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Stories, Histories, and Cases

A few years ago I came upon a very brief essay in *The American Scholar*, written by an obscure philosophy professor at Williams College in Massachusetts. The essay was published as a sample of the teaching of John William Miller, and it was introduced by one of his students from forty-five years earlier. "His thought was deceptively simple," this student writes, "as in the little essay 'History and Case History'. . . but for anyone who can grasp it, nothing will ever be the same again."¹ I must agree that my thinking about history and cases has not been the same since then. But in rereading Miller's essay several times, I have found myself less and less comfortable with it. What I shall do in this present essay is summarize Miller's main argument, point out what I perceive to be its fundamental weaknesses, and go on to explain why I still find his terms helpful in reading both history and literature.

Miller's essay makes a sharp distinction between histories and case histories. Cases, he insists, are events that occur again and again and whose outcomes can therefore be predicted. The understanding of cases is thus the basis of modern scientific power. In Miller's words: "Knowledge of cases brings control. It gets results, or avoids them." And again: "Science seeks the uniformities that permit us to say [for example] the earth is a case of gravitational order. Mere 'data' are absolute. A case never is. It assumes regularity."² But a history, in Miller's view, is something completely different. It is an account of a unique event, one that results in a different way of understanding the world. "The historian," Miller asserts, "does not tell you what is so." What is so is what can be fully explained by some science or other. The historian's work is different.

What he says is only that at some dated time — not clock time — such and such stories were told about nature, God, and man. Then he notes a

change in the way stories were told. He speaks of what was done, but not of every sort of doing — not of walking over a field, boiling a cabbage, spanking a child, smoking a pipe. . . . The doing that he reports is a critical doing, one that changed outlook, redirected energies, made men conscious of themselves in a new way. Newton, Avogadro, Darwin did such things. The deeds of history are the critical deeds, those that give a new shape to action itself. (243)

Thus, science seems to be the organized study of phenomena, which masters them by categorizing them into cases. But history is an account of what Miller calls “acts,” especially those that change the constitutional nature of the world. “The historical act declares a world in a constitutional aspect,” he writes. “It is a revelation, a disclosure, a declaration” (243). As a result, Miller insists that a *case history* is a contradiction in terms. A history does not describe a case. And a case may produce a record but not a history.

I said earlier that this essay changed my way of thinking. In fact, it has given me important comfort and support. In the years since I first picked it up, I have completed two books about documents in early American history and thereby put myself forward as an American historian.³ And Miller’s terms have helped me sustain my self-respect, while as an English professor from Canada I have seemed in danger of trespassing in alien territory. In these books I have tried to trace acts of the sort Miller describes — deeds and discoveries by founders of new ways of thinking. In writing these books I believed, as I still believe, that writings such as *The Federalist* or John Adams’s *Novanglus* papers or Washington’s Farewell Address are genuine historical acts. They changed their authors’ own identities as they were being composed, and they declared new worlds that Americans have lived within long afterwards. For better or worse, I have tried to do what Miller says a proper historian does — look into the past and note a critical change in the ways influential minds expressed what was most important.

Still, when I have reread Miller’s little essay I have had to admit that I cannot simply agree with him. I do not think, for example, that *cases* and *histories* are quite so irreconcilable as he claims. A doctor may diagnose an aspirin overdose, let us say, and by keeping an exact record begin to perceive that she is dealing with the onset of Reye’s Syndrome or even of some heretofore undiagnosed malady. What began as a case thus turns into a history, and it would be difficult to specify exactly where or how that happens. Many historical discover-

ies seem to take place through a process of keeping and reviewing very exact case records.

Miller also illustrates what he means by a case, by talking about a case in everyday mechanics, a car that needs a new spark plug. But the longer I have thought about that case the more complex it has seemed. The case of a defective spark plug could also be a case of improper maintenance, or of negligence by an earlier mechanic, or of improper manufacture of the car or the old spark plug, or of some separate problem in the engine that is causing the spark plug to be fouled. In fact it could be all these cases simultaneously. It might be hard but very important to discriminate which set of overlapping cases fits this particular problem. By accepting the new spark plug as the simple remedy for a simple case, a driver could merely be making matters worse. To deal with any serious problem in life, whether engine noise or symptoms that seem alarming, I look for an expert who will not merely get down to cases. I want someone with a sense of history, in Miller's sense, someone prepared to notice exceptional as well as commonplace occurrences.

As a result, I have come to think that education is a dialectic between perceiving the world in terms of cases and perceiving it in terms of histories. What seems to me a noise under the hood that threatens to wreck the car and thereby change my whole outlook on transportation may be to a good mechanic only a symptom of an overdue tune-up. The mechanic may chide me, but charge me much less than I feared. Or, to turn another way: what the doctor, the police, and the coroner record as a fatal drug overdose, a common case, may nevertheless and rightly be a history to the family that survives the victim — an event that they cannot come to terms with except through a new world view. Formal education is largely a matter of coming to recognize the outlines of thousands of common cases: this is the letter A; this is the periodic table of the elements; these are the sure signs of an ironic tone, or a coming bankruptcy, or diphtheria. But serious learning is more than mastery of such cases. It stems from the ongoing experience of crossing from cases into pressing situations where no case description is adequate.

That, Miller seems to imply, is where a keen mind begins to make history — that is, begins to tell important stories in new terms. But here, too, Miller's language may give us pause. If a keen mind succeeds in creating a new world view, in providing new outlines for understanding and mastering new cases, how can we who live thereafter really hope to be historians in the usual sense? How can we honestly

hope to perceive in the ways that people did before these new stories were told? As successors of Newton and Avogadro, we have surely lost some ways of apprehending the world. Living as we do within rigid clock time and literate, electronically interconnected, urban modernity, it is impossible for us to grasp how our forebears felt the rhythms of life even a century ago. Nonetheless Miller assumes that there is something uniform standing outside of cases that change, or changes momentous enough to be historical. He says there is a uniformity of human experience and behaviour through all time. At least he implies as much when he says that an historian can look back and clearly perceive such a change. People, he asserts, always tell some kinds of stories about nature, God, and man.

I will not lean too hard on that assertion and all its implications. But I find it worthwhile to lean on the idea that the irreducible constant in human experience is story telling. That opens a way to draw a distinction not only between cases and histories, but also between stories and histories. We all tell stories, but evidently many of us repeat ourselves most of the time. I think Miller would argue that what sets the good historian apart is knowledge of how to tell a new and compelling story. He or she must be a connoisseur of story telling, well acquainted with its large taxonomy of cases. And since the historian too tells a story, that story must be sophisticated. It is not enough to insist that the historian's stories are "true" as opposed to the novelist's or fabulist's works of fiction. The historian must also rival the talented storyteller by isolating a significant action and repeating it in memorable form. The stories of the historian, too, must be worthy of wide repetition and long preservation.

This may be an impossible ideal for most of us mortals. But it is a standard that opens fresh terms for appreciating good history and good literature.

Historical work must distil significant action from the evidence that survives. Hence we must always read historians with distrust. More evidence may somehow come to light. Or the full array of evidence may already be so enormous and complex that it is sure to be rearranged into new patterns. In some noteworthy instances, what seems unique to one historian may seem merely a case to another. Napoleon is unique to France, but just another case of the land-based imperialist to some scholars who recall Xerxes, Alexander, Caesar, and Hitler. In a current debate about the development of the Constitution of the United States, there are leading historians who see that event as unique. One calls it "a truly original formulation of political assump-

tions and the creation of a distinctly American system of politics.”⁴ But another well-known historian merely scoffs at this view. He sees such claims for uniqueness as symptoms of a common case — what he calls “naive *ideologia americana*.” By looking at the American experience from the point of view of a native New Zealander “an antipodean kind of historical consciousness” he claims to see American constitutional development as an episode in British history, a peculiar case of a general European story.⁵ Which of these histories is right? This question perplexed me for a long time. I now think that the question itself is misleading. Both writers claim to be historians, and in Miller’s sense both are doing their proper work: self-consciously shaping powerful but different stories out of the same material. The only way to master either view is to retrace the formidable range of learning on which both writers have built. And that means hazarding a new synthesis or world view of one’s own.

When we read literature, however, we suspend historical scepticism. We have to begin with the assumption that the author has adequately presented all that can be known about the action of this tale. Jane Austen knows everything worth telling about the Bennett family in *Pride and Prejudice*; she alone has expressed all that can be told. Or, to move immediately to a problematic case: Shakespeare, we assume, knows everything about his characters named Antony and Cleopatra. No new research will alter the completeness of the story that Shakespeare has told. To be sure, new research may produce some surprises. It may persuade us that Shakespeare sometimes composed very different versions of a single story. Or it may reveal that his scripts have been poorly edited. Or it may reveal intriguing connections between Shakespeare and older historians or contemporary historical events. But as readers and playgoers we set limits on such questions. We must turn away from them to concentrate on the action in the story before us. As experienced readers we expect a rare action matched by a subtle telling. That is all we want. That must suffice.

What divides the historian from the author therefore may be this difference of emphasis. Both seek out and retell unique actions. But the historian devotes most effort to seeking and discriminating. The author devotes most to shaping a tale that can live in the memory. Sometimes these two motives contradict or threaten to devour one another. The historian absorbs (and thereby trivializes) dozens or hundreds or thousands of old tales in composing a new overview; or the historian devotes years of labour to debunking the distortions of some great tale set in the past. The author, on the other hand, may

make free with the well-documented characters of famous people, or risk summing up an era or a continent in glib but unforgettable language. But both writers have the same large end in view, if we regard them in light of Miller's argument. Both resist the modern academic, scientific pressure to reduce experience to cases.

We all know how strong these case-making pressures can be. The academic study of literature itself forces us to pack stories into creaking wooden cases. From the freshman anthology to the professional journal we are pelleted with such mistreatments: Look at this short story as an example of characterization; look at that one as an example of first-person point of view; or look at this novel or play or range of works as typical cases of misogyny, or class conflict, or ineluctable ironic self-contradiction. Moreover, after decades of shifting grounds in fashionable criticism, we remain locked into departments, curricula, and professional societies that break literature up into very crude categories of history. For me, this has meant studying what is called Eighteenth Century English — a field that runs from about 1660 to about 1789, excludes writings from British North America, yet accentuates works from lonely outposts in Ireland and Scotland — provided they were written by the likes of Swift rather than Berkeley, Boswell rather than Hume. Similar well-worn arbitrary categories bedevil the study of every other literature I can think of.

Miller's argument offers a way out of such cramped thinking by reconciling history and literature. Miller does not say that they are the same or that they are all that matter. He is at pains to defend the integrity of other kinds of study, such as psychology. He insists that the making of categories and cases is essential to understanding and exercising power over the world.⁶ But the work of perceiving new stories is another essential kind of study. History and literature are allied in this view because both reject the sufficiency of knowledge based on cases. Hence the pressures that bedevil our study of literature need not result from history or even the academic discipline of history. They result from the misunderstanding of history as an effort of mind. Both history and literature urge us to isolate memorable human actions.

NOTES

1. George P. Brockway, "John William Miller," *The American Scholar*, 49 (1980), 236-240.
2. John William Miller, "History and Case History," *The American Scholar*, 49 (1980), 241.

3. *The Authority of Publius: A Reading of the Federalist Papers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1984); *American Silhouettes: Rhetorical Identities of the Founders* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987).
4. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969; rpt. New York: Norton, 1972), ix.
5. J. G. A. Pocock, "Republicanism and Ideologia Americana," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 325-346.
6. I wonder how deeply Miller finally believed in the power of categories and cases. The power of his own work had a different source. He remained memorable to many students because he made particular challenges to precisely what they said. "He made, he said, a point of taking each man at his word" (Brockway, 239). His writing also has the maddening looseness of brilliant ad hominem conversation, in which Miller may be in the process of making up his own mind. Much of his work, including the essay discussed here, consists of letters to former students; almost none of his writings were published during his life. This is not to say that Miller was a poor philosopher. It is rather that his surviving writings reflect habits of personal inquiry rather than systematic abstraction. His teaching energy went into challenging others to action, not into cataloguing cases or applying them in a regular routine or a finished discourse.