

Infinity and Limit: A Teacher's Eye

by Theodore Friend

(Posted with the permission of the *Yale Review*. The review first appeared in the *Yale Review* 73 [1984]: 446-51. The pagination of this version does not conform to the pagination of the original document.)

Asked to write a book review, I found that I could only begin with an expression of appreciation.

If you were eighteen years old, what might be the impact upon you of a man who appears to know something about nearly everything, and nearly everything about a few things; and who is willing to reason with you in your deepest ignorance and unreason? Imagine that this man treats you with dignity, never tries to overcome you; that he leads you onward without deceit, clearly trying also not to fool himself, until your thinking might acquire some rudiments of form and a spark of initiative. Imagine further that by the age of twenty-one you are confident that this man does not merely appear that way. He *is* that way. Might you not want to dedicate the college yearbook to him?

I imagine that many yearbooks at Williams college were dedicated to John William Miller in his long career there. I know that our class in 1953 voted him the teacher who had influenced us most. Twenty-five years later, long after his retirement and a few years before his death, we voted again to the same conclusion.

"What is a vote?" Miller might ask, with a slow, pleasant smile. I can see him put one arm behind his back and again to stride the width of the classroom or the lecture platform as he gathers ruminant energy; concentrated pauses, clear sentences, whole paragraphs pour out from under his heavy white moustache with the unrehearsed, unembarrassed fluency of a man who knows his own mind, and how to search it. He would look at a vote *sub specie aeternitatis* and then shake it out *sub specie temporis* until we were aware of its transience and its tangibility; were able to muse at its smallness, mull over its grandness.

With a popularity vote he had no truck.

As for influence: Miller took care to exhibit the workings of his own mind, and to point out the masked persuaders infesting modern life, so that we might be empowered, if we cared, never again to be influenced unconsciously.

He came at us with a steady dignified passion. Lucid, certainly; even though aphoristic, allusive, more than a trifle hard to get. Your pen had better keep flowing (I told myself) because you'll have to read this over in your notebook a couple of times and think about it before it sinks in. Eventually most of us "got something out of it." Many, like me, still think they got a lot out of it.

There were jokes, of course. Phil 1-2 was called "Miller's Mystery Hour." He himself may have nurtured the jest, as he did in *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*: "One should insist upon the claim that no 'question' in philosophy has, or could have, an 'answer'. Philosophy deals in constitutional confusions. . . . In terms of the question-answer view of knowledge, such a confusion could not . . . be described. So, philosophy is a mystery." Fundamental perplexities did not daunt Miller. He raced to the sporting question, and cheered us on with him in the chase.

"Confusion," of course, is far too deprecatory a term for what Miller inspired in students. He stood for massive processes: holding great spans of meaning in dialectical tension; subsuming long phases of past inquiry large volumes of the present, within a questing discourse; looking for a basic definition with which to begin or "end" a phase of thinking, or begin anew.

Now John William Miller's quest may be appreciated by others in these five volumes edited and brought forward (anonymously) over the last five years by George Brockway, also a former student. The Emersonian aphorisms are there to enjoy: "Mathematics and physics are infinities, and butter no parsnips. In math there are no parsnips, no butter either." And the Ortega-like seriousness about the enterprise of civilizing ourselves "The age is not notably devoted to the eternal. But in so far as it is not, it seems also to have lost a basis for reverence and responsibility." The ambition of his thought, its courage and its penetration are there to see held back from publication all those years during which his own guiding instinct told him that he must *teach* or perish. He embodies the nineteenth century title of his chair—The Mark Hopkins Professorship of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy. He sat on the figurative log, as Hopkins had talking processes and values with students.

Not only the log. One summer Miller spied a student atop a girder on a campus building being renovated. He halloosed him. "What is it like up there, Mr. Malcolm, on the very brink of eternity?" Little events, great portents. He had a way of making the commonplace reverberate. He was equally good at domesticating the awesome. A neighborhood grade school boy took to visiting him for tea in his retirement. "What do you two talk about?" his parents asked the boy. "Oh, *pi* and infinity, and stuff like that." Miller's books take that stuff, and much other stuff, and turn it, clay on potter's wheel, into vessels of meaning.

He sees "the scholar as a man of the world"—the title of an essay in *The Paradox of Cause*. Why? Because the scholar confronts a chosen manifestation of infinity. He is neither altruist nor escapist, but "the person who has made an alliance with the imperative and actual foreground, accepting its discipline and giving expression to its implications." Counting, from keeping a tally with stones, rises to mathematics. Meteorology rises from putting a finger to the wind, to Torricelli's barometer, to (Miller might have added) cloud-mapping by satellite. Of other fields the analogous is true, with special limits—semantics, psychology, history, whatever: "The function of scholarship is the discovery and maintenance of such modes of the infinite forms of finite actuality."

Miller cites Hegel with approval—we do not deal with the night in which all cows are black. Things may be distinguished and classified, both of which acts are vital. He applies, with strange aptness, Conrad: "in the destructive element immerse." The element in which one distinguishes and classifies, and acts, is the field of one's own scholarship, which is no less than one's own fate. We only drown if we try to climb out of that sea" "The scholar can deal only in the fateful, but he overcomes this by identifying himself with its laws. There seems to me quite enough romance in this to satisfy anyone."

Scholarship a romance? Yes, and a chivalrous battle. Miller was a connoisseur of the imperialism of fields of knowledge, their attempts to dominate and devour each other. He loved the struggles: physics against the supernatural, psychology *über alles*, neo-Sanskritic grammarians trying to stand the world on its syntax. Such a jousting had his natural opponents. Three are worth mentioning: Bertrand Russell, the behaviorists, and Sigmund Freud.

Russell went wrong by beginning with "sense-data." Embryonic mutations, asteroidal oscillations, neither these nor any array of facts can illumine philosophic night. Russell was a "pseudo-philosopher," and "intellectual" (term of scorn) in the sense of being an "outsider not immediately present in his own act." His *Scientific Method in Philosophy* was "a plain absurdity, a nullification of history." By abolishing the past, the present, and the imperative, Russell joined the barbarians, who are distinguishable by total irreverence.

How does philosophy, then begin and proceed? Only by definition of terms, as in Plato's attempt to define justice. In the beginning were things; therefore distinguishables; therefore the search for relative permanence in categories; therefore the certainty of categorical change. "What remains constant is not a group of properties, but the *distinguishability of a process*." And, proceeding with intractable problems, Miller comes out in his own aphoristic voice, closer perhaps to Croce than Chomsky, to Royce than Rorty:

The relation of language and object is neither physical nor logical; it is dialectical and ontological Any language is a language [a] because it embodies an order, and [b] because that order is understood.

The symbol is the union of inner and outer It permits the distinction of form and content. Without it, no distinction.

Logic is not a language about grammar. Logic is the occasion of grammar . . . [which] develops in the service of communication.

Miller thought carefully about what he named "the midworld," which he called utterance of any serious kind. It is "mid" between the incomplete self and the incomplete universe. Speech (whether artistic symbol or scientific notation does not matter, for both come from the one culture of the actual) is the manifestation of cultural incompleteness, the embodiment of such incomplete local control as humans can attain.

In submitting to human limitations is the discovery of human dignity. Because this was the very rule and condition of his thought, Miller refused to yield to the indignities implied in B.F. Skinner's world view. To make inferences about humans from the behavior of pigeons was bad enough to imagine a mechanistic world on such a basis, still worse. Miller's style of critique here is not frontal combat, but devastating subversion. He demonstrates that Skinner lacks the intellectual substance with which to make valid inferences in social science, let alone to project a utopia. He shows simply that Skinner cannot, does not, exhibit what he is talking about. His pigeons are not objects in the physical universe. In short, "Skinner has no pigeon."

The Freudians and the behaviorists are linked in their errors. "I would like to see either Watson or Freud define an *act*. Neither does. Neither can. And I know why. The reason is that both want to begin with the face but with facts not already colored by reason." With Aristotle, Miller sees humans as rational animals. Against much, perhaps most modern theorizing, he takes the radical stance that "All illness of mind is a departure from rationality." Lest that thought seem improbable or unsympathetic listen to Miller on anxiety: the "sign that one has ceased to define oneself through the community. Its source is ethical. Anxiety is always the sign of the breach in the integrity of the self in some *systematic* way." Summarizing what might be thought of as Miller's faith: reason discerns instinct, compounds a self, produces action, provides a community, propels history. Unreason flinches or fantasizes, splits the self, falters before the occasion for action, divides the community, distorts our historical capacities. Is this somehow too hopeful a view of the human condition? No. Health should define illness, not illness health.

Because Miller contends so robustly with modern dehumanizers, it is easy to forget that he included religionists in that lot. He thought them rather well vanquished from the seventeenth century onwards, and spends few words on them in these books. I remember, however, his critique of public lectures given on campus by Paul Tillich as "giving religious answers to philosophical questions." Tillich publicly retorted he was "offering existential answers to existential questions." Miller made no reply. For once, someone else had the better answer.

He strode across the lecture platform as Reason and strode back as Action. Which prevails? Reason, not action, gave humanity its first sense of universality and freedom. Such reason obtained its leverage upon "the constancy through which change and variety became intelligible." So Miller may be called, whatever subject he covers, a philosopher of history, in the sense that for him philosophy was the king of disciplines and history the queen. But all that he touched took on a princely grandeur, and he gave it freely away.

I yearn to hear Miller speaking with people beyond his pages. Reading him, knowing clearly where he stood, I imagine some sallies: To Teilhard de Chardin: "Arguments beginning with God lead to nonsense. So do those beginning with evolution. Beginning with both at once leads to nonsense compounded."

To the novelists Ann Tyler, Mary Robison, and Ann Beattie: "Bleakness is in the eye of the beholder. As in Emerson's day, nature wears the colors of the spirit. Still more so, living room decor."

To Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong: "You may by will impose a concept of necessity upon tens of millions of people for tens of years. But your system, like others radically arbitrary, will reveal its incompleteness—of quantitatively, for that is trivial—but structurally. When the insistent discourse is held the first question will be: 'Why is this necessary?'"

The essays in these volumes read like soliloquies or like letters (which many of them are). They awaken interior monologues as well as imaginary dialogues. One longs for conversation with a man who could say, "To have an ear for the music of the spheres—a mathematical harmony—is to lack order and direction and infinity." Miller's genius, in part, was to see clearly the relationship between infinity and limit, and to understand the contests among categories with which we try to order it. He brought all down to earth and presented it at tea. But the discourse went far beyond the tea tray. He posited to us, he keeps before us, the existence of a company of free minds who recognize each other the world over, by willingness to address in open reason the salient self and social need. A heady ideal then, and still.