

IN MEMORIAM:

Joel Myerson
1945-2021

I first met Joel Myerson (of blessed memory) in his Washington, DC, hotel suite at the 1989 Modern Language Association convention when he was chairing the University of South Carolina's Department of English and I was looking for a job. I inquired his suite number at the desk, to which the clerk responded, "you mean Joel Myerson from Columbia, South Carolina?" I must have flinched, I so associated Joel Myerson with the woods and villages of New England.



A month later, there I was myself in Columbia on a campus visit. In the course of a friendly private conversation in his office, I inquired what he was working on and was surprised to hear it was a Walt Whitman bibliography. I asked: wouldn't two Whitman scholars be one too many for the department? He parried with a wink. That night, he and Greta graciously hosted me at their booklined house in Columbia, where on walking into the front foyer I immediately noticed a glass-enclosed bookshelf containing first editions of *Leaves of Grass* and other familiar-looking Whitman imprints. Looking to make conversation, I remarked ingenuously about security, to which Joel responded: no alarm, no special precautions—the last thing local thieves would go for was a bunch of old books.

Joel Myerson had a lifelong affair with old books. I don't know enough to draw a portrait of this bibliophile as a young man, but I remember his repeated statements of indebtedness to the great bibliographer/book collector, Harrison

Hayford, whom he trained under at Northwestern. Hayford and his colleagues transmitted to him the art and mystery of the study of printed texts, which Joel practiced with great expertise and tireless devotion to the end of his life. He also convivially passed on what he had learned, often accompanied with a rollicking story about books, collectors, and academics, to succeeding cohorts of students and colleagues.

He played his cards as shrewdly at book collecting as at poker. Out of a public university instructor's salary he scraped together funds to build his great nineteenth-century American literature collections. Book by book, pile by pile, his holdings grew: Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Alcott, sundry Transcendentalists—and, of course, Whitman. That collection had a distinctive point of origin. It cohered via a single transaction with his own mentor and comrade, Harry Hayford. With copies of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* and various other prime Whitman imprints in hand, he set his mind to the task of building a major collection of Whitmaniana. Over time it grew to include not only all editions of *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman's other books and pamphlets but a wide array of a bibliographer's allies—textual and binding variants, poetry manuscripts and photographs, memorabilia (such as the hefty 1881 bronze of Whitman's writing hand cast from life), scattered correspondence, proofs, ephemera. That collection eventually found its permanent home alongside his other major collections of American authors and miscellaneous Americana in the eleven-thousand-volume Joel A. Myerson Collection of Nineteenth-Century American Literature housed at Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina.

It was a point of pride that his authoritative bibliographies drew extensively on his personal library. One by one those thick volumes took shape, typed (later, keyed) steadfastly with index fingers alone: Fuller, Parker, Emerson, Dickinson, and finally Whitman—that last, his last as he promised Greta, an eleven-hundred-page, multitude-containing paragon of scholarship. It was his personal Whitman summa and the Whitman community's bibliographical summit. Half a dozen additional secondary works on Whitman followed, as well as a 2011 supplement to the bibliography, and right up to his death the work—as scholar, collector, editor, colleague, and mentor—was ongoing.

Whitman was obsessed with his own “passing,” but he knew with perfect confidence that his work would live on. Joel too has passed, but his work lives on, informing and inspiring. Lovers of Whitman and nineteenth-century American literature writ large are the better for it.

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