

# *John William Miller and the Ontology of the Midworld*

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One curious feature of the American philosophical tradition is its ability to sustain and nurture fundamental reflection in an age in which such thinking is held to be antediluvian. The flood waters of scepticism and deconstruction seem to have rendered general categorical reflection powerless. Any talk about nature or world strikes contemporary fashion as a throwback to a pre-critical era in which philosophers naively trusted in their ability to overcome the imperial projections of a self which was unable, because of its fragmented state, to justify such projections. To attempt to reflect outside of the paradigm of the text is to evidence a serious insensitivity to the hermeneutic turn which has supposedly swept all historical debris from its path. The felony is compounded when it is asserted that the tradition of metaphysics has deposited recognizable and vigorous outcroppings of truth in its movement toward validation. What for some appears as a geological formation of great strength and beauty appears to the contemporary gaze as an obstruction to its open movement and hermeneutic free play.

Were we to join in the chorus of doubting Thomases we would have little time for a perspective which affirms the ability of human probing to make sense of our history and our world. And we would be especially skeptical of a framework which derives its inspiration from a self-confident if also self-critical metaphysics. Yet it is precisely because of the need for a renewal of general categorical reflection that we must be concerned with isolating and articulating those thinkers or movements which have helped us to find our way in a world which oftentimes seems beyond our ken. Among the thinkers who have made major contributions to this task are Justus Buchler, Charles Hartshorne, W.V. Quine, and John William Miller.(1) While the work of the first three thinkers have received fairly wide attention, that of Miller remains unexamined. Trained at Harvard at the end of the "Golden Age" of American Idealism, Miller developed a systematic perspective which gives voice to the fundamental insights of his teacher Josiah Royce. While rejecting the perspective of Absolute Idealism, he utilized and deepened some of Royce's key notions concerning the role of community and sign systems. His research led him to reflect at length on the role of historical consciousness in determining the shapes of human awareness. At the same time he did battle with the philosophical fashions of our century from the emergent analytic tradition of Russell and Wittgenstein to the instrumentalism of Dewey to the neo-realism of Perry to the existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger and to the scepticism of more recent vintage. During his long career he unfolded a categorical scheme which avoided the twists and turns of fashion in order to affirm the basic principles and traits of what he came to call the "Midworld."(2) In his analysis of this fundamental actuality he advanced our understanding of history, nature,

and human community. We are now in a position to make a preliminary survey of this conceptual landscape and to assess its meaning for the tradition of American metaphysics.

Even though Miller rejects the notion that philosophy must adopt the epistemological standpoint as primary, rather than the standpoint of the act, we will begin our analysis of his work by sketching his views on the knowledge relation. Miller begins to claim his unique categorical ground by rejecting the view that epistemology must concern itself with an analysis of the merely receptive states of mind as these states contemplate primitive sense-data. The knowledge relation is not one which follows passively after the contiguous association of various sensations. Rather, it is a relation involving action and direction. Our relation to the world is not established as a consequence of prior determinations but as an action which gives meaning to the two terms of the relation. He states, "Looking is a verb. It is not a common noun" (MS 10). The action of looking determines the contour of the item looked at. The active dimension of knowledge makes it difficult to find or to trace out a pure stream-of-consciousness. No 'stream' could exist without a prior determination of its environment, its location. This determination comes from the act "The act declares the environment and articulates it" (MS 14). The human acts of looking and thinking establish the 'where' for any understanding of the self and its objects. Without action we would not have anything like a world. Miller criticizes James for failing to recognize the basic meaning of the act in determining meaning and actuality. In spite of his innovations, James remains tied to a view which leaves the role of action veiled in mystery.

Empiricism, whether radical or not, remains tied to passivity:

It is a pseudo-empiricism that takes its stand in the passive subject, and no empirical declaration is possible in passivity. For empiricism is test, and test is act, and act assumes the law which defines its possibility, spatial law, temporal law, causal law, a world where not anything can happen and not all rules are off. The association of empiricism with passivity can only destroy empiricism as a method of knowledge: for in passivity the distinction between fact and illusion becomes meaningless because irrelevant to the demands of test. (PC 48)

Both James and Russell posit a pseudo-empiricism which makes validation impossible in principle. The very meaning of the distinction between illusion and reality is tied to the acts which test the 'strength' of an appearance. Classical British empiricism is actually a pseudo-empiricism. In so far as James remained within the orbit of the British tradition he was unable to give proper scope to testing through action. Miller posits what can be called an empiricism of a higher order which makes action prior to the twin poles of subject and object.

Cognition has a bias in the noncognitive. "The noncognitive basis of cognition is the act" (MS 11). No thought can receive its determination in pure passivity. Neither can a thought become meaningful through pure thought alone. The act establishes the truth of any thought. Further, the act makes knowledge of nature its possible:

Act, not just thought, appears as a condition of truth. Nature is the portrait of which action is the original. Pure knowledge (mathematics, for example) is also pure act, the general form of action. To calculate is to use stones (calx). (PC 61)

Hence action stands as the foundation for all knowledge of truths and the world as such. It creates the framework within which any portrayal of nature is to be possible. Such a portrait receives its stability and richness from the series of acts which generate and sustain our apprehension of regional traits. Local acts, such as the use of artifacts, support the more general articulation of the world itself. The seemingly primitive act of counting enables thought to understand the more complex structures of space and time. All formal properties, from those of space to those of order per se, derive from the act. "A World without action is a world without form" (MS 45). Any epistemology which fails to make action primary fails to make form intelligible.

For Miller, traditional views of the knowledge relation are dyadic, affirming a tension between an isolated, and oftentimes passive, subject, and an independent world. Dyadic views fail to give proper definitiveness to both subject and object. The subject becomes further and further removed from its field of operations while the field itself becomes something to be 'arrived' at through a series of epistemic acts which are themselves of questionable validity. The divorce between subject and object can only be overcome by a triadic view of the knowledge relation which sees the act as a third term uniting the traits of both subject and object. The act functions in and through thought to create the unity of subject and object. Traditional empiricism remains cut off from the power of the act which alone can serve to show the proper relation between the self and its world.

The monadic perspective of Absolute Idealism also fails to show the full reality of the knowledge relation. The world becomes absorbed into the a-temporal life of the Absolute Self which contains the realm of objects as its own private thoughts. Finite mind becomes little more than an illusory moment within the sovereign and unmoved Absolute. The only possible solution to the problem of the self and its objects is that of the Roycean triadic view:

We must abandon the whole business of a dyadic form of knowledge problem, i.e., the subject versus the object form. That will never provide the check to the subjective nor the objective which is more than an idea. Nor is a monistic solution any good. One needs a triadic relation as Royce urged. There the real and true are original, but partial. One can seek their fuller meaning, but not their radically remote reality. (PC 61)

The act generates the third term which "checks" the scope and extent of the subjective and objective components within knowledge. An act instantiates a proper sign or symbol which functions as the link between subject and object.

The realm opened up by the triadic epistemology is that of the Midworld. It occupies a domain between the isolated subject and its remote world and serves to hold these two realms together in mutual transparency. From the standpoint of human knowledge, the Midworld is constituted by signs and symbols which represent the embodied content of the world. The core of a symbol is the "functioning object" which governs the life of the symbol and which has given it voice. "All knowledge occurs through symbols" (MS 154).

The triadic epistemology results in an implied semiotics. The realm of knowledge is the realm of all symbols and their communication to other selves. Like Royce, Miller affirms that the world of symbols is the world of social communication. Symbols cannot be private as they already stand between subject and object and cast light in both directions. Further, symbols reach out both to other symbols and to other symbol users. They are social in this dual sense.

All knowledge occurs in and through symbols. The realm of symbols serves to present and preserve the Midworld for the community of interpreters. Within this realm of signs one stands out as fundamental. The symbol which functions as the source and genesis of all the others is that of the human body:

The original symbol is the body and its organs. Unless one stands off from one's body and alleges a disembodied mode of experience, one cannot quite objectify the body. It is the original instrument and actuality of experience. The body is not a physical body or object, but the condition of all knowledge of bodies. It is not known as body directly, but only as part of a region to which it belongs and with which it is continuous. Nor are other bodies known apart from the activity of one's own body. (MS 155)

It would not be incorrect to say that the human body is the central citizen of the Midworld. Miller is using the term "body" in the broad sense which includes the mental and the physical and stresses the centrality of functioning. Through its acts, both mental and physical, all other objects become rendered as signs and symbols. It is the place of places which locates all other functioning objects and their symbolic expression. It is the origin for all local control of aspects of the Midworld. Local control occurs whenever a sign or symbol is emergent from an act. It represents an articulation and stabilization of a specific region of inquiry or action. Since the body is the original symbol it follows that it is also the basic functioning object. It stands as an immediacy of function. Form and order emerge from the acts of the body. It is important to stress that Miller firmly rejects the Kantian view of a purely formal consciousness and its categorical projections. All unity comes from the body and its symbolic and functional transactions. Kant erred in assuming that the body was itself a projection of the pre-categories of space and time. Miller reverses the relation by making the body primary for the determination of spatial and temporal structures.

The centrality of the body is seen in its creative role as the source for all artifacts:

The body is the absolute artifact, that is, it is the artifact that in its functioning creates all other artifacts and symbols. It is the absolute actuality, that is, the union of form and content in functioning. It is neither abstract form nor abstract content, this being a distinction that occurs *apropos* of its own activity. (MS 46)

This is not to assert that the body creates the being or existence of all artifacts but that it makes them actual by giving them form and order. The body is the locus of utterance and contrivance which conspire to render some objects stable for human use. Through manipulation the world becomes one of functioning structures and artifacts. The movement of the body serves to impose form on its surrounding field. The articulation and construction of the environment starts from local control.

Control over the environment stands or falls with the utilization of proper symbols. "Utterance and control are inseparable, and there is no control until the symbol becomes a factor in action. The word is essential to the object" (MS 70). Human utterance takes place in and through symbol. The sign series that emerge out of symbolic transaction generate the local control which stabilizes the world for human apprehension. For example, a clock, as a mechanical or electrical artifact, generates a number series which, when translated into signs, becomes normative for the control of human action. Of course, one cannot generate an actual infinity of signs nor can one understand the world from a point outside time and history. All signs are embedded in local conditions and push outward from those conditions. Even mathematics and science have their initiating movements from within the local control tied to the human body. "Science is the expansion of local control" (MS 123). Physics and geometry emerged from the primitive conditions of counting and pointing which were later formalized into categorical structures. The use of simple artifacts made the movement toward some conception of pure number or pure energy possible. No human enterprise or perspective can totally emancipate itself from the local control which brought it forth.

From this it follows that all cognition is derived from the functioning objects, with their attendant symbols, which collectively form the Midworld. The Midworld is not an environment per se but is that which projects the environment and makes it present to apprehension. Through the Midworld we emerge into a world which has both presence and a special form of totality. Contemporary scepticism, particularly as expressed in deconstruction, rejects the very notion of presence as a holdover from 'primitive' metaphysical thinking:

Presence and totality stand or fall together. The anti-metaphysics of our day masquerades as an assault on any totality; what it is equally attacking is presence, the other side of totality. The center of this obscurantism is the repudiation of the act. (MS 13)

The act is the motor force of the Midworld—a world which abides as a presence and as a totality. This presence is the result of the local control of symbols which brings certain functioning objects into secure human apprehension. The totality is not a closed whole but an expanding horizon in which the infinite, whether that of space, time, or the divine itself, only makes its appearance in the finite. Citing Tillich, Miller warns against any sense of totality which forgets that the finite is finite. But it does not follow from this that the finite cannot be the locus of the infinite, e.g., in a work of art or in the number system. Presence and totality emerge together to assure a stable and reliable world of artifacts dependent upon local control. To reject one is to reject the other. The price to be paid is loss of control and a steady descent into nihilism.

The Midworld is not a closed totality but stands as the source for the various environments which govern human life. "Unenviored, it projects the environment" (MS 13). The Midworld is not cognitive but it makes all cognition possible. The body of the Midworld, its symbols and functioning objects, emerges as the mobile contour which becomes the environment. The act brings cognition and environment into actuality against the backdrop of pre-thematic awareness. This process is made possible by the peculiar form of definition which emerges from certain functioning objects. On a number

of occasions, Miller refers to the centrality of the simple yardstick as a source for measure:

The yardstick, however, is a functioning object. It is tied to action, to doing. And on that doing depends the whole vision of space and of its infinity. Nor is it a "tool" to be used for a purpose and then cast aside, as if one could now do without it. Such functioning artifacts define the environment but are not objects in a prior environment. (MS 72)

It would make no sense to ask for the 'length' of a yardstick. The yardstick is the source for our ability to answer such a question. It lays down the measure by and through which space can become manifest. In its functioning it makes space actual. Miller asks us to recognize that such functioning objects in the Midworld have a unique ontological status. Thus the yardstick is both mathematical and material: embodied number. To reduce them to mere tools or to objects merely present is to violate the ontological integrity of the Midworld.

The movement from the yardstick to pure space is a continuous one involving greater scope for local control. The forms of space and time are not Kantian fore-structures which emerge from the power of the transcendental imagination but are products of a series of bodily acts which determine the meaning of particular spaces and times. Miller gives a brief historical account of the dynamics of this process:

It was the Greeks who were the founders of science—in the broad sense—because they dealt with the midworld. Euclid's geometry and Aristotle's logic. They recognized the power of the functioning object. They declared a world on its terms. Say that man is rational; can one say so if there has been no utterance? Rationality is not a fact unless it is a factum. It appears in what has been done. It is, therefore, a moving immediacy, not a static quality. (MS 190)

Euclid's use of lines and points provided the basis for the generation of a formal three-dimensional account of the cosmos. His bodily acts of measuring and looking became symbolic through the use of simple lines as expressed in the media of writing. From these actions of local control, generative of the Midworld, a larger picture of an orderly universe emerged. Aristotle's utilization of utterance gave birth an orderly account of the categories wherein the structures of beings became articulated.

The Greek projection of space and its categories was the initial moment in the development of the science of local control which has flowered into the modern understanding of space/time. Greek navigational problems were the seed bed for speculation about the structure and dynamics of the cosmos and its relation to chaos. There is no absolute leap from local control to systematic speculation in science or metaphysics. Rather, a series of acts, all tied to the generation of the functioning objects of the Midworld, grow into actions of greater and greater scope.

The relation between the Midworld and the environment per se is to be understood along functional lines. When one speaks of the environment one is tempted to think of it in terms of static container analogies. Hence it would be asserted that the Midworld is located at the 'center' of the environment and that the environment has a definite contour.

Our relation to the larger realm of the environment is often envisioned as a passive one of response to pre-determined stimuli. Miller is critical of any behavioristic account which would assert that we come upon an environment ready-made and somehow adjust ourselves to it:

One does not "adjust" to environment as if it were come upon—external, a finding, an accident, the occasion of a specific and terminating response. The environment (singular) is met in the powers with which one is already in league—in having spoken, counted, or read a book by someone else who lived long ago. (MS 86)

Since the environment is itself a product of the Midworld it follows that it is somehow related to our acts and thoughts. It is not over against us as a static reality but becomes actual through bodily and mental actions. We cannot 'adjust' to it because it is a functional extension of the local control of the Midworld. "I propose the environment, singular, as the extension or implication of functioning in a medium that is a functioning object of any sort" (MS 86). The environment extends outward from specific functioning objects which receive their 'shape' from human acts. The relation between persons and their environment is dynamic and cannot thus be reduced to a passive stimulus-response model.

Miller takes his analysis further by casting doubt on the notion of the environment. Since an environment is the consequence of local control, and since local control may differ from one culture or person to another, it follows that our world is constituted by numerous environments. Container analogies fail on two counts. On the one hand they fail to convey the dynamic relation between person, Midworld, and environment. On the other hand they fail to exhibit the true plurality of environments emerging from local control. The world is a mobile infinity of actual and possible environments and thus cannot be reduced to singularity or rigidity. Further, the world is not knowable in its full outline, as possibilities for greater local control always exist. The environment is an infinity composed of numerous environments of varying scope.

In the historical evolution of local control we have moved beyond the natural environment toward one which is artificial. Functioning objects have come to occupy a realm between us and so-called 'pristine' nature:

We no longer live in a natural environment, but in an artificial one. Even nature itself has become artificial. It has ceased to be capable of description by eyes and ears, and is now understood in terms of yardsticks, clocks, balances, voltmeters, and an elaborate mathematical apparatus. "Back to nature" has come to mean back to ignorance. The functioning object does not alienate from nature but rather reveals it. (MS 103)

As our eyes and ears become increasingly less reliable as a guide to nature we are forced to recognize the power of the functioning object as the only avenue toward knowledge. A phenomenology of nature must now be seen as a phenomenology of the Midworld which utilizes a hermeneutics of functioning objects as its method. This is not to say that we no longer have access to nature but that we play an active role from the start in determining what is to be available. In one sense, nature has become more artificial but in another, and deeper, sense, nature is becoming more and more open to human probing through the

intervention of artifacts. For Miller, the development of artifacts is one which promises to bring us closer to the traits of the environments which surround us. It might be more helpful to say that nature is artifactual rather than artificial. As artifactual it is a functioning extension of the Midworld and hence firmly related to human action whether random or methodic.

As noted above, all knowledge occurs through the symbols which embody and express functioning objects. Symbols form semiotic series which are available to the human community. To be a symbol is to communicate. A sign or symbol occupies a domain between subject and object and holds the two together. Symbols convey fundamental traits of the Midworld and make these traits manifest to the community. Language functions through symbols to give utterance to the Midworld. The original speech is metaphorical:

The wine-dark sea depends on grape juice. Consequently early speech is metaphorical. In a metaphor one object assumes the status of identifying another—as hard as a diamond, swift as an arrow. Emerson makes this point, and he was a poet with a feeling for the assimilation of words to acts. (MS 75)

Metaphors are short-hand designations for human acts of comparison and analysis. Metaphors are functioning units of language which convey a novel array of traits. So-called literal language is derived from the functioning speech of metaphor. Emerson's masterful use of numerous metaphors enhanced his ability to penetrate into the ontological structures of the Midworld. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Emerson stands as one of the early pioneers of the Midworld.

Language is tied to action and function and utilizes metaphor as a crystallization of the act. Utterance has the power of revelation in that it brings traits into unhiddenness. "Utterance is the Midworld" (MS 169). The Midworld becomes present as an unbounded totality through the utterances which live in and through symbols. The Midworld thus becomes incarnate through utterance:

I marvel at the Christian idea of the incarnation. It is amazing. Yet it proved popular and has so continued. I am proposing that any utterance has that quality of revelation. A yardstick or a clock is a metaphysical actuality, an incarnate power. Until the word was made flesh, it had no actuality. (MS 152-53)

The word unveils the traits of the Midworld which stands between subject and object. It is important to Miller's perspective that we reject the notion that only the self is revealed through language. The triadic epistemology, distinguishing between self, Midworld, and environment, governs the ways in which language will convey traits. The Midworld becomes incarnate as the realm which supports the self. While the Midworld becomes actual through language it does not thereby become a mere projection of an imperial self-consciousness. Yardsticks and clocks function as the measure for space/time. The actuality of space/time lies in the Midworld rather than in the constituting acts of a 'pure' transcendental ego. It is more accurate to say that we disclose the Midworld through the act than that we project it from the recesses of the transcendental imagination. The



Midworld stands between self and the environment and holds both together in co-transparency.

This triadic structure cannot exist outside of history. The Midworld is essentially historical and cannot be removed from historical reality. "Thus history is built in triadic relation. As Hegel would say, one must find in the object all properties of the subject" (PH 166). Of course, one finds more in history than the traits of the subject but one finds at least that. History is intimately tied to the Midworld. "History rides on the Midworld" (MS 18). Miller takes great pains to show that the philosophy of history is a part of the ontology of the Midworld and that our understanding of history is a part of the ontology of the Midworld and that our understanding of history must differ from that understanding which is appropriate for physics.

History is the realm of human acts and gives evidence for our powers and capacities. Difference is not to be effaced in a misplaced drive toward the uniform. "In history, all difference is original, not to be seen in terms other than itself. Originality is ontological. In physics, difference is not ontological. It is derivative" (PH 25). Human acts originate structures and are not reducible to a uniform casual analysis which ignores fundamental differences or teleological patterns. The historical record is the record of the original and originating deeds which have come to express aspects of the evolving Midworld. The reduction of history to a physics of matter would destroy the unique qualities of the Midworld.

Physics attempts to explain the non-original. That is, it directs its focus away from that which is *sui generis* or absolutely non-repeatable. It is concerned with that which is pervasive and uniform. Absolute novelty is held by physics to be something outside of the reach of physicalistic categories. Physics drives to attain a complete and unified perspective on nature as a whole. Its historical failures do not constitute evidence against its intent.

History attempts to explain the original. That is, it is concerned with that which emerges from a unique constellation of conditions. It is ideally incomplete and rejects the very idea of a closed or bounded totality. Diversity and variety are sought and, when discovered, given their proper place in the Midworld. Any analysis of given causes must include the effects generated by those causes. The inverse relation of effect to cause must be laid bare as cause and effect can function symmetrically to shed light on each other. For example, the persuasive lure of a communal idea can work backwards, as it were, to govern and direct specific acts. Hence the ideal functions as a cause and as an effect but in different respects.

History is the career of the human will and manifests purpose. Purposes are finite and capable of endless revision but they remain at the center of historical evolution. Accidents are part of history and cannot be explained away through an absolute teleology of uniform purpose. History does not have a purpose but consists in innumerable purposes in various degrees of expression. The past is not a static repository of facts but is a record of the human struggle toward local control. "The past is the definition of the

order of growth" (PH 24). This growth is manifest in the drive toward generic expansion in the orders of local control. This movement does not have an absolute goal but works through a series of finite goals in an effort to deepen and expand the structures of the Midworld.

The field of history involves finitude and limitation. The historical agent cannot become absorbed into an a-historical realm of pure will-less contemplation:

In sum, history is action, and action is will, and will is both purpose and the revision of purpose, and the revision of purpose is freedom, having no end other than the maintenance of action itself. Act is limitation, and hence exploration. The form of exploration is the philosophy of history. . . . Action is the order of the will. (PH 35)

The historical agent comes up against both accident and limitation. For Miller, all historical acts are bound by the constraints of finitude. The early Christian idea of guilt through the Fall evokes this fundamental sense of finitude of historical action. "We have a stake in guilt, a metaphysical stake, one that speaks not of transcendence, but of actuality" (PH 69). The guilt of actuality is the guilt of historical incompleteness. The drive to overcome guilt through transcendence is a violation of the true meaning of historical embeddedness. Miller cites Augustine as a thinker torn between an existential sense of guilt and an equally strong need for the a-historical realm of God's kingdom. The ambiguity is central to Christian and Western experience.

For an Augustinian Christian, time is tied to a sense of exile. The neo-Platonic strain within Augustine struggles to leave finitude and the fragmented actuality of history. Yet the Christian experience of the incarnation exerts a counter-pressure moving thought toward an acknowledgment of the true relation between the finite and the infinite. This tension remains at the heart of our experience of history.

Our relation to history, like our relation to the Midworld in general, should involve some sense of immediacy and presence. Miller is sharply critical of the view that we must become detached from the flow of history in order to preserve our integrity in the present. "History is the place one goes when one gives up passing judgements and accepts identifications" (PH 85). These identifications recollect the acts and deeds of prior members of the community. Like Gadamer, Miller insists that the past become efficacious in the present:

In all its historical nomenclature—God, nature, atoms, reason, personality—the real is always a force, a control, a determiner. The question of the status and meaning of history turns on the acknowledgment of influences that dwell only in time. This is the heresy of history; it is the reason why it is baffling or even repugnant. (PH 98-99)

We become individuated through the forces which help to determine the contour of our present identity. To achieve and maintain a self one must identify with effective forces of the past. The reality of the past becomes incarnated in the present in such a way that its energy is intensified rather than spent.

The proper relation to the past is thus an active participation which relieves the career of specific acts. Through this identification we find our own self-definition:

For now as in the past we call that our world which gives status and authority to the immediate. The record of these endeavors is history. There the modes of self-definition become explicit and serve as the vehicles for an understanding of what we have become. (AH 241)

Biography is central to our recollection of the past, for in biographical and autobiographical reflections the act becomes the key to life. By letting past lives become actual in the present we reinforce the chain of genuine community which forms one of the strongest links in the Midworld.

Recalling the community in the present is fundamental to the stability of the Midworld. Miller evokes the spirit of one of his teachers in order to show the essentiality of community:

In his notable but neglected *The Problem of Christianity*, Josiah Royce speaks of "Time and Guilt" and of "Community and the Time Process." A community exists in its career, in the recognition, of its self-maintaining piety. A society needs to be reaffirmed—sometimes through the vicarious atonement made by those not guilty of a specific crime, avowing through their own sacrifice the absoluteness of the values which the crime has threatened. (AH 258-59)

The crime of treason exists in the past and may have no relation to any given individual in the present. Yet the bonds of community are strengthened whenever a guiltless individual makes a present atoning deed. This, according to Royce, may make the community even stronger than it would have been without the initial treasonous act. The community maintains its internal symbolic integrity through a series of interpretations which promise convergence in the future. Signs and symbols form their own community by linking together other symbols. The human community is the horizon within which these sign series become articulate and transparent.

History carries the power of the divine within itself. "A historical past is more than a thing of time; it is always the bearer of infinity, the dynamic of forces in time" (PH 167). The infinite is never manifest as a closed totality or as a realm which stands outside of history. It is embedded in and reactant to the finite. To fail to retain the distinction between the finite and the incarnated infinite is to fall prey to the demonic. Demonic distortion inflates the finite with infinite content and ignores the limitation of the media of incarnation. A genuine philosophy of history preserves the sense of limitation for the artifacts of the Midworld. A given artifact or symbol may be a medium for the infinite but it should never thereby become confused with the divine power which animates it. For Miller, the infinite is always located in the Midworld but is never to be identified with any part of it.(3)

Thus far we have given an indication of some of the fundamental aspects of the Midworld. It is generated by the act which emerges from the human body in conjunction with its mind. Utterance gives birth to signs and symbols which are the outer clothing of

functioning objects. The realm of functioning objects is actualized through local control which stabilizes and articulates the things of the environment. The environment itself, remembering that this notion should exist in the plural, is a product of the Midworld. History is that dimension of the Midworld which prevails as effective purpose in previous lives. The divine appears fitfully in some of the effective forces of the past. History is also the locus of the demonic which attempts to seize the infinite for finite and particular purposes. Human cultural evolution can be understood to involve a drive to expand the scope of the Midworld through local control while avoiding the demonic distortions that such a drive may entail.

Miller's analysis of the traits of the Midworld needs to be assessed in terms of its place within the evolution of American metaphysics. Before we can locate its contribution and importance, we must examine Miller's own conception of the nature of metaphysical inquiry in philosophy. Above we noted his rejection of the kind of radical scepticism which marks the contemporary mind. This scepticism has waged an assault on all forms of presence and totality in order to stress the importance of difference and absence. Metaphysics is held to be an imperial projection of brute presence such that the richness and diversity of reality becomes eclipsed in favor of generic categories of dubious value. Miller adopts a rather different perspective: "Metaphysics, then, is no attempt to evade immediacies. It aims rather to get them established. This aim has never been undertaken in cold blood, but always with a intensity and ardor which to many has seemed not the least count in the indictment" (AH 239). If Miller were to give a specific definition for metaphysics it would be as follows: metaphysics represents a systematic analysis of the traits of the Midworld as that world relates to persons and to the larger world of innumerable environments. It has as its objects history, nature, community, functioning objects, symbols and signs, and the divine. Philosophy, in so far as it is metaphysical, seeks universal definitions for the actualities which emerge from the Midworld.

In his 1922 Dissertation Miller probes into the concept of the thing as a term of universal designation. Many of his later ideas are presented in embryonic form:

What the philosopher may attempt with profit is an analysis of the thing, the outstanding presumption of all science. The advantage of this approach lies in the universal applicability of the concept, for thought, dreams, hallucinations, houses, stars all things . . . . This beginning has the advantage of making absolutely no assumptions about particular "things" from which a start is made, as the pragmatist starts from the body, together with an unlimited environment which has produced it and in which it responds. Everything is grist for the mill, even neutral entities. (DT 36)

His later use of the concept of the "functioning object" has its roots in this generic concept of thinghood. Metaphysics seeks generic spread combined with interpretive justice. Whatever prevails must become intelligible through the general categories of a system. Miller refers to Whitehead's idea of the fallacy of simple location to reinforce the insight that categories must maintain distinctions between classes of things while attempting to have universal applicability. The drive toward universality is tempered by a pervasive fallibilism which remains attuned to the embeddedness of thought in given dimensions of the Midworld.

We have noted above Miller's critique of James' radical empiricism and the stream-of-consciousness. James is held to advocate a philosophy which rests on passivity for the thinking self. Of course, Miller acknowledges James' religious voluntarism but insists that the underlying psychology and epistemology fail to give proper scope to the centrality of the act. Dewey's pragmatic instrumentalism is seen as a form of crypto-behaviorism which places too much emphasis on the environment and selective human response. Dewey's naturalism is held to be dangerously close to a form of materialism in which the self and its history are ignored in favor of biological transaction. Of the classical American thinkers, only Royce receives fairly unambiguous praise. Miller cites Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Royce's *The Problem of Christianity* as the two most important texts in our inaugural attempts at understanding the Midworld (MS 34). From Hegel he derives a strong sense of the role of spirit and action in determining the shapes of historical awareness. Some sense of Hegel's dialectical method is retained in his analysis of historical appropriation. From Royce he derives a good portion of his understanding of community and the role of triadic semiotics. In so far as we would wish to place Miller within the American tradition we can say that he represents an existentialized and naturalized version of the later Royce. There is ample textual evidence that Royce moved in radically new directions around 1913 when he worked through some of the implications of Peirce's sign theory.(4) This research flowered into the careful and rich analysis of community and signs in his *The Problem of Christianity* of 1913. Miller takes Royce's mature perspective to heart and gives it new life in a very different philosophical climate.

This continuation of the Roycean legacy does not, however, reduce the profound originality of Miller's own perspective. His analysis of the Midworld is unique in its intent and outline and contains numerous insights with far-reaching implications. It should be obvious that he has moved philosophical query into a domain where it can bear great fruit once it has left the region of barren scepticism. We will conclude with a preliminary assessment of these gains.

By making the act central, Miller has with one stroke outflanked the narrowly epistemological perspectives of the analytic tradition. His sustained critique of sense-data theory, above all as represented by Russell, reinforces his conception that perception and cognition are active in determining the basic contour of reality. The shift toward a functional account of perception enables him to have a meaningful sense of validation. "The act is the warrant of the perception" (MS 50). Outside of bodily and mental action, no validation is possible. Both James and Russell slight the role of function and thereby run into difficulties concerning the problem of truth. The passive and spectatorial view limps along behind a pseudo-empiricism which fails to account for the traits of experience as lived.

For many contemporary thinkers, a direct line of descent can be traced from the transcendental turn of Kant to the perspectivism of Nietzsche. In particular, Kant is held to have broken the back of pre-critical metaphysical 'speculation' into the orders of nature and the world. Nietzsche stands as the logical culmination of the turn toward transcendental structures of constitution. The primacy of subjectivity is seen to have

precluded the possibility of reflecting on the structures of nature or of a meaningful history. Mind has become emancipated from the body and the fundamental sense of finitude is translated into a sense of the utter plurality of world perspectives. The earlier piety of naturalism (in its non-reductive form) is rejected in favor of a celebration of the projective powers of creative consciousness. Miller's emphasis on the centrality of the body as the fundamental symbol in the Midworld reverses this decline into subjectivism. The actions of the body in establishing local control of functioning objects determine the shapes of space and time in the Midworld and its surrounding environments. The body is generative of yet embedded in the Midworld and this dual directionality is far more expressive of our actual finitude than the perspectivism of neo-Kantianism. Body and mind are located in a realm which has its own lines of convergence and its own tendencies of control. Nature is not an appearance sustained by the delusions of metaphysical consciousness but is the center of the Midworld. It becomes actual through the Midworld and in turn provides the Midworld with a surrounding domain of possibility.

The measure of the Midworld comes from functioning objects that exist outside of the projective hubris of consciousness. The numerous functioning objects within the Midworld reinforce a common tendency to isolate and reveal actualized traits. Such objects have a unique ontological status and serve their creators well. Consciousness is not cut off from nature but cuts into it with precision and verve. Miller justly celebrates this historical triumph.

The classical American tradition has in general tended to ignore the philosophy of history. Outside of the evolutionary cosmology of Peirce, little attention has been paid to the meaning of history per se. Our tradition has no one to compare to such historical thinkers as Hegel, Comte, Marx, Heidegger, or Gadamer. While Randall has developed a philosophy of history in anything like the European sense. His evocation of historical forces and their appropriation reminds us of the best of Heidegger and Gadamer. The stress on difference, variety, incompleteness, origination, and the guilt associated with finitude have advanced our understanding of those traits unique to the realm or realms of the historical. History has as its object the triumphs and failures manifest in the fitful evolution of the Midworld. Miller's often moving account of this evolution has added an essential dimension to the tradition of American metaphysics.

Finally Miller has retained the sense of the importance of systematic and confident metaphysical speculation which has been all too absent in contemporary reflection. His refusal to fall prey to the shifting tides of scepticism attests to the sturdy power of critical common sense to overcome the self-inflicted wounds of a subjectivity turned against itself. His development of the insights of the later Royce gives more absolutistic dimensions. Miller is more than an echo of the Golden Age of American metaphysics; he stands as a pioneer in the movement toward that symbolic and functioning realm which sustains human life. His exploration of the Midworld represents a return to that kind of confident sanity which has often been the true strength of our tradition.

## Endnotes

1. I wish to thank my colleague, Henry Johnstone, Jr., for showing me the importance of the writings of John William Miller. Johnstone, a former colleague of Miller's, is among a growing group of scholars who are utilizing and developing aspects of Miller's perspective. I also wish to thank George P. Brockway, Joseph Fell, and the American Philosophy Group of The Pennsylvania State University for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Miller was born in 1893 and died in 1978. He received his B.A. from Harvard in 1916. After serving in the Ambulance Corps in World War I, he returned to Harvard, where he received his Ph.D. in 1922, writing a dissertation entitled, "The Definition of the Thing." While at Harvard, he studied with Royce, Santayana, Hocking, and other members of the Philosophy Department. He taught at the University of Connecticut from 1922-24 and at Williams College from 1924 until his retirement in 1960. He was a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota in 1937-38. His collected papers can be studied at the library of Williams College.

2. Miller's works have been masterfully edited in a series of volumes from W.W. Norton and Co. One volume appeared shortly before his death, and four more followed. The titles of these works (with abbreviations) are: *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays* (1978) (PC); *The Definition of the Thing with Some Notes on Language* (largely a reprint of his 1922 Dissertation, 1980) (DT); *The Philosophy of History with Reflections and Aphorisms* (1981) (PH); *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* (1982) (MS); and *In Defense of the Psychological* (1983) (DP). In addition, he published an important Afterword to Ortega y Gasset's *History as a System*, "The Ahistoric and the Historic" (W.W. Norton, 1961) (AH). The interested reader will also want to read: George P. Brockway's "John William Miller," *The American Scholar* 49 (1980): 236-40, which gives a lively account of Miller as a teacher; and Joseph P. Fell's "An American Original," *The American Scholar* 53 (1983-84): 123-30, which gives a succinct review of Miller's five published works.

3. My view of the role of the divine in Miller comes from an interpretative reading of the text. Others might see less importance in this notion.

4. For an analysis of the hermeneutics of the later Royce as it contrasts with the work of Gadamer and Heidegger, see my, "A Comparison of Royce's Key Notion of the Community of Interpretation with the Hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 20(3) (1984): 279-30.