



In Memoriam: James E. Miller, Jr.

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IN MEMORIAM: JAMES E. MILLER, JR.



James E. Miller, Jr., died in Chicago on his ninetieth birthday, September 9, 2010. An Americanist with wide-ranging interests, he published books on Herman Melville, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and T. S. Eliot. His longtime work on “America Reads,” a literature series for secondary school students with Scott Foresman, reached innumerable young readers. But he was best known for his field-shaping contributions to Whitman studies.

Influenced by the then-dominant New Criticism, Miller provided incisive analyses of Whitman’s poems in essays published in *PMLA* and other

leading venues. These essays, reworked and supplemented in *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (Chicago, 1957), highlighted Whitman’s artistry and elevated his standing in the academy. Miller promoted Whitman studies in other ways, too, with his early analysis of the Whitman tradition, *Start with the Sun*, co-authored with Bernice Slote and Karl Shapiro (Nebraska, 1960); with his overview study *Walt Whitman* (Twayne, 1962); with his illuminating “*Song of Myself*”—*Origin, Growth, Meaning* (Dodd, Mead, 1964), which presented parallel text versions of the 1855 and 1892 texts; and with his groundbreaking study of Whitman’s influence on twentieth-century poetry, *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman’s Legacy in the Personal Epic* (Chicago, 1979). Miller was a rare academic, capable of publishing in the best journals and with the most prestigious publishing houses, while also being unpretentious enough to recognize the value of a good introductory study and the central importance of teaching to academic life (fittingly, he served a term as President of the National Council of Teachers of English). Given his commitments and his love of Whitman, it is appropriate that one of Miller’s last contributions to the field was an overview, meant especially to benefit those new to Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: America’s Lyric-Epic of Self and Democracy* (Twayne, 1992).

Born in Oklahoma, Miller served as a cryptographer for the Army during World War II. He later attended the University of Chicago where he earned his M.A. and Ph.D. His early career was spent at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he rose to become chair of the English department at age thirty-six. He was called back to join the University of Chicago faculty in 1962. He was appointed Helen A. Regenstien Professor of English and served as chair of this department from 1978 to 1984. His career had an international

dimension as well: he lectured and taught in numerous European and Asian countries. He retired in 1990.

I came to know Miller in the late 1970s, when I was a graduate student at Chicago. I took his Poe/Hawthorne/Melville class and later an independent study course on Whitman. Soon thereafter he agreed to direct my dissertation on Whitman's theory of poetry. It was remarkable that he found time for me (the Whitman course was an overload) since he had an ambitious research agenda, heavy administrative duties, and, most significantly, his first wife, Barbara Anderson, was dying. There was a moving moment in one of our sessions when Miller, who always seemed completely engaged, apologized and asked me to repeat something I had said. It was a moment of distraction, and he handled his human frailty and vulnerability with memorable grace and candor. Occasionally, he was also known to offer homespun wisdom, as when he advised me, some years later, "never to accept a job until it has been offered to you."

Miller was honored as one of four Centennial Scholars at the University of Iowa Whitman Centennial Conference in 1992, and, after remaining active beyond others in his generation of Whitman scholars, he was honored as the lone Whitman Sesquicentennial Scholar in 2005 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conference commemorating the 150th anniversary of the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*. During that Nebraska conference, Miller and his second wife, Kathleen Farley, learned that the suitcase of a Whitman scholar from China, Liu Shusen, was torn beyond repair while in transport to the conference. It was only last year that I learned from Shusen that Jim and Kathleen gave him one of their own suitcases for his return trip to China. The generosity was characteristic of them both.

Readers of this journal are students of the nineteenth century, an era when many believed in the possibility of the good death (with the Civil War bringing death in unprecedented numbers to people in the prime of life, the belief may have become an emotional, spiritual, psychological necessity). We live in a very different age, of course, and the idea of the good death is no longer a prominent part of our culture, if it exists at all. I suspect many of us are skeptical that there can be a good death. In the loss of Jim Miller, a loss presaged by several years of decline into Alzheimer's disease, we wonder again at the decay brought by time. To the end, Jim recognized his beloved Kathleen, and for that we can be thankful. Kathleen notes that at the end of his days, when many memories had been erased, he would gaze at the long array of books bearing his name and delight in repeating "I read books, I taught books, I wrote books. I can't live without writing a book." Even as he lost track of the world, he continued to know himself. Whatever we make of such mysteries, we can take some solace in knowing that Jim Miller died in his home surrounded by the love of his children and wife Kathleen. I've been told that they held hands and sang "Happy Birthday" at his death. That's a little unconventional, perhaps, but maybe it was exactly fitting: it was his birthday after all, and his was a birth and a life worth celebrating, even and especially on the occasion of his death.

—Kenneth M. Price, *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*