

## A STUDENT'S MEMORY OF JOHN McDERMOTT

Linda Simon  
Skidmore College  
[lsimon@skidmore.edu](mailto:lsimon@skidmore.edu)

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*

—Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day”

Queens College, in the 1960s, was (and still is) a large, urban, public university; it was (though no longer) free. If there had been no tuition-free college, my parents would likely have sent me to a secretarial school to prepare me for a job as, maybe, a typist, so I could fill the time before I got married, started a family, and became a homemaker. Although they did not, like Henry James, Sr., see colleges as hotbeds of depravity, higher education was not something my parents valued, especially for a girl. College seemed irrelevant to the future I was supposed to inhabit, which seemed to me at once starkly vivid and inevitable (a husband and a home of my own) and terrifyingly vague (if not that, then what?). I was the first person in my immediate family to go to college, and I had no idea, really, what to expect—from my education and certainly from myself. The word ‘transformative’ was nowhere in my vocabulary.

Grateful as I was to be in college at all, Queens felt like a bigger version of my large, urban high school. There were many required classes to complete and these, apart from language classes and science labs, were, for the most part, lectures. One was not: a required class in English composition, for whom my professor was the Ruskin scholar Helen Gill Viljoen. With a few exceptions, Viljoen emerged as one of the few teachers I remember from my undergraduate experience. She was gentle, low-key, incisive, and focused. The textbook we used for the class was one she had co-edited, *A Preface to Our Day*, which contained essays by writers who I knew were crucially important to my education: Milton, Matthew Arnold, Emerson, and, of course, Ruskin, among them. The essays were challenging, about such lofty subjects as aesthetics, morality, censorship, and social responsibility. I can't imagine what my own essays were like, but Prof. Viljoen made me—and my efforts at writing—feel valued and respected in ways that no other teacher ever had before. Her office, though redolent with stale cigarette smoke, felt like a precious, sunlit space, and our meetings, for me, privileged moments.

I never felt, though, that the mostly 19<sup>th</sup> century men whose works dominated the curriculum in English composition—and those whose ideas I encountered in so many other classes—were once living, breathing, vital, and vibrant human beings. They were, to put it succinctly, dead, and to imagine them as alive seemed completely beside the point. The point, as I understood it in my first semesters in college, was to become literate in great books, great men, and their great ideas; to fill in names on a timeline of Western culture. There was an introduction to music, where, for the first time in my life, I heard the works of classical composers. I think I was not alone: the professor imparted the news that one does not applaud at the breaks between movements. With that advice, I thought I had been given a key to the kingdom. There was an introduction to art history, where, for the first time in my life (my family did not go to museums), I saw slides of Greek sculpture and Renaissance paintings. And there was a required survey course called Western Civilization.

In that class I encountered a professor as different from Helen Gill Viljoen as anyone could be: John McDermott. Was it in Western Civ. that I first read William James? Or Emerson, Camus, Heidegger, Kant? Was it in Western Civ. that McDermott recommended—well, insisted, as he bounded across the room—that we all read a startling new work of science fiction, William J. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz?*, where we would find characters engaged in issues that, we were learning, were not limited to the domain of philosophers: the search for truth, the tension between science and religion, the thorny question of individual responsibility to others and to the future. These were the issues that recurred in McDermott's other classes as well, which I took, along with so many other students, philosophy majors or not, who were bitten by the scintillating energy of his teaching style.

When I became a college professor myself, I encountered among my colleagues a range of teaching styles: the pontificator, the clown, the performer; some who wanted to be cool, some who decidedly did not; some who would have preferred to be anywhere but in the classroom, and others who seemed genuinely to thrive there. From my perspective as a student, McDermott was one of the latter. I had no idea then that pedagogy was central to his recently completed doctoral dissertation, but it was clear that pedagogy was more than theoretical: it was urgent. And teaching was not merely a matter of exposing students to great men and their great ideas but leading these credulous young people to doubt—those ideas, and themselves—opening them, as he once put it, “to novelty, surprise, and the dismaying message” that their beliefs “may have been self-foreclosing.”<sup>1</sup>

Surely, he knew that at a free city college, his teenaged students were not culturally or economically privileged, and we were raised with prescriptions, and deeply-embedded proscriptions, for our future. Teenaged rebellion seemed like a noisy eruption that some enacted, and left behind, with little consequence. To embark on a journey to the unknown was, our elders warned, to tempt fate. The world was dangerous, hubris was punished, and those who strayed

from a well-worn path courted failure: a typist could always get a job. Anyone with a 'big idea' was a buffoon.

But McDermott laced his classes with surprising autobiographical tidbits about his young family, his mother, his siblings, the trajectory of his own life: "It may be of interest to know," he summarized his career later, "that an urban, proletarian ethnic from a large, economically scarred family can wind up having taught philosophy, letters, history, and matters cultural to more than twenty thousand students."<sup>2</sup> Not to mention hundreds of lectures throughout the world, abundant publications, and scores of honors.<sup>3</sup> As his student, it was of great interest to know this: of great interest and inspiration.

Empowerment, like transformation, was not a word in my vocabulary, although it must have been current in the culture of the 1960s, because McDermott found the term "gratuitously overused in our time. For William James and for McDermott, hear 'possibilities,' 'energies.'"<sup>4</sup> But even these words were not quite right: "Although modest in intonation," he added, "the explosive word is 'congenial,' by which James means that we are 'in on something.'"<sup>5</sup> I yearned to believe in possibilities. "We ought," James wrote, "to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*."<sup>6</sup> I was all too familiar with a feeling of *and*; *if* and *but* seemed too daring to contemplate.

Arthur Lothstein, another former Queens College student from the 1960s, ebulliently described McDermott as "the Johnny Appleseed of philosophers" who treated his students as "clipped buds desperately in need of recultivation"—seeding, mulching, weeding, and irrigating—in a rich garden of ideas.<sup>7</sup> "McDermott's passion for ideas is so contagious," Lothstein recalled, "that you actually find yourself caring about whether the world is a vanilla monism in which there is nothing new under the sun, or a tutti-frutti pluralism..."<sup>8</sup> McDermott's classes were "aflame with the language of possibility, chance, edge, novelty, and risk."<sup>9</sup> These were classes where *if* and *but* were vibrant invitations to think, to act, and to be.

Among the thinkers we studied, James, of course, stood out brilliantly. McDermott created James as a live presence in those

classes, a complicated man unafraid to be contradictory and uncertain. A philosopher for whom salient questions were much more crucial than answers; who followed unblazed trails: on mountains and thought and in the course of his life. “We realize this life as something always off its balance,” he wrote,

something in transition, something that shoots out of a darkness through a dawn into a brightness that we feel to be the dawn fulfilled. In the very midst of the continuity our experience comes as an alteration. ‘Yes,’ we say at the full brightness, ‘*this* is what I just meant.’<sup>10</sup>

I learned from McDermott’s classes that my education, in college and beyond, would—and should—throw me off balance, pushing me from darkness to, I hoped, some brightness yet unknown to me. I learned, as James put it, “What really *exists* is not things made but things in the making.”<sup>11</sup>

Years later, when I read memoirs recalling William James as a teacher, I recognized qualities that I saw in McDermott. A Harvard graduate student in the 1880s recalled the “originality” of James’s teaching style, his charm and energy. “We appreciated fully,” wrote Edmund Burke Delabarre, “his remarkable genius for felicitous, clear and picturesque expression...”<sup>12</sup> James’s lectures, another student remembered, “were always vitalizing. No studied rhetoric. Always happy turns of intriguing phrases, a glow of warmth and meaning.”<sup>13</sup> “He was in a marked degree unpretending, unconventional, human and direct. The one thing apparently impossible to him,” Dickinson Sargeant Miller remarked about James’s teaching, “was to speak in an *ex cathedra* throne from heights of scientific erudition and attainment.”<sup>14</sup> While James’s colleague Josiah Royce “sat immovable” in class, “James would rise with a peculiar suddenness and make bold and rapid strokes for a diagram on the black-board” and, with a “look of human and mellow consideration,” address his attentive students.<sup>15</sup> Both James and McDermott, as teachers, showed a remarkable empathy for their students; they insisted that philosophy was none other than a

personal quest, and they shared a visceral excitement about idiosyncrasy and the intensity of *now*.

Unlike some of McDermott's other students, I did not pursue philosophy as a graduate student or teacher but instead brought what he had inspired in me to my writing, and, not least, to the choices I made in my life. As a biographer and cultural historian, my subjects have been men and women who chose paths that defied others' expectations. A reviewer once remarked that I was drawn to mavericks, which seems apt. All of them asked, as James did, as McDermott did, "What makes a life significant?" All of them responded, as McDermott once wrote, "The distinctively personal ingredient should color all of our activities, otherwise we live in the gray of correctness, external and dead to the world and to ourselves."<sup>16</sup> And all of them struggled—often off balance, often in darkness—to face the perilous and the risky: to discover, as poet Mary Oliver put it so incisively—and as McDermott urged us to discover—what they might dare to do with their own wild and precious life.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> McDermott, "Possibility or Else!," 132.
- <sup>2</sup> McDermott, "Afterward: You Are Really Able," 270.
- <sup>3</sup> McDermott, 270.
- <sup>4</sup> McDermott, "Possibility or Else!," 133.
- <sup>5</sup> McDermott, 133.
- <sup>6</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 245.
- <sup>7</sup> Lothstein, "No Eros, No Buds" 180.
- <sup>8</sup> Lothstein, 183.
- <sup>9</sup> Lothstein, 184-85.
- <sup>10</sup> James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 283.
- <sup>11</sup> James, 263.
- <sup>12</sup> Delabarre, "James in the Late '80s," 113.
- <sup>13</sup> Starbuck, "James in the Middle '90s," 168.
- <sup>14</sup> Miller, "A Memory," 125.
- <sup>15</sup> Miller, 129.
- <sup>16</sup> McDermott, "Possibility or Else!," 135.