The "Miller's Tale," if not the fabliau as a genre, presents us with a pattern of mistakes in perception, a sharp, dramatic contrast between the real and the imaginary, which confirms basic assumptions about our world at the same time that it raises important questions. Although our sense of the real begins with what is both actual and possible in perception, it is easy to confuse the two, or to underestimate one or the other. The relevant truism, of course, is that we usually think we know what's there, but we often don't. In fact, the main comic incidents in the "Miller's Tale"--kiss, laying on of hot ploughshare, falling off the roof--belong to that type of slapstick comedy based on such confusion. Our response to the confusion derives from assumptions concerning perception, or, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, from the fact that the perceived world is an ensemble of routes taken by the body. The characters portrayed by the brilliant practitioners of this kind of comedy--Charlie Chaplin, Peter Sellers, or Jacques Tati--cannot discover these routes. Given a metaphysical ungainliness in such clowns, the ordinary routes of the body are like mysterious passages sought by legendary navigators. Inspector Clouzot cannot walk into a room without being ambushed by lamps and chairs, or becoming locked in mortal combat with a telephone.

John and Absolon most obviously and habitually have situated themselves in relation to static worlds, one defined by narcissism, the other defined by anti-intellectual credulity; whereas Nicholas has situated himself beyond these structures.

In what follows, I shall give a much abbreviated summary of Merleau-Ponty's ideas on perception, the most important of which are immanence and transcendence, or presence and absence, which, in turn, are basically different aspects of the more inclusive antithesis of the actual and the possible. I shall then apply these ideas to the much-discussed portrait of Alison and to the perceptual responses of John, Absolon, and Nicholas.

Merleau-Ponty attempts to explain the sense of the real that begins in perception through a program of perceptual calisthenics that both trims our assumptions and tones up our expectations. Perception, he points out, is always both more and less than we think, potential and actual in surprising ways, both unlimited and limited, transcendent and immanent. We always see, hear, and touch from the point of view of a limited perspective; but within that limited point of view there are clues, reflections, implied textures of "an immense latent content of the past, the future, and the elsewhere." We are always confronted by the unchallengeable presence and the perpetual absence of things, and nothing reveals itself without thereby hiding most of itself. Perception then is paradoxically both immanent and transcendent: immanent because I cannot conceive a perceptible place in which I myself am not present. Even if I try to imagine some place in the world which has never been seen, the very fact that I
imagine it makes me present at that place. By transcendence in perception is meant that the things which I see are things for me only under the condition that they always recede beyond their immediately given aspects. I never see a house in its entirety, or the house as seen from everywhere. The house is given as an infinite sum of perspectives, a series of partial views in each of which it is given, but in none of which is it given exhaustively. An observation of Paul Claudel's brilliantly dramatizes the paradox: "a certain blue of the sea is so blue that only blood would be more red." Itself paradoxical, this poetically schematic insight captures that sense of expansiveness and singularity which describes perception, the synecdoche or metonymy within the basic act itself.

In general, then, our perceptual existence is fully accounted for by what we actually and potentially see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. This actuality and possibility are inextricably bound together in the same act of perception, with an emphasis, however, on what can be, on the fact that a thing continues to be defined by that which is beyond our immediate sense experience. The contrast between the real and the imaginary, an essential feature of the climactic incidents in the "Miller's Tale," invokes a special manifestation of this transcendence. When an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first. The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of another evidence. A convincing substitution of the real for the imaginary reveals the "prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows how or why, whose realizations are never what we would have imagined them to be, and which nonetheless fulfills a secret expectation within us, since we believe in it tirelessly." The least particle of the perceived incorporates it from the first into this paradoxical totality and the most credible phantasm glances off at the surface of the world, because the whole world is present in one reflection and is irremediably absent in the richest and most systematic deliriums. The act of judgment, by distinguishing the real from the imaginary, by saying that one thing is not and that something else is, invokes the mysterious totality of what is, of being, which is all there is, because outside of this, there is nothing.

The portrait of Alison provides not only an emblem of totality by the encyclopedic variety of its imagery, but introduces us also to the insistent presence and absence in perception itself. Images of things that are early, young, new, or fresh give us a sense of unchallengeable presence akin to seeing something for the first time. She is more joyous to look at than the "newe pere-jonette tree." Other images, such as the primrose, cuckoo flower, and the latten pearls on her leather purse, suggest a filling out of vegetative and mineral categories; and, indeed, the effictio as a device is intended to give satisfaction precisely by its completeness. Again, it is the actuality of presence and immanence that we primarily experience in Alison's resemblance to young animals in her sudden, playful bursts of vitality; and yet the skittish, elusive quality of these images suggests the unforeseen, the unpredictable--Alison's enticing possibilities, which in turn reflect a seductiveness in reality itself. With this elusiveness, a kind of absence comes into her portrait that has further sensuous developments: "Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth, / Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth." The apple simile, with its circular rhythms, directs perception sensuously to Alison, who, though not seen in her entirety, is nevertheless amply comprehended. The rotund depth of the store of apples intimates the unseen, unfelt, secret life of what is perceived. What is inviting to taste and sight here is potential, not actually tactile or visible and hence part of the perceptually transcendent. The most compelling union of presence and absence, however, of the actual and the possible, is the image of the doll--popelote, which, by evoking the urge to grasp and fondle, elicits such a lively possibility that its realization seems already present. The response intended by the portrait is perhaps summed up in Absolon's reaction: "if she hadde been a mous, / And he a cat, he wolde hire hente anon." In a word, there is a pounceability about Alison that sets in motion the exploration of physical and moral space. Just as the courtly heroine often has a philosophical dimension, Alison, her rural counterpart, brings us uniquely into contact with what is real. In reacting to Alison, her two suitors and husband display ludicrous, but unmistakable metaphysical gestures. Nicholas is precipitous in seizing upon the newly perceived and manifests a raunchy grabbiness. Absolon courts the real by dandyism. The apprehensive husband, John, only wants to imprison the real, which is unpredictable in its hiddenness, and to keep Alison "narwe in cage."
John's view of the world rejects what is transcendent in the real, a rejection that begins in his habits of perception and becomes especially clear in his boastfully ignorant attitude towards "Goddes pryvetee." Two uses of this phrase, which richly suggests the mysterious totality of the real, occur in a sequence that begins when Nicholas sequesters himself in his room: for John, this hiddenness refers to things that men should not know; for Nicholas, it is an effectively persuasive reason for not informing Robin and Gill of the flood. At John's anxious insistence, his "knave" goes up to the room "ful sturdily," in that manner of confidently and precisely taking hold of things that characterizes the tricksters in the story, recalling the directness of Nicholas's first approach to Alison. Receiving no response to his knock, he opens another route to his perception. His gaze enters through a hole in the door and encounters a gaze of Nicholas in the act of seeming to pry open the universe:

An hole he foond, ful lowe upon a bord,  
Ther as the cat was wont in for to crepe,  
And at that hole he looked in ful depe,  
And at the laste he hadde of hym a sight.  
This Nicholas sat evere capyng upright,  
As he had kiked on the newe moone.

The manner in which the "knave" looks in has those aspects of limited perspective--its immanent particularity--that foreshadow much of the action. In contrast, the bodily posture of Nicholas reveals someone exhausted by looking, someone who has tried to see things as they are in themselves, that is, from all perspectives. Nicholas's pretended overgaping at the stars shows a perceptual hubris, a cocky omniscience that will be chastened by the hot coulter, whereas Robin's peeping through the hole is a more accurate example of limited, serial human perception. John's first reaction to his servant's report--"Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee"--anticipates his credulity and determines his subsequent remarks about perception. With an uneasy mixture of fear and scorn, he focuses warily on transcendence, on what can happen--"A man woot litel what hym shal bityde"--on the planes and routes within our perception that escape us:

So ferde another clerk with astromye;  
He walked in the feeldes, for to prye  
Upon the sterres, what ther sholde bifalle,  
Til he was in a marle-pit yfalle;  
He saugh nat that.

For John, to employ anachronism, clerks belong with men in top hats and monocles who slip on banana peels, who forget the routes taken by the body. The anecdote typifies the comic confusion of immanence and transcendence in perception, of thinking we know what's there. John prides himself on his grasp of the obvious, but nothing, of course, can be so elusive. He is betrayed by the transcendence of what is in front of him. Having boasted of pious ignorance, he will be reproved for his superstition. His manner of entering Nicholas's room--prying under the door with a staff while Robin knocks it off its hasp--shows his artless, downright style of being; and his exhortation to Nicholas reveals attitudes towards the transcendent that undo him:

Awak, and thenk on Cristes passioun!  
I crouche thee from elves and fro wightes.  
Therwith the nght-spele seye he anon-rightes  
On foure halves of the hous aboute,  
And on the thesshfold of the dore withoute:  
"Jhesu Crist and seinte Benedight,  
Blesse this hous from every wikked wight,  
For nyghtes verye, the white pater-noster!  
Where wentestow, seinte Petres soster?"
Superstition characterizes John's sense of the unseen. He cannot grasp the fact that mystery begins in perception itself: that "Goddes pryvetee" is the theological resolution of a more prosaic transcendence that begins in the senses. For him, elves and "creatures" people horizons that he fears to acknowledge. He has changed the reflections and clues of an elsewhere into beings that can threaten the security of his immediate perception. Closing off his thresholds, he uses religion to avoid risks and construct defenses against reality. His secret preparations for the flood, designed to escape the notice of Robin, Gill, and others, remove him from that social contact that adds to our own perspectives and ironically distances him from the open totality suggested by the phrase, "Goddes pryvetee." A ludicrous obsession with the wrong perceptual clues, especially a "listening in depth," chronicles his final experience of gravity and solidity. Appropriately situating himself in darkness, which is the absence of figure and ground, he gives himself to prayer, and "stille he sit, / Awaitynge on the reyn, if he it heere." Sleeping soundly through the romp below him, he is awakened by Nicholas's loud, wild pleas for water, and once more gives into fantasy, thinking

"Alas, now comth Nowelis flood!"
He sit hym up withouten wordes mo,
And with his ax he smoot the corde atwo,
And doun gooth al; he foond neither to selle,
Ne breed ne ale, til he cam to the celle
Upon the floor, and ther aswowne he lay.

Having desired to keep Alison "narwe in cage," praying to be secure from the elves and wights of feared perceptual horizons, he plunges with due justice into what is not actually perceived, the perceptually transcendent, the real possibilities of "Goddes pryvetee." That a real perception dissipates an illusion could not be more emphatically dramatized; and with authentic perception comes the presence of the whole world, a definitive experience of the real, whose accomplishment, however, is still deferred. For the sobering future that awaits John begins with the neighbors who run to "gauren on this man"; his broken arm; oaths proclaiming his madness; the failure of his own explanation; and the general laughter. Although the victim of yet another fiction, he, of course, is not deceived; and, although isolated once again, he is situated within a more reliable and enlarged perceptual field, whose pungent reality is incontestable, for "stonde he moste unto his owene harm . . . ".

The prelude to Absolon's perceptual experience is the immanent, self-regarding way in which he defines the space of his world, an attitude manifested especially in two passages. First, the virtuosity of his dancing is presented as an unsituated physical dexterity. Exceeding the properly gratuitous movements of dance, Absolon seems to indulge a kind of unattached flurry that anticipates his failures to locate himself in real perceptual fields:

In twenty manere koude he trippe and daunce
After the scolde of Oxenforde tho,
And with his legges casten to and fro . . .

This prodigality of movement affects mastery of the body's routes belied by later developments. The second characterizing passage occurs when, taking his giterne to the carpenter's house and dextrously poising himself by the shuttered window, he makes musical advances to a wife actually in bed with her husband. The insouciance of the exchange between John and Alison reverses Absolon's own opinion of his adroitness and proficiency:

This carpenter awook, and herde him synge,
And spak unto his wyf, and seyd anon,
"What! Alison! herestow nat Absolon,
That chaunteth thus under oure boures wal?"
And she answerd hir housbonde therewithal,
"Yis, God woot, John, I heere it every deel."
Attaching so little importance to the husband's presence shows a carelessness of figure and ground in perception that makes him especially vulnerable to the punitive effects of an unwary imagination. When, therefore, John ceases to be in evidence because of his hidden preparations for the flood, such total perceptual absence guarantees misadventure.

Immediately for Absolon, as previously for John, fantasy begins to outrun perception, the imaginary to usurp the real, which will, however, soon return with an earthy tenacity. His sense of taste becomes the focus of the tension between perceptual immanence and transcendence: "My mouth hath icched al this longe day; / That is a signe of kissyng atte leeste" (3682-83). The initial clue of a future elsewhere--an itching mouth--builds lavishly to the dream of a feast, and, as he rises and prepares himself to visit Alison, becomes a sensual concern with oral messages:

But first he cheweth greyn and lycorys,  
To smellen sweete, er he hadde kembd his heer.  
Under his tonge a trewe-love he beer,  
For therby wende he to ben gracious.

There may be something even in his manner of walking--"He rometh to the carpenteres hous" (my italics)–that suggests inattention to the body's proper routes. Worsted in his first exchange with Alison, he is promised a kiss. Most deliciously, a false transcendent anticipation bids him open his taste buds to the fullest. His imagination is already actually enjoying the kiss before the message of the real perception enters his consciousness:

This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie.  
Derk was the nyght as pich, or as the cole,  
And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,  
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,  
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers  
Ful savourly, er he were war of this.

Having wiped his mouth with expectant certainty, he prolongs this assurance into the manner of the act itself--"Ful savourly"--a phrase which itself suggests lingering exploration. The reversal of this virtually absolute assumption that we know what's there becomes only slowly instructive for Absolon. His answer to the real sense experience is once more fantasy, this time, to the delight of Nicholas, a beard, "a thynge al rough and long yherd." Biting his heretofore pampered lip, Absolon contemplates revenge, while taking temporary comfort in the different textures of sand, straw, cloth and chips, which parody the opulent, sensual transcendence that he sought in the kiss. The chaste plainness of these purifying textures--granular, fibrous, smooth, incisive--corrects his wayward labial expectations and recommends a more plausible world. Narcissism has humiliatingly distorted his capacity for accurate perceptual transcendence. Therefore, just as John, pushed across the threshold guarded by the elves and wights of his superstition, will fall into the real world, so with Absolon. Unsentimental, functional anatomy presses through his fantasies to reach his actual senses. An unforeseen possible has become actual. Having selectively defined the world by dandyism, he has been exquisitely apprised of a more inclusive view.

Finally, the nemesis of the arrogantly successful lover provides for the tale's perceptual experiences a generalization that is spatial and concrete, but philosophical as well. Nicholas, having successfully manipulated John by the phrase, "Goddes pryvetee," believes himself to be in control of the actual and possible structure of space, but fails, like John and Absolon, to realize the range of perceptual transcendence. Laying the plot for John and watching Alison entice Absolon to the disillusioning kiss, he has contained their perspectives and situated their worlds within his own. In seeking to amend the jape, Nicholas wants to ascend to a new level of trickery, a parody of further transcendence. The motif of secrecy is cumulatively present, as Nicholas once more attempts to manipulate the hiddenness of things: "up the wyndowe dide he hastily, / And out his ers he putteth pryvely . . . " (my italics). This final repetition of a secrecy word invokes the whole pattern--the Miller's jibe about not being inquisitive, Nicholas's plot, John's anti-intellectualism, the clandestine preparation of the tubs--but especially the
ontological ground of the action, that totality on whose threshold their perceptions take place--"Goddes pryvetee." Furthermore, "pryvely" may suggest that Nicholas's attempt at a new level of trickery parodies Theseus's ascent to a new understanding of mystery in the "Knight's Tale." A startlingly different possibility, however, is actualized. When Absolon requests the object of his vengeance to speak, because he doesn't know where she is, we are reminded, for the last time, of the night's darkness which creates a space of almost pure possibility and transcendence, without figure and ground. Mortifyingly situated by the fart that gives a final response to his own squeamishness, Absolon "was redy with his iren hoot, / And Nicholas amydd the ers he smoot." Having fouled the air, burned in his tout, Nicholas cries out for water; John awakens to his fantasy of a flood and falls to the ground. A parodic succession of the elements that bind Theseus's fair chain of love--air, fire, water, earth--attends upon this nearly apocalyptic triumph of the real over the imaginary, and alludes to the principles of material totality in the medieval world. Nicholas, who had pretended to view things from a kind of ubiquity, is reintroduced to the situated world of comic limitation. Having presumptuously exploited the mysterious for the purpose of sexual gratification, he is surprised by that literal, immediate world which he has considered his domain. His mad plea for water testifies to the fecundity of those astonishing possibilities that he has considered so predictable.

Each of Alison's three suitors, on one dramatic occasion, fails to gear himself successfully onto the real world. John and Absolon most obviously and habitually have situated themselves in relation to static worlds, one defined by narcissism, the other defined by anti-intellectual credulity; whereas Nicholas has situated himself beyond these structures. Because of the inflexible nature of these other worlds, Nicholas, as trickster, has been able to exploit the possibilities of real space. His own world, though combining the actual with the possible, is, in turn, limited by the trickster's own narrowly focused conception of this scheme. All these worlds lack a due regard for perceptual transcendence. The fact that Absolon's revenge, which initiates the tale's climax, takes the specific form of the trickster tricked makes a final essential point. If the trickster can be tricked, he can also further trick those who are trying to trick him, a complication which in fact develops in the "Reeve's Tale." This unlimited vulnerability suggests a definition of human experience, at least in the fabliau, as an open process of interactions between actual and possible, a process which points to what in the Middle Ages was the true field of fields. The ubiquity that Nicholas has assumed does not pertain to the real nature of human space, which is, instead, a pact between the virtual body and the actual body, a physical experience of potency and act, terms which for the Middle Ages encompass what is real, or being itself. This pact is a function of the immanence and transcendence of perception, and emphasizes what can happen, that range of very concrete possibilities that is partly the subject matter of human choice, divinely foreknown but no obstacle to human freedom, in a phrase, "Goddes pryvetee." The structure of perception, as described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and dramatized, as I hope to have shown, in the "Miller's Tale," provides for this metaphysical principle a concrete manifestation. It is, I believe, partly for this reason that in the "Miller's Tale," as Charles Muscatine observed, the "genre is virtually make philosophical" and so completely fulfills its "fabliau entelechy."

**Source Citation** (MLA 7th Edition)