

Review: *Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape*

By John Miller

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Miller, John. *Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape*. Tuscaloosa, AL : University of Alabama Press, 1997. xvi, 167 pp. US\$29.95 hardcover ISBN: 0-8173-0901-2. Acid-free paper.

Over the last 50 years many articles, books, speeches, and reports have been produced addressing the apparent aggressor-victim relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural environment. Unfortunately, most are limited to a small segment of the man-to-nature interface and focus their attention on ways to quickly remedy one particular situation. As a result, the vast majority of these documents rely solely on either statistics or emotional pleas of preservation for nature's sake as adequate justification for change. John Miller's *Egotopia* addresses environmental issues from a philosophical approach in the sense that it relies on logical thought rather than numbers or emotion.

Egotopia addresses the entire U.S. environmental issue by stepping away from the fervent fights over specific incidences of environmental degradation and instead examining the issue from the perspective posed by the questions: 1) what has caused the environment to degenerate to this point? 2) what must be done to rectify the situation? Miller's discourse begins with the claim, in the spirit of Dante and Milton, that paradise is more than an untouched natural setting; it is rather the respectful coexistence of nature with humanity. He then spends the first seven chapters demonstrating how, since the days of the Industrial Revolution, the "American" has drifted from the path of cooperative coexistence because of a desire for economic security and self-gratification. The rest of the book is dedicated to describing the manifestations of this new attitude towards the environment and what needs to be done to return society to the proper path.

Chapters One and Two, entitled, respectively, "Dark Satanic Malls" and "The New Man: Mimesis and Immanence," focus on the general character of the typical American or, in the author's terms, the New Man. Miller, in his eloquent prose, describes the Second Fall of mankind as society's decision to sacrifice all that is beautiful (i.e., communal values,

social responsibility, reciprocal obligation, respect for nature, peaceful coexistence with nature) for the ugliness of utility, self-indulgence, self-gratification, and individual improvement. In essence, the last two centuries have seen an evolution from the condition in which society defines the individual to one in which the individual defines society. We now live in a world where the meaning of self and identity is found simply within each individual, without regard for the community/society.

Chapters Three through Seven highlight ways in which this revolution in social values has evidenced itself through individuals' actions and relationships with the external environment. The most striking points Miller makes here are: 1) the sociological effect of the economic lows and highs (typified by the Great Depression and post-World War II boom) on the New Man, which results in the prevailing attitude that one's identity is determined by the ability to purchase and consume; 2) the failure of education, art, and religion to discourage consumerism and self-centered attitudes through the emphasis of aesthetics in modern society; and 3) the pervasive extent of consumerism as shown by the prolific growth of billboards and other public advertising in the modern landscape.

Chapters Eight through Ten passionately describe, first, his view of what the modern landscape would have been like had society not drifted and, secondly, the steps and positions to be taken to reconcile the difference between what is and what might have been. These are perhaps Miller's most eloquent arguments in the entire text and the most passionate. They are also the most controversial and open to attack by potential detractors, ranging from hard-core environmentalists to more right-wing fair use proponents. Radical environmentalists will be most offended by his claim that their tunnel vision allows them to be easily manipulated by those less concerned about the environment, resulting in less public policy revision. Fair users and landowners will be most troubled by the comment that land usage will fall under greater constraint by community vote rather than individual choice. No matter what your personal views are regarding U.S. society, the American social attitude, or the environment, Miller forces you to examine your position and verify the validity of your logic.

The final chapter, appropriately titled "Breaking the Spell: The Future of the New American Landscape," efficiently summarizes the logical arguments made throughout the book and solidifies his call for reform and a return to aesthetics. He also provides a few rays of hope for success by acknowledging that there are groups working towards a renewal of aesthetics and the peaceful coexistence of man with nature,

as well as by asserting that the evolution towards total consumerism and self-centeredness is self-destructive. He encourages those who share his view not to falter in their quest, because the modern relationship between society and the environment will, through its own consumptive nature, eventually force the return of aesthetics.

A true challenge for most Americans who have been reared in a society dependent on statistics and polls to justify arguments for, or against, an issue. Recommended for all libraries for no other reason than to provide a break from the statistics rhetoric so common to environmental discourses and as a reminder that popularity does not necessarily justify a decision and that numbers do not necessarily determine the course of action to be taken.

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