

John William Miller

by George P. Brockway

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John William Miller taught philosophy at Williams College from 1924 to 1960; and for the next eighteen years, until his death on Christmas Day 1978, he talked philosophy with his former students, for whom his house was always open and to whom he wrote marvelous and marvelously voluminous letters, some more than a hundred pages long. Until a few months before his death he had published only four essays, one in an undergraduate magazine and all of them more or less technical; yet he taught and left detailed notes for vigorous and original courses in epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, the history of philosophy, logic, metaphysics, the philosophy of history, psychology, and the state.

At one time he held the informal record of having the largest number of former students doing graduate work in philosophy at Harvard, but he derived special satisfaction from his continuing association with those who became historians, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen. He said that history was the history of thought; at the same time he felt that businessmen were doing the work of the world and that one of the weaknesses of intellectuals—he thought they had many weaknesses—lay in their supercilious indifference to such matters. He took pride in the familiarity with cost accounting he had gained in his father's business.

The Williams senior class regularly voted him the teacher "whose personality has influenced you most" and frequently "best lecturer." The yearbook was three times dedicated to him—once while he was a visiting professor at Minnesota, in celebration of his imminent return to Williams.

Miller was a tall, large-boned man of unfailing courtliness. A favorite word with him was "presence," by which he meant proclaiming one's thought in one's actions and accepting in one's thought the implications of one's actions. His own presence was powerful and immediately felt by all his students. He made none of the usual plays for popularity. His classes did not start with warm-up jokes, nor did he make regular-guy references to football games or house parties. He demanded decorum in his classrooms; if you slouched or put your feet up on the seat in front of you, he made a sharp impersonal comment on the meaning of courtesy. You didn't do it again.

Early in his career, he had the misfortune to find himself in competition with the senior man in his department, who wrote him several letters, which he preserved, of ambivalently avuncular advice on his teaching. From these it can be inferred that even as a very young man he made extraordinary demands on his students, and that they

responded enthusiastically by following him to his office and to his home for long extracurricular discussions, often on matters barely touched on in class.

Anyone calling on him in his office or his home was greeted with a formal but warm handshake and an assurance of welcome. Almost immediately, with little or no small talk intervening, conversation would begin on a question that had been exercising him or his visitor. At appropriate hours something to eat or drink might be offered; in his younger days it could have been homemade wine. At the end of the session he would gravely thank the visitor for breaking up his "routine," when around him piles of uncorrected examinations and term papers testified to his resistance to routine.

For him the method of philosophy was Socratic. One started where one was—local control, he called it—and proceeded to articulate the implications. Sophomore empiricists, of whom there were always many, were asked what they could possibly mean, on their premises, by "no" or "not": "Can you see no elephants?" Sophomore dogmatists, who were equally many, were led to understand the occasion of skepticism in the clash of dogmas. His senior logic course started with a question: "What sort of universe would a logical universe be?" He was perhaps happiest when some student, imbued with the pluralism of William James, replied, "A block universe." Then a dialogue would begin, eventually involving the entire group, which rarely exceeded ten or twelve in the prewar years when Williams mustered fewer than a hundred and fifty seniors. In a heady hour that frequently continued past the class-ending bell, students would be led to say and see that logic is inherently incomplete, implying continuums at both ends and so the possibility of, and occasion for, new discoveries. A logical universe would be similarly and—to use another of his favorite terms—constitutionally incomplete. Since logic, moreover, is a study in connections, a logical universe would be intracommunicated and articulated—in short, very much like the universe we know and not a block universe at all.

To say that students were stimulated by such discussions would be a colorless understatement. I remember especially my first formal introduction to the idea of cause, which ended with Miller's writing on the board the conclusion that "Universal causation is the refutation of mechanism." For anyone like me, and indeed for most "literary" undergraduates of that day, who had hitherto learned quietism from Hardy or Housman, such a conclusion was shattering.

The demands Miller made on us were not merely intellectual. "There is," he said, "just one quality in every man which he must change at least once; he must change his philosophy." He continued: "Only in the discovery of some fatal threat to himself in the framework of his inheritance can he discover freedom." Volumes could be written with this dictum as a text, but here it will serve to indicate that he saw philosophy as an enterprise involving the whole man in inescapable ways. To change one's philosophy was no light matter, and he treated students in their turmoil with the most delicate respect.

With undergraduates he was no missionary for a Millerian point of view, and he was proud of his success in directing attention to problems rather than to his answers. Philosophy did not, he said, offer information about the world that could be proved or

disproved and memorized, as one could prove or disprove and memorize Boyle's Law. Beginning students were therefore frequently puzzled. They were used to being told what to believe. In other courses they learned that the Corn Laws were attacked and defended for specific reasons that could be underlined in the textbook; that osmosis worked in a certain way, that Leonardo had unfortunately painted *The Last Supper* in something other than *buono fresco*. But Philosophy 1-2 provided no answers, only questions that, once raised, would not go away. He insisted only that the questions be faced and the consequences of one's answers be deliberately accepted.

His devoted students did not fall into any predictable pattern of thought. They included men who became Anglican bishops, Roman Catholic priests, Protestant clergymen, and professional philosophers of several persuasions. At a Williams College colloquium in 1978, honorary degrees were awarded to five alumni who were presidents of other colleges. When they discussed what had meant most to them in their education, it turned out that all had studied under Miller and all remembered him vividly. "He was," one said, "a person who frightened me and thrilled me." Another said that his choice of a career came from Miller's "having challenged me and pushed me to the wall."

Miller was not in any way indulgent of his students' whims. Agreement was not compelled, but understanding was required. No one got a high mark for denying free responsibility and simultaneously asserting morality. At the same time no one got a high mark for regurgitating lecture notes. Miller gave very few high marks anyhow. He happened to preserve a record of one course's grades; it shows only five As in two sections totaling seventy-five students, and this was a postwar class, when the "gentleman's C" was no longer fashionable.

The courses varied from year to year, partly because they were to some degree shaped by the problems brought by the students, and partly because Miller himself was always alert for new insights, always searching for new ways to express old ones. His bibliographical notes for Philosophy of the State, a one-semester course he offered to seniors, are on two hundred five-by-eight cards. His notes, queries, and more or less detailed studies of particular topics occupy several hundred pages in notebooks, in blank examination books, and even on the backs of cardboard posters (he cut these in half and found them convenient to write on when held in his lap).

In spite of his immersion in the history of philosophy, and although he was awesomely well read in all the humanities and the sciences as well, he was not a scholar in the ordinary sense and did not consider himself one. Of many of his contemporaries he read only enough to catch the drift of their thought. "It is," he wrote, "always difficult in dealing with the history of philosophy to demonstrate that a figure in a standard textbook ought to be in the textbook. There are those who would stop the story with St. Thomas, and others favor John Locke, holding, with James, that philosophy goes around Kant, not through him." As for himself, he was particularly impatient with the various analytic and positivistic schools. That their essentially ahistoric positions should be in the ascendant in his time no doubt aggravated the feeling of isolation to which he, like many undergraduate teachers, was prone. In any event, his study of the past was not a search of

arguments or debater's points. To one correspondent he wrote: "Give me your views. I can quote authorities, too, but it won't get us anywhere because my authorities are your follies. Authority in thought means to me what must be taken into consideration, no more. But, I should say that I think anyone who ventures in thought must be taken into consideration."

The senior man in the department called himself a critical realist and had written several books on the subject. Miller had studied under Josiah Royce and with special intensity under William Ernest Hocking, and in defending their idealism against the realist attack came to a more comprehensive understanding of their weaknesses as well as those of the attacker. The result was a lifelong study of epistemology. He early came to the conclusion that the ancient problem of universals and the equally ancient problem of appearance and reality had no solutions on passive terms, that a passive observer was a self-contradiction, and that the consequences of active observation were profound and pervasive. Act, actuality, acting, action became central words in his lexicon.

A hasty reviewer of Miller's book *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays*, noting this trend in his thought, oddly mistook him for a follower of Dewey's instrumentalism. But Miller was concerned with the conditions of action and with the self-maintenance of those conditions. His ethics considered how it was possible to do any deed at all. His logic considered how it was possible to make a meaningful assertion.

Though all his students were exposed to his thought—for he lived by talking—it is fair to say that none of use came close to encompassing it. There are at least three reasons for this.

The first was that his thought was truly original. Nothing in our previous training or experience prepared us for it. We were predisposed to misunderstand, to fail to see. I still have my notes for Phil. 1. His position is substantially there in those notes, which I thought I understood, and I didn't see it at all. I didn't even begin to see it until two years later, and now, forty-five years later, I still rediscover points I dutifully but uncomprehendingly made note of then.

He knew he was breaking new ground—there was no false modesty about him—but he did not appreciate how difficult it was for others to follow. It was difficult for professional philosophers no less than for laymen—and this is quite apart from a professional's commitment to his own point of view. He said, no doubt overstating the case somewhat, that only Hocking, among professionals, showed interest in his essay "Accidents Will Happen" when it was first published in the *Journal of Philosophy*. Ten and fifteen years later he was puzzled and even hurt that "History and Humanism" and "The Midworld" seemed to meet considerable incomprehension when he read them before the Harvard Philosophy Club. In recent years he was, I know, sincerely offended that his dictum, "The universal is the form of the actual," did not find an immediate response. The first time I begged him for an elucidation, he impatiently changed the subject. He had no audience, he said, and I had to confess myself an inadequate one, though I could see that he was subtly distancing himself from Hegel.

The second reason why so much of his thought eluded us was that it was constantly developing. The admittedly clumsy term "the midworld," which will be central to a forthcoming book of his later work, was not used by him in my undergraduate days, and the distinction he made between artifacts and "functioning objects"—another clumsy term—was not defined until a few years ago. These are only two examples of many that could be cited.

Finally, none of us knew more than a part of him—because there were so many of us. He made, he said, a point of taking a man at his word. Taking each man at his word, meeting each student on his own ground, he had many grounds to cover. With one of us he would explore abnormal psychology; with another, the common law; with a third, existentialism; with a fourth, the philosophy of history; with three of us in my senior year, aesthetics. Sometimes this was done by way of directing honors work, and sometimes it led to formal courses in the catalogue, but more often it was done for the love of it. God knows we loved him for it.

In all this there was one thing he could not abide: debating. In his essay "Idealism and History" (included in *The Paradox of Cause*) he writes: "The practice of teaching philosophy by argument is widespread. But any such procedure is the plainest evidence that nothing necessary can result. . . . There is no conventional philosophy, but only the free discovery by the individual of his own reality through a wholly free activity." Again, in "History and Humanism," he says, "For I do think it is at last a matter of exhibition rather than of abstract argument." Nietzsche's superman, he remarks in "Utopia and State," "can be tamed, because he can be argued with." Any of us who tried quickly found that Miller himself could not be tamed.

Sometimes he expressed his aversion to debate with terrifying ferocity. I remember him once terminating a discussion of a point by turning on a friend who had been arguing for it all evening. "No," he said abruptly. "No. It is no good arguing. I hate what you are supporting." I have been shown letters he wrote to others castigating their arguments in terms that make you gasp, and I have received one or two such letters myself. It is probable that some good men were thus driven away—to their loss, and no doubt to his, too. In a possible autobiographical comment in "Accidents Will Happen" he writes, "There are beliefs, moods, conflicts, attitudes which seem impervious to modification." Certainly there are situations in which his usual tact and courtesy were unpredictably overridden.

It was not that he would not suffer fools. In my sophomore year I worked out a monstrous amalgam of Unitarianism with Hardy-esque determinism. Aglow with foolish enthusiasm, I sought him out in his office and read him my manifesto. He listened gravely, managed to find something to comment on in the midst of my absurdities, and sent me on my way with the feeling that I had been taken seriously. And indeed he would take seriously any student who showed even the most misconceived willingness to grapple with his own thought.

But of course Miller was not all solemn seriousness. He enjoyed laughter at his own expense. He told with relish how a camping companion, the then assistant dean (there were only one dean and one assistant dean in those innocent days), called him the Prince of Darkness. He appreciated the campus pun that identified him at the Phantom of the Apriori (like many who respect language, he enjoyed puns). His favorite actor was W. C. Fields, who could make him laugh until the tears came, his hand held over his mouth in a characteristic gesture. He loved Gilbert and Sullivan and could quote long passages from them. He himself had a secret talent for light verse and once recited for us a naughty ballad he had composed while in the ambulance service in World War I; so far as I know this has nowhere been reduced to writing. It was on a beer picnic in Flora's Glen (previously celebrated as the inspiration for Bryant's "Thanatopsis") that several of us first began to know him. Many years later he suggested that his book be dedicated "To the Williamstown Utopian and Beer Picnic Society." With some misgivings I suppressed the tribute.

For forty years I tried off and on to get him to let me publish a book of his writings. Several times I thought I had persuaded him, only to have him back away. Once he even signed a contract for his dissertation, but it was clear enough that his intention—and that, too, of the founder of my firm, the late Warder Norton—was merely to boost my morale as I entered the army. At the time of his retirement I put together, with the help of a friend, a collection that contained most of the essays he ultimately published; yet still he hesitated.

In a letter that became the essay "Functioning Objects, Facts, and Artifacts," he wrote, a year before his death, "I have promises to keep and cannot keep them all." Then he quoted the seventeenth-century poet James Graham:

He either fears his fate too much
Or his deserts are small
Who will not put it to the touch
To win or lose it all.

Having once put it to the touch, he was ready to do it again. Just before his death he was working again on the idea of nature. He remarked that there are only two "philosophies"—the philosophy of history and the philosophy of science. He had advanced far beyond his dissertation topic, *The Definition of the Thing*, but the problem was not fundamentally different—only greatly evolved.

He wrote incessantly, more often than not letters he didn't send or essays he never quite finished. Several of the latter were typed by his students and circulated in a sort of samizdat and eventually included in the one book he published in his lifetime. He was much concerned with style, sometimes contending (falsely) that he had none and sometimes that philosophical discourse had none. These contentions were variants of his notion that philosophy was a one-on-one affair. Nevertheless Miller left at least a dozen drafts of the start of the first chapter of a book on the philosophy of history. He proposed a rough outline in a letter to me and made notes, sometimes extensive, for the succeeding

chapters. These are brilliant and will be published, but they also intensify our regret for which might have been.

As I reread what I have written, I see that I have described the ideal teacher in the ideal undergraduate college. I'll not back away from that. I was awakened and stimulated by other great teachers—the late David Brown, then also of Williams, chief among them—but my life was permanently shaped by Bill Miller. I can name almost three hundred other students whose experience was similar and for each one I can name there must be several I have not had contact with. Miller's influence on us was through his presence, his presence resulted from his taking us at our word and insisting that we take him at his word. He was generous, not merely with his time but with his thought. His thought was deceptively simple; but for anyone who can grasp it, nothing will ever be the same again.

Of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest, and justest, and best.