



Dougherty, James. Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye [review]

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REVIEWS

JAMES DOUGHERTY. *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993. xxiv, 326 pp. \$32.50.

James Dougherty's scholarly and well-written book on Whitman's special rendering of the visual and urban experience of the modern, democratic poet gives us some fine new readings of poems and groups of poems—notably "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and *Drum-Taps*—as well as a distinctive view of the stages of Whitman's career keyed to different ways of seeing the world and understanding the self in the world. It is a unique blend of philosophical, psychological, and historical criticism, distinguished by Dougherty's admirable ability always to *add* something to the poems he reads and to resist reducing them to his own critical schemes. The humility and decorum implicit in these readings are also evident in his plentiful and generous citations of other studies of Whitman. In extending the historicist tradition of recent criticism (as represented by writers like Carroll Hollis, Wynn Thomas, Betsy Erkkila, Kerry Larson, Kenneth Price, and Ezra Greenspan), *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye* represents a major contribution to our overall understanding of Whitman's poetry and the tradition of modern art in which Whitman participated and made his mark.

The philosophical outlook that guides Dougherty's analysis is that of Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, in which the human figure of modern history, guided by the inquiring eye of the visual imagination, tends to alternate between alienation from the worldly scene, embeddedness in it, and the curious state of the "empty I . . . stuffed full with the world" (Buber, qtd. in Dougherty iii). In the 1855 poems, especially in "Song of Myself," Dougherty argues, Whitman experimented with these various existential perspectives. One of the earliest poets to deal directly with the mass culture—both as a subject and an implied audience of his poems—Whitman explored various roles for the citizen-author, each of which correlates to a particular visual mode. Though inclined toward privacy and interiority (and a corresponding tendency to bring forth pictures from the "inward museum" of memory), the poet searched for the means by which "his vision might be both stabilized and communicated"; ultimately, says Dougherty, "visual experience, either direct or mediated through popular illustration, serves as the base of communion between Whitman and his readers" (xiv). This approach was consistent with Whitman's politics, since democracy fosters an ethic that urges each citizen to "see for yourself" and to adopt a "seeing-is-believing" faith in empirical understanding. As Dougherty puts it, "Whitman turned repeatedly to rhetorical evocations of a visual or pictorial world as a way of twinning his vision with that of his readers and so invoking a substantive reality in which both could believe" (21). Thus, for Whitman, "the power of vision is not only creative; it is communicative" (26).

The language experiment of the 1850s and early 1860s was therefore largely an experiment in visual imagination and communion, with the poet slipping in

and out of several roles. He was the seer who models the highest form of vision so that readers may take up the practice themselves—who, in the poetics of the 1855 Preface, shows people the path between reality and their souls. He was also the poetic guide who directs the reader's vision toward poignant scenes and significant actions, often connecting current events with historical and scenic prototypes. And finally he was the poetic realist who loses himself and his desire to direct or guide in the details of the thing he represents—the nature poet or maker of word pictures, as he appears, for example, in the *Drum-Taps* poems “Cavalry Crossing a Flood” and “Mother and Babe.” In his declamatory mode, Whitman would resort to “assertive recitation,” cataloging “personages, events, and places so well secured in the American museum that a recital of their names alone, or at most a conventional phrase or epithet, invokes the state of mind for which they are a composite metonym” (46). As a counterpoint to this “parataxis en masse” (48), Whitman also engaged the reader in a deeper inquiry, in which “catalog yields to narrative, a description governed not by the force of Whitman’s assimilative will, but by the rhythms of what he sees,” thus “opening a space for reality to act on its own terms” (52). The interspersing of the first mode with the second accounts for the strength of many of the poems of 1855, 1856, and 1860, in which the poet blends newly elaborated scenes of American life with standard images of popular consumption. In such ways, Whitman helped to build what Dougherty calls the Matter of America (corresponding to the old heroic topics connected with the Matter of Rome, of Britain, and of France).

Whitman’s cultivation of the Matter of America, in Dougherty’s reading, followed upon the poet’s dissatisfaction with the inner search for an unmediated, transcendental experience of reality. “Song of Myself,” for example, is “a mimesis of the activity of democratic consciousness”: “When from self-consciousness it turns to the Not-Me, it turns usually to the material and method of the popular print, especially to the genre style, which presented the contemporary rather than the historical, the common rather than the extraordinary” (61). As Dougherty’s analysis makes clear for the first time, Whitman owed a great debt to both the style and the content of the sketches and wood engravings that had begun to appear in the illustrated weeklies of the 1850s. But, while borrowing from popular journalism, Whitman also sought to “improve and broaden” the people’s taste, both artistically and politically (64). Among others, David Reynolds, in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, has documented Whitman’s use of popular themes and genres; but, whereas Reynolds distinguishes Whitman’s poems on formalist grounds as the work of a great stylist, Dougherty keeps the political message in mind, discovering in Whitman’s additions and subtractions to the Matter of America the taste and purposes of the radical democrat. Dougherty argues, for instance, that “*Harper’s* would not have published an engraving of so heroically ‘picturesque’ a black workman [as Whitman depicts in ‘Song of Myself’]; in lithograph, ‘darkies’ appeared mainly in comic caricatures” (65). Whitman also brought prostitutes (male and female), urban workers, immigrants, and city rabble before his audience in a profusion and explicitness unknown in his time. In Dougherty’s view, “Whitman uses such visual images to extend his readers’

receptivity beyond the range of conventionalized thought, to recognize persons and matters that were 'invisible' according to canons of social and literary taste" (69).

But, failing to retain a dependable publisher and uncertain of his reception, Whitman entered the 1860s fearing that his efforts to redirect and revise popular vision had failed and that he would never be "absorbed" by the people as their chief poet. Against this prospect, *Drum-Taps* indicates a pivotal moment. In that book, according to Dougherty, Whitman entered upon a new stage in his career, in which he dedicated himself "to a systematic depiction of conventionally stabilized visual images" (75). Though the "photographic" or "imagist" style of many of the war poems was new for Whitman in the sense that the earlier poems had not forecasted such a turn, Dougherty argues convincingly that "there is much in that style that conforms to earlier pictorial conventions"; thus "*Drum-Taps* represents Whitman's bid to be 'absorbed' by America" on new credentials—"not as a radically democratic visionary but as the inheritor and master of a tradition according to which poems were like pictures" (76-77). We have always known that *Drum-Taps* was more conventional than the poems of the 1850s, but Dougherty's historical analysis reveals a new layer of conventionality associated with the "pen-pictures" of contemporaneous writers like John Henry Hayward who, along with battlefield illustrators like Winslow Homer, met the demand for images of the war among a news-hungry public in an age before cheap photographic reproduction was available. Not that Whitman conceded totally to this demand, for many of the voices of 1855-56 survive in *Drum-Taps*. In addition, a "Satanic" voice—that of the embittered and rejected outsider, cultivated first in the 1860 "Calamus"—also appears. Thus, "*Drum-Taps* is a book divided between several voices and several poetics" (89). It mixes the old declamatory poems with descriptive and narrative poems and introduces as well "a humbler perspective," from which "the subversive tones of Satan, heard so clearly in some of the poems of *Drum-Taps*, could modulate into the more acquiescent voice of a citizen who remembers the cost of victory; who stands aside from triumph to sing dirges for the fallen" (90). In this mode, the citizen-poet "narrowed the panoramic scope of his earlier poetry, in favor of a quiet attentiveness to the commonplace heroism of bivouacs and hospital wards" (117). Just as the Civil War "gave steady purpose" to Whitman's personal life, Dougherty goes on to say, it also "resolved the shuttling between objective and subjective, I and Not-Me, that had so agitated the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*" (117).

The techniques and subject matter Whitman developed in his war poems would consume his poetic practice for the rest of his career. After the war, the poems he wrote divided into two fairly distinct classes—first, the "poems of the mind," reflections of public events, reminiscences, and proclamations, and, second, the newer "pictorial illustrations, serenely transmitting a stable physical world seen in depth" (126). In short, the world of the I and the world of the Not-Me became conventionally separated in these later poems, which lack both the "shuttling" agitation of the radical early poems and the transcendent power of poems like "There Was a Child Went Forth" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"—the two poems that Dougherty rates highest among Whitman's great-

est accomplishments largely because of their exquisite balance of the various modes of visual (and visionary) experience.

The best of Whitman's poems, Dougherty notes, are rooted in the life of the city, the life the poet knew best from personal experience. "It was within the schema of the city," says Dougherty, "that Whitman might have most successfully fulfilled his ambition to be the public poet, drawing for his fellow citizens a path between their souls and the 'dumb real objects' of America" (197). As an urban poet, Whitman had his greatest impact upon future generations of writers and visual artists, forecasting the appeal of photographic technology that, like his poems, claims to exclude nothing within the scope of the eye or lens, to foreground the objects and the people that conventional vision shuns. The play of surface and depth, perspective and immersion, and the corresponding play of detachment and commitment in public life, become key topics in the work of visual artists like Jacob Riis, John Sloan, Alfred Stieglitz, and Berenice Abbott as well as writers like T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Saul Bellow, and Denise Levertov—all of whom Dougherty covers in the several chapters of survey that conclude his book. With these chapters, Dougherty adds new dimensions to our understanding of Whitman as having transformed his Romantic heritage to adjust himself and his readers to the world of the modern with its mass societies and urban spectacles.

Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye thus handles three closely related themes: the interplay of subjectivity and objectivity (or sympathy and prudence) in the development of citizen psychology and socialization, the role of visualization in a poetry oriented to public life, and the effect of urbanization on modern art and consciousness (also the topic of his fine 1980 book *The Fivesquare City: The City in the Religious Imagination*). Dougherty takes some trouble to tighten the relation among these themes, indicating, for example, that the sense of a gap between subject and object is largely an effect of emphasizing visual perception over other modes of empirical knowledge. Despite his efforts, though, the themes tend to drift apart at times and make the book appear a bit loose and eclectic in its argument. Nevertheless, we should grant this measure of eclecticism to the author, for it keeps him from forcing a thesis upon his readers or upon the poems and pictures he interprets. As it stands, this readable book succeeds quite well in advancing our understanding of Whitman's place in cultural history and should also increase the appreciation we feel for Whitman's struggle with himself and his sorting of cultural resources in the service of a truly public and democratic art.

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JOEL MYERSON. *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993. xxiv + 1,097 pp. \$250.00.

In "Whitman: Bibliography as Biography," delivered at the Whitman Centennial Conference at the University of Iowa (and now printed in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* [1994], ed. Ed Folsom), Joel Myerson defined descriptive bibliographies as "much more than listings of titles with selected full-scale physical descriptions of major works." They are, he said, reflecting most