

Nathaniel Hawthorne

# 1844 in Great American Literature

Millerites and apocalyptic expectation as a part of the canon of American culture.

by Gary Scharnborst

FOR OVER A CENTURY, THE MOST NOTORIOUS millennial movement in American history has inspired American authors to literary re-creations of the phenomenon. The adventist prophet William Miller, who predicted that the world would end through the literal return of Christ and the cataclysmic inauguration of His Kingdom in 1843 or 1844, and his followers, known simply as Millerites, could scarcely have imagined the fascination they would exercise for so long after the scheduled fulfillment of that prophecy. Rather than populating the Kingdom with risen saints as they had hoped, their lasting influence probably has been among those generations of writers who have reinvented the story to serve their own literary purposes. These allusions merit examination because the climate of ignorance about the American millennial tradition<sup>1</sup> has been congenial to the growth of

Miller legend<sup>2</sup> and, as John P. McWilliams has noted, a cultural historian can observe the gestation of popular myths only by returning to "the extant data of original disagreements."<sup>3</sup> Was Millerism, as it often has been portrayed, the unfortunate consequence of mental or doctrinal aberration? Was Miller a megalomaniac who commanded a woeful cult of misguided zealots? Were their eschatological expectations invariably derided or dismissed by responsible people? The more reliable answers to these questions may be found not in secondary texts such as Clara Sears' *Days of Delusion* (1924) or Alice Felt Tyler's *Freedom's Ferment* (1944), but in literary works considered as primary documents.

Moreover, the Millerite phenomenon historically has been a touchstone for reflection by American authors upon a variety of themes, some of them, like political reform, only tangentially related to apocalypse. With the nation in the 1840s in the throes of economic and political turmoil and with a national literature in the faint blushes of its "coming of

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age," Millerism provoked dissimilar responses from similarly esteemed writers. In the late nineteenth century, literary realists adopted Millerism as backdrop for historical fiction. More recently, with the threat of the End looming again, literary modernists who find catharsis in absurdity have discovered that the Millerites with their ludicrous doctrine were prophetic in an unsuspected way. By tracing the images of Millerism from contemporary sources, through the rise of realism, and into this century, the literary historian may examine the artistic or political temperament of such American authors as Hawthorne, Emerson, Whittier, Longfellow, Eggleston, and Coover.

A brief summary of salient facts about Millerism may serve as a frame for this survey.<sup>4</sup> A self-educated farmer and converted deist, William Miller began to lecture throughout rural New York in 1831 that, according to his calculations, Christ's Second Advent would occur sometime in late 1843 or early 1844. Miller employed five methods of calculating the date, each one equating symbolic days mentioned in biblical text with literal years, each one indicating that the End would occur during the 12 months preceding March 21, 1844, or the spring equinox that ended a year in the sacred Jewish calendar. He attracted no greater following than other revivalists of the "burnt-over district" until, in 1839, he recruited Joshua Himes, a Garrisonian abolitionist, to promote his crusade.

During the economic depression that gripped the nation in the wake of the Panic of 1837, Millerism prospered under Himes' direction.<sup>5</sup> Adventist papers entitled *The Midnight Cry* and *Signs of the Times* were published in major cities; the movement spread from its New England base north to Canada, south to Virginia, west to Missouri, and across the Atlantic to England;<sup>6</sup> and an estimated 120 Millerite tent-meetings were held during the warm months of 1842, 1843, and 1844 with estimated

attendance of a half-million. The appearance in March 1843 of the most brilliant comet of the century, was hailed by some Millerites as an omen from God, a Last Warning which corroborated their prophet's calculations. Although the *parousia* did not occur by March 1844 as expected, the movement continued to spread.

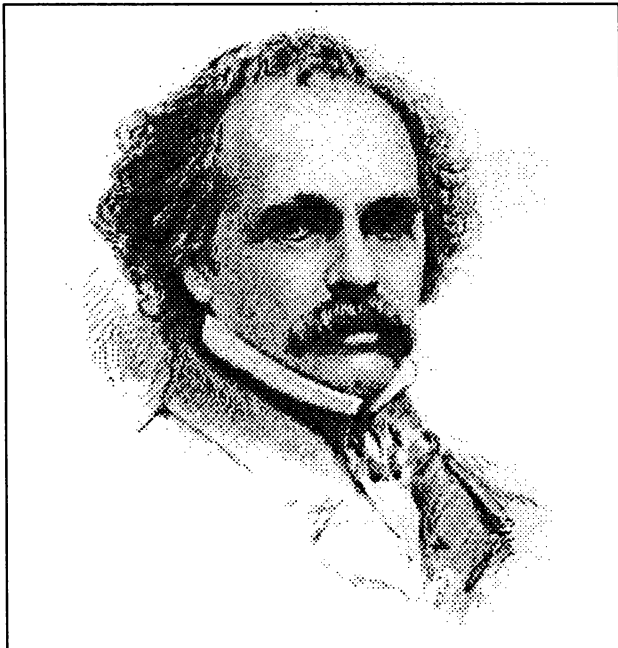
Miller eventually issued a revised prophecy, agreeing with some followers that the Day of Doom should occur the next "tenth day of the seventh month," or October 22, 1844 on the Roman calendar. As this day neared, lurid stories of mental collapses, murders, and suicides of hysterical Millerites, as well as rumors that some of them had sewn muslin ascension robes, were repeated from rival pulpits and in newspapers. Undoubtedly, many believers neglected business or farm, ignored debts, and otherwise allowed their worldly obligations to lapse in order to prepare for the imminent End. During the night of October 22, many of them remained at home or gathered in their usual meeting-places to pray, though one well-publicized band fled Philadelphia "as Lot did from Sodom" and awaited the Advent in tents until a fierce storm ended the vigil. After the Lord failed to materialize on this date, the movement lost most of its following, and its largest remnant eventually merged with another group to form the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Miller died five years after the Great Disappointment, and Himes lived in near-anonymity as an Episcopal priest in South Dakota until his death in 1895.

American authors who lived during the Millerite excitement played several variations on the theme in their literature, although four general types may be identified. First, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne responded with apparent appreciation for the imaginative thrust of the movement and claimed romantic kinship with the prophet. Certainly, Poe was familiar with Miller's prophecy in March 1843, for he referred to it in print that

month.<sup>7</sup> However, as Daniel Hoffman notes, he probably was influenced by Miller's millennial expectations as early as 1839 when, in "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," he described a fiery holocaust which consumes the earth.<sup>8</sup> From the realm of Aidenn, Eiros recalls that as the End grew near "Mankind grew paler" until "All human operations were suspended." Finally, there occurred "A combustion irresistible, all devouring, omnipotent, immediate;—the entire fulfillment, in all their minute and terrible details, of the fiery and horror-inspiring denunciations of the prophecies of the Holy Book."<sup>9</sup>

Millerism seems to have sparked Poe's apocalyptic fantasies, and he profitably mined his vein in such later works as *Eureka* (1848) and "Mellonta Tauta" (1849). In *Eureka*, he discussed "the inevitable catastrophe" or "great End" which he prophesied "is at hand," and substantiated his metaphysical musings with astronomical evidence about a comet much as the Millerites in 1843 had regarded a comet as proof of the imminence of the End. Moreover, he described "one Miller or Mill" as the most clever logician of the nineteenth century, presumably alluding to William Miller as well

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as John Stuart Mill.<sup>10</sup> In "Mellonta Tauta," a phrase which Poe elsewhere translated as "These things are in the future,"<sup>11</sup> a pundit aboard a balloon in the year 2848—a literal millennium in the future—repeats the reference to "one Miller, or Mill." An ironic revelation in the form of a gossipy letter, this tale ends as Pundita's balloon collapses and she descends, a comic Christ, into the sea.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Hawthorne was fascinated by Miller's prophecies and recurrently referred to him in tales written at the height of the enthusiasm. Theorizing that a writer of romances should eschew verisimilitude "to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience" and aim instead to depict "the truth of the human heart," Hawthorne composed tales set in the neutral territory "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet." In order to work modern materials into his fiction, he had to select what was neutral though not yet distanced by history. William Miller was typecast for Hawthorne's repertory of "phantasmagorical antics," most notably in "The Hall of Fantasy" (February 1843), because, as a visionary, he already moved in shadowy circles between fact and invention.<sup>13</sup> Hawthorne in this tale clearly did not treat Miller in a tone of amused condescension. Rather, the prophet's celebrated mystique and his skepticism about the efficacy of social reform entitled him to prominent station in the Hall.

Hawthorne contemplated the implications of Miller's prophecy in several romances written during ensuing months. In "The New Adam and Eve" (February 1843), he imagined "good Father Miller's interpretations of the prophecies to have proved true. The Day of Doom has burst upon the Globe, and swept away the whole race of men." Upon this frame, he constructed a jeremiad lamenting the vanities of civilization. The new Adam and Eve wander amid the ruins of the past and "pass unconscious judgment upon the works

and ways of the vanished race" (pp. 247, 262). In "The Christmas Banquet" (January 1844), published only weeks before the expiration of the year when, according to Miller's original calculations, the overripe earth was destined to be plucked from the heavens. Hawthorne seemed to sympathize with a disconsolate prophet whose expectations were liable to disappointment. In "Earth's Holocaust" (May 1844), written, according to F. O. Matthiessen, "when the activity of the Millerites had caused him to ponder how reforming zeal might bring to destruction all the age-old abuses and encumbrances of the world,"<sup>14</sup> Hawthorne envisioned a vain attempt by earth's inhabitants to destroy their "accumulation of worn-out trumpery . . . by a general bonfire" like the final conflagration (pp. 381, 403). Though he was not a Millerite apologist, in fine, Hawthorne like Poe was intrigued by the possibilities Millerite doctrine opened to the writer of romance.<sup>15</sup>

The Transcendentalists of the 1840s offered a second response to Millerism. Though opposed to forms of dogma, the Transcendentalists recognized their ancestry with the Millerites in the "come-outer" tradition. Both groups denounced the sensuality of the physical world of appearances and preached a mystical faith in the dawning of the millennium. Thus when Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, and Christopher Cranch visited a Millerite meeting in 1840, they "found themselves at least superficially in agreement" with them.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Millerites came out to await the literal thousand-year reign of Christ inaugurated through supernatural intercession, Transcendentalists hoped for a spiritual millennium progressively inaugurated through the symbolic agency of Nature.<sup>17</sup> Thus Parker once declared that October 22, 1844 was "too long to wait" for the millennium.<sup>18</sup>

Ralph Waldo Emerson adopted an even more sanguine attitude toward Millerism. An anecdote about his encounter with a Millerite

on the Last Day, though almost certainly apocryphal, illustrates his cheerful skepticism. When asked by a fanatic "Sir, do you not know that tonight the world is coming to an end?" Emerson reportedly replied, "I am glad of it; man will get along better without it."<sup>19</sup> Certainly, he expressed no strong hostility toward the movement in his several allusions to it. After reading an article in *Signs of the Times* early in 1843, for example, he recorded in his journal that he had learned "of an excellent Millerite who gives out that he expects the second advent of the Lord in 1843 but if there is any error in his computation,—he shall look for him until he comes."<sup>20</sup> A few months later, he opined that "New England cannot be painted without a portrait of Millerism with the new advent of hymns" and copied into his journal the lyrics of a popular Millerite anthem. On the same page, he listed Millerism as the first characteristic of "The Age."<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Emerson may have alluded to the movement in several of his compositions published in *Essays: Second Series* (1844). For example, his reference in "The Poet" to popular religious imagery—"some stars, lilies, leopards, a crescent, a lion, an eagle, or other

Edgar Allan Poe

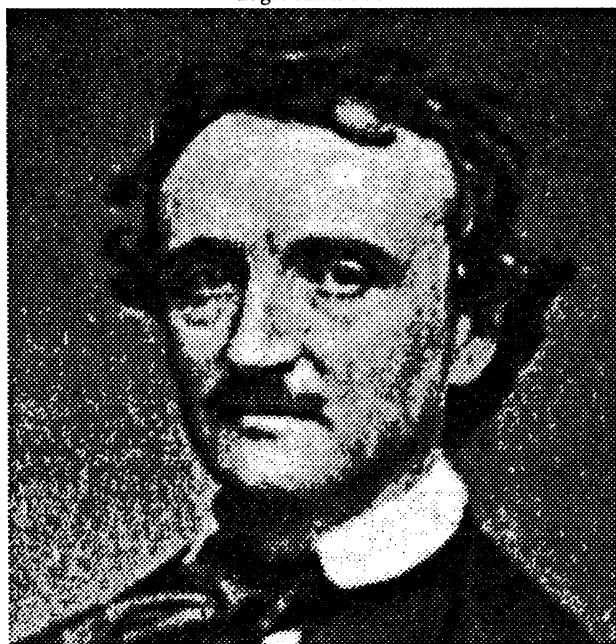


figure which came into credit God knows how, on an old rag of bunting, blowing in the wind" probably describes murals depicting the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and the apocalyptic vision of John, which Millerite evangelists used to illustrate their sermons.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, in "Nominalist and Realist" Emerson regretted that a prophet with impunity may declare "I thought I was right, but I was not" and demand "the same immeasurable credulity" from his followers,<sup>23</sup> much as Miller had in March 1844. Still, despite misgivings, he appreciated Millerism as a come-outer enthusiasm akin to his own Transcendental faith.

The Quaker poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier shared a third contemporary perspective on Millerism with progressive reformers in the millennial or post-millennial tradition, including Adin Ballou, John Humphrey Noyes, and William Lloyd Garrison. Like the Transcendentalists, these reformers anticipated eventual amelioration

of all earthly imperfections and a reign of saints in a this-worldly paradise. They also believed that the Second Advent was either a spiritual, ahistorical event or would occur only after the millennium. As Hawthorne recognized, they were liable to charge pre-millennialists like the Millerites, who believed the earth was doomed, with shirking responsibility to reform its institutions.

Garrison deplored the adverse effect of Millerism on the effort to abolish slavery, and his statements on the subject warrant review for the light they shed on Whittier's thought. In early 1843, shortly before the commencement of the millennial year, he published a two-part series in *The Liberator* in which he excoriated

the "Miller mania" and protested "the prolongation of a popular delusion [which] cannot fail to be attended with evil consequences."<sup>24</sup> Although he admitted that he had no personal acquaintance with Miller himself, he noted with regret that two of Miller's chief lieutenants, Himes and Charles Fitch, had defected from abolitionist ranks.<sup>25</sup> A few weeks later, another former abolitionist wrote *The Liberator* to defend his decision to resign from a temporary movement to enlist in Miller's eternal one, and his letter met with Garrison's curt reply: "Our friend B. speaks of two kingdoms of Christ—one of peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, set up 1800 years ago, and another that

remains to be set up, at the end of the world! We do not think that any improvements can be made upon the first one."<sup>26</sup>

Like all progressive postmillennialists, Garrison scorned idle chiliastic speculation and pressed for constructive social reform. This was the attitude Whittier shared. Like

Garrison, he could express his abolitionist dream and postmillennial expectations, as in his poem "The New Year" (1839), as well as admonish the Millerites for the social quietism, as in "The World's End" (1844). In this essay, Whittier acknowledged that Millerism was not a doctrinal aberration, but that a similar prophecy had been uttered "in every age since the Christian era" began. Still, he confessed that he could not sympathize with his Millerite friends because "the effect of this belief in the speedy destruction of the world and the personal coming of the Messiah, acting upon a class of uncultivated, and in some cases, gross minds, is not always in keeping with the enlightened Christian's ideal of the better day." By promot-

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ing a narrow interpretation of Holy Writ, Millerism undermined efforts at social reform.<sup>27</sup>

However reasonable this objection, these reformers were so ready to discredit the fanaticism that they often repeated sensational and unsubstantiated stories about its traumatic effects.<sup>28</sup> Whittier once urged his readers to execute their "simple and clearly defined duties of the present life" instead of prying "into the mysteries of the future" like one unidentified couple in Maine who had been "very unprofitably engaged in brooding over the mysteries of the Apocalypse, and in speculations upon the personal coming of Christ and temporal reign of the saints on earth." Obsessed by the prospect of earth's imminent dissolution, according to Whittier, the pitiful pair "came to an agreement that the husband should first kill his wife and their four children, and then put an end to his own existence. This was literally executed,—the miserable man striking off the heads of his wife and children with his axe, and then cutting his throat."<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, public opinion about the Millerites was colored by this kind of hearsay. Himes claimed in an open letter written after the Disappointment (printed in *The Liberator*) that "the reports so generally circulated by the 'press' and otherwise, as the 'fruits of Millerism'—of insanity, suicides, and the breaking up of families, with poverty, distress, &c. . . . are, most of them, unfounded; and those which have any semblance of truth are greatly distorted and exaggerated."<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, too, his protest was not often heeded, and these reports have usually been accepted at face value even by modern historians.

After condemning its alleged influence, Whittier did not allude to Millerism again until the enthusiasm had waned and slavery had been legally abolished. In about 1866, he confided to Annie Fields that he "had been deeply impressed lately" with Millerite doctrine,<sup>31</sup> and in two poems published that year

he treated adventism less polemically. In "Snow-Bound," he depicted "A not unfear'd, half-welcome guest" of his family that winter night during his boyhood whose "sweet voice had notes more high/And shrill, for social battle-cry." As he later explained, this woman, Harriet Livermore, eventually "embraced the doctrine of the Second Advent" and withdrew from the battle for social reform. Because she "felt it her duty to proclaim the Lord's speedy coming . . . she crossed the Atlantic and spent the greater part of a long life in traveling over Europe and Asia." His poetic tribute to her concludes:

And still, unrestful, bowed, and gray,  
She watches under Eastern skies,  
With hope each day renewed and fresh,  
The Lord's quick coming in the flesh,  
Whereof she dreams and prophesies!  
Where're her troubled path may be,  
The Lord's sweet pity with her go!<sup>32</sup>

Whittier also expressed without acrimony his postmillennial view of adventism in "Our Master." "We bring no ghastly holocaust," the poet averred, because Christ reveals Himself through those who continue His ministry of reconciliation on earth. Epidemics of religious enthusiasm like Millerism postponed rather than heralded the millennium.<sup>33</sup>

The movement provoked more derisive criticism from politically conservative writers, especially James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Unfortunately, within the past century their genteel disdain for the mass-maniacal clamor of Millerism, the fourth type of contemporary response, has been misrepresented as the attitude of most mid-nineteenth-century Americans. In retrospect, their complaints seem the most unkind cuts, for unlike Garrison and Whittier they had little motive to criticize and little exposure to the movement; consequently, their attacks consisted of little more than rumor and innuendo.

The patrician Cooper, embittered by the libel accorded him in the press for his opposition to the Anti-Renters of New York, regarded Millerism as further evidence of the rabid mob mentality threatening the republic. Though at least one group of itinerant Millerites held meetings in Cooperstown during the millennial year,<sup>34</sup> Cooper himself probably did not attend them, for in correspondence he disparaged the movement.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, he intruded into his novel *Wyandotté* (1843), set in pre-Revolutionary New York, a preachment upon the dangers of Millerism. He contrasted his genteel protagonist, who “saw and felt the consequences of education, habits, manners, opinions and sentiments,” with “the ordinary demagogue, a wretch equally incapable of setting an example of any of the higher qualities in his own person or practice, an of appreciating it when exhibited by others.” Lest his commentary be misunderstood, Cooper specified “Miller’s interpretations of the prophecies” as one example of the demagoguery he feared.<sup>36</sup>

Although his own modest postmillennialism is evident in his utopian novel *The Crater* (1847), he expressed in a letter written soon after its publication the same bias against Millerism that he shared with other conservative contemporaries.<sup>37</sup>

With their assumption of Brahmin superiority, Longfellow and Holmes mocked Millerism as a virulent strain of mass lunacy. Though Longfellow’s publisher advertised *Kavanagh* (1849) as “a beautiful picture of life in our own times,”<sup>38</sup> this story included a description of a Millerite camp-meeting that was neither beau-

tiful nor pictorially accurate, one obviously formed by rumor and prejudicial newspaper reports rather than personal observation. Indeed, the account of the evangelist’s arrival in the New England village contains the earliest allusion in American literature to the gowns allegedly worn by Millerites on the Day of Doom. The infection carried by this evangelist quickly spreads through the village. One evening, as the fanatics sing one of their “awful and ludicrous” hymns to gloom and doom, an orphan, convinced by their theology of fear that she has been consigned to a sinner’s hell and that she labors hopelessly beyond the pale of deliverance; drowns her-

self in a river—an incident Longfellow obviously could not have witnessed (p. 102). Holmes ridiculed Millerites in an early installment of *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1857-1858), originally published in the organ of Brahmin culture, the *Atlantic Monthly*. Referring to the comet of 1843, the sardonic Autocrat admits he would have felt more nervous “if I had

thought the world was ripe. But it is very green yet, if I am not mistaken; and besides, there is a great deal of coal to use up, which I cannot bring myself to think was made for nothing. If certain things, which seem to me essential to a millennium, had come to pass, I should have been frightened.” He then declaims a satiric poem, entitled “Latter-Day Warnings,” detailing in eight quatrains those conditions he would consider harbingers of the End. Only “When legislators keep the law,/When banks dispense with bolts and locks,” etc.—when all this transpires let “Miller’s saints blow up the

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globe;/But when you see that blessed day,  
Then order your ascension robe."<sup>39</sup>

Significantly, antebellum authors who mentioned the ascension robes allegedly worn by Millerites usually viewed the movement with patrician condescension: suffered limited, if any, personal exposure to it; and referred to robes, which they considered symptoms of madness, in works composed years after the movement had lapsed into disarray. Most of the other contemporary figures surveyed here seemed sympathetic to the spirit of Millerism, though not its dogma, and Whittier even acknowledged its orthodoxy. The picture that emerges is from this literature suggests, as Whitney R. Cross has concluded on other bases, that the Millerites "cannot be dismissed . . . when the whole of American Protestantism came so very close to the same beliefs."<sup>40</sup>

Although the memoirs of Annie Fields<sup>41</sup> and the letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson<sup>42</sup> indicate that a dispersed remnant of Millerites continued into the 1860s to expect Christ's imminent Second Advent, the generation of authors who matured during the Age of Realism regarded the enthusiasm exclusively as a historical event. Occasionally, as in John DeForest's *Witching Times* (1856) and *Irene the Missionary* (1879), these realists distilled details for their literature from recorded Millerite history.<sup>43</sup> Typically, however, literary realists treated Millerism as historical backdrop for local color stories.

This ostensibly objective view of the movement was adopted first by Edward Eggleston, who believed that the novelist shared the obligation of the historian to "set down things as he finds them"<sup>44</sup> and who thus designed his novel *The End of the World* (1872) as a history of Millerism in southern Indiana. Its melodramatic plot deserves little comment, for it hardly differs from myriad sentimental stories then popular: the love of Julia Anderson and August Wehle triumphs over the opposition of

Julia's shrewish mother, a misunderstanding and estrangement, and the evil machinations of a mustachioed villain. Yet, as William Randel observes, the novel "has value not because of its plot but because of the scenes and events that form the background of the plot. The climax of the love story coincides with the day which the Millerites had announced as the end of the world."<sup>45</sup>

Having adopted the method of a realistic novelist and social historian, Eggleston portrayed the Millerites as pious and sane citizens. Elder Hankins, the evangelist who propagates Miller's "new-fangled" faith in the community of Sugar Grove, converts many residents whose expectation of the End relieves "the fearful monotony of their lives" (p. 59).

In all, rather than depicting the Millerites as a collection of crazies on the fanatical fringe of frontier society, Eggleston suggested that the movement enjoyed mass appeal. As he concluded in his own voice: "The assured belief of the believers had a great effect on others. . . . An eminent divine, at that time a pastor in Boston has told me that the leaven of Adventism permeated all religious bodies, and that he himself could not avoid the fearful sense of waiting for some catastrophe" (p. 251). This realistic appraisal of the movement earned the praise of W. D. Howells, who like Eggleston had been a young boy living in the Ohio River valley during the millennial year. Howells agreed in his review of the novel that during "the great Millerite excitement . . . vast numbers of good people throughout the country believed that the end of the world was at hand, and probably most men were touched with a vague fear that it *might* be so."<sup>46</sup>

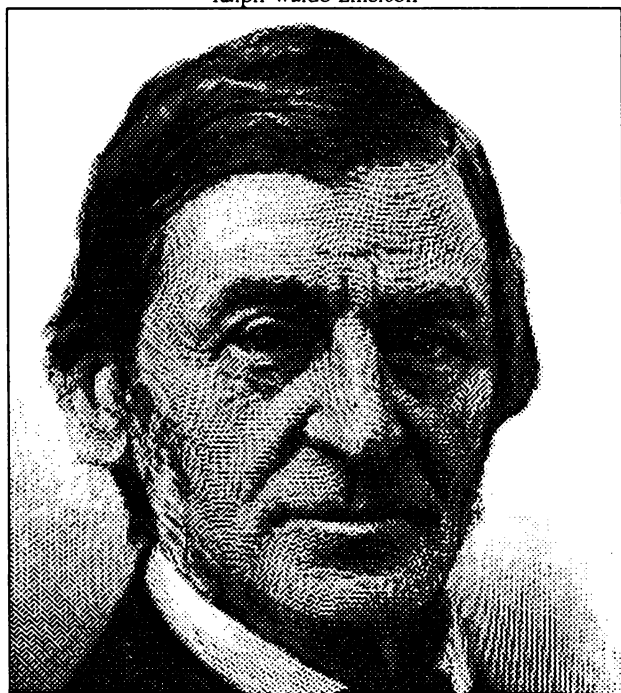
In four climactic chapters, Eggleston chronicled the events of the Last Day and following morning. "Work was suspended everywhere" (p. 256), he reported, and popular terror seized upon crimson clouds and shooting stars as signs of the End. Retiring to "a large bald hill" to await their ascension,



these Millerites “wept and shouted with the excitement” (p. 257). Like the Philadelphia sect that suffered poor weather on the night they expected the End, they finally were dispersed by a torrential rainstorm. A lightning bolt “produced a startling effect upon the over-strained nerves of the crowd. . . . And then the hurricane struck them, and they half-ran and were half-carried down the rear slope of the hill” (pp. 275-276). Sobered by the dawn of another day, “Some declared that the world had ended and that this was the new earth,” while others “still waited for the end,” and still others reacted by embracing “the blankest atheism and boldest immorality” (p. 278). Purporting to record social history, Eggleston even attributed some of these details to other sources.

Yet how accurate is this picture of Millerism? Unfortunately, most of Eggleston’s evidence seems to have been hearsay. Despite errors of method and fact, however, the work merits modest praise for the realistic tone in which it attempted to treat a movement that had become the butt of ridicule. He exonerated the Millerite leaders for irresponsibility for

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the outburst of enthusiasm, explaining that “every religious delusion has grown from some fundamental error in the previous religious teaching of the people” (p. 58). He even praised the descendants of the Millerites, “the Adventists of to-day,” as “a very respectable denomination, a doing work which deserves more recognition, from others than it receives” (p. 57). However flawed the factual basis of his history, Eggleston at least adopted the conventions of historical investigation and disregarded the jaundiced view of Millerism then popular. If his account is not entirely accurate, neither is it deliberately malicious.

Mary E. Wilkins, a New England local colorist, also used Millerism as historical backdrop for her short story “A New England Prophet” (1894). Although she claimed that she had based her story upon an actual incident in her hometown of Randolph, Massachusetts,<sup>47</sup> Wilkins probably modeled it upon Eggleston’s novel. Like Elder Hankins, Wilkins’ prophet “expounded strange and subtle mathematical calculations and erratic interpretations of history as applied to revelation with a fervor which brought conviction to his audience.”<sup>48</sup> In both accounts, a prominent Millerite suffers the scoffing of a skeptical brother who saves him from ruin by assuming ownership of his farm before the scheduled Day of Doom and returning it after the day has passed. The climax of both stories, the marriage of a young Millerite woman and her unconverted lover, occurs while the band of believers await the End atop a hill. And Wilkins in her denouement described the “pallid shivering people” returning to their homes the next morning (p. 611) much as had Eggleston in his novel. Unfortunately, Wilkins also compounded Eggleston’s historical inaccuracies. Whereas Eggleston had alluded only once to ascension robes, for example, Wilkins recurrently mentioned them. Jane Marsh Parker, a writer

of popular didactic stories and the daughter of a Millerite evangelist, was so provoked by this distortion of the historical record that she publicly rebuked Wilkins for reinforcing "many erroneous impressions of a movement which, disastrous as it was, did much to clarify the theological atmosphere."<sup>49</sup>

Though Parker doubted the reliability of Wilkins' history, she certainly appreciated Millerism's potential as a subject for realistic fiction. Nearly a decade earlier, she had attempted to set straight the record of the movement in an historical novel entitled *The Midnight Cry* (1886).<sup>50</sup> Judged only on aesthetic grounds, it is a poor novel indeed, with stilted characters and a contrived plot; considered as a study of Millerism, however, it is remarkable, for it combines the virtues of eyewitness reporting with the advantages of historical retrospect, and although patently autobiographical, it is probably the most complete and reliable history of Millerism written before Francis Nichol's definitive apology *The Midnight Cry* (1944).

The value of Parker's novel as a historical source has been overlooked despite Parker's methodical refutation of popular misconceptions about the "memorable fanaticism."<sup>51</sup> In an early chapter, she constructed a factual frame for reminiscence by summarizing Millerite doctrine, history, and exegetical method. During the summer of 1844, she reported, about 50,000 Millerites fixed the day "when the Lord should literally descend from heaven." Though this spiritual quickening often was jeered, "Thousands who scoffed at the teachings of Father Miller in public, trembled in secret." Rather than apologizing for the delusion, Parker candidly admitted its errors, though she added that the Millerites, as biblical literalists, navigated the mainstream of fundamentalism, not a backwash of apostasy. Once establishing that 1843 Jewish time "did not end until 1844 Roman time" and that "Jewish authority was paramount in such matters,"

these literalists could calculate from biblical clues the exact time of Christ's return.

The seven times began with Babylon, 677 years before Christ, and these seven times were 2520 years, and then like any simple sum in subtraction was  $2520 - 677 = 1843$ . The getting of that 2520 years was easy enough: one had but to multiply seven (representing times) by 12 (representing months) and the product by 30 (representing days), and there it was.

Moreover, Parker attributed Millerism's popularity to its orthodox extremism, rather than, as had Eggleston and Wilkins, the titillation it offered bored and illiterate farmers (pp. 96-101). Though she colored these paragraphs with her personal recollections, she accurately delineated in them important theological and historical characteristics of the movement.

In the remainder of the novel, Parker fleshed out this skeletal outline by illustrating the orthodoxy of Millerism and the normality of Millerites. Although Parker admitted that the End might seem "scientifically unthinkable and theologically monstrous" to her modern readers, she assured them that forty years earlier sane Christians had not been so enlightened (p. 223). Though she acknowledged that adventism forestalled institutional reforms (pp. 53, 134, 210), she also documented the benevolent influence it exercised through individual regeneration (pp. 223-224).

As in the stories by Eggleston and Wilkins, the climax of Parker's novel occurs simultaneously with the climax of religious excitement, though her eyewitness report of the Last Day contains none of their lurid details. Parker had precluded suspense about the terror attending the End by paraphrasing in another early chapter a seminal exegetical work usually ignored by historians of the movement, Miller's "Dream of the Last Day." Like Michael Wigglesworth's "The Day of Doom" and Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, end-

points of a popular American tradition in which it may be placed, Miller's work described "a globe reeling to destruction, the stars hurled from the heavens, the children of men crying in vain unto the Judge, descending, attended by a retinue of angels and archangels" (p. 141). The eventual climax of the novel hardly compares with this vision. Rather than describing ecstatic flocks perched on hills awaiting the new dispensation, Parker set her climactic chapter in a private home where her adolescent heroine passes a feverish night (pp. 278-281). This incident and her repeated references to the disquieting effect of chiliastic doctrine on young minds (pp. 101, 157, 179, 188) suggest that, however sympathetically she sketched the Millerites, her novel cannot be construed as an unqualified apology for them. As one reviewer concluded she painted "a graphic picture of the extensive disorder caused" by Miller and his followers.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly Eggleston, Wilkins, and Parker were intrigued by Millerism as a subject for historical inquiry, and each limned the movement in a realistic fiction. Each attempted, unlike earlier authors, to explain its appeal. The most accurate depiction was rendered by Parker, the least celebrated writer, though errors in the stories by Eggleston and Wilkins may be attributed to the popular image of Millerism that they assimilated rather than to the personal biases or literary shortcomings. As self-styled historians, Eggleston and Wilkins repeated as fact the popular legend that the believers had donned robes for the ascension; thus their stories, though purporting to record

the local history of Millerism, illustrate the process by which the rumor embellished the gospel truth.

In the twentieth century, American authors have adopted a peculiarly modern attitude toward Millerism. Those in the realistic tradition, including critical realists, have slighted the anachronistic subject. Upton Sinclair referred only incidentally to it in his muckraking essay *The Profits of Religion* (1918),<sup>53</sup> and Sinclair Lewis in *Elmer Gantry* (1927) and Waldo Frank in *The Bridegroom Cometh* (1938)

ignored Miller though they censured modern adventists. On the other hand literary modernists, infatuated with the abstract ideas of time and the absurd, have celebrated Miller as a prophet of nonsense. Much as Poe and Hawthorne had been fascinated with Millerism a century earlier as a subject for romance, literary modernists have been enraptured with it as an incredible topic

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*A survey of Millerism in American literature suggests that during the nineteenth century the enthusiasm was not dismissed merely as wholesale madness but was recognized by such authors as Hawthorne and Emerson as a subject for sensitive and serious contemplation.*

for ridiculous fictions. Subverting the traditional notion of a paradigmatic or time-ordered fiction that arranges concords between beginning, middle, and end,<sup>54</sup> these modernists manipulate time just as traditional writers manipulate character and setting in plots with linear continuity. For example, Djuna Barnes illustrated "spatial form" in her avant-garde, novel *Nightwood* (1936) with a vignette about a woman unrestrained by time, "the only woman of the last century who could go up a hill with the Seventh Day Adventists and confound the seventh day—with a muscle in her heart so passionate that she made the seventh day immediate."<sup>55</sup> Modifying the mi-

metic function of realistic fiction, moreover, these modernists invent absurd worlds-without-end which resemble no real world so much as that netherworld to which Miller and his followers had expected to be translated. For example, an ageless Millerite in William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955) reads Miller's "Dream of the Last Day" with the dedicated fervor of a new convert.<sup>56</sup>

These chief features of literary modernism, the manipulation of time and the realization of the ludicrous, are combined in *The Origin of the Brunists* (1966), an exhaustive new-novel adaptation of Millerite history. In this novel, Robert Coover cracked the seventh vial as though it were a fortune cookie and invented a technologically modern world into which the Millerites, the obvious analogue to the macabre Brunists, have been transported. Giovanni Bruno, the miraculous sole survivor of a coal mine cave-in, suffers brain damage from carbon monoxide poisoning. A spiritualist, a holy roller widow, and an amateur numerologist independently discover some esoteric meaning in his mumblings and dumb gestures and elevate him to prophetic office. Slowly increasing their number, the group infers from Bruno's grunts that the End of the World will occur on April 19, the last day under the sign of Aries. They fashion white tunics for their ascension. The editor of the local newspaper, a protagonist playfully named Justin Miller, infiltrates the cult, publishes his own "midnight cry," a special pictorial exposé headlined BRUNISTS PROPHECY END OF WORLD!, and plans a Millennium's Eve TV documentary.

Meanwhile, the Brunists attract international attention. Miracles, suicides, and astrological verifications of the prophecy are reported around the world. On the Last Day, the robed Brunists lead a crowd of spectators and media crews to a slag hill, their bizarre Mount of Redemption. There they sing and pray while vendors hawk popcorn and soft drinks amid

carnival tents. Suddenly, a violent storm breaks and frenzied Brunists leap into "the air as though trying to fly," strip, and roll in the mud.<sup>57</sup> Random violence erupts in the confusion: a child is trampled, one woman dies in an epileptic fit, another suffers a miscarriage, an old man is crushed when the bingo tent collapses, and Miller is virtually crucified. Recovering from their Disappointment that Christ temporarily had postponed his appearance, the Brunists are institutionalized: their hymns climb the top 40 charts; their leaders write popular inspirational books; Sister Clara Collins, a time-warped Ellen White, becomes their "Evangelical Leader and Organizer"; and Giovanni Bruno, their crazy prophet, is sent to a mental hospital.

In light of some recondite parallels between the Millerites and the Brunists, it is apparent that Coover researched Millerite history for this novel. For example, both founders are poor poets before they become prophets, and both movements collaborate prophecy with multiple computations and astronomical evidence and prosper under the direction of subordinates. Nevertheless, Coover deliberately distorted the record by referring to ascension robes, hysterical suicides, and crazed behavior on the Mount of Redemption because, as he observed, "It is easier for me to express the ironies of our condition by the manipulation of Platonic forms than by imitation of the Aristotelian."<sup>58</sup> Instead of writing a historical novel or even a parody of a historical novel about Millerism, he assaulted the very notion of historical veracity. More simply, he voided the teleological bowels of history by creating a novel world in which "facts" are irrelevant, if not incredible. His selection of oft-distorted "facts" about Millerism as analogues to those irrelevant if not incredible "facts" recorded in his metahistory of Brunism is ironically propitious.

This survey of redactions of Millerism in

American literature suggests that during the nineteenth century the enthusiasm was not dismissed merely as wholesale madness but was recognized by such authors as Hawthorne and Emerson as a subject for sensitive and serious contemplation. Occasionally, it even was credited with reviving orthodox, though extreme, millennial expectations within American Protestantism. Although progressive reformers like Garrison and Whittier justifiably inveighed against the movement because it bid fair to deplete the ranks of the Party of the Future, the allegation that the Millerites prepared robes for their ascension seems to have been an idle rumor spread largely by their partisan and patrician critics until it obtained the force of truth. This study also silhouettes differences and similarities among the literary strategies of romance, realism, and modernism in the treatment of a single subject. Whereas

the writers of romance mingled fact and fantasy in their invention, the realists purported to record social history, which in each case climaxed with the scheduled fulfillment of prophecy on the Last Day. Like Poe in "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion," the modernists wrote about Millerism from a point of view transcending logical progression, as if a pointless apocalypse already had consumed the common-sense world and left an ironic one in its place. Indeed, the new dispensation expected by Miller corresponds to the *nouveau roman* just as the End of the World corresponds to the predicted Death of the Novel. This literature demonstrates that the specter of apocalyptic death haunts each generation, including our own. In apocalyptic times we all become characters dreading the conclusion of an insufferable drama. No other prophecy of our universal plight is quite so surefire.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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