

WHAT'S SO YAHWEH OR THE HA-WAY

Stephen Paul Miller. *There's Only One God and You're Not It*. Marsh Hawk Press, 2011.

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Stephen Paul Miller's *There's Only One God and You're Not It* reads like an exodus from the current arguments about poetry with its mix—or *gemisch*—of Jewish history, theology, linguistics, humor, pop culture and commentary about contemporary poetry. At a time when poetry seems difficult to define for many, Miller reminds us that, *yes, it is that complicated*. He also reminds us that important things—our belief systems, our histories, our cultures—should be complicated, should require study. Nevertheless, this sprawling intellectual range with its genesis and focus in Jewish cultural studies works alongside Miller's jocular, his friendly *chutzpah*. These poems teach us and they entertain us. They also recall the poetic tradition of William Carlos Williams—as Miller is “rooted in the locality” of American culture and place. We read these poems with their allusions to Hitchcock, Cole Porter, and the WWF—to name a few, and say to ourselves: *Toto, we're not in Jebel Musa anymore*.

The title poem, “There's Only One God and You're Not It,” begins:

All the peoples of all the world
 degrade one another's gods
 but Jews first think
 your gods do not exist(5).

This opening of the longest poem in the book (at eighteen pages) works within the root components of humor. It reflects reality, surprises us, and begins its work of contradictions. Like much of the rest of the book, it works in negations. Whatever we think we know, Miller is sure to reveal what seems opposite. Whether it is to teach us a bit of ancient history where we “find tons of/ Israelite idols until exile, / then nearly none” or to provoke us in the opening question of “Postscript to Ezra's Torah,” the opening poem of the book: “How/ is it yes said no?,” this poem keeps us thoughtfully off balance, even as it energizes and wildly ankles along. He goes on to multiply-render and multiply our understandings of history, a multitude of popular and scholarly cultural references flying past. The arrogance or confidence of the opening (depending which definition of *chutzpah* you choose)

is followed by humorous humility:

An ordinary man,
I go with the gods who
bring me
but as Babylonians drag around Yahweh

I call all concerned to say
“We’re going in an entirely different direction,
all other gods *nothing*.” And it’s done! You
find tons of

Israelite idols until exile,
then nearly none.
Yahweh marks
Israelites

From Canaanites when Israel’s
Canaan.
We’re the un-Canaanites,
Mighty, mighty non-Canaanites (5)

The humor, rhymes and rhythm, and the jagged, scroll-like rendering of the poem on the page all contribute to expanding the opening pronouncement. We begin to enjoy the trip through Jewish history and the way that it picks up American speed with its play on the name of a Boston ska band. While the allusions to ancient Jewish culture and history might feel for some readers like driving through miles of cultural fog and historical hairpin curves, Miller’s engaging voice seems to keep telling us: *relax—quit trippin.*’

if Israeling, so to speak,
means “wrestling
with El,”
do Yahweh ‘n El

make all WWF? Don’t know, probably not,
but
consensus is
founding Israelites

skip government
a century or two
for extended family settlements,
fewer than 300 people each, and

connected only by a loose council
 of tough judges—
 proto-Israelites
 more like Thomas Jefferson than the Tea Party (11-12).

The layering of juxtapositions and contradictions (“more like...than”) rolls past us like a landscape of Jewishness in America. These layers encourage us towards connections between and among the pasts and the many kinds of present—from the Tea Party to the genesis of Facebook at Harvard to a “TV cop show shooting / under Washington Square Arch” (35). What can we understand about our present /our presence through the windshield of these pasts?

In the last poem of the book, “Indie Poet, Man,” Miller begins with a Rodney Dangerfield joke, telling us that “you can’t fake funny like poetry” (85). It is in this initially jocular poem that we find what might be the core of the book: How do you judge contemporary or “indie” poetry? What is the worth of “indie poetry,” man? He begins the circuitous answer by laying out two initial arguments:

Poetry One’s
 the ping-pong ball indefinitely suspended as you
 lose yourself in sky. The second poetry says *something*.

...

One poetry needs the other to
 whistle Nazi Code—breaking it to
 write in sand. It really happened.
 We ground each other down.
 Indie poetry needs the world and
 the world needs Indie Poetry awake
 to stop tipping its pitches
 and remove the bad taste of *Lost*.
 No one likes uncomfortable,
 but if it works you go with it (85).

What is implicitly argued against is simple meaning and binary argument. While the poem seems to be set out as such, it sneaks in the multiple, telling us that Indie Poetry “does 2 things, now and forever, which intersect and divide” (85). These intersections and divisions create tension and proliferate, reminding us of Williams’ lines in “Spring and All”: “rooted they/ grip down and begin to awaken.” The centripetal energy of “grip[ping] down” and the centrifugal motion of “begin[ning] to awaken” are part of the great mystery of rebirth and regeneration. We see this in Miller, too, but alongside it we hear a defense of this poetic generation and what may

seem the excess and/or uselessness of indie poetry. Indeed, it seems to be a time when readers feel lost in the vastness of cultural production by way of our speedy technology. Poetry seems to have become the whipping boy for what we don't understand, can't quantify, can't control. Miller's work makes a claim for the way knowledge and poetic language is "uncomfortable," and for a multiplicity that continues to invent and re-invent, "begin[ning] to awaken," with its eye towards the past tradition, "grip[ping] down."

Someone says aren't
 "indie" and "poet"
 redundant
 since every poem's
 low budget
 but every poem takes
 tremendous cultural capital.
 Hard and soft
 education tells you poems are boring
 self-absorbed
 forms. My cultural
 capital breathes
 process and openness
 and transparency and
 accountability even if
 or because it is just
 some Jewish guy
 talking in the language
 he is. Poetry after all's
 the best place to talk (88).

This poem, and the book as a whole, celebrates and grapples with the American idiom and identity. These poems take on, implicitly and explicitly, the questions that plague us about what may feel like cultural oversaturation, even as they remind us that poetry takes on the complicated, and provides us with "the best place to talk." This offsets the ease of current cultural production and accessibility—an ease that has the potential to pacify and encourage nostalgia for the binary or the limitations set out by the "tough judges" that inhabit our political landscapes. The multiplicity, rigor, and humor that Miller presents here seem a cultural redemption and exodus, or a "way out," of damning simplicity.