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November 26, 1968

Yesterday, when Willson Wood and I were together at Kirky's Funeral Home, we discussed the strange personality ^{of Miller}. The very words we used were strangely like the ones Lerond Curry was to use in the sheet we got today. We agreed that Miller was, first of all, a lonely man. In spite of all his many acquaintances and his exceedingly loyal students, there was always about him some unfathomable depths that I never ventured to explore. Frankly, there seemed a sort of unalloyed sadness in his very make-up. This personality trait made his farewell speech at the end of the "Shakertown Revisited" play so effective. He said little but somehow looked and acted the strange mood of the occasion, summing up in his brief appearance something of a wide stretch of history.

Loyalty would have been one of the words I would have used anywhere in speaking of Russell Miller. In our department, in the twelve years that we worked together, there was never a short word, never a misunderstanding. My only quarrel with him was that which I had with Miss Stith: there was just too much work done, too little rest taken. I wondered all the years how he ever got enough rest to keep him going. Years ago I learned through him and through Mrs. Mutchler how tenuous was his thread of life; he even told me that he might go suddenly. Not once in months, though his hands might be swelled until they shone, did he complain enough for an outsider to know that he was living on borrowed time.

Not many people knew the thoroughness of his scholarship in history as well as in drama. His first degree was in history, he got advanced training in business, and then, as you know, he did his graduate work in speech and theater. I read his dissertation project some three times, always marveling at his understanding of history and personalities. I took him to distinctive places connected with his study: the home of the Generals Buckner, Fort Donelson, the old forts around ~~MU~~unfordville,

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some historical spots in the Mammoth Cave National Park. First and last, we spent hours talking over the plans of his dissertation; he honored me by using a sentence from one of my speeches at Mammoth Cave as a sort of text for the whole study; he believed, as I do, that the breed of heroes is not dead, that there are still millions of opportunities to be heroic. I deeply regret that I did not know about his being in the hospital until he had sunk into his final hours; I was at the hospital when he was wheeled down the hall and put into the ambulance to be taken to Nashville on a forlorn-hope trip; I believed then that he would be dead in hours, at the most.

A great many people have misunderstood him because of his queer following. I will admit that I would like to have had a good barber or two today to make some of his students look a little more like human beings. There seemed to be far too many beards and unshorn locks and shabbily-dressed people for the size of the crowd and that in a famous college town. I know, however, that he often was the person who got hold of the most eccentric student and somehow made him worth liking and worth a good job. Today, as I looked around, I saw a goodly number of the outstanding speech teachers of Kentucky, his boys and girls, and there was nothing odd about them in looks; they may have been nutty-looking and stage-struck immature children when they began their work here, but they have grown up and are worthy of respect now. Maybe some of the extra hair and beard obvious today will gradually fade away and leave some genuine boys and some girls, too, a little more like persons. I am glad, thankfully glad, that I have not had to work with would-be actors; I am afraid that I would have offended their lofty opinions of themselves. Most of the students who were stage-struck carefully avoided me; I was not especially sorry. However, some of his best actors, not too odd in appearance or conduct, were top students for me.

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Since there is no harm in wishing, I do wish he could have lived to see the department of speech and theater in the new Fine Arts Building that is soon to be started. Even getting into the Old Library quarters would have given him a big lift this very school year. He was almost boyish in his enthusiasms for the right appearance of things connected with his plays. I have heard severe criticisms made of his "slave-driving," as many people called his demands as a director. But somehow, after a play was staged and highly praised, these same critics would confess that only by his exacting demands could things have turned out so well. People like my wife's brother, accustomed to the biggest actors and biggest companies, told me that Miller's staging and rendering of CARROUSEL exceeded in genuine effect the original company, which he had seen; he had also seen the screen version and the Little Theater version. This brother, Bishop Hines, has often spoken, on later trips here from Buffalo, of the professional touch that Miller was able to give his amateur performance. I have heard many similar appraisals of SHAKERTOWN REVISITED, which I have seen twice and marveled each time at the acting and the atmosphere created by the simple stage devices used.

We have lost a big man, one to be long remembered, just as Lerond said, by those whom he taught and the successive students of his own students. His death leaves only Willson Wood and Wilma Rabold of the nine whom I left in the department when I retired, on August 7, 1959; two went elsewhere, four retired, and now Russell Miller has died. It is a new but interesting department now, one that I highly respect and have pinned my faith to. The individual goes down in the struggle; the type lives on. The wood thrush I knew along Beechfork Creek, sixty-odd years ago, died of old age years and years ago; but the wood thrushes that still sing along that creek near Fidelity somehow know the very song that first found its way into my consciousness.