

REVIEWS

EDWIN HAVILAND MILLER. *Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": A Mosaic of Interpretations*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989. xxx + 179 pp.

A mosaic is an appropriate figure both for Whitman's masterpiece and for this unique book of criticism. Professor Miller fully appreciates the double appropriateness of the figure, as he shows when considering the multiple attempts at finding a partitive structure to the poem: "Yet it is only Whitmanesque to believe that in the future a reader will uncover, no doubt by happy accident, patterns embedded in the rich details of the mosaic that at last produce the harmonious consensus that has eluded generations of reader-lovers" (xxviii). There may be some irony in Miller's avowed belief, for his "mosaic of interpretations" leads one to question the dream of some future "harmonious consensus." Instead, the mosaic of Whitman's poem manages both to elicit a rich variety of responses and to elude its "reader-lovers."

Miller's book is itself a mosaic, as much in form as in content. The volume opens with a twenty-page introduction to the genesis and reception of the poem, to critical appraisals from 1938 to the present, to the search for genre, and to the search for structure. A useful, concise account of "The Plan of the Mosaic of Interpretations" concludes the section. The second part of the book presents a facsimile reprint of the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself" (pp. 1-44). Line and section numbers appear in the right-hand margin, and the glaring printing errors of the first edition (such as the infamous "abode," 15:320) disappear. The heart of the book, "The Mosaic of Interpretations" (45-145), provides critical commentaries, draft lines, and later revisions of Whitman's 1855 mosaic. Then we find a concise but comprehensive critical apparatus: notes, bibliography, and index (147-179).

Perhaps the most striking and praiseworthy aspects of Miller's mosaic are its range and impartiality. In the section on "The Search for Structure" (xviii-xxviii), for instance, Miller presents no less than nineteen versions of a partitive or "phasal" structure, from Carl Strauch's 1938 essay to Calvin Bedient's piece in the 1987 companion to the PBS *Voices and Visions* series, and a note sends the diligent reader to yet seven more (147). In the "Mosaic of Interpretations," Miller admittedly exercises editorial control, selecting interpretations he judges to be important and original, omitting the derivative and foolish. But, again, the hallmark of the "Mosaic" is Miller's balanced approach: in most cases he allows the critics to speak for themselves, and the result is a rich multiplicity of critical voices and approaches. The mosaic is thus a corporate figure, embracing the work of almost three hundred critics.

One of the problems raised by the corporate figure is that of reducing multiplicity to coherent order. Miller accomplishes this task through careful selection and arrangement. In sections of the poem that have received a great deal of commentary, for example, he divides the mosaic into thematic headings:

Section 5, which has been over the years a center of gravity for critical commentary, is divided into three parts—Mysticism, Sexuality, Art (alternatively, God, Man, Poet)—with an epilogue featuring interpretations of crucial lines. Section 1 features a special discussion of “Grass as Symbol.” And “Whitman’s Catalogues” receive special status by being placed at the end of the “Mosaic of Interpretations” (141-145). Miller’s strategy thus resembles Whitman’s method of arranging the poems in clusters after 1860, a further indication of the close relationship between the two mosaics.

This is not to say that Miller is merely acting as an editor, for he certainly applies a generous amount of his own critical judgment to the poem and to the critics. In commenting on Section 51, for instance, he summarizes and evaluates the work of four readers, then contributes two paragraphs of his own, connecting the section to *Moby Dick*, Montaigne, and Emerson. In Section 52, he notes that Whitman’s use of the hawk image parallels the closing figures of *Moby Dick* and *Walden*. Throughout the “Mosaic of Interpretations,” therefore, Miller adds his own voice to the interpretive chorus.

Some readers may find that voice to exercise too much authority or control. Miller can make absolute pronouncements, such as the statement that Charles Ives is “the greatest of American musical composers” (83), which appear less than absolutely valid. He also undercuts provocative readings: so, a few pages later, he quotes Leslie Fiedler’s suggestion that the sea in Section 22 replaces the human lover Walt Whitman may never have embraced, only to add, “Surely loving the sea has little in common with the complexities of human relationships and maturation” (87). Many of Miller’s critical judgments are influenced by his great admiration for the poet. So, to take another example, he consistently refers to the speaker as “the I,” whereas other commentators would insist on a more decentered version of the poetic self (see Bloom’s commentary on Section 5, p. 64). What emerges from this choral method, however, is not one definitive, authoritative interpretation but a plurality of often conflicting interpretations. And that portrait of the poem and its critics clearly suggests the relative impartiality of the author. There can be no doubt that Miller presents a comprehensive mosaic, even if the reader discovers a tile or two missing or misplaced. Moreover, the bibliography ensures that all of the three hundred critics are represented, even if their work is not discussed fully in the “Mosaic of Interpretations.”

A further value of the book is its usefulness as an interpretive tool. On one level, the book provides a running commentary on the poem, often focusing on specific lines or phrases. On another level, the attentive reader can use the “Mosaic” section, the bibliography, and the index to piece together the work of a particular critic. And because the index is divided into several sections, the reader can find cross-references to every section of the poem, to thematic elements, and to literary influences. This means that Miller’s work allows the true “reader-lover” of the poem to pursue any of several avenues of interpretation, from the most basic to the most arcane. For this reason the book will be a valuable tool for a large variety of readers, from the bewildered undergraduate to the devoted scholar.

“Song of Myself” has bewildered even its most devoted readers for nearly 135 years. But in this regard we should remember the concept of textuality

Whitman formulates in *Democratic Vistas*: "Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does." The mosaic of "Song of Myself" furnishes the framework, but the reader must construct the poem. And even in doing so, the reader should be intent on completing himself or herself, rather than completing the poem, through the "gymnast's struggle" of interpretation. Professor Miller's *Mosaic of Interpretations* can, in this sense, be no more complete than Whitman's poem. But in furnishing a host of insightful hints, by other critics and by himself, Miller constructs a version of the poem that is more than merely complete.

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DAVID LEVERENZ. *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989. xii + 372 pp.

In Peter Weir's recent film, *Dead Poets' Society*, the inspiring but unconventional teacher played by Robin Williams takes as his model the figure of Walt Whitman, whose portrait hangs over his classroom. For those in the know, this can hardly be an innocent set of signifiers: the teacher is obviously gay, and he is bringing to his adolescent male charges the message of sexuality in the poems of Whitman. But at the same time that the film signifies this sexual plot, another set of signifiers denies it: the poem of Whitman's most often referred to is "O Captain! My Captain!" and the teacher has a picture of an attractive woman on his desk (even though she is absent from the film and the plot). The second set of signifiers, coming after the first, says this film doesn't mean what you think it means. It certifies the film's safeness for its large American audience.

Of course it could be that the heterosexual plot is the *only* plot in the film, and the homosexual plot is only in my imagination. It *could be*, except that in that case the film makes no sense. If the Whitman who is invoked is the Whitman of "O Captain!" he is the very heart of conventional pedagogy and patriotism and hardly likely to inspire anyone to anything. And if Robin Williams is invoking that Whitman, why does the family of his favorite student react with such violence to his influence over their son? Is it really because they hate the theatre so much? Of course, the hatred of the family, the torments they inflict on their son, his eventual suicide, and his roommate's emotional collapse all make sense as a study of the effect of homophobia on the perceived incursion of homosexuality into a homosocial world. By silencing the homophobia theme, or leaving it available only for the sophisticated, the filmmakers have provided a film that seems curiously empty.