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# JOURNAL

Ann Arbor,  
December 1997

WILLIAM IAN  
MILLER

**E**ight inches of snow today, the wet kind that clings to trees, cracks branches, and makes the beauties of the other seasons vulgar by comparison. Vulgar? I've got it wrong; what could be more kitsch than that flaky winter wonderland stuff? Still, I like

it best, even better than fall, which always makes me feel inadequate amidst that orgy of color. With little exception, my workmates complained about the snow. Weather whiners. Ship 'em out to California.

I pedaled my bike through the snow to my office and back, which is about all the adventure my family responsibilities will allow these days. Nonetheless had a mild bit of excitement when the bike tire decided to follow its own will down a deep car-tire track in the wet snow, whereas I seemed intent on going straight. The bike and I slid down into the path of an oncoming car that fortunately was driven by a snow nerd, one of those people so unnerved by "winter driving conditions" that they go no faster than an old man in a walker. Told K when I got home to no great effect. She probably didn't believe me. In fact, she shouldn't have, for I have exaggerated the account even to myself. Otherwise it would have bored me. The bike did skid out, but I recovered within yards of the car and never crossed its path.

**W**hat is it about political theory that makes performances in that genre so routinely dull? Mind-bogglingly tedious discussions of whether *unicameral* is preferable to *bicameral*. Brain-deadening, lesion-creating treatments of

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checks and balances. Insipidly dim readings of Hobbes, Locke, and the other five or six books political theorists admit to their canonical texts, which do not even half fill 24 inches of bookshelf. They don't even know Hobbes was funny, making jokes

from one end of *The Leviathan* to the other, dark jokes to be sure. Like this: "Sudden dejection is the passion that causeth weeping; and is caused by such accidents, as suddenly take away some vehement hope, or some prop of their power. . . . Therefore some Weep for the losse of Friends; Others for their unkindnesse; others for the sudden stop made to their thoughts of revenge, by Reconciliation."

Only one of these sheddings of tears is for something we, in our oppressive treacly piety, would allow as proper: the losse of Friends. But in the next clause it is our Friends who make us weep by their unkindness to us. This makes the meaning of the loss of friends in the first clause more troublesome. Did we lose the friends because they died or rather because they attached themselves to our enemies in unkindness? Hobbes's wit is to leave it open, but not by much, for the third clause is about the joys of revenge, or more accurately about the sadness of losing those joys to the dull safety of peace and reconciliation. Friends, it seems, are nothing but a source of tears, unless they join us in taking vengeance on our enemies, who most likely had also once been our friends. Friends, in Hobbes's mordant scheme, are those who have yet to betray us, or those with whom we have reconciled after they betrayed us once already.

**O**ther boring debates: egoism vs. altruism, gay vs. straight, women vs. men. It seems to me that a more fruitful pairing for political, social, and moral theory is fools vs. knaves.

Imagine a major in Knave Studies, which by one account is what history, political science, and economics are anyway. Imagine a major in Fool Studies. But that would merely duplicate psychology and sociology and whatever it is they do in the Ed School. That is why we need to bring the knave and the fool together, explicitly contrasting one with the other. Do fools produce the conditions that enable knaves to thrive, or is it that knaves are just fools under another set of descriptions? Which group really runs the show? Knaves are usually thought to be brighter than fools, fools being the great sea of prey, like wildebeests, there to be culled and clipped by the knaves, who are few and élite. But we all know stupid knaves and knavish fools, mostly because we ourselves spend time in both roles, now one, now the other, depending on our particular areas of expertise and particular dispositions. One of the most knavish tricks of recent vintage is to deceive oneself in a self-aggrandizing way about one's own abilities. This used to be the mark of the fool. No longer. Remind myself to work through this sometime.

Watching Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* for the fortieth time with Louie and Eva on my lap. I am teary. The fortieth time and I fall for the rote sentimental moves yet again. But it seems to be more than just the moves made in the movie; it is also the sentiment engendered by the kids on my lap, by the association Disney animation has with my own childhood. But that I should be shedding tears (no one else in the room is; the kids and K are flinty) instead of jeering when the Beast turns into Fabio. . . . My career commitment to heroic literature is surely motivated by my embarrassment at my own sentimentality. Not true. It is just that no cheap romance can match the sentimentally evocative power of the heroic.

A related matter from last January. Went back home for the NFC title game, Packers against Carolina. My only positive religious experiences have occurred in Lambeau Field when the Packers win important games in the freezing cold. (I never have religious experiences during conventional religious services. The psychological constitution needed, for instance, to endure the repetition of the amidah—a

fifteen-minute prayer that needs no repeating to bring time to a halt—without intense irritation or resentment is, for me, simply unimaginable.)

Freezing cold, I said. None of this phony lowering of the temperature with windchill calculations, just the plain facts. It is minus three degrees today, ma'am. Oh yes, and winds are gusting to thirty. Start with everyone showing up an hour early, then move to "The Star Spangled Banner," which always fills me with anxiety: Do I sing, do I stand at attention in some way that I hope will seem non-parodic, do I take my hat off, if I don't will someone knock it off? These are concerns left over from the '60s. Now I sing lustily, even though I feel a bit silly for doing so and note that the fans on the other side of the field are already breaking into cheers at "and the rockets' red glare." And I was worried about not being sufficiently pious! Propriety demands that you don't break into cheers at least until "o'er the land of the free. . . ." The cheers grow louder and spread, a total feast of misrule I think, but around me all are still singing earnestly, so I continue to sing myself, sorely tempted, however, to break into cheers.

But then, epiphany: Just at "the bombs bursting in air," roaring over my left shoulder, so low I think I can reach up and touch them, fly four F-111's in perfect formation. Well, I declare. Unreflective ecstasy. The timing is part of it, but it is mostly the pure functional lethal beauty of those fighters, the highest artistic achievement of the twentieth century. I feel a surge of tears come to my eyes, but manage, thank God, to repress them and say to my sister, trying desperately to restore my sense of irony, that I would never again complain about the defense budget. If it's going for those beautiful airplanes, count me in. But there are tears later, after the final gun, for which my sister, in an effort to keep hers at bay, mocks me.

The Packers won and no one left the stadium for almost an hour after the game. A quiet communion, astonishingly decorous. (I can only imagine that this is what religions strive for but rarely achieve outside of the remarkably successful enthusiastic religions, although they dispense with the decorum.) Five hours at minus three degrees and people wouldn't leave. All just stood at their seats, feeling religious.

I am not sure it is as risible for people from Green Bay to behave in this way as it would be for people from San Francisco or New York. To be sure, there was in this communion a bonding with the Packers. But there was also a bonding *against*, as I think there must be in all successful bonding. Not against the Carolina Panthers. They had been defeated and we felt benevolent toward them. It was rather a bonding of small towns against large cities, to which they have been consistent losers for the last 130 years, of the Midwest and Cold North against the shallowly hedonic coasts, of dull decency against trendy slickness.

Green Bay bears a special burden for all small towns and had just discharged it heroically. Even a Jew from Green Bay like me—confused as that identity might be—feels this with a passion. I stood there moved. My self-critical faculty was operating, but it let me off lightly, thinking it amusing that I could have been swept along so, well, uncritically. But if you can't lose yourself in this, I thought, then kiss the notion of community, a notion I can mostly do without, good-bye.

Communal ritual as embarrassment. Except for sports events—actually, not even excepting them—all communal ritual behaviors make me feel silly. Touching the Torah with the prayer book and then kissing the book was more than I could ever bear, even as a kid. I always cheated, never quite kissing the book, never quite touching the Torah, finding a way to get lost in the press of those into-it souls who rushed right up without the least sign of embarrassment. And that was before I added in the aversion of thinking that the goal of all this was to bring my lips into indirect contact with the lips of all those wheezing, coughing, mucus-rich old men.

Even the Cub Scout salute, at age eight, felt degrading. Two fingers to the forehead. You knew it typed you as a weenie, not compared with the kids who were not Cub Scouts (that was long before not being a Cub Scout was cool) but compared with the Boy Scouts who got to use three fingers, and with “real people” in movies about the army who got to extend *all* their fingers. That two-fingered salute managed to turn being a little kid into a kind of moral failing.

But that paled next to the hip handshake of the late '60s and early '70s, and the awkwardnesses of whether to extend your hand straight out in the conventional style or hold it at a slight angle to ready oneself for the new grasp. No matter how you pulled it off you ended up feeling ridiculous. If you offered a conventional shake and the other guy offered the hip one, you felt uncool. If you offered the hip one and the other guy offered the conventional one, you felt like a pretentious fool. If you both joined miraculously in the hip handshake, you only felt mild relief at not having blown it, tinged with a strong sense of the phinness of the gesture, whereas if you just met in the conventional shake, you felt relief and a small twinge of gratitude to the other for having allowed the situation to pass without the mutual destruction of dignity.

Watching women shake hands with each other. If one offers a limp hand to the other while the other shakes in a firm hearty style, who feels what kinds of embarrassments and shames?

Sex has to be procreative to be, finally, enjoyable. All the embarrassing activities that constitute sex, the tristesse, the loss of dignity, are on occasion rewarded after a time by the pleasures of baby flesh. The most unambivalently pleasurable bodily contact with another that there is, is burying your face in or just squeezing baby flesh, preferably between six months and eighteen months of age, but still pleasurable until they hit three and start to approximate humans. Of course, better that this delight be indulged immediately after the bath. Even this innocent pleasure of the flesh is not without its risks of triggering disgust.

Christmas season again and I have the flu, not the sniffing congestive kind but the all-consuming nausea kind. These flus test me morally, for I find myself in a trial of the spirit to keep from vomiting. Even though I know it might bring relief, the degradation suffered to obtain it is too great a price to pay. Vomiting threatens the soul, not just morally but physically; one fears, at least I fear, that the convulsions might be so powerful as to heave up the soul itself, and covered with pumpkin pie to

boot. That is about as far as any attempt to give vomiting a spiritual aspect can go, for vomiting is not of the spirit, but of the grossest matter imaginable.

Some homelier issues then: It is not unusual that one vomits after eating and drinking things one likes, in fact likes too much; otherwise why eat them to excess? The remarkable thing is that on the way back up you can re-identify the ingredients of that evil visceral ragout with exquisite particularity. Yes, that's the Caesar salad, that's the brussels sprout; what was that now? Oh yes, the Sicilian olives, and, my God, the cheesecake too. And amidst all that consuming misery you are able to register amazement at the enduring individuality of the food that makes up the *mélange*. Truly remarkable, you think, both that foods can retain their distinctiveness once mixed together like this and that I can discern it and register surprise in my present condition. Or is it rather the foods' very refusal to give up their particular identities, their refusal to become inextricably compounded into a new substance with no traces of the original elements, that is making me sick?

The miseries of being chair of the hiring committee. I am not cut out for it. I cannot muster the courage to call references. Once I actually manage to contact one, I find the conversation so awkward that I end it before I have asked the necessary questions. Then the face-to-face interview with the fawning candidate. The first thought that still goes through my head, the head of a nearly-52-year-old academic, is could I take this guy in a fight if I had to? I think I found myself drawn to academics because it was the only profession where I could answer yes more than 70 percent of the time.

The holiday season. I still feel mildly grateful to Christians who don't say Merry Christmas to me, but now things have gotten utterly out of hand with this Happy Holidays stuff. Even the Salvation Army bell ringer says Happy Holidays. In the public school there is no Christmas program. There is plenty of Kwanza and Asian and South American stuff, even "I have a little dreidl," which is safe if there are only one or two Jews in the class—a

little something for everyone for whom pity and contempt seem appropriate. But none of those beautiful Christmas carols.

How are minority groups supposed to develop the requisite hostile energy needed to remain distinct from the majority if the majority is denied the opportunity to irritate them with the smug assumption that the majority way is natural and neutral? My own sense of Jewishness would pretty much disappear if I were deprived of the feelings of awkwardness that public Christmas celebration prompted in me, that awkwardness of simultaneously loving the beautiful songs, feeling like a traitor for loving them, and hating Christians for thinking that I had no moral dilemma in singing them. Easter is a different story, a thoroughly unpleasant feast. No pleasure there except the colored eggs and the awful chocolate rabbits. That was when I got accused of killing Jesus and there were no pretty songs to compensate for the beatings.

Louie (my six-year-old) had his friend M over today. K told me how M had asked her when she was taking him home whether she liked colored lights or white lights on the trees. M offered, "I like colored ones." Then he added somewhat dejectedly, "We have white ones though; my parents think the colored ones look cheap." There is some small tragedy there in the costs of taste. I mean Christmas is not the season to be tasteful, fa la la la la la la. When I was growing up in Green Bay our house was the only dark one, and while looking with longing at the colored lights glowing from our tasteless neighbors' windows, I was racked with envy, perversely mixed with pride for not joining in. Eva asked if we could put blue and white Hanukkah lights out on our bushes. I refused to budge. I suppose I am as coldly malevolent as the tasteful parental Fates who made M's Christmas something less than perfect.

I always felt Jews who had Christmas trees were cowards for not turning their backs on the obvious forbidden pleasure of tree-light. What so upsets you about it, Miller? they'd ask. A Christmas tree has no religious significance and besides it's pretty. My reply: Then put it up in August.