Progress and Perfectibility in Samuel Miller’s Intellectual History

As I remember it, the formation of the History of Ideas Club at The Johns Hopkins University was not preceded by any declaration of principles, nor by the adoption of a formal constitution and bylaws. It was essentially a friendly gathering of men who believed in the fundamental unity of knowledge and felt the need of crossing the barriers of administrative and departmental divisions. In fact, it may be said that the Club existed before having a name; it took shape thanks to the catalytic influence of Lovejoy. We had the greatest respect for some of our older colleagues who engaged in what might be called “atomized” research and listened to them patiently and often profitably; but we knew the dangers of overspecialization and we thought that the time had come for experimenting with what Lovejoy called “cross fertilization.”

The meetings of the Club were not intended for the presentation of finished papers. Members felt free to submit hypotheses, to venture outside of their designated field, in the hope of getting the suggestions and criticisms of their colleagues. One of the first results of these meetings, for some of us at least, was the demonstration of the polyvalence of terms generally used, the inadequacy of labels, the necessity of sharper distinctions and definitions.
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The Club might well have taken for its motto, the saying of Montesquieu at the beginning of Book XI of the *Esprit des lois*: "There is no word that has admitted of more various significations, and has made more different impressions on human minds, than that of Liberty." Without a keen analysis of these key words the History of Ideas might easily have degenerated into vague and so-called philosophical disquisitions and generalizations, such as those which gave a bad name to comparative literature or philosophy of history. Fortunately we had a friendly guide and pilot in these intellectual adventures. We soon realized that such terms as Nature, Romanticism, Primitivism, Exoticism, or Evolution, to mention only a few striking illustrations, had many facets and were not to be lightly and loosely used. Through his work more than through precepts and discussions on methodology, Lovejoy stood among us as an extraordinary exemplar.

The author of this essay has often regretted that his connection with the Club has become distant and irregular. The paper presented here, if circumstances had allowed, would and should have been submitted to the Club. It is tentative and exploratory; its only excuse for being written at all is that it may call attention to the need of defining more exactly the many acceptations of a word which became a sort of battle cry during the eighteenth century and expressed in a somewhat nebulous way the ideal of the nineteenth.

On January 1, 1801, at the request of some friends, a young minister of the Presbyterian Church, the Reverend Samuel Miller, delivered a sermon containing an attempt, "on entering a new century to review the preceding, and to deduce from the prominent features of that period such moral and religious reflexions as might be suited to the occasion." Being requested to publish it, he soon formed the very ambitious plan of writing a complete conspectus of the eighteenth century, including the-
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ology, morals, politics, natural philosophy, and literature, and "discussing the main events in the Christian church, in the moral world and in political principles and establishments during that century." Three full years were spent in the preparation of the work which was published in January, 1804 (although dated 1803) under the title of:

A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century. Part First; in Two Volumes: containing a Sketch of the Revolutions and Improvements in Science, Arts, and Literature, during that Period. By Samuel Miller, A.M. One of the Ministers of the United Presbyterian Churches in the City of New York, Member of the American Philosophical Society, and Corresponding Member of the Historical Society of Massachusetts.

This descriptive title fails to give even an approximate idea of the wealth of the documentation contained in these two fat volumes of 560 and 517 pages respectively, with copious footnotes and additions. The table of contents lists twenty-six chapters, ranging from Mechanical Philosophy to a capital discussion of "Nations lately become Literary: Russia, Germany, United States of America."

If we remember that Dr. Miller had intended to discuss in additional volumes, which were never written, the "exciting subject of Politics, as well as the Subjects of Theology and Morals," it will be seen that this summary is far more extensive than the "encyclopedic tree" of Diderot and d'Alembert or Jefferson's tabulation for establishing a library. Truly encyclopedic in its compass, the Brief Retrospect is not a dictionary or a dry repertory. In some respects it is compilation, and modestly the author admitted that in many instances he had to be content with second-hand information: "It will not be supposed that the author has attentively read all the works concerning
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which he delivers opinions. Some of them he never saw, and has ventured to give their character entirely on the authority of those whom he considers better judges than himself. Many he has seen and consulted, with more or less attention, as his avocations allowed."

There is no mystery about the sources of his information: he made use of all the treatises, dictionaries, and encyclopedias he could lay his hands upon; he consulted the best critics and authorities; he borrowed books from the Circulating Library of Caritat and undoubtedly he was assisted by his associates in the Friendly Club. Some of the chapters are highly technical, and we are not aware that the young churchman had pushed very far his investigations in this field. We know for certain that the chapter on medicine was contributed by his brother, Dr. Edward Miller, who may also have advised him on other chapters dealing with natural philosophy. But Samuel Miller was possessed with such an insatiable curiosity that, on his own admission, he managed to obtain at least some "acquaintance" with most of the works he discussed.

In every page, and practically in every paragraph, he injected comments and reflections of his own; his personality was too vivacious and his mind too irrepressible to permit him simply to report accepted opinions. A staunch Presbyterian of unwavering faith and unimpeachable conduct, he never hesitated to give the Devil his due. While gathering material for the Retrospect, he actively engaged in the fierce battle between Federalists and Republicans, declaring himself unequivocally for Jefferson in terms which he later bitterly regretted:

I profess to be a Christian. I wish all men were Christians. We should have more private, social and political happiness. But what then? Because Mr. Jefferson is suspected of Deism, are we to raise a hue and cry against him, as if he ought to be instantly deprived of his rights of
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citizenship? If he be an infidel, I lament it for two reasons: from a concern for his own personal salvation, and that a religion, which is so much spoken against, does not receive his countenance and aid. But notwithstanding this, I think myself perfectly consistent in saying that I had much rather have Mr. Jefferson President of the United States, than an aristocratic Christian (*Life, I, 131*).

His attitude towards authors and scientists suspected of infidelity or known to be infidels is defined in a similar vein in the Preface to the *Brief Retrospect*:

Should any reader be offended by the language of panegyric which is frequently bestowed on the intellectual and scientific endowments of some distinguished abettors of heresy or of infidelity, he is entreated to remember that justice is due to all men. A man who is a bad Christian may be a very excellent mathematician, astronomer, or chemist; and one who denies and blasphemes the Saviour may write profoundly and instructively on some branches of science highly interesting to mankind. It is proper to commiserate the mistakes of such persons, to abhor their blasphemy, and to warn men against their fatal delusions; but it is surely difficult to see either justice or utility of withholding from them that praise of genius or of learning to which they are fairly entitled (*I, xii-xiii*).

And so it happened that, when discussing the improvements of the English language during the eighteenth century, Samuel Miller referred unexpectedly to a rank infidel:

There are some good remarks on English style in the *Inquirer, a Series of Essays*, by William Godwin. Though no friend to human happiness can recommend the moral or religious principles of this writer, which are pre-eminently fitted to delude, corrupt and destroy; yet he is himself master of a vigourous style, and his judgment on a question of literary taste is entitled to respect (*II, 101*).
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No less remarkable is his appreciation of Buffon's theory of the earth, which had aroused the ire of the Paris theologians:

Such are the outlines of a theory bold and plausible, as might have been expected from the mind of its author, but unsubstantial and deceptive. Its manifest object is to exclude the agency of a Divine Architect, and to represent a world begun and perfected merely by the operation of natural, undesigning causes. That it cannot be reconciled with the sacred history, will appear evident on the slightest inspections; and that it involves the grossest absurdities has been clearly shown by successive geologists. It was embraced, however, by M. Bailly, of France, by the celebrated Hollman, of Goettingen, and others; and continues to be respected and adopted by many to the present time (I, 167).

At a time when the names of Voltaire and Rousseau had become anathema in political and religious circles, Samuel Miller was one of the very few churchmen who had enough courage and objectivity to refuse to pronounce a wholesale condemnation of their works. As a budding historian, he had looked for models among his predecessors and he was aware of the real revolution undergone by historiography during the last half of the eighteenth century: "the best historians have interwoven with their narratives of political and military events, much amusing and valuable information, concerning the religion, learning, laws, customs, trade and every other object tending to throw light on the progress, genius and conditions of different communities." Speeches and other extraneous matter have been excluded by the best historians from the body of their works and the modern reader can now appreciate "how intimately revolutions, and other national events are often connected with the current of literary, moral, and religious opinions; and how much a knowledge of one is frequently fitted to elucidate the other." This remarkable improvement was largely due to a man who was
"endowed with an uncommon share of wit, humour, fancy, and taste," and who had "enjoyed a high reputation, not only as an epic poet, but also as a dramatist, an historian, a novelist, an essayist, and a miscellaneous writer." It was to be lamented that his talents "were so much devoted to the cause of impiety and licentiousness," but it had to be recognized that "the author to whom we are probably more indebted than to any other individual, for introducing and recommending this improvement in civil history, is M. Voltaire. His Age of Louis XIV, was one of the first specimens of a work upon this plan."

These few quotations, which could be multiplied, may serve to illustrate Samuel Miller's historical and critical method. Obviously he thought that as an historian he had to record a consensus of opinion on a given author, while preserving his right to express, often in his footnotes, a severe denunciation on moral grounds of productions otherwise highly regarded. The Brief Retrospect was written and published at a time when the battle between the partisans of the French "philosophes" and the defenders of orthodoxy was still raging and when very few writers or, for that matter, churchmen preserved a calm judgment. In fact, in this respect, the Brief Retrospect stands by itself.

It offers another even more uncommon merit. While European writers like Madame de Staël were striving to divest themselves of national prejudices and to judge of European culture as a whole, not even the woman often regarded as the founder of comparative literature was able to forget or do away with traditional attitudes and prejudices. To say that Samuel Miller was a better "European" than the author of the book just published under the title of De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les mœurs et les institutions sociales, may seem paradoxical and yet the paradox is only apparent. For reasons which need no elaboration, Miller knew more about England
than about any other country. He admitted that his knowledge of continental Europe was very rudimentary. He probably read French easily; it is very doubtful that he had any German; and his acquaintance with Italian and Spanish was exceedingly slight. But it is remarkable that, when he brought together the results of his inquiry on what may be called the intellectual state of Europe, he refused to recognize any territorial division. The chapters of the Brief Retrospect cut across all frontiers and are treated as subdivisions of the great republic of letters which transcends all national distinctions. Thus it happened that the very remoteness of his situation and his keen interest in all matters of knowledge combined to make of Miller not only a "good European," but a true cosmopolitan in the broadest sense of the word.

In addition he was a very good American. While the achievements of distinguished Americans are listed in the Brief Retrospect as part of the contribution of his fellow-countrymen to the general development of knowledge, Miller took care to sum up these achievements by themselves at the end of several chapters. In his concluding chapters he abandoned his general or international method of exposition to treat separately of three nations which during the eighteenth century had risen "from obscurity in the republic of letters, to a considerable literary and scientific eminence";—namely Russia, Germany, and the United States of America. In studying such a striking phenomenon, Miller was eager not only to do justice to his country but to test and verify his theory of history and to "correlate" historical and social events with the progress of intellectual activities and the diffusion of knowledge.

Without attempting to give a résumé of these ninety pages full of facts, which constitute a complete intellectual history of the United States from the origins to the end of the eighteenth cen-
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tury, I shall simply recall that it was part and parcel of the
campaign started around 1780 by Benjamin Franklin in France
and Thomas Jefferson, still in his native Virginia, to define the
character of the society and culture which had arisen in the New
World. Miller presented no extravagant claims. He was espe-
cially anxious to call his fellow-countrymen's attention to what
remained to be done and to the measures to be taken to bring
American culture to a fuller development. He conceded that
"what is called a liberal education in the United States" was,
"in common, less accurate and complete" than in Great Britain
and in "some of the more enlightened nations on the Eastern
continent." This situation was not to be attributed to any
deficiency of native talent, nor, contrary to Buffon's theory, to
"any inaptitude in its soil or atmosphere to promote the growth
of genius," but to well-defined causes which in part could be
remedied: "Defective plans and means of instruction in our
Seminaries of learning; Want of leisure; Want of encouragement
to learning; Want of Books." Another unfavorable condition
was the constant comparison established between the productions
of England and the literary efforts of the United States, which
tended to discourage many authors. Moreover, "Americans are
too apt to join with ignorant or fastidious foreigners, in under-
valuing and decrying our domestic literature; and this circum-
stance is one of the numerous obstacles which have operated to
discourage literary exertions on this side of the Atlantic, and to
impede our literary progress."

The conclusion, however, is optimistic, for Miller firmly be-
lieved that these baneful influences would gradually diminish.
His prophecy is worth recording:

The number of learned men is becoming rapidly greater.
... A larger proportion of the growing wealth of our
country will hereafter be devoted to the improvement of
knowledge, and especially to the furtherance of all means by which scientific discoveries are brought within popular reach, and rendered subservient to practical utility. . . . [The time is coming near] when we shall be able to make some return to our transatlantic brethren, for the rich stores of useful knowledge, which they have been pouring upon us for nearly two centuries (II, 409-410).

This bright prospect for America brings to a close Miller's general survey of the eighteenth century. It is truly an astonishing achievement and yet it seems to have been completely ignored by recent literary historians. As far as I have been able to ascertain, Merle Curti, in his book on The Growth of American Thought (1943 and 1951) was the first to pay a long overdue tribute to his forgotten predecessor.

The first monumental work devoted solely to this field [intellectual history] appeared in 1803, when the Reverend Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian clergyman of New York, published his two-volume Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century. This series of essays on virtually every phase of the intellectual life of Europe in the eighteenth century included surveys of the state of knowledge in the United States and of American contributions to knowledge. With all its shortcomings it was a notable effort and is still useful to the student of the growth of American thought (p. ix).

More recently this high praise of Samuel Miller was echoed by John Higham, in an article on "The Rise of American Intellectual History" (American Historical Review, April 1951). Going much farther than Merle Curti, Mr. Higham does not hesitate to see in Samuel Miller an American representative of the enlightenment, a statement which, as we shall see, cannot be accepted without strong reservations.

History of thought assumes a central importance in historical study as Voltaire, Condorcet, and others celebrated the
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progress of humanity and the power of reason as its driving force. To these apostles of Enlightenment, the record of human intelligence in the past had an altogether new significance, it confirmed their faith in a progressive future.

The first American to study systematically the materials of intellectual history performed a similar function and bore a similar debt to the impulse of the Enlightenment. In surveying advances in twenty arts and sciences, Samuel Miller's *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (1803) showed caution as well as learning, but it testified in every chapter to the triumphs of progress and reason . . . (p. 454).

A closer analysis of Samuel Miller's views of the doctrine of progress will show that these resemblances are superficial and call for essential qualifications.

Very significantly Miller carefully avoided the use of the term "progress" in the title of his book, substituting for it the word "revolution," by which he meant considerable changes and even unprecedented changes. But in his introduction he refused to commit himself, pointing out significantly that it was extremely difficult to distinguish "between revolution and improvement."

"Who can undertake to say in what cases these are synonymous terms, and when they are directly opposite? If every change were to be considered an advantage, it would follow, of course, that the strides of civilized man, in every species of improvement, during the last century, have been prodigious. But alas! this principle cannot be admitted by the cautious inquirer, or the friend of human happiness."

In the century which had just come to a close he saw "much to deplore and much to admire," an unusual number of revolutions, and "at least some improvements." This might serve as a conclusion to practically every chapter in the first volume which deals with the "revolutions" the eighteenth century had witnessed in the realm of science, and the material features of
human life. We may take as an illustration the chapter on chemistry. According to Miller, from a source of amusement and an object of curiosity, chemistry had been converted into a most instructive, interesting and valuable science. "There is scarcely an art of human life which it is not fitted to subserve; scarcely a department of human inquiry or labour, either for health, pleasure, ornament, or profit which it may not be made, in its present improved state eminently to promote." (I, 108)

This is simply the recognition of a fact and common knowledge. But such a recognition does not imply the approval of "chemical philosophy" and of the extravagant votaries of chemistry who "have undertaken, on chemical principles, to account for all the phenomena of motion, life and mind, and on those very facts which clearly prove wise design, and the superintending care of an infinite intelligence, have attempted to build a fabric of atheistical philosophy. This is a remarkable instance of those oppositions of science falsely so called, of which an inspired writer speaks, and for which the past age has been remarkably distinguished." (I, 110)

Having clearly defined and limited the realm of science, which to him, as to Benjamin Franklin and his colleagues of the American Philosophical Society, consisted essentially in "useful knowledge," Samuel Miller experienced no difficulty in granting that everyday life has undergone an unprecedented transformation during the eighteenth century. These changes had come with dramatic suddenness, particularly in America, and in his praise of that scientific revolution Samuel Miller was second to none:

When we compare the ancient modes of living, with the dress, the furniture, the equipage, the conveniences of travelling, and the incomparable greater ease with which the same amount of comfortable accommodation may be obtained at present, none can hesitate to give a decided preference in all these respects, to modern times. Perhaps it
would not be extravagant to say that many of the higher orders of mechanics and day labourers now wear better clothes, and live, not more plentifully, but in some respects more conveniently, more neatly, and with more true taste, than many princes and kings were in the habit of doing two centuries ago, and in a manner quite as pleasant as multitudes of a rank far superior to themselves, at a later period. In short, the remarkable and unprecedented union of neatness and simplicity, cheapness, and elegance, which has been exhibited, in the art of living, within thirty or forty years, is, at once, a testimony of the rapid improvement of the mechanic arts, and one of the most unquestionable points in which we may claim a superiority over our predecessors. (I, 403)

Thus spake the American and the friend of Jefferson, for no European at that date would have been justified in drawing such a glowing picture of the new way of life brought about by the conquests of science. Whether the great improvements in the physical sciences had been accompanied with corresponding improvements in "the science of the human mind and the auxiliary branches of philosophy" was really the crux of the problem. Samuel Miller intended to discuss it under its different aspects and to treat particularly of the political, social and religious consequences and significance of the "revolutions" which had taken place during the eighteenth century. He never completed his survey of this enormous field; but the second volume of the Brief Retrospect makes sufficiently clear the main lines of his doctrine.

He started with a chapter on the "Philosophy of the human mind," in which he acknowledged in Descartes the master and initiator of modern philosophy. Samuel Miller's appreciation of Descartes is worth reproducing in toto, inasmuch as it may serve to explain the continuous popularity of the discourse De Methodo in American colleges during the eighteenth century:

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Descartes was the first metaphysician who drew a plain and intelligible line of distinction between the intellectual and the material world, or between spirit and body. The importance and utility of this distinction is obvious. He was the first who showed that the analogical mode of reasoning, concerning the powers of the mind, from the properties of the body is totally erroneous; and that accurate reflection on the operations of our mind, is the only way to gain a just knowledge of them. It was his philosophy which threw the phantasm, the sensible species, the substantial forms, &c. of the old system into disgrace, and introduced a more simple, perspicuous and rational method of investigating metaphysical truth. (II, 4, n.)

Miller's admiration for Locke's Essay on Human Understanding is unreserved, for this great work forms an "era in the history of metaphysical science." But while granting generously that Malebranche was "an acute and learned metaphysician," and that George Berkeley was "equally distinguished for the penetration and comprehensiveness of his mind, and the eminence of his virtues," he maintains that both of them "espoused a doctrine contrary to all our feelings and senses." Hume, Hartley, Reid, and Monboddo are worth mentioning "among the curiosities of the age" and the latter talks "with a semblance of reason and may be read with patience." Such is not the case of the celebrated Immanuel Kant, inventor of a system which has found great favor in Germany. Unable to understand a word in the general drift of Kant's system, Samuel Miller reproduced word for word a brief account of the Kantian philosophy published in a "British literary journal," adding as a footnote that, "The complaint that all this is obscure and scarcely intelligible will probably be made by every reader."

Of all the eighteenth century philosophers only one deserves unreserved admiration and endorsement, "the celebrated Ameri-
can divine, Mr. Jonathan Edwards, for some time President of the College of New Jersey”:

This gentlemen wrote on the side of moral necessity, or against the self-determining power of the will; and investigated the subject with a degree of originality, acuteness, depth, precision, and force of argument, which the accurate reader cannot contemplate but with astonishment. . . . It is worthy of remark, that our great countryman, Mr. Edwards, appears to have been the first Calvinist who avowed his belief so fully and thoroughly in the doctrine of moral necessity as his book indicates. Though all Calvinistic writers before his time were characterized by a firm adherence to the doctrine of Predestination; yet they seem, for the most part, to have adopted a kind of middle course between his creed and that of the Arminian contingency. The penetrating and comprehensive mind of Edwards went further; demonstrated that this middle ground was untenable, and presented a more clear and satisfactory view of the doctrine of free grace, when contemplated through the medium of his main doctrine, than had ever before been given. (II, 30-31)

This very rapid and incomplete review of Samuel Miller’s opinions of the contemporary philosophers may help us to understand his attitude towards a group of French writers against whom he pronounced a drastic condemnation. On this occasion, the author of the Brief Retrospect emphasized the necessary distinction, too often overlooked by historians, between progress and perfectibility. This distinction becomes absolutely essential in any study covering the latter half of the eighteenth century. It was lost sight of during the battle which raged around Diderot’s Encyclopédie; it would help to explain both the thesis defended by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his First Discourse and the arguments of his opponents. Particularly it would make more intelligible the attitude of American divines, like
John Witherspoon, whose admiration for material progress might otherwise be represented as a concession to the spirit of the Enlightenment. Samuel Miller's lengthy argumentation against the French advocates of the doctrine of perfectibility has at least the merit of stating unequivocally the position of the two enemy camps. It demonstrates at least that it was possible to keep within the orthodox Calvinistic fold while enjoying all the benefits and pleasantness of material progress:

In the latter half of the century under consideration, a new doctrine concerning the human mind was announced, which is entitled to some notice in this place. This doctrine, it is believed, was first adopted and advanced by M. Helvétius, a celebrated French writer. He was followed by Mr. Condorcet, and some others also in France; by means of whose writings it obtained considerable currency among the literati of that country, and was afterwards embraced and defended, with much plausibility by Mr. Godwin, and others in Great-Britain.

In treating that momentous question Miller did not judge from second-hand information. He quoted and had probably read: Helvétius's *A Treatise on Man, his Intellectual Faculties, and his Education* (Translated by Hooper, 2 vols., 1777); and Condorcet's *Outline of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795); Godwin's *Inquiry concerning Political Justice* (second edition, 2 vols., 1796). Intent upon preserving a judicial attitude, he specified that "It is not meant to be asserted that all these writers agree with respect to the details of their several systems; but that they concur in asserting the omnipotence of education, and the perfectibility of man." Before engaging in what was only a preliminary skirmish, Miller endeavored to reconnoiter the positions of the enemy:

The advocates of this doctrine maintain the *Perfectibility*
of Man. With regard to the nature of the human mind they appear, in general, to embrace the system of materialism. They suppose that the thinking principle of man is the result of corporeal organization; that the difference in minds results from the difference in this organization, and more especially from the subsequent circumstances and education of the individual, that by means of the diffusion of knowledge, and the adoption of better principles and modes of education, the improvement of man in intellect, in virtue, and in happiness, will go on to an illimitable extent, that, at length, mind shall become "omnipotent over matter," perfect enjoyment assume the place of present suffering, and human life, instead of being bounded by a few years, be protracted to immortality, or at least to an indefinite duration.

Unfurling the banner of orthodoxy the theologian then entered the fray. But, even in the heat of the fight, Miller never indulged in the vituperations and anathema launched at that time by many of his brethren against the infidel philosophers. His condemnation is a summing up of the case, not the fierce denunciation of a pamphleteer:

This system is unsupported by any facts; it is contrary to all the experience of mankind, it is opposed to every principle of human nature, and it is scarcely necessary to add, to the plainest dictates of Revelation. That man may, and probably will, make great improvements hereafter, in science and art, is readily admitted. That he cannot presume to assign the bounds to this improvement is also admitted. But that there will be absolutely no bounds to it, or, which is the same thing as to the argument, that it will go on beyond all assignable or conceivable limits, is to suppose the constitution of man essentially changed, his present wants, habits, and mode of subsistence totally superseded and a nature conferred upon him wholly different from that which his Creator gave him. (II, 29)
Samuel Miller intended to set forth his views more fully in the latter part of his work, and to show "the extravagance, weakness, inconsistency and injurious consequences" of the doctrine of perfectibility "with respect to its moral and political applications." So baneful and so widespread, however, was already the influence of the new system, that he could not wait for the uncertain publication of the last two parts of the Brief Retrospect. When he wrote his chapter on Education he felt that the doctrine of perfectibility was "too remarkable and too pregnant with mischief to be suffered to pass without more particular attention."

It is, that Education has a kind of intellectual and moral omnipotence; that to its different forms are to be ascribed the chief, if not all the differences observable in the genius, talents and dispositions of men, and that by improving its principles and plan, human nature may, and finally will, reach a state of unlimited perfection in this world, or at least go on to a state of unlimited improvement. In short, in the estimation of those who adopt this doctrine, man is the child of circumstances; and by meliorating these, without the aid of religion, his true and highest elevation is to be obtained; and they even go so far as to believe that, by means of the advancement of light and knowledge, all vice, misery and death may finally be banished from the earth. This system, as before observed, seems to have been first distinctly taught by M. Helvetius, a celebrated French author, who wrote about the middle of the age we are considering, and was afterwards adopted and urged with great zeal by many of his countrymen, particularly Mirabaud, and Condorcet; and also by Mr. Godwin, and others, in Great Britain. (II, 292)

The condemnation of perfectibility is pronounced on four counts. First, it is contrary to the nature and condition of man—that is to say, to what may be called the doctrine of Chris-
Christian individualism. This is an opportunity for Samuel Miller to emphasize, even more than he had done before, the necessary distinction between progress and perfectibility:

Though every succeeding generation may be said, with respect to literary and scientific acquisitions, to stand on the ground gained by their predecessors, and thus to be continually making progress; yet this is by no means the case with regard to intellectual discipline and moral qualities. Each successive individual, however elated the genius, and however sublime the virtues of his ancestors, has to perform the task of restraining his own appetites, subduing his own passions; and guarding against the excesses to which his irregular propensities would prompt him. . . . If every successive individual of our species must come into the world ignorant and feeble, and helpless; and if the same process for instilling knowledge into the mind, and restraining moral irregularities, must be undergone, de novo, in every instance, on what do these sanguine calculators rest their hopes that we shall attain a state of intellectual and moral perfection in the present world?

There we have, in clear and simple terms, one of the first definitions of that American individualism resting on a solid religious basis which was to be described so vividly by Tocqueville some thirty years later.

Miller's second objection to the doctrine of perfectibility is that it is "contrary to all experience." The world has existed for six thousand years; it may be granted that mankind is more enlightened than at any other period, but could we say that "real wisdom, moral purity and true happiness have always kept pace with the improvements in literature and the sciences? Are the most learned and scientific nations and the most learned and scientific individuals, always the most virtuous? Are luxury, fraud, violence, unprincipled ambition, the vicious intercourse of the sexes, and the various kinds of intemperance less frequent
among the polished and enlightened nations of Europe than among the untutored natives of America?"

We might easily infer from this quotation that Miller had intended to give an answer to the famous question proposed by the Académie de Dijon and treated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. But Miller's reasoning is entirely different from the demonstration of the philosopher from Geneva. In fact he would deny that there was any problem at all. If the principle that knowledge alone is sufficient to reform, exalt and finally render perfect the human race, "we should find virtue and happiness both in individuals and societies, bearing an exact proportion to the advances made in knowledge. . . . But if it not be *generally* true, that in proportion as men make progress in intellectual improvement, they make progress in moral excellence; we may with confidence conclude, that these two species of improvement do not necessarily stand in relation of cause and effect to each other, and therefore that from the existence of the former we cannot legitimately infer the existence of the latter."

This is a far cry from the denunciation of society and civilization in the famous *Discours* of Rousseau, but perfectly consistent with his refusal to admit that education or circumstances alone can modify or condition the moral behavior of man. It is also consistent with the attitude observed by Miller all through the *Brief Retrospect*, in maintaining that the scientific, artistic, or literary achievements of a given man are completely independent of his religious beliefs.

His third argument is a striking illustration of the necessity of differentiating between what is too commonly called progress and "melioration." Increase in population was generally considered as a progress in the eighteenth century, but it has been asserted "by acute and well informed writers, that the progress of popu-
lation, when unrestrained, is always in a geometrical ratio, and that the increase of the means of subsistence is, under the most favourable circumstances, only in an arithmetical ratio.” This is clearly a case when a so-called progress results almost necessarily in unmitigated evil. This argument did not apply evidently to conditions then existing in America, but would ultimately apply to any country afflicted with an indefinite increase of population. Needless to say here that Samuel Miller could not claim any credit for these pessimistic considerations. He had borrowed them from “an anonymous work,” recently published under the title *An Essay on Population,* “a work which, in force of reasoning, and in candour and urbanity of discussion, has rarely if ever been exceeded.” In Malthus’s *Essay* Samuel Miller had found a cold-blooded and “scientific” refutation of the visions of Godwin and Condorcet and particularly of “the perfectibility of man and society”:

... It is evident, that the progress of population must continually, unless in extraordinary circumstances, be checked by the want of subsistence; that these two will ever be, from their very nature, contending forces, and will be found more or less, in the most advantageous states of society, to produce want, fraud, violence, irregularity in sexual intercourse, disease, and various kinds of vice; and, as the natural consequence of these, especially in their combined force, much misery and degradation to man. There seems to be no method of avoiding this conclusion, but by contending, that when knowledge shall have made a certain degree of progress, both the intercourse of the sexes, and the necessity of food and raiment will cease. But will any one seriously maintain that such events are probable? Do we actually see individuals or communities, as they advance in learning and refinement, discover less propensity to the sexual intercourse, or a greater disposition or ability to do without the means of bodily sustenance? It will not be pretended that either of these is the case. But as long as the
propagation of the human species continues to stand on the footing and to depend on the principles which it now does; and as long as food and raiment are necessary as means of subsistence, human society must be doomed to exhibit more or less of ignorance, vice, and misery.

In his fourth and final argument, Samuel Miller contrasts the Millenium of the philosophers and the Millenium of the Bible:

The sacred volume teaches us that we are fallen and depraved beings; that this depravity is total, and admits no remedy but by the grace declared in the Gospel; that the most virtuous will never be perfect or completely holy in the present world, and that misery and death are the unavoidable lot of man under the present dispensation.

It is true that the Scriptures speak of a millenium or period of happiness, but the Millenium of the Bible differs essentially both in cause and nature from the Millenium depicted in philosophic dreams, which is only "an absurd portrait of knowledge without real wisdom, of benevolence without piety, and of purity and happiness without genuine virtue."

In conclusion, Miller is willing to grant that education is extremely powerful; that much of the difference we observe in the talents and dispositions of men is to be ascribed to its efficacy; and that "the lovers of knowledge may be expected hereafter to make such improvements in literature, such discoveries in science, and such useful reforms in the plans of instruction, as exceedingly to promote the general improvement of man." Unfortunately although the eighteenth century has witnessed important "revolutions" in education, it cannot be said that they constituted real improvements: "Particularly with respect to the patient, laborious and thorough investigation of the various objects of knowledge, the depth of erudition; the discipline and subordination of academic establishments; and
Samuel Miller realized how incomplete and rapid was his characterization of the eighteenth century, since he had to postpone dealing with the fundamental subjects of politics, morals and religion. He undertook, nevertheless, to sum up in a final chapter, entitled Recapitulation, the various aspects of the period as far as they had been presented in the Brief Retrospect. All considered, it could be asserted with confidence "that in no period of the same extent, since the creation, has a mass of improvement so large, diversified and rich been presented to view."

"No less than fifteen characteristics could be found, some good, some bad, and every one of them susceptible of qualifications and reservations. We shall try to give them here in Samuel Miller's own words, while regretting not to be able to reproduce in full the text of our author. According to him, the eighteenth century was:

(1) An age of free inquiry; (2) the age of physical science; (3) the age of economical science, marked by a real revolution in medicine and in all subjects pertaining to the welfare of man; (4) the age of experiment, under the influence of Bacon; (5) the age of revolutions in science, brought about by the rapid succession of discoveries, hypotheses and systems; (6) the age of printing, with a prodigious increase of new works and new editions of old works; (7) the age of books, the spirit of writing exceeding all former precedents, and resulting in hasty productions of books and periodicals; (8) the age of unprecedented diffusion of knowledge, for common people read and inquired to a degree that would have been thought incredible in an earlier century, while seminaries of learning and circulating libraries were multiplied; (9) the age of superficial learning, ("the unprecedented circulation of magazines, literary
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journals, Abridgments, Epitomes, &c., with which the republic of letters has been deluged, particularly within the last forty years. These have distracted the attention of the student, have seduced him from sources of more systematic and comprehensive instruction, and have puffed up multitudes with false ideas of their own acquirements ); (10) the age of taste and refinement; (11) the age of infidel philosophy, which has poisoned the principles and completed the ruin of millions; (12) and yet the age of Christian Science, for a better knowledge of the universe and of the history of man should lead us to a greater admiration for the work of the Creator; (13) the age of translations, which have established closer contacts between different peoples; (14) the age of literary honours, and of international memberships in learned societies, and (15) the age of literary and scientific intercourse, for while in all preceding ages literary men were in a great measure “insulated,” increased facilities in transportation have enabled them to travel and to communicate freely. Taking all in all, it could be asserted that great as were the achievements of the age just come to a close, they only heralded the opening of a still greater era and “that substantial advancement in knowledge which the enlightened and benevolent mind anticipates with a glow of delight.”

This analysis of the most important problem treated in the Brief Retrospect is far too sketchy and incomplete to justify any formal conclusion. A comparison with Miller’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries cannot easily be made, since he has not dealt with the most controversial aspects of the doctrine of progress, namely politics, morals and religion. He has said enough, however, to enable us to determine the distinctive features and the main lines of his approach.

The most striking is the sharp distinction established between progress and perfectibility. The word progress itself does not necessarily imply improvement, but change, slow and gradual, or
sudden and revolutionary, for the better or for the worse, according to the circumstances and the use that man makes of his discoveries. These discoveries have a cumulative effect and pass on from one generation to another. But limits have been assigned by the Creator to the power of man's intellect. These limits are unknown and there are still worlds to conquer, but sooner or later they will be reached. However great may be the knowledge of man, knowledge will never make him complete master of natural forces. Finally there is practically no relation between scientific knowledge, artistic and literary achievements and morality, virtue and true happiness.

In the domain of morality, virtue, religion and to a certain extent of the intellect, on the contrary, everyman starts de novo. He is born feeble physically and mentally. He has to fight the same fight as his forebears, to overcome the same obstacles, to repress the same instincts or impulses, to check the evil tendencies which are in him. He may encounter circumstances more or less favorable and it is granted that education and particularly religious education may help him, but in the last analysis every individual stands on his own and remains a weak, imperfect and sinful creature, but for the grace of God.

Of course this is straight Calvinism and we know that Samuel Miller was uncompromisingly orthodox in his religious tenets, but in fact he was much closer to Saint Augustine than to Calvin. An examination of the last chapters of the City of God (Book XXII, Ch. 24 and 29) would provide a most fitting commentary to the conclusion of the Brief Retrospect. There one will find a triumphal hymn to human industry, extending to all the realms of human activities: "Vestimentorum et aedificiorum ad opera quam mirabilia, quam stupenda, industria humana pervenerit; quo in agricultura, quo in navigatione profecerit; quae in fabricatione quoque vasorum, vel etiam statuarum et picturarum
Nothing new under the sun—improvements in the daily life of every man, in his clothes, in housing, farming and navigation, in domestic utensils and in works of art, all the modern comforts and enjoyments, so highly praised by Samuel Miller and by him presented as conquests of the eighteenth century—were already the privilege of Saint Augustine’s contemporaries. The conclusion is strikingly similar for, according to Augustine, however extensive may be the discoveries of man and the apparent happiness prevailing in the terrestrial city, perfection can never be attained, since “in the torrent which carries mankind along the evil which they received from their progenitor and the good which was granted by the Creator are inextricably mixed: utrumque simul currit isto quasi fluvio atque torrente generis humani, malum quod a parente trahitur, et bonum quod a creante tribuitur.”

Whether the distinction established by Samuel Miller between progress and perfectibility was observed by many of his American contemporaries, I am not prepared to say. We know that Franklin at least on one occasion had deplored the fact that morality and science did not proceed pari passu. After congratulating Priestley on his new experiments “on the purification of the atmosphere by means of vegetation” the old doctor added:

The rapid Progress true Science now makes, occasions my regretting that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the Height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the Power of Man over Matter. We may perhaps learn to deprive large Masses of their Gravity, and give them absolute Levity, for the sake of easy Transport. Agriculture may diminish its Labour and double its Produce; all Diseases may by sure means be prevented or cured, not excepting even that of old Age, and our Lives lengthened at pleasure even beyond the antediluvian Standard. O that moral Science were in as fair a way of Improvement, that Men would cease to be Wolves to one another, and that
human Beings would at length learn what they now improperly call Humanity. (Passy, Feb. 8, 1780, Smyth ed. VIII, 9)

Seventeen years later, in one of his not so rare moments of despondency, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Bishop Madison: "What is called civilization seems to have no other effect on him [man] than to teach him to pursue the principle of bellum omnium in omnia on a larger scale, and in place of the little contests of tribe against tribe, to engage all the quarters of the earth in the same work of destruction." (Jan. 1, 1797. Memorial ed., IX, 359-60.)

But both Franklin and Jefferson were fundamentally in harmony with the philosophes. They observed and deplored the lag existing between scientific discoveries and social progress and their Americanism was too strong to permit them to indulge for long in pessimistic considerations. We have to turn to France to find a parallel to the fight waged by Samuel Miller against the upholders of the doctrine of perfectibility. Without going into the antecedents of the movement, let us simply recall that Madame de Staël had published the first edition of her famous work De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales in 1800, and that, in 1802, there appeared a second edition, revised, with a long preface in which she attempted, not very successfully, to distinguish between progress and perfectibility. It was, according to her, the problem of the age: "D'où vient donc que ce système de la perfectibilité de l'espèce humaine déchaîne maintenant toutes les passions politiques?" It was the fundamental problem discussed by Chateaubriand not only in his Lettre à M. de Fontanes sur la seconde édition de l'ouvrage de Madame de Staël, but also in the Génie du Christianisme which preceded the Brief Retrospect less than two years (April, 1802). Shall we recall that Chateaubriand gave
a whole chapter to the study of the "Constitution primitive de l'homme. Nouvelle preuve du péché originel" (Première partie, Livre III, Ch. 2)? That in the book devoted to the progress of the sciences, particularly Astronomy and Mathematics, Chateaubriand endeavoured to define the limits of human knowledge?
That in the Essai sur les Révolutions he had already taken sides, in addressing those who are dazzled by "le système de la perfection"? Whatever may be the shortcomings of the hasty production of Samuel Miller, the forgotten book of a forgotten man, and however incomplete is this altogether too brief account of it, we hope at least to have shown that the Brief Retrospect was a not altogether negligible contribution to the great debate, still going on in our days on the extent and limitations of human knowledge.

BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

as “Papers for the second edition of part I of the Retrospect,” a “List of my publications, 1793–1836” established by Miller himself.