



Caxtonian

A Newsletter of The Caxton Club of Chicago

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August 1996

Walt Whitman — From Brooklyn Editor to the World's Poet

"For the truth of the matter is that a satisfactory biography of [Walt] Whitman must be essentially a biography of an inner life and the mysterious creative processes of poetry. It was in Whitman's inner life that the great things, some of them heroic, happened. It is his inner life that infused into the 'Leaves of Grass' such greatness as it possesses, which is far more than his contemporaries guessed." —Henry Seidel Canby

I recently read Henry Seidel Canby's *Walt Whitman: An American*. This fine, 1943 biography is one of the first recognitions (and still one of the best, it seems to me) of Whitman's importance in American literature.

What Canby did so well in this study was to reveal Whitman, the publicly acclaimed Brooklyn editor, metamorphosing into the poet of American democracy, who transformed not only poetry but the role of the poet beginning in 1855 with the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*.

Canby focused on Whitman's "inner life," that hidden domain of his being, which he nurtured independent of his professional and public life. Canby commented, "The struggle of a growing self to be born into consciousness and action has never been better illustrated than in Walt the editor giving birth to Walt the poet, who nevertheless is more truly a twin brother than a son."

As I read, I was struck by two things: first, Whitman led a "double-life" in his maturing years — as most truly gifted people must, even in today's society. It is a revealing commentary on our culture that the home, business and industry, schools and religious institutions — even colleges and universities — often fail to provide fertile ground for the growth of genius. Genius still struggles silently, if it does not rage, against great odds to be born in human beings.

The second thing that struck me was how seldom we address the inner life these days — and how inept we seem to be in dealing with the inner life. The



This picture of Whitman appeared in the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, replacing the author's name: readers were able to find Whitman's name only by reading the initial long poem, later called "Song of Myself," where he included the line: "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son." He indicated that he considered the picture as an integral part of his book, and he included it in some later editions of Leaves. It is a steel engraving of a daguerreotype.

*From James E. Miller, Jr.
Walt Whitman - Updated Edition*

mass of people, I fear, lead lives of pervasive superficiality. The sanctity of life itself, the profundity of the human experience on earth, and the magnanimous nature of the Cosmos are seldom considered, to say nothing of being understood, even at the graduate level of most universities.

Television has encouraged the supreme superficiality of our age, it seems to me. No television program — even of eight hours'

duration — could probe the subtle shades of meaning in word, poem, thought, and life as Canby did in this remarkable book about Whitman. To read good books regularly with intelligence and sensitivity is to have one's own inner life probed and cultivated.

The compartmentalization of knowledge is another thing. The inner life smacks of religion, and we'll have *no* religion in the classroom. As the absence of good thinking in religion leads to a form of superficiality called anti-intellectualism, so the absence of sound spiritual discernment in learning leads to an even more extreme — but equally dangerous — form of superficiality that we might call "anti-spirituality."

To make students, and especially gifted students, choose between either religion or education — as we frequently do — is to deprive them of the emotional freedom to choose both and then to sort out from the many varieties of each the most noble and ennobling for their lives. And it is to deprive them of what Canby called "A fraternal love, or at least affection," the "cement of democracy."

This was central to Whitman's philosophy as the poet of democracy, and it offers a powerful incentive for understanding in our day, as Canby said: "For the man or woman emotionally free and fully developed will be easily directed toward love, rather than hate, of his fellow creatures. The need for love, like the need for political freedom, must be satisfied by a successful democracy."

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Caxtonian

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Musings...

Last week I bought a copy of *Pictures* (1927), a poem unpublished by Walt Whitman in his lifetime (1819 - 1892), but written by him, according to the introduction by Emory Holloway, around 1850 — five years before he first issued *Leaves of Grass*.

Reading through the poem, I was reminded of many passages in Whitman's later writings. I was reminded of his boundless optimism in the vast diversity of America — a microcosm of the world — which he celebrated in his poetry. And I was reminded that 1996 marks the 120th anniversary of the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, where Whitman, the most important poet of his day and, history would prove, of all American literature, was wholly disregarded by the intellectual establishment of his time and by his own countrymen.

Whitman had written "Song of the Exposition" in 1875 in hopes that he would be invited to have a role in the Centennial celebration, just across the river from his Camden, NJ home. He began preparing a two-volume edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the "Centennial Edition," in 1875. By March 4, 1876, two months before the opening of the Centennial on May 10, this edition was printed.

But Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, William Cullen Bryant, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Bayard Taylor, and Sidney Lanier were chosen for honors and recognitions by the Centennial Commission. Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes and Taylor declined the Commission's invitations to write the official poem for the Centennial. Whittier agreed to write it, called the "Centennial Hymn," provided that he didn't have to attend. Whittier's hymn was sung with fervor at the opening of all major events at the Centennial. And Whittier did *not* attend.

In a survey of American literature for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (March 1876), Edwin Whipple ranked the American poets of his day: Longfellow, Whittier, and Bryant were the top three. Of Whitman, Whipple wrote: "[He] declined to listen to the suggestion that his daring disregard of Convention should have one exception, and that he must modify his frank expression of the relations of the sexes. The author refused, and the complete edition of the *Leaves of Grass* fell dead from the press."

The impact on Whitman of this judgment and the public disregard for him, though he visited the Centennial repeatedly, seems severe, judging from a journal entry written by Whitman, November 8, 1876, two days before the closing of the Centennial: "The forenoon leaden and cloudy, not cold or wet, but indicating both. As I hobble down here and sit by the silent pond, how different from the excitement amid which, in cities, millions of people are now awaiting news of yesterday's [Hayes-Tilden] Presidential election; or receiving and discussing the result — in this secluded place uncared for, unknown."

Caxtonian Jim Miller, in his fine study of Whitman, clarified the source of disparity between Whitman and many of his countrymen — then and now — it seems to me. Miller tapped the very heart of the poet's brilliance, observing, "Whitman insisted...that the poet must first be cosmic before he can be American." The vision of the three-name poets was native: Walt Whitman's, interstellar. In art — and life — such a distinction is forever decisive.

Robert Cotner
Editor

A Review

Caxtonian Culminates Career With Two Whitman Studies

Walt Whitman - Updated Edition. James E. Miller, Jr. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990. \$22.95

Leaves of Grass - America's Lyric-Epic of Self and Democracy. James E. Miller, Jr. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. \$23.95

Reviewed by Robert Cotner

Caxtonian James E. Miller, Jr. culminated more than 40 years of study of Walt Whitman with two fine books that stand as definitive companion volumes of the poet and his poetry, written for the very audience to whom Whitman directed *Leaves of Grass*.

Walt Whitman is an updated version of Miller's 1962 book. It is, as he notes, an assimilation of scholarship, an introduction (for "those who feel the need of such a formal meeting"), and an entree for various suggested avenues into the poetry of Whitman.

In the opening chapter, "The Masks of Whitman," we meet the poet in the sundry guises through which he created himself in his poetry, from child to bearded sage. While, as Miller wrote, "Whitman's biography is largely irrelevant to his artistic achievements," every aspect of his life is indeed reflected, if not recounted, in the evolving poetry of *Leaves of Grass*. In Miller's view the creation of the poetry actually was integral of the fulfillment of his vital and committed life.

Thus, the seven chapters that follow the opening chapter traced the synonymy of Whitman's life and poetry in a highly readable manner, with emphasis continually upon the poetry.

One of the great strengths of Miller's work is illustrated through a sentence in

which he portrayed Whitman as editor and Whitman as poet. Miller wrote: "It is as though he threw away his pen in 1855 and began to write with a gnarled twig of an ancient oak." There is implicit here an understanding of poetry and an affinity with the poet that sustain the scholarship throughout the book. What Miller leads us to, in fact, is the



"Belated Tribute to a Troubled Artist," a photograph by Thomas Eakins, 1887, taken in Walt Whitman's Mickle Street home, Camden, NJ. (Philadelphia Museum of Art - 71-371. From the collection of Robert Cotner.)

development by Whitman of an original form of American poetry, which Miller called the "Lyric Epic."

Miller's 1992 study of *Leaves of Grass* is a thorough description of, as the subtitle states, "America's lyric-epic of self and democracy." Miller nestled Whitman's work into the national context, the crucial event of the time, the Civil War, being the "real parturition" — or birth — of America in that it guaranteed the endurance of the Union and abolished slavery...."

It is Miller's conclusion that Whitman consciously conceived of *Leaves of Grass*

as an epic of America and structured it from edition to edition as reflective of what he had witnessed through his own lifetime. Miller said Whitman's "most stunning innovation" — was the inclusion of the "reader as principal character," in this American epic. "You" are there at strategic places throughout this developing epic, and the involvement of the reader in this manner is a source of both the vitality of the poetry and the genius of *Leaves of Grass*. Miller said, "None of his followers to the present day has been able to pull off such a brilliant poetic trick."

Miller saw *Leaves of Grass* as an integrated whole. Individual poems can never be fully understood until they are read in the context of their placement by Whitman. It is thus imperative that *Leaves of Grass* be read as one reads a novel, from beginning to end. And to fully appreciate them, we need to go to a secluded place, out-of-doors, and read the poetry aloud, Miller suggested.

Because of the richness of Whitman's epic, Miller urged personal reading and personal response to the poetry, which encompasses Whitman's cosmic vision from birth through death — and beyond. The spirituality of Whitman includes, Miller observed, his sexually-explicit poems, which were not understood in Whitman's own lifetime — and are often misunderstood today.

There is a richness in Miller's analysis, deriving from decades of association with Whitman and the resulting insights Miller brought to the discussion, always understated, in great part because Miller wanted "You" to enjoy the pleasure of discovering your own views of this remarkable American epic, considered by many as our greatest poem.

Rev. Redmond Burke, Long-Time Caxtonian And Educator, Dies

Redmond A. Burke, CSV, a Caxtonian since 1954, died in Oskosh, WI, May 27, the 57th anniversary of his ordination. He was 81 years old.

A native of Missouri Valley, IA, the Rev. Mr. Burke dedicated his life in a long career of teaching and library work in higher education. He served as professor and librarian at Dowling College, Des Moines; Rosary College, River Forest; DePaul University, Chicago; Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, and the University of Wisconsin/Oskosh. He was on the faculty in Oshkosh for more than 25 years and was deeply involved in many academic and civic organizations as well.

Caxtonians will remember that the Rev. Mr. Burke displayed in the "Personal Treasures" centennial exhibit of The Caxton Club at the Newberry Library his copy of Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Of Old Age*, Westminster, 12 August 1481, printed by William Caxton.

He will be fondly remembered and greatly missed among Caxtonians.

Caxtonian Subscriptions Offered to Non-Members

The Caxton Council at the April meeting approved offering the *Caxtonian* through subscription for \$30 a year to non-members. Since several Non-Resident members had dropped out of membership, the Council reasoned that they might enjoy continuing contact with the club through a subscription to the monthly *Caxtonian*.

Subscription envelopes have been prepared and are available upon request. Caxton Club members may wish to consider sending gift subscriptions of the *Caxtonian* to friends and fellow bibliophiles for special occasions.

Husband of Caxtonian Gwendolyn Brooks Dies

Henry Blakely, 79, "Poet of 63rd Street," husband of Pulitzer-Prize winning poet and Honorary Caxtonian Gwendolyn Brooks, died July 3, of a heart attack.

Many will remember that Mr. Blakely had had a heart attack on April 17, the day Miss Brooks gave a presentation at the Caxton dinner meeting. She began her program that evening by reading a poem by Mr. Blakely from his book, *Windy Place*.

Brooks and Mr. Blakely, who were married 56 years, had two children, Henry III, and Nora, a poet in her own right.

Caxtonians one and all extend to fellow Caxtonian Gwendolyn Brooks and her family their condolences at this difficult time.

Dan Lang of River Street Press Dies

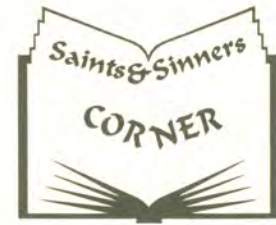
We are saddened by the death of Dan Lang, 56, president of River Street Press, on July 9, of cancer. Mr. Lang was a friend of The Caxton Club, who provided two years' of pro bono printing of the *Caxtonian* between 1993 and 1995.

"Dan Lang made possible the *Caxtonian* by his generous contribution of two years' printing to get it started," *Caxtonian* editor Robert Cotner commented, "and he enriched immeasurably our own centennial celebration."

Dan attended the Caxton dinner meeting June 1995. At that time, the club honored him for his important contribution to the club.

"I shall miss him as a professional," Cotner said, "but, even more, I shall miss him as a friend."

Caxtonians extend their sympathy to Dan's wife Jean and to the Lang family.



The late Rolf H. Erickson, Caxtonian, Council Member, and club vice president prior to his death in 1993, is being honored by Northwestern University with the Rolf H. Erickson Memorial Walk, a part of the Koch Memorial Gardens, Evanston. Caxtonian R. Russell Maylone, Chair of the Erickson Memorial Fund Task Force, invites contributions to the fund. For information, telephone 847/491-2894.

A monograph, *The Poets Praise "A Woman Reading,"* has been published by the John H. Vanderpool Art Association of the Beverly Art Center. Edited by historian Jimmie Lee Buehler, the anthology of poems celebrates the oil painting "A Woman Reading," by Frank Weston Benson, which appeared on the cover of the *Caxtonian*, April 1995. The monograph is available for \$3.50, from the center, 2153 W. 111th St., Chicago, IL 60643.

On **Mary 12**, *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, by Nicolaus Copernicus, was sold at auction in Chicago. The 1543 leather-bound volume brought \$26,000 from Krysztos Kania, a Highland Park resident originally from Warsaw. The *Chicago Tribune* reported "In 40 seconds of heady bidding at a gallery in the Merchandise Mart, Kania bested a New York collector for the right to own the famous text."

Biblio, a new magazine for book, manuscript, and autograph collectors, has been launched by the Aster Publishing Company, Eugene, OR. A four-color magazine, *Biblio* will be published by monthly issues (September-October; November-December) in 1996 and will become monthly in 1997. For advertising, telephone 800/330-7250; for editorial, 541/345-3800; for subscription, 800/840-3810.

Whitman Sings of the 1876 Centennial Exposition



The great Corliss Centennial steam engine (under the transept in the center of the aisle), 43-foot high, 700 tons, generating 1,400 horsepower — in its day the most powerful engine ever built — powered all of the operating machinery in the 14-acre Machinery Hall during the "International Exhibition of 1876," Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, between May 10 and November 10, 1876. (Photo #927, Centennial Photo Collection, Print & Pictures Department, Free Library of Philadelphia. From the collection of Robert Cotner.)

From "Song of the Exposition" by Walt Whitman

Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia,
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,
That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and
Aeneas', Odysseus' wanderings.
Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your
snowy Parnassus,
Repeat at Jerusalem, place the notice high on Jaffa's
gate and on Mount Moriah,
The same on the walls of your German, French and
Spanish castles, the Italian collections,
For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide,
untried domain awaits, demands you.

.....
And thou America,
Thy offspring towering e're so high, yet higher Thee
above all towering,
With Victory on thy left, and at thy right hand Law;
Thou Union holding all, fusing, absorbing, tolerating
all,
Thee, ever thee, I sing.

.....
Mark the spirit of invention everywhere, thy rapid
patents,
Thy continual workshops, foundries, risen or rising,
See, from their chimneys how the tall flame-fires
stream.

Mark thy interminable farms, North and South,
Thy wealthy daughter-states, Eastern and Western,
The varied products of Ohio, Pennsylvania,
Missouri, Georgia, Texas, and the rest,
Thy limitless crops, grass, wheat, sugar, oil, corn,
rice, hemp, hops,
Thy barns all fill'd, the endless freight-train and
the bulging storehouse,
Thy grapes that ripen on thy vines, the apples in
thy orchards,
Thy incalculable lumber, beef, port, potatoes, thy
coal, thy gold and silver,
The inexhaustible iron in thy mines.

All thine O sacred Union!
Ships, farms, shops, barns, factories, mines,
City and State, North, South, item and aggregate,
We dedicate, dread Mother, all to thee!

Protectress absolute, thou! bulwark of all!
For well we know that while thou givest each and
all, (generous as God,)
Without thee neither all nor each, nor land, home,
Nor ship, nor mine, nor any here this day secure,
Nor aught, nor any day secure....

Chronology of Publication

Leaves of Grass

by Walt Whitman

1819-1892

1855 - Publishes by himself, probably on July 4, the first edition...containing a preface and 12 poems, each entitled "Leaves of Grass."

1856 - Second edition published... containing 32 poems bearing individual titles.

1860 - Goes to Boston to oversee publication of the third edition,...the first by a commercial printer. The book contains 124 new poems. The arrangement of the poems reflects an embryonic structure suggestive of Whitman's epic intent. In a stroll on Boston Commons, Whitman rejects Emerson's advice to exclude certain poems.

1861 - As the Civil War begins, Whitman's Boston publisher fails, but the third edition continues to circulate through unauthorized use of the plates.

1867 - Whitman publishes the fourth edition,...revealing his intent to shape the whole of his poetry, including the Civil War and Lincoln poems, into a single structure, which follows roughly the contours of his life and times,...

1871-72 - Whitman publishes the fifth edition....[showing] his continuing determination to fashion a structure for his *Leaves* that will include the whole body of his poetry and the entire range of his and his country's experiences as he imaginatively or mythically conceives them.

1876 - Publishes "Centennial Edition" ... in two volumes, one a reissue of the 1871 *Leaves* and the other entitled *Two Rivulets*.

1881-82 - Publishes the sixth edition...in Boston. Although new poems will be added later, the book now assumes a structure containing poems in versions and positions that will remain fixed in the final publication of the work. The book is banned in Boston ... Whitman transfers publication to Philadelphia.

1892 - Issues the "authorized," ...sometimes called the "deathbed edition"; the text incorporates the sixth edition and other poem-clusters.

Adapted from James E. Miller, Jr.

Leaves of Grass -

America's Lyric-Epic of Self and Democracy

Book Marks

Luncheon Programs

All luncheon meetings, unless otherwise noted, are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th floor of the First National Bank of Chicago, Madison & Clark, Chicago. Luncheon and discussion, 12:30 p.m.

September 13

Caxton Historian Frank J. Piehl will entertain members and guests with an illustrated presentation, "Eugene Field, II, Forger Extraordinaire."

Note: There are no luncheon meetings in July and August.

*Ed Quattrocchi
Leonard Freedman*

Important Note: Members planning to attend luncheons must make advance reservations by phoning either the Caxton number, 312/255-3710, or Mr. Quattrocchi at 708/475-4653. Luncheon for members and guests, \$20.

"The miracle of Whitman is that, at the age of 37, without warning or notice, suggestion or hint, he brought forth a volume of poetry that would have graced the literature of any nation, and which, even had it stood unchanged, would have assured his fame as a poet."

*James E. Miller, Jr.
Helen A. Regenstein Professor
of American Literature Emeritus
University of Chicago*

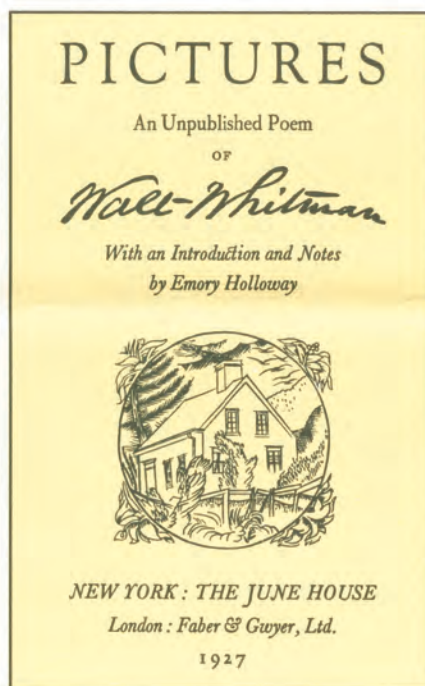
Walt Whitman—World's Poet

(Continued from Page One)

In this important truth the inner life of the individual and the inner life of the nation are synonymously fulfilled, and toward this end all teaching — and all learning — must move.

RC

Editor's note: Adapted from an essay first published as "Probing the 'Inner Life' for Gifts," in Presence, Fall 1984. Cotner was Executive Director of Growth Opportunities for the Gifted & Talented, Chattanooga, TN, and founder /editor of Presence.



Dinner Programs

All dinner meetings, unless otherwise noted are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th Floor of the First National Bank, Madison & Clark streets, Chicago. Spirits, 5 p.m., dinner, 6 p.m., lecture, 7 p.m.

August 21

Richard Bales, who has just finished an article on the Great Chicago Fire, will present a summary of his study on the inquiry about the cause of the fire. His work with Chicago Title Insurance Company has given him unique access to extensive pre-1871 records.

September 18

Werner Gundersheimer, Director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC, will speak on this remarkable institution in our nation's capital.

Karen Skubish

Advance reservations, which are absolutely necessary, may be made by phoning the Caxton office at 312/255-3710. Any special meal requirements (such as vegetarian) need to be made in advance. Members and guests, \$35.

The First National Bank of Chicago's parking garage, 40 S. Clark Street, offers a special parking rate after 5 p.m. to guests of the Mid-Day Club. When you leave, please tell the parking attendant you were at the Mid-Day Club, and your parking fee will be \$5.25



The Caxton Club
60 West Walton Street
Chicago, IL 60610

