

THE AMERICAN QUEST FOR A SUPREME FICTION: WHITMAN'S LEGACY IN THE PERSONAL EPIC, by James E. Miller, Jr., University of Chicago Press, 1979.

The meaning of the epic poem changed completely with the publication of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. This is the subject of James E. Miller's book, *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic*, published in 1979. Miller, Professor of English and Chairman of the Department of English at the University of Chicago, traces the American epic poem from its roots in the seventeenth century to modern day personal epics, concentrating on the influence of Whitman. "As a saint, an embarrassment, or a joke, old Walt haunts the American poetic psyche" (13). So Miller states, adding that "Walt Whitman was the pivotal figure for the American epic form, looming large in the long path coming out of the past and leading into the future" (x). Miller explains that he is not discussing "surface influences" but "the strong currents that flow in the depths below" (xi).

Since Whitman's title, *Leaves of Grass*, refers partly to his own poetic creation, it is appropriate that Miller's book is divided into three parts: "Roots and Trunk," "Branches," and "Leaves." Part I is concerned with the history and meaning of the epic. A chapter is devoted to Wallace Stevens's recipe for a "supreme fiction." Miller states that there is

an almost obsessive impulse in the American poet to write a long poem: not just another long poem, but a long poem for America, that will serve as its epic, and if not its epic, then as the embodiment of its Supreme Fiction, as a particularly American way of conceiving or perceiving or receiving the world (16).

The only chapter exclusively about Walt Whitman discusses the style and structure of *Leaves of Grass* as well as the ideals that he promoted in his poetry.

Until the publication of *Leaves of Grass* the epic poem was defined traditionally as "a long narrative poem, written in an elevated style, relating the exploits of a truly heroic hero, whose actions are closely bound to the destiny of his country" (34). Walt Whitman

created a personal epic with himself as its hero, in a free style with a common theme and interior action, yet with a prophet-like insight into the future of America. Thus the epic was redefined.

Since the initial impact of *Leaves of Grass* the presence of Whitman, though ignored by many, has been felt and each poet has experienced the need to glorify Whitman or to reject him. Even Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, influenced by the French symbolists, can trace their roots back to early America. Miller claims that the French poets were influenced by Edgar Allen Poe, who published his own epic, *Eureka*, in 1848 (19). Pound gives credit to Whitman: “‘Whitman is to my fatherland . . . what Dante is to Italy. . . . As for Whitman, I read him (in many parts) with acute pain, but when I write of certain things I find myself using his rhythms’” (70). Eliot denies the influence of Whitman, even insisting that Whitman could not have influenced Pound. “‘Whitman is certainly not an influence; there is not a trace of him anywhere; Whitman and Mr. Pound are antipodean to each other’” (103). Miller believes that Whitman’s “‘so called optimism and Eliot’s pessimism are two sides of the same poetic coin, that both outlooks derived from personal sources and were projected onto worlds that accepted the outlooks as confirming their own’” (102).

As time passed, other poets wrote their personal epics. Whitman’s presence can be felt in each. “‘Branches’” and “‘Leaves’” contain chapters on poets who have sprung from the Whitman tradition. Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, and Allen Ginsberg’s *Fall of America* are all written in the Whitman style, yet each is individually unique. Williams is quoted as saying, “‘The only way to be like Whitman is to write *unlike* Whitman. Do I expect to be a companion to Whitman by mimicking his manners?’” (128).

Miller stresses the importance of the shift in the world of poetry that took place in the late 1950’s and early ’60’s. With the publication of *Howl* by Ginsberg in 1956 the change began. Two poets who had followed in the traditional pattern, John Berryman and Robert Lowell, suddenly shifted to a new style of poetry. Each modeled his own personal epic poem after Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

The book closes with a chapter concerned with the future of the quest for a supreme fiction. Whitman predicted, in “‘A Woman Waits for Me,’”

Envelop’d in you sleep greater heroes and bards, . . .
I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life,
death, immortality, I plant so lovingly now.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote in 1975, “‘Where are Whitman’s wild children?’” (318), referring to Whitman’s prediction of “‘Poets to Come.’” Miller believes that the “‘vision and view lie not in a static achievement but in the quest itself’” (331).

Miller is a knowledgeable writer who argues his views convincingly. *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction* is a valuable addition to the library of any Whitman scholar or any reader interested in the progress of the American personal epic poem. To the reader uninitiated into the world of the American poets, the book is an introduction that invites further exploration. Upon completion of the book the reader realizes the power that Whitman had through his poetry. He can be seen now, not only as a unique poet with an individual style, but as a presence that will continue as long as poets continue their search for a supreme fiction.

— Hazel L. Redman

Language and Style in Leaves of Grass. by C. Carroll Hollis. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983.

In this stylistic examination of *Leaves of Grass*, Hollis attempts both to explain what Whitman was doing prior to 1860 and to show some of the changes that occurred afterwards. The new kind of poetry that Whitman was writing in the first three editions of *Leaves*, Hollis contends, was based on Whitman’s aspiration—oratory—and his training—journalism. Through an examination of features of these two bases, Hollis proves that Whitman was able to blend them into a persona that, in the early poems, was central to the making of the programmatic and prophetic poetry of democracy.

The “‘barrels of lectures’” that Whitman began in 1847 are notes for oratorical presentation. Already in a form suitable for utterance by a prophetic bard, these notes became poetry by being broken up into lines in the 1855 edition of *Leaves*, according to Hollis. Directly addressing a “‘you,’” Whitman used such features of oratory as negation, rhetorical questions, parallelism and repetition, and lists and catalogs.