



## WILLIAM WHITE, 1910-1995

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WILLIAM WHITE—editor of the *Walt Whitman Review* for twenty-six years, co-editor of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* for six years, and editor emeritus of the journal for the past six years—died June 24, 1995, in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. His death is a huge loss not just for the Whitman scholarly community, in which he was a central figure, but for communities devoted to the study of many American and British authors, from John Donne through Ernest Hemingway, from Emily Dickinson through Wilfred Owen, from A. E. Houseman through W. D. Snodgrass. His countless editions, collections, bibliographies, checklists, and catalogues covered an enormous range of authors and periods, as did his many articles. Bill was one of the few people in this or any other profession who could honestly claim to have written “thousands” of articles. There is mourning across the canon for this kind and smart and energetic man who devoted his life to writers and writing, and who made us all wiser about the authors we study.

Bill White came at literary scholarship from the perspective of a journalist, and he was always attracted to writers who had experienced the life of newspaper people, who knew what it meant to meet a deadline, to cover breaking events, to write under pressure. Thus it is no surprise that he admired Whitman and Hemingway, or that some of his best work on these two major figures concerned their journalism. His *By-Line: Ernest Hemingway*, which collected Hemingway’s newspaper

writings, appeared in 1967 and was translated into fourteen languages; it made the *New York Times* best-seller list. One of his most valuable contributions to Whitman scholarship was his indispensable *Walt Whitman's Journalism* (1968), which laid out for the first time just how vast and varied Whitman's accomplishments in journalism had been. It always seemed particularly appropriate that Bill each year edited a special Whitman section of the *Long Islander*, the newspaper that Whitman founded. Those *Long Islander* issues, now collectors' items, capture as well as anything the conjoining of William White and Walt Whitman—newspapermen deeply concerned with the condition of American literature.

Bill had the newspaperman's ability to juggle many assignments at once, and he was bemused by the inordinate amounts of time more traditional scholars would demand to complete tasks that he accomplished masterfully in no time while he managed simultaneously to cover things like auto racing for Detroit area newspapers. While other scholars lingered and worried over their work, Bill would get his out and move on to the next project. He never sacrificed accuracy for speed; he just worked more expeditiously than everyone else, and his patience wore thin when some scholars would complain about how burdened they were. Bill, meanwhile, kept turning out issues of the *Walt Whitman Review* every quarter with additional special issues now and then, covered sports for several newspapers, taught English and journalism at Wayne State University, and set up and chaired the journalism program at Oakland University—all while editing or proofreading his forty books.

Some of Bill's most lasting accomplishments in the area of Whitman scholarship involved his willingness to take on difficult projects that others shied away from or could not complete. When it looked like the ongoing publication of Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden* had come to a stop, for example, it was Bill who took on the arduous task of transcribing and editing Traubel's valuable but nearly illegible notes, who shepherded volume six into print, and who generated the momentum that is still carrying the century-long project to completion. Similarly, with Arthur Golden, he stepped in to save the variorum edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1980), the invaluable three-volume work that he was instrumental in bringing to fruition. His close friendship with the preeminent Whitman collector Charles Feinberg led to many key discoveries in Whitman scholarship, and Bill's meticulous edition of Whitman's *Daybooks and Notebooks* (1978), part of the New York University Press *Collected Writings of Walt Whitman*, became a model of careful textual scholarship. Bill arrived at some ingenious solutions for transferring Whitman's idiosyncratic handwritten symbols into the print medium, and his extensive footnotes in that three-volume collection form an eloquent do-it-yourself biography of Whitman's later years.

I find them the most reliable source for information on Whitman after 1876, and I still consult them at least once a week.

When in 1955, as part of the centennial celebration of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Gay Wilson Allen began the *Walt Whitman Newsletter*, he conceived of it as a one-year venture, a temporary place to publicize Whitman activities during a celebratory year. But scholars interested in Whitman found the newsletter too valuable to give up, and Bill White volunteered to take over the editing of it. Within two years, he had transformed the newsletter into a full-fledged academic journal, and under his guidance the *Walt Whitman Review* became the cynosure of Whitman studies, publishing critical articles, biographical notes, textual discoveries, and, in every issue, Bill's inexhaustible current bibliography of Whitman-related materials. Seven years ago, after the *Review* had been reborn at Iowa as the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, I took over from Bill the daunting task of compiling that ongoing bibliography. I quickly discovered how time-consuming a job it is to keep on top of the burgeoning Whitman industry, and I once again stood in awe of Bill's enormous energy (Whitman scholarship, after all, was not the only field *he* was staying on top of) and of his journalist's ability to get the facts quickly and to get them right.

Most major Whitman scholars of the second half of this century got their start in the *Walt Whitman Review*. I still treasure the letter from Bill accepting my first Whitman article back in 1979. Looking back over the decades of White-edited issues, I'm amazed by the vast roster of names of the writers and scholars Bill ushered into print. Anyone who wanted to find out what was really going on in the field knew they had but to write to Bill White: his breadth of knowledge was tremendous, his generosity of response was legendary, and his quickness of reply was at once the sign of his energy and the obligation of his journalistic ethic. He was willing to take chances, to publish a wide range of approaches to Whitman, to print things he did not necessarily agree with, in order to create an active caldron of critical thought. He had a Whitman-like commitment to a diversity of ideas and to a democratic access to print, and, as editor, he was less a gatekeeper than a welcoming host, ready to sit down with your essay and figure out how to make it say what it had to say more economically. Like all good newspapermen, and like fewer and fewer academics, he insisted on the concise and the clear over the wordy and the obscure.

But make no mistake about it: Bill was an academic. He always put his scholarship to certain journalistic tests, but it remained scholarship of the first order. No one was more attentive to detail or more industrious in tracking down the last nagging identification or citation. He was trained well at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (B.A., 1933), U.C.L.A., the University of Southern California (M.A., 1937), and the

University of London (Ph.D., 1953). He won prestigious awards—a Fulbright to Korea in 1963-1964, National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships, the Distinguished Alumnus Award from the University of Tennessee—and he taught at colleges all over the place, often after his “retirement” from Oakland University. His legacy to Whitman scholarship is a valuable one, and, perhaps more than anything else, it involves an energetic commitment to getting on with the work at hand and not spending too much time congratulating ourselves on what we have already accomplished. Bill once said when asked about his “formula” for success: “With a certain intelligence, sensitivity (but not too much), an optimistic temperament, experience (what you learn from books and your own coming and going), a sense of humor (so you won’t take yourself too seriously), energy, good health, and lots of luck, you may succeed in doing what you set out to do, get a little recognition and some satisfaction. . . . If you keep busy enough and have the love of one wife and a few good friends, you can find pleasure in life and forget the corruptibility of man.”

Good health deserted Bill several years ago, and with it went most of the other things, but he retained the love of one wife and a few good friends. Bill is survived by his “one wife,” Gertrude—a scholar who has frequently contributed to this journal and its predecessors—and by two sons and three granddaughters. Recalling her life with Bill, Gertrude said recently: “He always had classical music playing and his typewriter going when I passed his office. . . . I used to tell him . . . when I sued for divorce I would name his typewriter as co-respondent.” Bill’s typewriter is silent now, but the words it produced at his hands for fifty-five years will speak clearly and forcefully for generations to come.

*Ed Folsom, September 30, 1995*