In this exquisitely written book, Vincent Colapietro presents a compelling argument for the contemporary relevance and vitality of Miller's distinctive brand of historical idealism. Emphasizing Miller's conceptions of actuality and of history as "the story of acts," Colapietro shows how Miller's approach provides both a persuasive diagnosis of, and a genuinely viable response to, "the chaos confronting us today." (11) In Colapietro's words, "Miller does not free us from our past but rather liberates us from impoverished and, indeed, impoverishing ways of conceiving the overlapping histories in which our singular identities are rooted and by which our defining commitments are sustained." (3)

Employing Miller's notion of "constitutional conflicts," Colapietro begins by identifying the source of our contemporary chaos - "We feel ourselves to be in the midst of a profound upheaval" (4) - to be our disillusionment with the Enlightenment ideal of abstract rationality: "We, who have made the pilgrimage from Descartes and Bacon to our ravaged natural environment and our radically insecure identities, know the price to be paid for the disenchantment of nature and the uprooting of the self." (11) For Colapietro, Miller's genius lies in seeing such disillusionment as "our unique historical fate" (Ibid.) - a fate, moreover, that requires us to work through this history if we are to regain, in Miller's profoundly evocative term, our composure. Only by doing so can we understand and thus ultimately transcend "the deepest conflict of the present time" (15): that between the lure of a dogmatic (and therefore unwarranted) appeal to tradition and its compliment, the nihilistic desire to "undermine all bases for reverence and all claims to power." (Ibid.)

Miller's conviction that the cultivation of a historical consciousness is the surest route to making sense of ourselves and our world - "We turn to history not to judge others but to identify ourselves" (57) - clearly requires reconceiving the philosophical mission.
Accordingly, Colapietro’s second chapter explores Miller’s “revision of philosophy.” Stressing Miller’s debt to Kant and Hegel, Colapietro initially characterizes Miller’s understanding of the philosophic task as that of “defining the conditions for the possibility of experience.” (Ibid.) What makes Miller’s approach distinctive, however, is his insistence upon “the alterable forms of human action” (38) as the ground or ultimate warrant for “the most basic distinctions in human discourse: reality and appearance, fact and fiction, objectivity or subjectivity.” (61) It is for this reason, then, that philosophy is properly understood by Miller to be “the form of talk in which the act of telling is granted the status of a category, for by virtue of our acts all differences are told.” (77)

Moreover, in its authentic shape, this “form of talk” is inescapable: “it is the story of enforced distinctions told by an agent at the very moment that agent is experiencing the threat of constitutional confusion: it is an effort to maintain the most basic distinctions in the face of the most radical failure.” (82)

Yet, to accord finite actuality the status of ultimate warrant, as Colapietro points out, requires, in turn, a “reconceptualization of actuality.” (87) For Miller, such a reconceptualization demanded an exploration of that “domain of both experience and the actualities to which experience attests that is not reducible to appearance or reality, mind or world, subjectivity or objectivity, or any other characteristic dualism of the modern epoch.” (29) Miller christened this domain with the somewhat awkward name of “midworld.” As Colapietro elegantly demonstrates in the third chapter, it is this conception that evinces most dramatically Miller’s distinctive brand of idealism. For, given this conception, all action can be conceived as utterance because “all action gives voice to an order upon which action depends for its possibility no less than its revision.” (94) Likewise, agency itself presumes the disciplined body following those procedures such as counting or measuring that enable us to mark those differences that give shape and coherence, however provisionally and fallibly, to our world. The midworld, then, is “the source of the resources empowering us to draw the distinctions essential to our form of consciousness.” (107)

By so carefully delineating Miller’s celebration of the “historical situatedness” (Ibid.) entailed by
accrediting actuality categorical status, Colapietro is able to conclude his book by offering a powerful reading of Miller's conceptions of humanism and critique. While I find Colapietro's articulation of the intimate connection that Miller discovered between critique and piety - "self-critique requires the self-maintenance of those discourses, institutions, and practices on which all critique depends" (187) - to be an immensely helpful corrective to much current intellectual practice, it is nonetheless Miller's version of humanism as set forth in the fourth chapter that I regard as most fecund for contemporary philosophical practice. In Colapietro's words, "At the center of Miller's humanism is the insistence that the ultimate locus of human responsibility is the individual person fatefully entangled in the historical alliances of some actual place." (164) Living in Tennessee for the past ten years has forcefully impressed upon me just how central place is in the formation of subjectivity. That is, I have become increasingly convinced that region must be accorded the same status that we grant to gender, race, class, and sexual orientation in our efforts to chart axes of identity. By setting forth a humanism that takes place seriously, Miller's humanism, as Colapietro presents it, seems to me an invaluable resource for our endeavors to render ourselves intelligible, to "give adequate expression to [our] absolute or self-defining commitments." (62)

In this brief review, I have sought, above all, to set forth the main contours of Colapietro's argument for the value of recovering Miller's unique and distinctively American philosophical vision. I would be remiss, however, if I didn't at least gesture toward some of the comparisons with other thinkers that Colapietro explores throughout this book. These include such continental philosophers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Foucault - in this vein, Colapietro's discussion in the fifth chapter of the convergence between Foucault's mature view and Miller's approach is one of the unexpected delights of Fateful Shapes - and such canonical American thinkers as Thoreau, Emerson, Peirce, James, and Royce. Indeed, perhaps it is by placing Miller's writings in dialogue with those philosophical inheritances to which most readers of the SAAP Newsletter regard themselves as primarily beholden that Colapietro exhibits most tellingly his "affirmation" (272) of Miller's work.

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