light he may throw on Whitman's poetry is incidental to his thesis that Williams in order to become the poet he became had to "invent" an idea of Whitman as father of American poetry, but a father whose failure to fulfill the promise of "Song of Myself" left the way open for Williams to succeed him. This then is a study of an "anxious" influence, but not quite in Harold Bloom's sense, nor is the anxiety only Williams's. "Whitman's influence," Tapscott observes, "does not operate on Williams (or on his compatriots) through specific texts, but through an internalized attitude toward experience" (p. 19). Whitman as proto-modernist, then, is not simply Williams's invention, but has affected others in a similar way—Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Marianne Moore, Crane, Stein, Ginsberg, and Olson, among them. If Whitman is every modernist's father, however, Tapscott stands firm on his conviction that Williams alone in *Paterson* finds a language and a form "to carry the Whitmanian quest of a democratic epic of the double self into the local, diffracted, and alienating North America of the twentieth century" (p. 225).

If Tapscott's thesis is more complex than it first seems, so is his approach to Williams and his poems, an approach, he says, "from several angles of vision; in order to place the work in the contexts of its inheritance from Whitman, its metrical pioneering, and its adaptation of essential energies from such movements as Imagism, Vorticism, and Objectivism, I incidentally consider a variety of subthemes (the range of Whitman's influence, for instance, or the fate of the long poem in English since Milton)" (pp. 7–8). He hopes the relation of these "peripheral parts" to his essential topic is clear, but he is less than candid when he calls "the topic of the modernist use of Whitman" one of the peripheral parts (p. 8). So essential is it to his attempt to establish Williams as Williams saw himself—Whitman's true heir, and hence America's foremost modernist poet—that Part I, "A Whitman for Moderns," in which he makes his argument takes up almost half his book. Unfortunately, his treatment of this topic disappoints: for the most part superficial except for some fine readings of individual poems, it so intertwines exposition of Williams's view with exposition of the view of the other modernists that the Whitman who emerges seems made largely in Williams's image. Even his treatment of Williams on Whitman is sometimes ambiguous as when for several pages (pp. 16–18) he cites none of Williams's published prose while presenting as Williams's ideas views which endnotes reveal are those of others. To be sure, Williams held such views, but one may wonder at the method, especially when at the beginning of Part Two, summarizing chronologically

Williams's shifting notions of Whitman, he relegates to an endnote Hyatt Waggoner's contention that Williams knew little about Whitman until forced in 1947 to prepare a lecture for an academic audience (pp. 238-239).

When Tapscott finally puts aside his "modernist" theme, however, and begins his close reading of Williams's poetry as a continuing dialogue with Whitman, one's reservations and quibbles disappear. If the "new theoretical interpretation of the modernist tradition," as the back cover blurb to the paperback edition has it, was necessary for Tapscott to see the Whitman in Williams as clearly as he does, and thus to see Williams himself with new eyes, its inadequacies in its current state one can overlook. *Paterson*, of course, is both Williams's tribute and challenge to Whitman, and as Tapscott reads it, Williams's tribute is generous, his challenge gracious, so unlike the sometimes mean-spirited comments in his prose. Tapscott's lucid insights into the poems and especially *Paterson* defy summary here, but the Whitmanian dialogue between the Self and the self, the universal and the local, clearly has shaped Williams's late poetry and has been given a new direction by that poetry in turn. One can only regret for the sake of his book as a book that Tapscott did not save his revision of the modernist tradition in the light of Whitman for another occasion.

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