

*Review Essay*

## **Traditions of Seeing and Believing: Some New Books on Whitman**

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WHITMAN AND TRADITION: The Poet in His Century. By Kenneth M. Price. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1990.

LEAVES OF GRASS: America's Epic of Self and Democracy. By James E. Miller, Jr. New York: Twayne Masterworks Series. 1992.

WALT WHITMAN AND THE CITIZEN'S EYE. By James Dougherty. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1993.

More than any other American writer, Walt Whitman sought to control the interpretation of his work. With the initial appearance of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, he began the lifelong habit of placing anonymous "reviews" and articles about himself in the press. At the end of his life, he included a note on the verso of the title page of the 1891-92 ("deathbed") edition of *Leaves of Grass* stipulating that the "present [edition], complete," be used for "future printing." Individual poems could be read only as he had modified them and those poems would have to be interpreted in the context of the thematic clusters that he had worked assiduously to arrange. Further, he insisted that the interpretive prose essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travell'd Roadse" be printed as part of *Song of Myself*. Needless to say, Whitman's strategy of including these interpretive frames within his work

backfired; even before the vogue of deconstruction, Whitman scholars came to resist this attempt on the poet's part to control the reading of his work. Today, the preferred text of individual poems is likely to be the work's first appearance, not Whitman's modification; more often than not, Whitman's thematic sequences are ignored; and readers are distrustful of his comments in "A Backward Glance" and elsewhere.

Especially welcome, therefore, is James E. Miller, Jr.'s *Leaves of Grass: America's Lyric-Epic of Democracy* as an attempt to honor the poet's intentions as part of a comprehensive interpretation. So unusual is such an approach that Miller's brief volume, part of a Twayne series of introductions to literary masterworks for students, has the effect of forcing us to ask what we may have been missing by resisting Whitman's poetry of old age as "an astonishing body of lyric poetry, written in the final years of a poet of remarkable creative power, and deserve a better fate that they have had." Throughout, his interpretations are informed by a central theme of recent Whitman scholarship: the subtlety with which the poet involves the reader in the construction of meaning.

Miller's starting point is Whitman's anguish over the failings of American democracy, including slavery, disunion, corruption, exploitation, and racism. He reads *Leaves of Grass* as at once a powerful series of lyrics and a magnificent counterstatement to those failings, "a uniquely poetic statement of American democratic ideals." In the process, Whitman created a new form, the "lyric-epic," in which the personal and the public are harmonized: "His inspiration is lyric, his ambition epic, the one to be fitted within the structure of the other." But for many readers the difficulty with such an approach is that something vital is lost as the lyric poet is absorbed into the epic intent of the late Whitman. For instance, Miller finds little difference in the affective weight between the "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" sections, and he follows the poet in arguing that the homosexuality of the latter is "transfigured in to the social ideal of the love of comrades and of democratic brotherhood." Perhaps such statements are appropriate in a short introductory text, but missing is a sense both of the perplexity of the "Calamus" poet and of the complexity of individual works.

In *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*, James Dougherty too sees Whitman's starting point as the poet's response to a fundamental failure of American democracy, but he defines that failure as the problem of achieving community in the atomistic society depicted by Tocqueville, a society in which each person is thrown back "forever upon himself alone, and [which] threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart." In response, Whitman created a visual, urban poetics intended to "awaken the imaginative faculty of his reader, binding poet and reader into a common citizenship founded on that 'spiritual world' whose realities the common miracle of eyesight anticipates." The rub for Dougherty is that only in a few poems does Whitman achieve that "miracle," the creation on the page of the "picture-making words 'indicate' an external reality, but toward making them represent the play of images, ideas, and

feelings within the mind.” These few poems include “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “There Was a Child Went Forth,” and portions of “Song of Myself.” For the most part, he argues, Whitman was content to rely on the stock of visual images readily available in the periodicals, and he sees the post-Civil War poetry especially as vitiated by a rhetorical and political expansiveness. As opposed to the comprehensive treatment of Miller, Dougherty limits his analyses to those successful works, where through the power of the visual, reader and poet enter into a dialogic relationship of the sort described by Martin Buber in *I and Thou*. The consequence of his concern with the visual is necessarily to slight other dimensions of the poet’s work. The last third of *Citizen’s Eye* offers suggestive readings of urban poets, photographers, and poets who continue Whitman’s urban aesthetics, including Riis, Sloan, Steiglitz, Sheeler, Abbott, Williams, Hart Crane, and Leveratov.

In *Whitman and Tradition*, Kenneth Price also begins with a statement of the problems that provided the stimulus for the poet, arguing that his “self-assertions were rooted in fear: a person ill at ease with his sexuality became the virile bard, a failed politician sensitive to social fragmentation elevated America to the ‘greatest poem,’ the product of a family riddled with disease and neuroses celebrated the poet of ‘perfect health.’” Only through an act of will could Walter Whitman overcome these and other problems by becoming Walt Whitman. He had no choice, Price implies, but to go the whole way. Whereas other American poets might go back to Milton or Shakespeare as a source for American poetry, Whitman made a clean break with the British tradition. But to break with his predecessors did not mean that Whitman did not to draw from them—on his own terms. Price insightfully charts Whitman’s complex relationships with such predecessors as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Bryant, Longfellow, and especially Emerson. Both innovator and perpetuator, Whitman achieved a rare balance, one which, as Price shows, eluded most of his late nineteenth-century successors. Price’s careful study helps us to appreciate just how Whitman “managed to intertwine forces of literary prestige and antiliterary counter-culturalism by becoming himself a center of power while giving the impression that he stood outside all privileged positions. . . . Whitman has thus been compatible with innumerable later projects, projects of varying and sometimes even conflicting purposes. Such capaciousness is a mark of a truly vital tradition.”

One test of the vitality of the Whitman tradition, each of these authors remarks, is the uses to which it has been put by the poet’s successors. James Dougherty is especially good at uncovering ways that it was valuable for urban poets, painters, and photographers. Kenneth Price suggestively shows how writers of fiction such as Kate Chopin could draw from it. Such was the breadth and depth of Whitman’s achievement that his attempt to control interpretations and uses of his work was folly. The self-described “teacher of athletes” was “large, I contain multitudes.”