

Perry Miller and the Historians

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THE career of Perry Miller rebukes us all. Membership in the academic profession is granted only upon evidence of devotion, which must be demonstrated by willingness to spend long hours alone in library or laboratory, pursuing and arranging ideas. People so devoted often pride themselves on a certain refinement of manners, bearing, and conversation. And if somehow the ideas escape and devotion dims, manners, bearing, and conversation help to cover the loss: dignity can substitute for learning.

Perry Miller's manners were rough; his bearing was not quite the one expected of a professor; and his casual conversation was calculated to shock. He sometimes affected an uncouthness that made a perceptive listener at one of his lectures ask why he kept insisting that he was really a stevedore. The answer, perhaps, was that he feared dignity might not merely substitute for learning but overcome it. Indeed, his posture carried the suggestion that such a conquest had occurred in some that he saw around him.

It did not occur in him. The seeming stevedore, with the best historical mind of his generation, perhaps of his century, devoted it earnestly, fruitfully, humbly, and unrelentingly to scholarship. His very industry was a rebuke to those of us with fewer talents, who had greater need to work but could not match his intensity. And he compounded the force of the rebuke by working at a subject cast aside by previous scholars as too arid to be worth investigating: Puritan theology. Even in his last years, when he often appeared to be in a state of collapse, he outdid men of greater dignity who were granted higher honors by the scholarly world.

Miller's first book, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, was itself an orthodox, if brilliant, piece of scholarship in which he had not yet hit his stride. It has been more widely read than his other

works because it is more conventional. (His only other work that has been as widely commended is *Errand into the Wilderness*, a collection of essays and articles that can be read in pieces and so does not require the sustained attention of the reader.) *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, like most other scholarly monographs, can be summarized. In brief, it demonstrated what a few scholars had argued, though none so conclusively, that the founders of Massachusetts believed in a congregational ecclesiastical polity before they came to the New World, even though they had remained within the Church of England. It also described some of the problems they encountered in putting that polity into practice.

The only real hint of Miller's ultimate objective was the fact that the book gave so much attention to ideas. It was no novelty to be writing about the New England Puritans with respect. The denunciations of H. L. Mencken and James Truslow Adams had already been arrested, among historians at least, by Kenneth Murdock's *Increase Mather* and Samuel Eliot Morison's *Builders of the Bay Colony*. Miller had come to Cambridge to sit at the feet of Murdock and Morison, and seemed to be echoing their views in the preface when he hazarded the thesis "that whatever may be the case in other centuries, in the sixteenth and seventeenth certain men of decisive importance took religion seriously; that they often followed spiritual dictates in comparative disregard of ulterior considerations; that those who led the Great Migration to Massachusetts and who founded the colony were predominantly men of this stamp. . . . I have simply endeavored to demonstrate that the narrative of the Bay Colony's early history can be strung on the thread of an idea."

Coming after the works of Murdock and Morison, the words did not sound especially daring, but probably no one realized, perhaps not even Miller, how much he meant by them. It was a time when religious ideas excited hardly anyone. Avant-garde intellectuals dismissed them as pie in the sky, and divinity schools busied themselves with the arduous problems of homiletics. Miller himself was an atheist and never pretended to be anything else. With a historian's objectivity he had shown that some people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cared enough about religious ideas to act upon them. But it would have seemed a

little ridiculous for an atheist to take religious ideas seriously except insofar as they affected action.

That, however, is precisely what Miller did. Meticulously, chronologically he read everything written by Puritans in England or New England in the seventeenth century (in his spare time he read American literature of the nineteenth century and regularly offered new lecture courses on the literature of the South and West, local color, industrialism, romanticism). In 1939, six years after *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, he published *The New England Mind: the Seventeenth Century*, a belated *summa theologica* of New England Puritanism. In this and his subsequent works, instead of treating ideas as they affected actions, Miller scarcely mentioned actions except as they affected ideas. And yet by spelling out the ideas through which people of the time understood what they were doing, he rewrote their history. In occasional sentences, as in an unembellished line drawing, he was able, almost casually, to reconstruct social, political, and even economic history. Once one had the scheme of the thing clear, he seemed to say, it was scarcely worth the trouble to paint in the details of who *did* what.

The academic world received *The New England Mind* with cautious, bewildered plaudits. It was difficult reading and most readers attributed the difficulty to unskillful writing. Those who spent enough time at it recognized that the trouble did not come from the writing, which was always clear and usually brilliant, but from the complexity of the intellectual system that the book describes, and even more from the subtlety of the author's observations about that system. Miller saw in Puritan theology a vast apparatus for describing reality. He wished to delineate it without simplifications so that his contemporaries might compare it with their own systems, to which they too often attributed a greater degree of sophistication. But Miller could not be content with the role of expositor. He was forever poking the apparatus here to show how it responded there. And the result, to any but the most careful follower of the text, was confusing. It was difficult to see precisely how the parts were connected. And how could anything be so complicated? Where did the Puritans stop and Miller begin? An eminent historian once confessed to me that

reading Miller was to him like watching Einstein at a blackboard: he was impressed, he recognized there was something deep going on, but he did not know what.

Actually it is not impossible to treat *The New England Mind* as conventional intellectual history. One can describe its findings like those of any other scholarly work: its discovery of hitherto unsuspected elements in Puritan thought, such as humanism, Scholasticism, and the logic of Peter Ramus, its demonstration of the central role played by the doctrine of the covenant. Yet to say this is to say too little, for what Miller had done was to create a new genre of intellectual history. His book was not a building block for that imaginary tower of learning to which historical labors are always said to offer "contributions." Nor was it the end product of such contributions by others. Though Miller was always more than generous in acknowledging the help he received from the work of other scholars, *The New England Mind* in fact owed surprisingly little to anyone else's scholarship. It was an end product produced at a single stroke, a work of synthesis created when there were no contributions to synthesize. *The New England Mind* is both a description of a complex system of thought and a translation of that system into a universal commentary on the human condition. It is at once a work of history and a testament.

Miller had begun a second volume when the war interrupted him. After the war, however, he turned first to a study of Jonathan Edwards. In doing so, he was reaching ahead from the seventeenth century to the individual who in the eighteenth had worked most creatively with the intellectual problems that Miller had already identified and described. In Edwards, Miller saw the most challenging intelligence of American history, and the way Miller accepted the challenge is indicated in his astonishing statement that the whole of Edwards' writing constituted a giant cryptogram, which could be unravelled only by reading between the lines.

Previous scholars had recognized Edwards as a genius, but they had usually been content to praise him and hurry on; for Edwards' writings, though extraordinarily lucid as theological writing goes, were, like Miller's own, extraordinarily difficult to those not

versed in theology and not willing to give days and nights to them. Miller implied that Edwards' writings were deceptively simple, and the message he decoded from them was complex—an amalgam of Edwards' system and Miller's explorations of its implications.

Again, it is possible to state the main point made, that Edwards had recast the Puritan message in terms of Lockean psychology and Newtonian physics, that he had repudiated covenant theology and leapt into a modern way of apprehending the world, leapt so far that the twentieth century has not yet overtaken him. But again to state the point is to state much less of the book than would be the case with another writer. The genius lies in the tissue of implications and overtones that Miller wove around his story. He had become so familiar with New England thought that he could see the radical purpose in a conventional sermon or catch the personal gibe hidden in a theological treatise. Though he scorned the writing of social history, he revealed, almost parenthetically, the inner workings of New England society in the family feuds, local quarrels, and political maneuvers that swirled around the ideas of Jonathan Edwards.

After writing *Edwards*, Miller resumed work on the second volume of *The New England Mind*, subtitled *From Colony to Province*. In the earlier volume, while describing the tensions and paradoxes of New England Puritanism, he had not attempted to trace their unfolding in time. In *Colony to Province*, he took up again the theme initiated in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*: the impact of time and of the American experience on the system of ideas the Puritans brought with them. This is perhaps his greatest work, showing how in the isolation of the New World paradox and tension turned to contradiction and generated personal rivalries and party splits within New England orthodoxy. The central figure of the book is Cotton Mather, who with his father represented a conservative effort to keep the system as closely knit as possible. Attacking the Mathers on the one side stood Solomon Stoddard and on the other John Wise. And attacking them in the center stood Miller himself, mercilessly laying bare the egotism behind their efforts to retain control.

In one passage Miller revealed something of his own technique.

To understand the Mathers, he insisted (and for that matter the rest of New England as Miller saw it), it was necessary that we appreciate the habit of speech that grew up in New England as an inevitable concomitant of the jeremiads: references had to be phrased in more and more generalized terms, names never explicitly named, so that we are obliged to decipher out of oblique insinuations what to contemporaries were broad designations. When ministers denounced "oppression" and "luxury," they meant certain people whom they did not have to specify. The controversy between moderates and the charter party must be deduced from what seem like platitudes in election sermons, where minor shifts of emphasis betrayed party maneuvers. This habit of ambiguity, developed out of New England's insecurity, out of its inability to face frankly its own internal divisions, out of its effort to maintain a semblance of unity even while unanimity was crumbling—which became more elaborate and disingenuous as internecine passions waxed—was to cling to the New England mind for centuries. We look ahead to the decades in which an emerging Unitarianism swathed itself in terms of studied vagueness; even after the split, the habit clung especially to the Unitarian pulpit, many of whose brightest lights were proud that their sermons never indicated any awareness of controversy. In Boston society today, matters may be fully discussed which, to an outsider, seem never to be mentioned at all. Such tribal reticence only an occasional Thoreau was to defy or an Emily Dickinson to turn into secret triumph.

And we may add that among historians only a Miller would have the daring, the imagination, and the learning to penetrate that tribal reticence. At the end of the volume we are ready for the unfolding of Edwards' giant cryptogram.

By 1953, when *Colony to Province* appeared, Miller's years of reading in later American history and literature were demanding more expression than he could give them in his teaching and he was again impatient to reach ahead. He projected a large-scale study of American thought from the Revolution to the Civil War, leaving behind for a time the intervening history of New England. As usual, there were preliminary forays in articles, monographs, anthologies and even one lengthy book, *The Raven and the Whale*, which he once referred to, while writing it, as a "comic book." There was also an introduction to a newly discovered journal of Henry Thoreau, as dazzling a piece as Miller ever wrote.

The new work, of course, was never finished. One hopes that parts of it were in a form that can be issued posthumously; one also hopes that no one else will attempt to bring unfinished sections of the manuscript to completion. Because Miller's style was

unique. It would not be difficult to hold to his main theme, which ran through *The New England Mind* and, by his own statements, through the new work as well: the way in which the human intellect has apprehended reality in America. But Miller's distinction lay in an extraordinary ability to discover order where others saw chaos, and to express his deepest insights without uttering them, by tracing unsuspected patterns in the raw materials of the past.

Only one who has studied the raw materials for himself can fully appreciate the beauty of those patterns in *The New England Mind* or how faithfully they encompass the materials. No one but Miller, in fact, has in our time known so well the materials of New England history during the period that he covered. But a few of us have studied some of them. To do so and then to read or reread Miller is to be stunned not only by his familiarity with the sources but by the way he has put into a paragraph interpretations and observations which one might expect to find as the conclusion of a whole monograph. And good monographs have been written, are being written, and doubtless will be written to document in detail what Miller has already said and could himself have documented.

How then are we to assess his achievement? It is, of course, true that he has had a powerful influence of the kind that other great historians have had. He has changed in many ways the standard picture of early New England. Because of him we know now that the founders of Massachusetts were non-separating Congregationalists, that the exodus to Connecticut was not the result of a democratic impulse, that the Antinomian controversy involved a dispute between John Cotton and other ministers in which Cotton was defeated and obliged to accept the doctrine of preparation, that New England theologians employed the logical system of Peter Ramus, that they made the covenant of grace the central doctrine of their system, and that Jonathan Edwards repudiated that doctrine. These and a great many other such propositions, which have found or will eventually find their way into the standard textbooks, can be counted as a heritage of Miller's work.

But to make such a statement is to reduce the man to the terms by which we measure other historians. One feels a similar incon-

gruity in observing, what is true, that because of him a great many other scholars are now studying Puritanism. Some of these are his students, and it is more than a personal observation that Perry Miller was a great teacher. You could not be in his presence without feeling that he cared about you and your ideas. Indeed, he always saw so much more in your ideas than you had seen yourself, that you were compelled to stretch your imagination and to reach beyond yourself. Something of this impetus was communicated by his writings to persons who never saw him. He was a man thinking, and the phenomenon is so rare that it cannot fail to affect everyone who sees it or hears of it. To be sure, it excited envy, mistrust, and dislike as well as imitation. People almost seemed to hope that he was drinking himself to stupefaction, so that his relentless creativity could not continue to chide. And when at last he was gone, one sensed a subdued relief at the funeral service. But there is no escape from his example. Such men do not live without effect.

Yet one remains in the end with the sense that his influence was incommensurate with his genius. Charles Beard and Frederick Jackson Turner, whose intellectual achievements were inferior to Miller's, had at least as great an influence on the study of history as Miller had or is likely to have. He was, in fact, not a leader of thought, because at the level he worked, thought will not bear leading. He raised a standard to which no one could rally. His true achievement lay not in altering the general picture of early New England, nor in the encouragement he gave his students, nor even in the example he set to men who would think. His achievement was a series of books the like of which had not been seen before, the record of a mind that craved reality and reached for it through history, as others have reached through religion or philosophy. Only when historians become philosophers and philosophers historians will the full significance of his achievement be understood.

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