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John William Miller's "The Owl"

John William Miller wrote "The Owl" in the 1960's intending it for publication. It has not appeared in print until now. In it he makes a vigorous defense of the supremacy of the present and of the actuality which lies beneath more traditional metaphysical distinctions such as those of: appearance/reality, phenomenal/noumenal, and subject/object. The philosophical tradition, in true owl-like fashion, has eschewed living immediacies for the night-time pseudo-illumination of categories which flee local control. Standing in contrast to this oblivion is the realm of the Midworld in which human actions generate and sustain functioning objects which serve to keep living immediacies alive.

In his survey of the history of philosophy, Miller finds several crucial junctures where the possibility of finding the realm of the actual was present. In particular, Hegel, in his daring reconstruction of Kant's categorical scheme, moved away from non-embodied categories toward the realm of the living Spirit. Hegel's case is especially instructive because of the struggle to find actuality amid the self-gathering of Spirit's expressions in nature and history. Tragically, this heroic struggle to master the actual became in fact yet one more flight away from the Midworld toward an atemporal domain of pure categorial transparency. In the end, Hegel's metaphor of the owl revealed his deeper preference for that twilight consciousness which destroys all present immediacy.

Throughout his writings, Miller emphasizes the primacy of the self-reliant individual who controls his or her immediate environment through actions of local control tied to functioning objects. His favorite example is that of the yardstick which measures local space and makes it actual to the concrete individual. The yardstick has the unique ontological status of all functioning objects, namely, that it secures and stabilizes immediacies through action. In other contexts Miller criticizes the empirical tradition for its passive understanding of sense-data.¹ The concrete individual knower is not, according to

Miller, a passive spectator but a locus of control over the actual. More forcefully put, the individual establishes the contour of the world through utterances and products which become part of the self-encompassing Midworld.

A phenomenology of the Midworld takes a different form from an alleged phenomenology of Spirit. Whereas the latter attempts to lay bare the various shapes of self-consciousness as they cancel and resurrect themselves under the binding measure of the Absolute, the former more fitfully and patiently works through those ordinary artifacts which give shape to present immediacies. At the other philosophic extreme, Miller challenges those contemporary skepticisms which would deny any role to the present or to consummated wholes within living experience. The flight from the present, whether done in the name of an atemporal ideal or in the name of an extreme anti-structuralism, denudes reality of those powers which sustain and guide human civilization.

Like many classical American thinkers, Miller combines a sophisticated anti-intellectualism with a strong belief in critical common sense. While the owl philosophy flees the actual, the daily traffic of thought moves in the other direction where the Spirit gives way to the spirits. Emerson stands closer to the inner history of the self-revelation of the Midworld because of his ability to root all categories and metaphors in living immediacies. The individual is never eclipsed by alien and atemporal expressions of the ideal. In his occasional references to the political sphere, Miller commends Lincoln, in some respects a public Emerson, for his understanding of the forces of local control and their role in the larger communal orders.

The owl memorializes the past and thereby remains blind to the actual. Since the entire history of philosophy can be crystalized in the metaphor of the owl, it follows that the return to the living present and its local actualities requires a new understanding of philosophical thinking. It is as if philosophy must go under its own tradition and immerse itself in the articulate present. In this going under it would become for the first time the true voice of the Midworld and serve the

internal logic of local control. In a sense, Miller places philosophy under the demands of praxis whereby its categorial powers and potencies would be empowered to serve the deeper needs of human communities. Unlike other thinkers who would ask philosophy to forego its traditional role so as to give way to some form of literary criticism or psychopathology of suspicion, Miller has a sturdier goal in mind with his insistence that living actualities become emancipated from categorial closure. In keeping with this more vigorous goal, Miller remains confident that the resultant actuality will remain a stable source for human existence.

In his other writings, Miller details a symbol theory which would, in many respects, serve to replace the owl thinking of the tradition.² Local control traffics in artifacts which are themselves embodied in living signs and symbols which render the Midworld intelligible and communicable. Miller rejects the notion that we must abandon communication if we are to rescue philosophy from its hostility toward the actual. Philosophy, even in its reconstructed and more humble form, is nothing if not articulate. Underlying many of Miller's conceptual and phenomenological innovations is a strong commitment to non-authoritarian sign structures. The symbols and signs of the Midworld become and remain democratic only insofar as they serve the deeper purposes of meaningful communication. With all of his emphasis on Emersonian individualism, Miller remains committed to those emancipatory ideals which preserve the actual from demonic self-inflation.

Readers interested in secondary literature can consult "John William Miller," by George P. Brockway, *The American Scholar*, Spring 1980, pp. 236-240, "An American Original," by Joseph P. Fell, *The American Scholar*, Winter, 1983-84, pp. 123-130, "John William Miller and the Ontology of the Midworld," by Robert S. Corrington, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Spring 1986, pp. 165-188, the book review essay by Vincent Colapietro in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*; New Series, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 239-256, and "Introduction to John William Miller's 'For Idealism'" by Robert

Corrington, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*; New Series, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 257-259.

The Pennsylvania State University

NOTES

1. Cf. John William Miller, *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), pp. 42-51.
2. Cf. John William Miller, *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982), pp. 106-123.