

## REVIEWS

EDWIN HAVILAND MILLER, ED. *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990. xx + 320 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$16.50 paper.

Almost thirty years ago, shortly after the first two volumes of Edwin Haviland Miller's edition of *The Correspondence* were published in 1961, T. O. Mabbott proclaimed in his review that there was "almost nothing to complain about." The same can be safely said about Professor Miller's *Selected Letters*, handsomely published with photographs and drawings to suggest the various stages of Whitman's life in letters: 1840-1841, 1842-1860, 1861-1865, 1866-1873, 1873-1881, 1881-1889, and 1890-1892. These periods correspond roughly with the divisions in the six volumes of *The Correspondence* (1961-1969), and each section is introduced knowledgeably and succinctly. The selection (250 from a total of over 2800 letters) reflects favorably on the intimacy Miller has had with the material for so long. The selected letters catch Whitman at both his worst and best stages. The worst is probably 1840-1841 and 1890-1892, where we encounter, respectively, a brash, even inconsiderate individual and a rather pathetic, "house-tied" poet almost totally preoccupied with his various infirmities. The first is more disturbing to the general perception of Whitman than his final stage, where physical complaints are to be expected. For we do not find here what we find throughout the rest of the *Selected Letters* as well as *The Correspondence*: a kindly man who cares sincerely and unselfishly about family, friends, and "lovers" (more on this last category below). Instead, the letters of 1840-1841 present us with an individual almost totally unrecognizable as Whitman—someone who does not "dote" on anyone *but* himself. More often he broods with the impatience of youth. "Life is a dreary road, at the best," the unsatisfied schoolteacher from Woodbury tells Abraham Paul Leech, a book-keeper from whose papers these earliest-known letters were retrieved in 1985 by the Library of Congress. "I am just at this time in one of the most stony, rough, desert, hilly, and heart-sickening parts of the journey.—But Time is the Great Physician who cures, they say, our ills of mind and body.—I pray the fates he may rid me of my spleen ere long." Not much of the Open Road is showing here!

The letters from this early period, which were first printed by Arthur Golden in 1986 (and are here collected in book form for the first time), suggest a "foreground" to mediocrity, but they also show alongside the subsequent epistles and poetry a Whitman who was truly "in and out" of the psycho-sociological game he dramatized in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's "average" become "divine" not in their aspirations but in their achievements or occupations. Miller's selection takes us in and out of some of the most telling moments of the poet's epistolary "game" that was played out behind the poetry. As to be expected, the 1850s are sparsely represented in both editions of Whitman's letters, the Whitman family generally being together during this period. Once

the Civil War gets underway and the poet's brother George enlists in the Union Army, the "correspondence" goes beyond the "letter" of conscious intent to show Whitman's great compassion. He does so mainly as a brother not only to his soldier-brother and family but to the legion of wounded and sick soldiers in the wartime hospitals. Whitman first got into his hospital routine in Washington, D.C., when he visited some of his brother's compatriots in the 51st Regiment of New York Volunteers. "O my dear sister," he told Mattie, his sister-in-law, "how your heart would ache to go through the rows of wounded young men, as I did—and stopt to speak a comforting word to them. There were about 100 in one long room, just a long shed [Campbell Hospital] neatly whitewashed inside." Whitman, as Miller's selection cleverly shows (somehow without being redundant), manages to tell his hospital story to everyone he writes in the coming weeks, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whom he also applied for help in landing a full-time government job in the beleaguered nation's capital.

If Professor Miller has a special emphasis in the selection and annotation, it may be to show Whitman in his "Calamus" relationships. It was in the third volume of *The Correspondence* (1876-1885), published in 1964, that the poet's relationship with Harry Stafford was first revealed. Whereas Peter Doyle's intimate letters to the poet apparently did not survive, Stafford's did in the collection of the late Charles E. Feinberg. These letters (or notes) along with Whitman's letters to the eighteen-year-old lad show that the poet had more than a fatherly or brotherly interest in Stafford. Miller suggests with some evidence that there were similar alliances and that the poet was generally left disappointed and even pathetic in the wake of his "perturbations." This last point will probably not sit well with the homosexually-oriented critics of the Good Gay. When the "affair" (for lack of a better term) concluded with Stafford's marriage in 1884, Whitman was sixty-two. Harry went on to have three children, Miller tells us in his heading for this period, "two girls and a boy who was named after his grandfather, not Walt Whitman." Miller may prefer the poet to the person—not because of Whitman's alleged homosexuality, though, but because he may feel embarrassed for the poet for being such a helpless victim of his intense need for love and affection. Indeed, in the general introduction to the volume, the editor calls the letters "lovely prose creations of an affectionate man who was denied the affection he craved. . . ." In other words, the *need* for love, either homosexual or heterosexual, is noble and universal, but the efforts in that direction are all too often unfortunate and even pathetic.

What Miller admires above all about Whitman, of course, is the poetry, which universalized and ennobled the loneliness of the human condition. It is therefore as an editor of the correspondence that Miller appreciates how Whitman in his letters becomes the "poet" of the colloquial and the personal. It is poetry, but poetry without the conscious art which "intrude[s] with its affections." Rather, it is the art of making the best of even the worst (personal) situations. In counselling Stafford about one of his (or their) "blue spells," Whitman told the young man: "my theory is that it is *in oneself* and not from outside circumstances one suffers such unhappy hours." Whitman, however involved he became with his young friends, always managed, it appears, to

stand back with the sound advice of an elder brother. In fact, with Stafford at least he apparently stood on excellent social terms with the young man's parents—leading us to wonder about the exact nature of the relationship. That Whitman required “lovers” there is no doubt; that he also needed to retain, or regain, his brotherly composure with them is also plausible. As he told one of his soldiers years after the war: “you seem very dear to me . . . like some young brother who has been lost, but now found.”

Naturally, no selected edition can substitute for a full one, but this book will serve as an excellent introduction to Whitman. Though there are places where additional annotation would aid clarity, these are rare exceptions to a marvelously well-equipped edition of letters. It is a tribute (one of the many) to Professor Miller's distinguished career in Whitman studies and elsewhere.

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JEROME LOVING

JAMES E. MILLER, JR. *Walt Whitman*. Updated Edition. Boston: Twayne, 1990. xvi + 174 pp.

This classic entry in Twayne's United States Authors Series was originally published in 1962. Professor Miller has now revised his book, and while it remains substantially the same, he has made some small but significant changes and additions to take into account what has happened in Whitman scholarship over the past three decades. In an engaging preface (where he recalls that his original introduction to Whitman came as an undergraduate in 1939 when he read what turned out to be a bowdlerized version of “Song of Myself”), Miller characterizes his revisions as “detailed throughout, in the sentences, paragraphs, and chapters, but only with the purposes of correcting errors and bringing the bibliography and the frame of reference up to date” (p. x). Not only has the frame of reference been brought up to date, however, so has the overall presentation: Miller's revision can, among other things, be read as a study of the emerging awareness of the necessity for nonsexist usage of language. Compare these two passages, the first from the original version of the book:

Man was, after all, the supreme fact for Whitman. The universe of *Leaves* is man-centered, even though there is full acceptance of science which paradoxically proves otherwise. It is only natural that one of Whitman's most frequently recurring images should be the populous city—the dwelling place of man en masse. And the detail that appears almost invariably—the sidewalk or pavement—suggests not man comfortably situated in his home but man in movement, energetic and creative, traveling the open, and endless, road.

Now the same passage from the revised version:

Men and women were, after all, the supreme fact for Whitman. The universe of *Leaves* is human-centered, even though there is full acceptance of science which paradoxically