Review Article

Reading (Deconstructing) J. Hillis Miller: Humanist and Pluralist

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In his day, J. Hillis Miller, now in his eighty-eighth year, was one of the most influential of literary scholars, among the leaders in introducing phenomenology and, later, deconstruction to an Anglo-American audience. His early books *The Disappearance of God* (1963), *Poets of Reality* (1965), and *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968) were greatly influenced by Georges Poulet and the Geneva school. *Fiction and Repetition* (1982) was written under the umbrella of Derridean Deconstruction. All four were required reading for a generation of graduate students.

I wrote a full chapter on what we might now call Miller's early work and what was certainly his most influential period in my *The Humanistic Heritage: Theories of the English Novel from James to Hillis Miller*; here I discussed his relationship to the Anglo-American tradition.

I cannot say that I have kept up with all of his more than thirty books. In 2005, Stanford University Press thought he had enough of a following to publish *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*, bringing together examples of his work with commentary by others on his work. With some regret, I wonder if a major press would do such a volume in 2015 or whether his place in the firmament has somewhat faded.

I saw Miller on occasion when I still went to MLA and at times when he still lived on the East Coast, and found him a generous colleague, which meant a great deal to me as young aspiring scholar working my way through the ranks. The first time I gave a plenary talk at a conference, he was one of the other speakers, and he made me feel welcome. Indeed, he contributed a fine essay on *The Secret Sharer* to the Bedford Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism edition of that work, which I edited in the

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later 90s.

What attracted me to his criticism was his strong and lucid close readings of canonical novels; these readings showed an attention to the subtleties of language without losing empathy for what authors were trying to do. In his early books, he maintained a nice balance between the macrocosmic view and microcosmic view, what I have truncated in my own work to "Always historicize; always the text." Later, as he belonged to theoretical communities that sometimes had a problematic relationship to primary texts and would zero in on a handful of passages in a novel, he did not lose the sense of the evolving novel.

The volume under review consists mostly of revisions of published essays and talks. On the whole, the volume does not cover new ground, but Miller's nuanced arguments are a pleasure to read and his panoramic view of the theoretical mindscape that still drives literary studies for some is impressive. Reflecting the breadth and depth of a man of prodigious learning, *Communities in Fiction* takes us on a tour of some of the stopping points that have been marked on the theoretical map these past fifty years.

In his opening chapter, "Theories of Community," Miller reviews various definitions of community, but to me this seems a somewhat tangential introduction to what follows. Rather than present a compelling argument, he asks whether the novels he discusses represent "a true community" (17). His unremarkable conclusion is: "[A]ssumptions about the nature of individuality and intersubjectivity largely determine one's idea about community" (17). The nominal subjects of the second through fifth of six chapters are mostly Victorian and early twentieth-century novels: Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, Conrad's *Nostromo* (by far the longest and perhaps the best, running nearly 100 pages, although it could have been somewhat shorter without losing its main points) and Woolf's *The Waves* (perhaps the most rigorous chapter in terms of taut argument).

Miller has always stressed that his focus is on "how does meaning arise from the reader's encounter with just these words on the page?" (*Fiction and Repetition* 3). While Miller draws upon the tradition of Western philosophy from Hegel and Kant to Nietzsche and Derrida as a way of understanding literature, many of Miller's most compelling insights do not depend on his great fund of theoretical reading. Perhaps the most provocative essay is the last one comparing Pynchon's "The Secret Integration" and Cervantes's story "The Dog's Colloquy" as a way of de-historicizing post-modernism and by implication challenging the practice of defining works by literary periods. He concludes:

> Definitions of post-modernism in literature by way of formal and structural features tend not to be valid because they can be shown to characterize earlier literary works, too. [...] [D]efinitions of period styles in literature, and even period names in literary history generally, are highly problematic, always to be interrogated and viewed with suspicion. (307)

Depending on the concept of cogito, a version of authorial presence that seeks to

define the essence of a writer or artist that informs individual works, the central argument of his early books, *The Disappearance of God* and *Poets of Reality*, is the increasing subjectivity of individuals as we move from the Romantic to the Victorian and then the high Modernist period. Even though he disdains periodicity from *Fiction and Repetition* onward, Miller's underlying assumption about the individual's disengagement from community—an engagement once defined in part by a relationship to God—is still very much a part of his discussions in this new collection. But it is hardly news that the relationship between individual and community is at the heart of the English novel, a genre which by and large has more a grammar of individual motives than a grammar of political cause and effect that we find in its European counterpart.

Of course there are exceptions on each side, notably, among European novels, *Madame Bovary*, which is concerned with class and manners, and, on the English side, *Nostromo* as well as *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, all of which seem to be driven by politics and history. But in the case of Conrad—originally a Pole—I have argued (and Miller seems to concur) that he shows that politics is composed of personal motives.

Those who prefer critical essays that immerse the reader in the imagined ontology of novels may at first experience a certain resistance to Miller's discussions. I do need warn those whose eyes glaze over when they read yet once more "Heidegger" and "*Dasein*" (Heidegger's existential term for presence or being there) as well as those who think Raymond Williams's utopian Marxism is something long past, a kind of academic correlative to Woodstock.

Reading Hillis Miller, as he moves from Derrida, Benjamin, Husserl, and Jameson to Blanchot and Althusser, one feels in the presence of a mind versed in the theorists whose "names long ago stilled your academic play," to riff on Yeats's "September 1913." There is something almost quaint about Miller's immersion in the theorists he cites, especially since citing them is not always a way forward to the goal of explicating primary texts. This is especially evident when, after citing Williams at great length in the first essay, he rightly concludes: "Little or no countenance is given by Williams to the idea that a novel may be an imaginary world, a counter world, a heterotopia with its own somewhat idiosyncratic laws and features"(6).

Indeed, one question is whether in *Communities in Fiction* Miller's theoretical apparatus is always necessary or whether this apparatus is often digressive and even at times puts a screen between his readings and his audience. For example, do most readers learn much about Trollope in the first of these two sentences: "Heideggerian '*Mitsein*' of Jean-Luc Nancy's assertion in *Being Singular Plural* that each of us is primordially exposed to the others, so that my singularity is always plural, are two more recent ways of dealing with the problem of inter-subjectivity. Trollope's hypotheses of a collective consciousness is another way" (42-43)?

Miller's work represents what I call, with a note of irony, "advanced criticism." But is there a teleology (akin to scientific research) of literary criticism in which one

scholar builds on another as we move towards enlightenment? Or do we get suggestions and ideas from the critics we read that help us in our own scholarship and perhaps enable us to provide suggestions and ideas for our own readers. Has literary criticism in the past fifty or so years leapt forward or has its focus shifted from a kind of eclectic pluralism to more one-dimensional approaches so that new insights result from applying different perspectives—whether called rhetorical, narratological, biographical, feminist, deconstructive, new historical, Marxist, or resistant—all of which are valid when done well, but sometimes limiting a more eclectic reading.

We might say good literary criticism is purposeful and gives us readings that are helpful, but we need to remain skeptical that we are on a straight march to enlightenment. At times scholarship genuinely adds to what we know; an example is Kevin Birmingham's *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's* Ulysses. But even excellent critical readings are more likely to be significantly different from preceding readings rather than better than them. In fact, Miller evokes Paul De Man—one of the iconic figures of "advanced" reading and his colleague during his Yale years—as a theorist who is most doubtful about the sufficiency of any reading; "No one, [De Man] says, can free herself or himself from ideology. It is those who think they are clear-seers who are most victims of illusion" (96).

Think about the great figures of the past—Frye, Matthiessen, Nash Smith, even Booth, and indeed, Miller himself—and how many students read them as we did a few generations ago? Have they been intellectually superseded or have they been replaced by different kinds of thinking? If there is progress, it is more a crablike sideways motion with only a small forward thrust.

I enjoyed the essays in the book under review less for the rather loose macrocosmic argument than for the journey through the fiction. Beginning with *Fiction and Repetition* and, to an extent, even earlier, Miller has been, for me, a critic offering us wonderful middles, that is, a brilliant critic whose apercus I value as much or more than his overarching argument. Certainly in *Communities in Fiction*, he does not observe the King's advice to the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*: "Begin at the beginning [...] and go on till you come to the end: then stop." Rather, we accompany Miller's deft mind interfacing with works that, in most cases, he has read many times and loves. If we have ever heard his deep resonant voice lecture, we may while reading hear his voice sharing with us his responses.

The Miller of *Communities in Fiction* is often a humanist. His careful and detailed descriptions of character behavior and motives in Conrad's *Nostromo*, for example, are those of a critic who enjoys thinking about how novels represent reality and what we learn about a grammar of motives from reading them. His vast reading helps him, too, compare the narrative strategies in James's *The Awkward Age*—consisting entirely of dialogue—with that of Nostromo's reliance on a narrator's commentary. (210). I smile when I see his comment "Form follows function, in fiction as in architecture" (210), because the focus on the inextricable relationship between form and function is one that Dorothy Van Gent (*The English Novel Form and Function*) or I

and other Anglo-American formalists would stress.

In *Communities in Fiction*, the humanist Miller shows a commendable awareness of the world beyond texts as well as of history and even biography. This is hardly the deconstruction of De Man, who eschews such subjects for reasons I have discussed elsewhere in "The Narrative of Paul De Man: Texts, Issues, Significances" (a chapter in my *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics*). Interested in human behavior as much or not more than in what he calls "comprehensive rhetorical readings" (308), Miller uses recent historical events to give us context as when he compares George W. Bush's behavior to the insane Pedrito Montero in *Nostromo*: "When he was President, our Pedrito Montero, may have been motivated (who knows?) by an illusory image of himself based perhaps on his playing of video games (which we know he did) rather than [as did Conrad's Pedrito Montero] reading light histories" (213). An earlier Miller might have dismissed such lack of rigor. Or, when discussing *Nostromo*, Miller sets the death of Viola's wife in historical and biographical contexts of which he is reminded: Teresa Viola "dies in the midst of the Monterian revolution, just as Garibaldi's wife had died in the woods from exhaustion, during one of Garibaldi's campaigns for freedom, and just as Conrad's mother had died from the effects of the exile imposed by the Russian authorities on her husband, Conrad's father, for his political activities" (210).

Within the classroom we need teachers who understand how diverse approaches can yield rich pluralistic readings of complex texts, while respectful of the text's historical and biographical contexts. Better yet, we need flexible, judicious, innovative, and imaginative critic-scholars who can draw upon multiple ways of approaching a text without applying one formula fits all. Often in *Communities in Fiction*, Miller becomes one of these.

Miller's one-page Coda on the current "self-destructive human behavior" of nonfunctional communities (308) protests against global warming, the Patriot Act and other rulings and decisions which permit surveillance, and the US Supreme Court's nullification of a crucial part of the Voting Rights Act. This very short political and quixotic polemic does not really derive logically from his preceding analyses of novels, although it may follow from his own deeply felt emotions. Cheering his concern for larger issues that shape our world and his awareness that novels are by humans and about human behavior, I celebrate this towering literary critic-scholar as a humanist and pluralist.