He was not nearly as famous as Alfred North Whitehead, Ruth Benedict, Hannah Arendt, C.S. Lewis and the other luminaries included in Joseph Epstein’s essay collection Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers. Nevertheless Williams philosophy professor John William Miller received high praise in the chapter about him written by his former student George Brockway ’36: “Of all the men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest, and justest, and best.”

Brockway borrowed these words from Plato’s dialogue Phaedo, spoken by Phaedo in eulogy of Socrates, one of the greatest of all masters. Brockway’s assessment also hints at why Miller, who taught at Williams from 1924 to 1960, deserves more widespread recognition—albeit posthumously.

Miller was an extraordinarily fine teacher whose full-year introductory course provoked serious interest in philosophy as much among the practical student as among the intellectual type. Students called the course “The Mystery Hour.” And one might suppose that of all subjects philosophy introduced at 8 a.m. is especially liable to sound murky and mysterious.

Philosophers, perhaps in the company of theologians, seem the most natural denizens of the ivory tower. But Miller claimed the proverbial “Elm Street” as his home. And his “earthy”—as he put it—philosophy was one of human action, not of some ethereal idea. He was proudest of those of his students who were exemplary in what he called the actual world. One such student was Gen. Telford Taylor ’28, Allied prosecutor at the Nuremberg War Trials and later an outspoken critic of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and of the Vietnam War. Another was Brockway, who was chairman of the publishing firm W.W. Norton & Co.

Miller did have local fame. For a start, there was his striking presence in Williamstown. Shortly after his death, an article in The Williams Record noted, “He was the only person who could walk up Spring Street alone and look like a procession.” An imposing figure at 6 feet 2 inches tall, he moved and spoke with dignity and courtesy. He was a model of civility; he

Nearly half a century after he taught his final class at Williams, and 29 years after his death, John William Miller is being recognized beyond the Purple Valley for his contributions to the history of contemporary philosophy—thanks in large part to his former students.

By Joseph P. Fell ’53
"Strife is the symbol of what is personal."

"The transcendental policing of instinct is, I'm afraid, a dead horse, at least academically."

"I don't suppose I could come to class without doing some damage."

"I don't know whether I said much today, but it's Monday."

Some of John William Miller's "Sayings," Recorded by William Brewer '44 in Philosophy 5-6, Courtesy of the Archives

Of why the Miller hours were mystery hours. The mystery, the lure, was what philosophy this fascinating teacher had himself arrived at, very likely through his own youthful disorientation. Whatever it was, he was not so much talking about it as living it, and he seemed to be suggesting that since philosophy is its history, the only way to reach where he himself stood was by starting with ancient philosophy and moving forward. He wanted students to focus not on him but on the history of philosophy.

Students like me who went on to pursue Miller's highly original thinking at length discovered that he had published very little. This didn't cause us to think he had failed, but it did tend to limit Miller's fame largely to his students. And it prevented his students from carrying their understanding of him much farther than they were able to do by reviewing the notes taken during his lectures. There were no books by Miller to help them, and the originality and difficulty of his philosophy meant that help was indeed needed. Originality in philosophy (and not only in philosophy—think of Einstein) means difficulty, the need for modifying inherited, familiar, deeply ingrained thought patterns.

To be sure, a student could go back to Williamstown and interrogate Miller about basic and difficult (they are mostly the same) points in his philosophy. Some intrepid souls did so. Or one could pose such questions to him by mail and could count on substantial philosophical replies that occasionally ran to as many as 100 pages! But this possibility ceased with the death of Miller on Christmas Day in 1978.
Nothing absolute can be proved.

Philosophers and thinkers may write for the New Republic, but they don’t run for office.

You’ve got to stand up as men and not as the scribes and Pharisees.

To be historical is to make plausible something great but one-sided.

Egoism is the foundation of morality.

This is what went wrong in the Garden of Eden.

Education can’t be imposed—this is indoctrination.

I find it quite hard to make undergraduates believe you can have a state and still be amorphous volitionally.

Colapietro, then at Fordham University, who himself wrote Fateful Shapes of Human Freedom: John William Miller and the Crises of Modernity, published in 1993. The fellowship fund has also awarded four Miller Essay Prizes thus far for especially fine journal articles published about Miller.

A number of Miller’s students have donated to the Williams archives lecture notes they took in his courses or letters written by Miller to them. Some of these artifacts give a quite vivid sense of Miller’s teaching.

Although Brockway died in 2001, W.W. Norton recently published a sixth volume of Miller’s writings, The Task of Criticism: Essays on Philosophy, History, and Community, jointly edited by Colapietro, McGandy and me. Unlike the five earlier Norton volumes, it is an introduction to Miller’s philosophy and contains a number of the very best and most basic of Miller’s published essays together with essays newly chosen from the Miller collection. Each is preceded by an editorial introduction designed to help the reader understand the essay in relation to other of Miller’s writings and in the context of the history of American and European philosophy.

In this way The Task of Criticism faces head-on the considerable difficulty of understanding Miller’s bold step beyond the idealist philosophy he inherited. If he sometimes called his position “historical idealism,” he finally rejected the choice between idealism and realism that seemed dictated by the philosophical environment of his youth. He came to the conclusion that the ideal and the real were both aspects of a more basic kind of being, the actual. He also asserted
that we live and act in a “midworld”—an intriguing term that we students sensed referred to the core of Miller’s philosophy. This is both an evolutionary and a revolutionary step, as argued in Stephen Tyman’s Descrying the Ideal (1993), the first book by a Miller fellow. It is evolutionary in that it carries further the work of the idealists Kant and Hegel. It is revolutionary in its claim to have finally overcome the dualistic premise of Descartes, which has caused inordinate problems (such as the antithesis between the ideal and the real) for the entirety of modern philosophy.

The late Gary Stahl ’54, in a chapter on Miller in his Human Transactions (1995), says that the “midworld” is the “context of action midway between the subjectivity of the self and the objectivity of the other generated within it.” I risk this brief splash of philosophical vocabulary only to give some sense of the difficulty—and the likely historical importance—of Miller’s philosophical writings. This also helps to show why it may take considerable time for his way of thinking to catch on, and why there is a need for an introduction to help the potential reader get oriented to Miller’s task.

Of Miller we now have an interesting double portrait. During Miller’s life there was a career as a greatly admired and provocative teacher. But only now that there is a second career as a published philosopher can we begin to resolve the mystery of the deep source of his provocations. It begins to look like his central ideas of a “midworld” and a “metaphysics of democracy” (which Walt Whitman called for and Miller supplied) may turn out to be major contributions not only to the history of American philosophy but to the broader history of contemporary philosophy. These ideas enabled Miller to challenge a nihilism he found corroding much of cultural life in his century. Against that virulent form of skepticism, Miller championed the power of human critical acts to maintain both scientific and moral community.

Thanks to Miller’s second career, we can now see the heart of the philosophy that made his teaching so original, so engaging, so powerful.

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