

Miller's Aporia of Reading¹

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Joseph Hillis Miller (b. 1928-), the distinguished professor of English and comparative literature, is the author of such famous theoretical collections as *Fiction and Repetition*, *Ariadne's Thread* from the 80s, or *The Ethics of Reading*, *Versions of Pygmalion*, *Victorian Subjects* and *Theory Now and Then* published in the 90s – to mention only the recent ones. Regarding his theoretical approach, he belongs to the 'Yale-gang' together with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey H. Hartman and the late Paul de Man; moreover, the list of the boa deconstructors should be completed with Jacques Derrida, the 'stepfather' of American deconstruction. Although deconstruction is still haunting in the textual analyses and the influence of the first great generation is still tremendous in literary criticism and philosophy the Yale-gangsters are gradually losing their convincing strength. Unfortunately, we should admit that it is especially true with regards to Miller's present work.

The editors of the "punchy, short, and stimulating" *Thinking in Action* Routledge series – namely, Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney – asked Miller to write a book 'on literature' so as to make the readers think about its real meaning and importance – with the help of a well-known and famous literary critic. Actually, in 1999 in another Routledge series, the New Critical Idiom, Peter Widdowson was asked to write a book titled *Literature*. However, "[one's] little book on Literature"² sounds rather narcissistic and blatant the latter is a scholarly work while the former is rather haphazard. Besides the great number of annoying printing mistakes, Miller's *On Literature* is a mixture of quasi-banal statements and brilliant but fragmentary ideas. Reading the work, we cannot forget that exactly Miller, speaking about 'the ethics of reading' and good (deconstructive) readers,

¹ The present paper is a review on J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002)

² Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. x.

asks us to pay attention to every detail in a text; especially, to those moments when the author is interpreting his own ideas.³

The unbalanced structure of the work follows the old-fashioned though practical pattern of ‘what is-why to-how to’ with relation to reading in six chapters, each with several – sometimes – quite awkward subheadings. In the first chapter titled “What is Literature?”, Miller summarises the short history of the term ‘literature’, and he connects “the modern Western concept of literature” not only with the invention of the modern sense of the self but also with “the appearance of the modern research university”(4). Moreover, emphasising its dependence on printing, he foresees the gradual disappearance and transformation of literature and deals with the new media and the changed conditions of teaching. He clearly sees that today a young person’s ‘ethos’ is not fundamentally formed by literature taken in its original sense, but by other forms of multimediality: films, popular music, computer and television.⁴ In few pages he highlights several exciting problems without elaborating on them but, as we are still in the very first chapter, these can be thought to be his introductory ideas. By the end of the ‘introductory’ chapter Miller, referring to Kafka’s idea, defines the power of literature that it creates a world out of words, it can generate a *virtual reality*: “A literary work is not, as many people may assume, an imitation in words of some pre-existing reality, but, on the contrary, it is the creation or discovery of a new, supplementary world, a metaworld, a hyper-reality” (18). Then he gets obsessed with this idea expressing the power of literature *in* the abundance of metaphors: literature is secular magic, a work of literature is an abracadabra, or a book is a portable dreamweaver. He introduces Lewis Carroll’s Alice books and (rather awkwardly) a childhood reading, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, as his favourite and frequently used examples.

The second chapter, “Literature as Virtual Reality”, *opens with* the importance of the opening sentences in literary works. According to Miller, these radically inaugural words work like the magical “Open Sesames” and each one should be regarded as a miniature genesis. Then, at random, he quotes several stored famous openings from his ‘hard-drive’ – from Milton,

³ See in J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987) and *Theory Now and Then* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

⁴ He expresses the same opinion in his interview made and recorded by István Adorján in Pécs in 2000 - see in *The AnaChronisT* (2002) 297–302. In *Theory Now and Then* he also says that a new attitude is needed at institutions of higher education, which, working on new MA and BA programmes, we should accept. According to Miller, for instance, the chairs of English departments should react to the change in literary canon, consensus and multimediality by adopting themselves to the new situations – instead of being a rock becoming a rocking chair? (203)

Kafka, Faulkner, Yeats or Dostoevsky. Discussing the effect of these beginnings, he calls the attention to the 'pleasurable' violence of literature: "the irruptive, transgressive violence of these beginnings is often proleptic or synecdochic, part for the whole, of the work that follows" (27). The wildness of literature is rapture-like (Nietzsche) which means that reading a literary work, one is being drawn forcibly out – that is, enraptured – into another world inhabited by ghosts.

After this ghostly opening, in a subchapter titled "Literature's Strangeness", Miller attacks criticism claiming that it is likely to deal with literary works in standard ways depriving them of their monad-like (Leibniz) singularity. He says that the different schools of literary criticism spring from the fear of the strangeness of literature and he gives the most striking metaphor of a literary work. Opposed to the Heideggerian notion, namely, in literature the universal truth of Being is revealed (cf. the Greek truth, *aletheia*), Miller accepts Derrida's idea that each work has its own truth and resembles a hedgehog rolled up in a ball. Derrida, in the essay, "Che cos'è la poesia?", deliberately keeps the Italian word for the hedgehog, *istrice*, protesting for the idiomatic truth and against the 'true' translation of a given literary work. Derrida says that a poem is like an *istrice* that in its habit of self-defence rolls itself into a ball and bristles its spines, that is, it is a text spiked/hedged about with difficulties. As Miller comments on this image: "For me too, each work is a separate space, protected on all sides by something like quills. Each work is closed in on itself, separated even from its author" (35).

This section is of crucial importance and some remarks should be made. On the one hand, as Miller says, literary theory and criticism, due to its fear of literature, contributes to the death of literature theorising about it (see the discussed work, *On Literature*). On the other hand, the deconstructive reading practice paying delicate attention to the rhetorical figures and devices of a text is on the way to become a piece of literature itself (see again the discussed work or the present review). Moreover, about the 'prickly' metaphor I should say that as a ghost it appears in Friedrich Schlegel, the early Romantic German critic's works where he uses exactly the same image to describe his favourite form of writing, the fragment. The Schlegelian hedgehog becomes really appropriate in Miller's fragmentary argumentation where the figures of speech, the haunting literary phantoms, are frequently emphasised.

In the third chapter ("The Secret of Literature") seven secular, or literary dream visions are displayed so as to support the central idea "that each literary work gives news of a different and unique alternative reality, a hyper-reality" (80). Miller discusses works written by his allies, the chosen

members of ‘a Motley Crew’ – as he calls them using the name of a glam rock band (!): Dostoevsky, Anthony Trollope, Henry James, Walter Benjamin, Proust, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida. Although the starting point cannot be regarded as Miller’s greatest insight in the *fragmentary* analyses he really provokes further thinking on the reader’s part. For instance, in six pages, he gives the key to understand Trollope’s vivid literary worlds discussing how the novelist transformed his practice of daydreaming into novel writing. Or in the James-section referring to the prefaces to *The Golden Bowl* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, he praises the novelist’s practice of re-reading and revising his own works, which is connected with Benjamin’s ideas on translation. According to Miller, both practices aim at reaching the perfect: James’s grasping the Absolute, Benjamin’s glimpsing at “pure language”. Paradoxically, while every work and each translation should be taken as the fragments of this wholeness, in its purity being undifferentiated, the Absolute is empty and meaningless, since meaning depends on differentiation (63). The Millerian parallel raises several questions, for example, about the autonomous totality of a fragment, or about the discussion of Benjamin’s *translated* ideas of translation, but the critic fails to conclude, which becomes his (and her) reading practice in the present work.

In connection with Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*⁵, Miller emphasises the importance of lies that help to make the virtual and potential (*virtuel*) realities ‘come true’ – allowing us “to multiply and diversify our lives immeasurably” (67). While Proust like other artists shows us the way to alternative universes Derrida ‘invites’ the reader to the experience of ‘the wholly other’. Miller refers to – as in two and a half page we cannot say, he analyses – Derrida’s definitions of literature in his thesis defence “The Time of a Thesis, Punctuations” and in two essays titled “Passions” and “Psyche: Invention of the Other”. Unfortunately, perhaps due to the complexity of the question, these sections on Proust and Derrida are the least developed and detailed ones. In the best part of the chapter Miller deals with Maurice Blanchot’s “The Song of the Sirens: Encountering the Imaginary”, where again the idea of the fragment and the fragmentary human experience of totality is in the centre. This subchapter is connected with James’s Absolute, Benjamin’s pure language and Proust’s pure time. In Blanchot’s description of the episode when Ulysses is enchanted by the Sirens’ song, Miller finds

⁵ Regarding the English translation of the title, Miller remarks that the traditionally used Shakespearean phrase, *Remembrance of Things Past* does not really provide a glimpse at pure language. We can admit that with the Hungarian *Az eltűnt idő nyomában* we are given the possibility hidden in the French *recherche* to find lost time, and also to have a tentative look at language in its purity.

the allegory of reading, the encounter with the literary, or the literal (truth). Here Miller, claiming that the version of his concept of literature is closest to Blanchot's, summarises his argument: "Most of the other writers I have discussed in this chapter, and I too, think of the actual literary work, the words on the page, as the material embodiment of events that exist in some imaginary realm in all their richness of detail, waiting, perhaps indefinitely, to be incarnated in words" (70).

Similarly to the Sirens's song, more exactly, to the promise of 'the song of songs' about which they are singing to their victims, reaching the 'pure' meaning of a text is always ahead, waiting to 'come in its otherness' (Derrida). Accordingly, the twin Sirens' island as the origin of the song can be associated with the silence of the sea, or the silence of 'pure language' and 'pure time'. Miller also calls attention to Blanchot's another exciting idea about the origin of the novel. Distinguishing two kinds of protagonists, Blanchot says that there is the storyteller, who survives the encounter with the imaginary, for instance, as Ulysses tricks the Sirens to listen to their voices and get away with it. The other type exemplified here by Ahab in *Moby Dick*, dies, or is swallowed up in the imaginary, consequently, only a survivor can tell Ahab's story. This idea connects our reading with Trollope's *ars poetica*, who having given up his self-deluding daydreaming, became a survivor-storyteller.

After the what is—chapters, in the fourth "Why Read Literature?" a brief history of literary criticism is given. Basically, Miller differentiates two groups on the basis of what they think about the importance of virtual realities, that is, the imaginary in human life. Before contrasting the views of the two, he deals with the Bible, which is truly shown as the 'book of books' providing models for the genres of secular literature.⁶ It can be guessed that the activity of the first group warning against the dangers of literature starts with Plato, who was afraid of poetry for two reasons. On the one hand, he questioned the divine origin of poetry, on the other hand, he regarded it as an imitation of imitations (of the ideas). However, as a good reader, Miller remarks that while Plato shows his distaste for poetry and imitation, he does it playing the role of his master, Socrates. The Platonic list of the thinkers condemning literature is obviously short. After the mentioning of Kant's aversion to novel reading which "weakens the memory and destroys the character" (94) and Bentham's utilitarianism, Miller rather deals with the (romantic) anti-Platonic and Aristotelian group. He mainly discusses

⁶ Certainly, Miller does not regard the Bible as literature (see the title of the subchapter, "The Bible is not Literature") though he mentions that in the sense of being written in letters it can be called 'literature'. He delicately balances between his previous ideas on the imaginary and the absolute authority of God's word here.

Aristotle's defence of poetry praising imitation due to its beneficial effects on man (cf. pleasurable, cathartic and instructive), and he adds the vague notion that in several periods literature is taken as socially and pedagogically useful.

On the whole, in the 4th chapter, instead of detailed analyses, the reader is rather given Miller's enthusiastic outbursts about the merits of literature. He confesses that his "pernicious escapism" exemplified by his hobby-horsical *The Swiss Family Robinson* "was the beginning of a bad habit that has kept [him] in lifelong subservience to fantasies and fictions rather than soberly engaged in 'the real world' and in fulfilling [his] responsibilities there" (96). The question of responsibility comes up again in the last subchapter where Miller basically deconstructs Austin's distinction between the constative and performative speech acts with relation to literary works. As he argues, although the writer has the power to tell the truth (cf. constative language) and maybe he is true to his own virtual reality he is much more likely to manipulate the readers to believe in a piece of fiction (cf. performative language). We cannot forget – as Austin and the rhetorical readers, de Man, Derrida and Miller think – that words work on their own, whatever their utterer intends; that is, "the literary work is self-authorizing" (113).

In the last two chapters, "How to Read Literature" and "How to Read Comparatively", Miller deals with the practical question of teaching reading and reading itself. In Anglo-Saxon literary criticism there is a long-lived tradition discussing the theory of reading, starting with the close reading of New Criticism in the 1940s and 50s. In this sense deconstruction and the rhetorical reading practice is closely related to the pedagogical nature of American criticism. In several of his recent publications Miller writes about 'the new ethics of reading' which is related to the teaching of reading. It is obvious that the pedagogical aim is a key issue but for Miller "the primary ethical obligation of the teacher of literature is to the work of literature".⁷ That is, teachers before starting to teach should be(come) good readers so as to teach others how to read. However, a good reader is a mystery and Miller only prescribes that a sense for irony is required (115). He is quite sceptical as he calls teaching reading a mug's game and he says that good reading cannot be taught. Nevertheless, he offers two antinomic methods that should be used together, which results in the aporia of reading.

One way of reading is taking it as *Schwärmerei* – the term is borrowed from Kant (but could have been from Nietzsche as well) in the sense of enthusiasm, rapture or revelry. That is, we should believe what we are reading in "an innocent, childlike abandonment" (119), or, not without some

⁷ Joseph Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then*, 338.

sexual connotations, reading is said to resemble a love affair. Opposed to this 'fanatically innocent' way, there is the 'educated and experienced' reading when the reader pays more attention to 'the art of fiction'. Here Miller, like an exorcist, seems to accuse his own gang and their rhetorical close reading and cultural studies of the demystification of reading. The two ways also differ in their right tempo as the critical reading is slow (*lento*) while the other one is fast (*allegro*), and, definitely, the two tempos cannot be followed at once. A reader cannot read a work in rapture and pay attention also to its 'artificial' details and mechanism, since they prevent each other from working, which leads to an aporia - in Miller's reading.

In these chapters it becomes overt that Miller tries to save literature praising its merits (e.g. its magical power), and tries to give back its pleasure getting away from dry theorising. In the most shocking section, citing only the last lines of two literary works (*Jane Eyre* and *Women in Love*), he calls them "simply silly" as they fail to open new worlds. It can be said to be 'simply silly' to judge a work on the basis of its last words which are actually used to close that virtual reality. Here he sounds like the disappointed scholar, who getting tired of the great works of canon, analyses a children book, his childhood reading. He tries to read the novel in the two different ways, which is not at all convincing. In the 'slow' reading of *The Swiss Family Robinson*, instead of discussing its problematic narration, language and ideology, he deals only with the origin and the different versions of the work. Due to the lack of his points of analysis, he can only show the reader how he likes to read – and write about - this particular book giving him fun. Maybe the reader does not want to read about Miller's having fun reading this book and thus feels guilty not being a good reader, as she cannot become a little child "to read literature rightly" (120). With this 'insight', Miller resembles those criticised teachers who say to their students that they "got the poems wrong" (117).

Finally, in the last sixth chapter titled "How to Read Comparatively", his favourite children book is compared with such great works as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee's *Foe* and Carroll's Alice books. We should admit that the critical demystified reading is much more fruitful though the ideas are still fragmentary and we cannot escape Miller's recollection of his Baptist upbringing in a Virginian farm. His analysis is still quite 'airy' but at least the basis of comparison – cf. these are atypical Robinsoniads - is given which can provide the reader with some critical ideas on killing, imperialism, sexism, racism, and nationalism. Moreover, analysing a chosen section in the different, the early and later German and English versions of *The Swiss Family Robinson*, Miller shows his strength as a good deconstructive reader. But in the conclusion, he again writes in defence of

innocent reading referring to Adam and Eve's enraptured happiness contrasted with Satan's envious resistance in Milton's epic. Although here he does not compare Satan's cynicism to critical reading in an earlier passage, besides the father of the rhetorical mode of reading, Nietzsche, Milton's Satan is named as the prototypical demystifier (125).

"Strange things happen when someone reads a book" – confesses Miller in another work.⁸ Having read almost all of his writings, the reviewer, as a good reader, *should* read the present work rather as Miller's memoirs (*allegro*) than one of his great critical writings (*lento*). And if we forget about the intention of the editors we can enjoy reading quite a subjective book about what literature means not to the critic but to Miller, the reader. More exactly, in *On Literature* we can read about Miller's literature, or simply, about Miller's reading.

⁸ J. Hillis Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), 21.