Critical Commentary

America’s Epic
James E. Miller, Jr.

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Did Whitman write the epic for modern America? There have been many who contend that Leaves of Grass is merely a collection of lyric poetry, some good, some bad, all of it of a peculiarly personal nature that disqualifies its attitudes and philosophy generally. There have been others who have defended Whitman’s book as the embodiment of the American reality and ideal, as superb fulfillment of all the genuine requirements of the national epic.

What did Whitman believe? The answer may be found in a number of prose works, beginning with the 1855 Preface. It is clear in this early work that Whitman desired Leaves of Grass to bear a unique relationship with America: “Here [in America] at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night... It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it.” It is generally recognized that the entire Preface is a veiled account of Whitman’s concept of his own role as a poet. Certainly he includes himself in the category when he asserts: “The poets of the kosmos advance through all interpositions and coverings and turmoils and stratagems to first principles.” Although Whitman does not use the term, it is clear throughout the 1855 Preface that he believes his book to have the basic nature and general scope of the traditional national epic.

In Democratic Vistas, in the same indirect manner, Whitman again reveals his concept of the nature of his poetry: “Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the poet of the modern is wanted, or the great literatus of the modern. At all times, perhaps, the central point in any nation, and that whence it is itself really sway’d the most and whence it sways others, is its national literature, especially its archetypal poems” (V, 54–55). Whitman was by this time (1871) acutely aware that America had not accepted his book as he had planned and hoped. There can be little doubt that he conceived Leaves of Grass as an “archetypal” poem produced and offered to America at its “central point”—a book “sway’d” by the nation and written to sway others. Such a work as Whitman calls for in Democratic Vistas is surely the epic of America. And, basically, it is his own work which he desires to be recognized as such.

Key Ideas and Details What question about Whitman’s work does Miller pose? According to Miller, how does Whitman himself answer that question? What evidence does Miller provide to support this answer?

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