

Vincent Colapietro

Fateful Shapes of Human Freedom: John William Miller and the Crises of Modernity.
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When a philosopher's name appears in a book title, expectations of either close exegesis or critical commentary on that philosopher are typically aroused. The high philosophical merit of Colapietro's book arises from accomplishments having little to do with either exegesis or criticism. The reader is instead drawn into a series of engaging meditations on closely related perennial issues of human nature, metaphysics, culture, history, and freedom. These meditations proceed with the occasional assistance of inspiration from selected sentences of Miller, carefully drawn from his large body of published and unpublished writings. Colapietro has the happy facility of finding just the right quotation to punctuate the point being made, without ever setting Miller up for a hard blow. Indeed, it appears that Miller is never contradicted or criticized in these pages; a more ideal conversation partner than Colapietro could not be imagined. The primary aim of this book, we are told in the preface, is to reveal the extent to which the theme of history dominates Miller's philosophy. But this is merely a conciliatory bone thrown to the sort of historians of philosophy who anticipate a full meal of critical exposition and who read prefaces first. Since these meditations do have the nominal assignment of saying something about Miller that has not been said before, which is certainly accomplished, we need some acquaintance with this obscure philosopher.

John William Miller (1895-1978) was a Harvard graduate (PhD 1922) and taught at Williams College until 1960. Miller, caught between sharply opposed camps during Harvard's 'second golden age' of C.I. Lewis, W. E. Hocking, R. B. Perry, and E.B. Holt, sought a compromise between Hegelian idealism and pragmatic naturalism. One wonders how a confrontation with Whitehead, who arrived after Miller graduated, might have aided this search since Miller is evidently a process thinker. In any case, virtually no one at the time, or since, would have suspected Miller of intense philosophical thinking and writing. Miller was among that last generation of philosophy professors who could enjoy a fine teaching career while publishing almost nothing. Only a few devoted students have kept his thought alive, by getting into print several books after his death. Those who have read them find them to be a treasure. They apparently belong to that interesting genre of philosophical effort that tries to synthesize the best from two firmly opposed systems; Miller called no-one Master. This genre calls to mind similar creatively compromising (and better published) figures from that generation such as Stephen C. Pepper (1891-1972), Susanne K. Langer (1895-1952), Van Meter Ames (1898-1985), John H. Randall, Jr. (1899-1980), Arthur E. Mur-

phy (1901-1962), and Sidney Hook (1902-1989). From the fine efforts of Miller's students and admirers like Colapietro, it is obvious that Miller is hardly out of place with this quite respectable company and deserves serious attention from more than just historians.

The reader would hardly know (or long care) where Miller's philosophy leaves off and Colapietro's own philosophy begins. Approval of Miller is so unwavering and heartfelt that the sporadic exegesis becomes quite transparent to the perspicuous view of the philosophical problems themselves. The merely annoying habit of supplying fragmentary quotations, often so brief, oracular, and pulled from context as to be quite obscure by themselves, might leave the historian of philosophy frustrated from an inability to read paragraph-length stretches of Miller for herself and compare them with Colapietro's explanations. But I rather think that this sort of reader was never the intended audience. Miller is only a convenient jumping-off place for Colapietro's own extended musings, which in turn are exquisitely designed jumping-off places for the reader's own contemplations. Rare is such a book that makes a trained philosopher think for themselves, and to such profit.

Pluralistic pragmatists and hermeneutical continentalists will find this book quite congenial and stimulating. Friends of William James and John Dewey will agree with Colapietro that indeed we are here given an empirical naturalism worth fighting for. The comparisons with Henry Thoreau are brilliant. Most Wittgensteinians would find rewarding material here, although (surprisingly) Wittgenstein is first mentioned on the very last page. Not everyone enjoys a useful compromise, however. Reductive materialists, determinists, and rationalists beware! Miller (and Colapietro) advocate the fundamental nature of the 'Midworld' of human experience in all its pluralistic and historicist glory, which grounds agency, ordinary language, and any form of knowledge. Scientific realists will be dismayed to hear how physics cannot replace lived reality, just as idealists will be dismayed to see that no absolute of reason can guarantee coherence to the finite individualities of life. Colapietro explores the many aspects to the issue of how cultural processes both shape our capacities and potentials for freedom. Neither determined by history nor free from it, humanity is destined to endlessly re-formulating our story of how we can to have stories and how we might have better stories. After the chapters on revising philosophy and on the Midworld, two more chapters on 'Historical Displacements and Situated Narratives' and 'Critique, Narration and Revelation' complete the book. Miller and Colapietro find a point of mediation between tragedy and creativity, between pessimism and optimism. Although the trajectory of the past has made us, we need not reject the past or cultural bonds to find ourselves (what would we find?), since it is enough to take advantage of the openness of the future to seek gradual change for the better.

Should Miller's compromise be our compromise today? It is the end of Cartesian rationalism and metaphysical realism. The long-anticipated convergence of American pragmatism with the continental tradition of Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer is promised if we go down the path laid out by

Colapietro. Only the work of Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein, or Joseph Margolis' work compares. Colapietro's outstanding work should be read by anyone interested in the open possibilities of future philosophy.

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