WALT WHITMAN
QUARTERLY REVIEW

Volume 20 | Number 1 (2002) pps. 40-40

Athenot, Éric. Walt Whitman: Poète-cosmos [review]

Roger Asselineau

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2002 Roger Asselineau

Recommended Citation
Asselineau, Roger. "Athenot, Éric. Walt Whitman: Poète-cosmos [review]." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 20 (Summer 2002), 40-40.

Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1697

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walt Whitman Quarterly Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

REVIEW

ÉRIC ATHENOT. *Walt Whitman: Poète-cosmos*. Paris: Belin, 2002. 126 pp.

Leaves of Grass is as green as ever in France, and there even seems to be a revival of interest in Whitman. In the past few years, new translations have appeared: one of the 1855 Preface, which had not been previously translated, and a new complete translation of *Leaves* by Jacques Darras, an Americanist and a poet, soon to be published by Gallimard, the most prestigious publisher in France. It will supersede Léon Bazalgette's translation, which is nearly a century old, and which is rather awkward and prosaic, even occasionally faulty. So it seems that a new generation is taking over the task of cultivating *Leaves of Grass* on French soil. Several little books on Whitman have appeared recently, most notably this one by an academic critic.

Éric Athenot's *Walt Whitman* is a slim and handsome volume with a close-up of Mathew Brady's 1862 photograph of Whitman on the cover. It is the best short introduction to *Leaves of Grass* in French. It duly celebrates the powerful cosmic inspiration of the poet and his role as one of the founders of an American literature distinct from and independent of English literature, though stemming from it and sharing the same language. But Athenot is not a blind worshipper. His study is not uncritical. Just as André Gide thought that Victor Hugo was the great French poet—alas!—because of his grandiloquence, Athenot mentally adds the same reservation to his assessment of Whitman as the greatest American poet. He protests against the myth, the hagiography, that has grown up around the poet and magnified him in order to "sell" him as the champion and patron saint of Universal Democracy.

The book contains more positive elements, however—in particular, an interesting study of the innovative aspects of Whitman's language and prosody, including his rejection of "poetic diction" and his adoption of "vers libre" (which roused such indignation among conservative critics and readers in 1855), and the influence of symphonic and operatic music on his "vocalism." The different themes of *Leaves* are similarly carefully analyzed: the body and its dionysian appetites, for example, and America as an ideal democratic nation in a state of constant and irresistible becoming.

Curiously enough, in all these empathic analyses of Whitman's poetry, one sometimes feels the presence of an undercurrent of pessimism which contradicts the poet's optimism, but the final chapter on "Whitman, Poet and Prophet" shows that, even if *Leaves* is not a New Bible for a new religion, it contains a potent spiritual message reconciling man with his mortal condition on the earth and celebrating his participation in an eternally renewed physical and spiritual world.

University of Paris—Sorbonne ROGER ASSELINEAU