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The Rhetoric and Ethics of Reading*

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The context of my research is given by my doctoral thesis on irony, where I studied several ironological (irony-theoretical) texts of primary importance. In the last part I analysed the irony-conceptions of the (modern) American New Criticism and the (postmodern) American deconstruction. Now I would particularly like to emphasise the fact that while I was studying those texts on irony, my attention gradually focused on deconstruction and the so-called rhetoric of reading. The conclusion of my thesis is concerned with the (possible) ethics of reading, whereas the term was—and now in my paper is—borrowed from a Yale professor and critic, Joseph Hillis Miller, and his book, *The Ethics of Reading*. The study of this paradoxical term and its meanings—which we may look at suspiciously—leads to different reading techniques of modernism and postmodernism. I have used the word 'techniques', but I had better say 'practices' of reading because both in the American modernist New Criticism and postmodern deconstruction, the practicality of theories is emphasised. I think that for us teachers, critics, writers and readers (sometimes) functioning as 'models' in our life it is really important to take these ideas into consideration.

When we speak about deconstruction in the States, we feel compelled to indicate the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida's influence; immediately adding that Derrida does not name himself a deconstructionist and, actually, this something called deconstruction was born and brought up at the University of Yale in Paul de Man's, J. H. Miller's, Geoffrey H. Hartman's and Harold Bloom's, the four main deconstructors' work—of course, with Derrida's '(dis)seminating' step-fatherhood. In his *Allegories of Reading* de Man defines what the rhetorical means to him:

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> I follow the usage of common speech in calling this semiological enigma 'rhetorical'. The grammatical model of the question becomes rhetorical not when we have, on the one hand, a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning, but when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely incompatible) prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential abberations. (de Man AR, 10)

In the next sentence as antecedents, de Man refers not to Derrida's impact, but he mentions two modernist critics of the school named New Criticism: Monroe Breadsley and William Wimsatt, who also recognized the importance of the rhetorical in textual understanding. It also shows us that if we want to understand the rhetoric and later the ethics of reading, we have to map the preliminaries. That is, to understand the postmodern reading practice and its ethical implications, first, we need to know about the modernist view of reading, which gives the immediate context of American deconstruction.

In America in the 1940s–50s, having realised that students could not do anything with pieces of literature (especially, with poems), university teachers—John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, René Wellek, Allan Tate, William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks—developed and used a new method to analyse literary and philosophical texts. Besides practical textbooks written to students—eg. the famous 'understanding-series' (*Understanding Poetry*, *Understanding Fiction*)—their articles and studies were also concerned with the theory of literature, literary language and literary criticism; we can think of the well-known 'Wellek–Warren-book' titled *Theory of Literature*. Thus, it can be said that their mission—and they really took their work in such a way—made them immensely influential and productive.

What was new in their criticism? They deliberately acted against the branches of contemporary criticism, such as sociological, biographical or philological criticism, and demanded a more systematic and more rigorous approach in reading. They claimed that literary language differed from any other kind of language; consequently, critics, teachers, students, that is, readers had to concentrate on the texts themselves. In their work, *Literary Criticism,* Wimsatt and Brooks define "the principle task of criticism—perhaps *the* task of criticism—is to make explicit to the reader the implicit manifold of meanings" (652). They also undertook the task of improving the readers, not the authors, by showing them the complexity and inexhaustible richness of the literary works.

The key terms of their theoretically based approach are: "close

reading", structure and irony. That is, according to the New Critics, the text and its language are to be considered without any interest in the author's age or life; for example, in a poem we should pay attention only to the usage of language and the structure created. The real meaning of a literary text is given by and in its semantic structure, which is, on the one hand, dynamic—every poem is a little drama—showing the reconciliation of opposites; and on the other hand organic, that is, nothing is irrelevant. Thus, every detail contributes to the whole. As in his article, "The Heresy of Paraphrase", Brooks describes: "the structure meant is a structure of meanings, evaluations and interpretations; and the principle of unity which informs it seems to be one of balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes and meanings" (195). This poetic structure and its desired unity is not rational or logical, but—to use Brooksian similes—it resembles that of architecture or painting, a ballet or musical composition based on the "pattern of resolved stresses" (Brooks WWU, 203).

In poems, tension, conflicts and stresses are given by the 'problematic' elements, such as metaphors, symbols, paradoxes and other figures of speech, because they easily get their connotative meanings from the context. For example, Wimsatt in *The Verbal Icon* says that in a good metaphor "two clearly and substantially named objects ... are brought into such a context that they face each other with fullest relevance and illumination" (111). In spite of the conflicting or opposing meanings by the end of the close reading, an equilibrium of forces, a unity is supposed to be given, and "this unity is not a unity of the sort to be achieved by the reduction and simplification appropriate to an algebraic formula. It is a positive unity, not a negative; it represents not a residue but an achieved harmony" (Wimsatt VI, 114–115). Using the above mentioned drama-metaphor, it can be imagined as if the conflicting forces, more exactly the possible semantic (connotative) meanings of the words were fighting, and their tension resulted in a climax giving the theme, a leading idea or conclusion of a text. The whole process of close textual understanding is summarized in one word: irony. Nevertheless, in the modern New Criticism irony is overused. On the one hand, "it is the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context" (Brooks WWU, 209); that is, irony necessarily operates in every context and in every reading process. On the other hand, by the end of our close reading of a text we have to reveal the work's (possible) "invulnerability to irony". As Brooks introduces this idea in the wonderful arch-simile:

> Irony, then, in this further sense, is not only an acknowledgement of the pressures of a context. Invulnerability to irony is the stability of a context in which the internal pressures balance and mutually support

> each other. The stability is like that of the arch: the very forces which are calculated to drag the stones to the ground actually provide the principle of support—a principle in which thrust and counterthrust become the means of stability. (Brooks "Irony", 1044)

Let us pay attention to two things here: first, the figurative language used by the new critics in their close reading/writing; secondly, their obsession with a wanted/wished equilibrium and totality in textual understanding. While the first phenomenon leads us to the deconstructive attack on New Criticism, the second one foreshadows the moral implications of close reading.

Although the New Critics do not explicitly speak about ethical questions, for them poetry means "a way of knowing something: (if the poem is a real creation,) it is a kind of knowledge that we did not possess before"—as Allen Tate claims in *The Essays of Four Decades* adding: "it is not knowledge 'about' something else; . . .it is the fullness of that knowledge" (Tate 104–105). When Brooks says that, optimally, the ironical reading process results in "a unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude" (Wimsatt–Brooks LC, 380), he displays his totalizing and somewhat holistic, though dialectic, worldview. In the concluding paragraphs of his "Irony as a Principle of Structure" he confesses that in textual close reading "penetrating insights" can be gained and one of the uses of poetry is to make the readers "better citizens". But poetry, that is, a given figurative text, manages it relying on the expressed relevant particulars, not with the usage of abstraction. More accurately, it carries us "beyond the abstract creed into the very matrix from which our creeds are abstracted" (Brooks "Irony", 1048). Thus, specific moral problems can be the subject matter of literature, but the purpose of literature is not to point a moral.

I suppose, it can be guessed that in close reading—due to the critics' concern with true knowledge and wisdom—"such qualities as wit, ambiguity, irony, paradox, complexity, and tension are valued for more than aesthetic reasons; they are indexes to the view of reality—and of man and truth—in the work. They are, therefore, not really aesthetic or rhetorical but, since they are modes of apprehending reality, ontological or, in the broad sense, religious" (Spears 240). What's more, in "Cleanth Brooks and the Responsibilities of Criticism" Monroe K. Spears sees the mission of New Critics grounded in the tradition of Christian humanism giving ontological meaning to their reading practice while their irony is taken religiously, or at least ethically.

In the modernist close reading of New Criticism the belief in the possibility of order and the quest for order are emphasised, since in literature the reader is supposed to find true knowledge, "knowledge of a value-

structured world" (Wellek 228). As Wellek quotes Brooks's claim, namely, poetry gives "a special kind of knowledge... through poetry, man comes to know himself in relation to reality, and thus attains wisdom" (Wellek 229). The New Critics also have their belief in a strong sense of community expressed by the romantic idea of 'organic unity'. Actually, I characterised their reading technique as 'ironic' paying attention to the rhetorical forces of a given text, it is better called "irenic" striving for the equilibrium of those forces. Although we can find the New Critical approach quite positive and fruitful, we have to admit its basic idealistic naivity resulting from the modernist efforts aimed at solving the surrounding chaos of the world. Their desired vaulted arch symbolizing understanding can refer to perfection, but we cannot forget that it is suspended in the air between two solid, but imagined buildings.

In his early critical writings (*Blindness and Insight*) Paul de Man, one of the four Yale-deconstructors, deals with this shift from 'close(d)' reading to the open—later with his term named as allegorical—reading. In his essay titled "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism" he says, though the New Critics noticed the importance of and paid attention to such distinctive features of literary language as ambiguity or irony, these structural elements themselves contradicted the very premises on which the New Criticism with its central "totalizing principle" was founded. In the key paragraph he describes this process:

> As it refines its interpretations more and more, American criticism does not discover a single meaning, but a plurality of significations that can be radically opposed to each other. Almost in spite of itself, it pushes the interpretative process so far that the analogy between the organic world and the language of poetry finally explodes. This unitarian criticism finally becomes a criticism of ambiguity, an ironic reflection on the absence of the unity it had postulated. (de Man BI, 28)

Actually, it seems as if de Man had thought over the new critical approach of reading—reading its theory closely—, and on the basis of its faults or 'blind spots' and 'insights' he developed his later ideas. According to de Man, the greatest mistake of New Criticism was, while they tried to pay "such patient and delicate attention to the reading of forms" (de Man BI, 29), the presupposed idea of totality forced them to find closed forms and to strive for order. It can be said that they simply used Heidegger's theory of hermeneutical circularity, but they forgot about the fact that the (hermeneutical) act of understanding is a temporal one. As de Man remarks: "yet, the temporal factor, so persistently forgotten, should remind us that

the form is never anything but a process on the way to its completion" (de Man BI, 28). And the symbol that can show the true nature of textual understanding is not the circle or the arch, but the spiral line that consists of seemingly closed/closing circles displaying the temporal and neverending process of understanding, that is, the rhetoric of temporality.

In *Blindness and Insight* in the essay titled "The Rhetoric of Temporality", de Man regards allegory together with irony as the key rhetorical tropes in our (textual) understanding. Here he is concerned with the differences of the two rhetorical figures, which he defines in their relation to time. Though both show the discontinuous relationship between sign and meaning, the experience of time in the case of irony means "a synchronic structure, while allegory appears as a successive mode capable of engendering duration" (de Man BI, 226)—that is, it is diachronic. It is quite obvious why de Man feels obliged to distinguish the two tropes: he wants to resist, to get detached or differentiated from the new critical reading asserting that "the dialectical play between the two modes, as well as their common interplay with mystified forms of language ..., which it is not in their power to eradicate, make up what is called literary history" (de Man BI, 226). We can guess that after the New Critical emphasis on irony as a basic principle, in the de Manian reading, allegory is given primacy. Having published his theoretical works, de Man starts to interpret/read philosophical and literary texts relying on his ideas of the rhetorical. In the greatest collection of his readings titled *Allegories of Reading* (its subtitle says: *Figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*) he defines his rhetorical mode of reading:

> The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on a metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or the third) degree *allegories*. Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read. (de Man AR, 205)

But I can immediately add that efforts are made again and again as we try to understand, try to read a text and its allegory. It means that in the background, not only in the texts but in language itself, there should be something that makes the different allegorical readings possible and also helps us readers accept the impossibility of a final reading. We 'need' this something that is essentially rhetorical; we need irony. As in the concluding sentences of his *Allegories*—in the chapter titled *Excuses*—de Man says:

'Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration" (de Man AR, 301).

Now, after this long—but I hope necessary and not uninteresting—digression on reading, the most important question comes: what happened to the possible covert moral implication of the New Criticism in de Man's reading? I should claim that in the rhetorical deconstructive reading it has become overt; what's more, it has become evident. In his readings de Man speaks about the "practical ethical dimension of allegory" (de Man AR, 209) and he also says that "allegories are always ethical" (de Man AR, 206). The famous quotation reads as follows:

> Allegories are always ethical, the term ethical designating the structural interference of two distinct value systems. In this sense, ethics has nothing to do with the will (thwarted or free) of a subject, nor *a fortiori*, with a relationship between subjects. The ethical category is imperative (ie., a category rather than a value) to the extent that it is linguistic and not subjective. Morality is a version of the same language aporia that gave rise to such concepts as 'man' or 'love' or 'self', and not the cause or the consequence of such concepts. The passage to an ethical tonality does not result from a transcendental imperative but it is referential (and therefore unreliable) version of a linguistic confusion. Ethics (or, one should say, ethicity) is a discursive mode among others. (de Man AR, 206).

First, in this luminous paragraph, before going into details, we can find three different words related to our chosen topic: morality, ethics and ethicity. I think de Man does not simply want to play on words, since the more ancient—or modern—word, morality, and its science, ethics, are differentiated from the postmodern term, ethicity.[1] Although in their original meaning the words seem to refer to the same realm of the question of good versus wrong behaviour, from the common foundation the postmodern theory of ethics named ethicity gives rise to multiplicity. That is, in the word 'ethicity' we can see the deconstruction of ethics with preserving and questioning its aporetic roots. Despite the usual attack on deconstruction claiming that deconstruction turns from ethical problems in complete indifference, it rather turns to and regards such questions in their differences.

[1] Moreover, in its meaning the word 'ethicity' can be taken as being closer to morality than ethics, as it is also concerned with practice, not rules or system of rules formulated in ethics.

That is, the ethicity of deconstruction can be named 'ethics-in-difference' as being sensitive to variety it pays more attention to differences and consciously accepts them.

In de Man's theory, the new term of ethicity is strongly connected with the practice of reading, more exactly, the allegorical reading practice. In *Allegories of Readings* his analyses are about the universality and the impossibility of Reading (written with capital 'r') as he says "any narrative (that is, story-telling) is primarily the allegory of his own reading ... the allegory of reading narrates the impossibility of reading" (de Man AR, 76–7). However good we are as readers, we inevitably fail to read allegories due to the fact that a rhetorical trope says one thing and always means another, and its final reading thus becomes impossible. For de Man, "Reading" (written in quotation marks and capitalized)—also as an allegory—"includes not just ... the act of reading works of literature, but sensation, perception, and therefore every human act whatsoever" (Miller ER, 58). That is, it gives "the ground and foundation of human life" (Miller ER, 48) and, consequently, in a given text, event or experience we cannot reach a totality of understanding; that is, we cannot have a single, definitive interpretation.

De Man's theory certainly can be applied to de Man's reading of his own text or my understanding of his reading. In his *Ethics of Reading* J. H. Miller as a good reader tries to understand the impossible and reads de Man's ideas on ethicity in one of his chapters titled "Reading Unreadability: de Man". Analysing the famous quotation, Miller calls attention to the way de Man rejects the traditional, basically Kantian theory of ethics. Though de Man still uses the words, 'category' and 'imperative' alluding to the Kantian 'categorical imperative', for him the ethical category is neither subjective, nor transcendental—but linguistic. Being taken as a linguistic phenomenon, the ethical refers to a necessary element in language and life, namely that "we cannot help making judgments of right or wrong or commanding others to act according to those judgments (or) condemning them for not doing so"—says Miller (Miller ER, 46).

In his chapter on de Man's ethicity, he also emphasises the existential importance of reading and the 'fictional' (imagined sequence of allegories) nature of the (neverending) process of understanding that "mix(es) tropological, allegorical, referential, ethical, political, and historical dimensions" (Miller ER, 44). As de Man claims, the ethical just like the allegorical is only one of the possible 'discursive modes'; not a primary, but a secondary or a tertiary category, that is, they do not and cannot come first in textual understanding. Then what comes first? Referring again to the quotation it clearly says that the reading process starts from "a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction", then due to its

deconstruction it is followed (endlessly) by a sequence of "supplementary figural superposition" which tells "the unreadability of the prior narration". And these narratives—actually generated by the primary one are called allegorical narratives or allegories telling "the story of the failure to read" (de Man AR, 205).

Thus, *right* at the beginning of understanding we have rhetorical figures; more exactly, language with its determining laws. And—following de Man's ideas—I can say this is the very first and the very last moment when the word 'right' can be *truly* used, as starting our reading of a text with its rhetorical figures, we must (truly) enter its *false* world. Although we are in the realm of falsehood, being good readers we try to read it *right*; and, what's more, the ethical appears in this contextualized falsehood. For de Man "the term ethical designates the structural interference of two distinct value systems" referring to the epistemological true-false and the ethical right-wrong value-pairs. That is, in an allegorical reading a statement cannot be both true and right at once, as "it is impossible to respond simultaneously to those two demands" (Miller ER, 49).

Therefore instead of using the expression 'ethical value', de Man speaks about 'the ethical category' regarding it as an imperative: as an obligation it is taken absolute and unconditional. Both Miller and de Man (and I myself) struggle with the real meaning of de Man's ethicity—as can be expected in a text claiming the unreadability of reading. Miller quotes another interesting passage, where de Man clearly names his 'true' categorical imperative: "in the case of reading of a text, what takes place is a necessary understanding... an understanding is an epistemological event prior to being an ethical or aesthetic value" (Miller ER, 51–52). I think it becomes obvious that de Man knows only one imperative: the imperative of language with its—quite hermeneutical—'read!' or 'understand!'. Returning to the central de Manian principle, Miller concludes that "to live is to read, or rather to commit again and again the failure to read which is the human lot... each reading is strictly speaking, ethical, in the sense that it *has* to take place, by an implacable necessity, as a response to a categorical demand" (Miller ER, 59). Our world is full of texts and systems of signs, which we are bound to understand; we cannot help reading, but we should accept that we cannot go beyond the borders of language. And we also have to accept that the ethical is only one of the possible but necessary referential modes of our reading.

Actually, Miller tries to read and interpret de Man's theory of the 'rhetorical close-reading' from an ethical point of view, but he himself cannot escape from falling into the traps of the rhetorical, of language. At the end of his reading on de Man's ethicity, Miller answers his own question

using the tricky affirmative of double negation. He says that in de Man's case "(the) ethics of reading imposes on the reader the 'impossible' task of reading unreadability, but that *does not* by *any* means mean that reading, even 'good' reading, *cannot* take place and *does not* have a necessary ethical dimension" (Miller ER, 59. Italics are mine).

On the whole, Miller's effort, aimed at showing the ethics of reading in de Man's ethicity, cannot be seen as really convincing. Miller is apologizing all time that he is only a reader (and cannot be anybody else), which also means that he must be mistaken if he thinks his own reading as a definitive one. Despite of it being a 'mission impossible' he still insists on the necessity of the ethical in understanding, and works out his ethics of reading, relying on de Man's ethical-linguistic imperative expressed in the allegorical reading. Thus in the following chapters after interpreting de Man's ethicity, he explores passages from three novelists' (George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and Henry James) works. Although in his introductory "Reading Doing Reading" Miller confesses that his selection of texts and their ordering is not innocent, he claims that he at random chose his examples. Let us believe him in the case of the literary works, but I strongly doubt that the second chapter written on the famous de Manian passage resulted from an arbitrary choice. The same is true of the other topic dealt with in the previous chapter, since the very first chapter is concerned with Kant's categorical imperative.

In fact, towards the end of the chapter on de Man's 'unreadable reading', Miller quotes Kant's concluding sentence in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*) about the incomprehensibility of the moral imperative: "And so we do not indeed comprehend the practical unconditional necessity of the moral imperative; yet we do not comprehend its incomprehensibility, which is all that can be fairly demanded of a philosophy which in its principles strives to reach the limit of human reason" (Miller ER, 56). According to Miller, while Kant, to some extent, still believed in the ability of language and reason to formulate an understanding of a nonlinguistic impossibility, de Man regards the moral imperative and reason as aspects of language and language cannot be used to understand/to read its own limitation.

In a chapter titled "Reading Telling: Kant", Miller tries to understand and deconstruct the Kantian categorical imperative to show an example of his (mysterious) ethics of reading. The English translation of the well-known apodictic formula[2] goes "I always should act *as if* my private maxim were

[2] "...ich soll niemals anders verfahren, *als so*, dass ich auch wollen könne, meine Maxime solle ein allgemeines Gesetz werden." I basically rely on the English translation of the Kantian formula quoted in Miller's work, but I also consulted with the original

to be universal legislation for all mankind" or in another way "I should never act *in such a way* that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law" (Kant 21). In the formula, Miller calls our attention to the usage of 'as if' (*als so*) and 'in such a way' together with the mode of past subjunctive (cf.unreal past): to accept the Kantian categorical imperative, we should use our imagination. That is, with this *als so* we must enter the world of fiction, and having created a fictitious context, a little novel, we shall be able to tell whether or not the action is moral. Miller again emphasises that narrative or story-making gives the basic activity of the human mind together with the ability of telling stories to each other and understanding them; that is, (again) we cannot help reading. He finds that "narrative serves for Kant as the absolutely necessary *bridge* without which there would be no connecting between law as such and any particular ethical rule of behaviour" (Miller ER, 28). Moreover, Miller finds it is quite interesting that in his sytem, Kant regarded his third critique, *Critique of Judgment* (work of art), as serving as a bridge between epistemology (the work of pure reason) and ethics (the work of practical reason) separated by a deep chasm.

Then, among other passages, Miller quotes a footnote from *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in which Kant tries to give what he means by the expression, 'to act from respect (Achtung) for law', claiming that "respect can be regarded as the effect of the law on the subject and not as the cause of the law... All respect for a person is only respect for the law of which the person provides *an example*" (Miller ER, 18. Italics are mine). Here it is again expressed that in our life we are related to the ethical through finding analogies and reading stories. We can judge a person or an act as ethical, because we find him or it being analogous to the incomprehensible law: as if human beings and their life events or narrated stories were used as rhetorical figures of speech (signs) referring to the moral imperative.

According to Miller, this footnote reveals the Kantian reading of ethics, as he finds that the author reads himself or re-reads his own text. As Miller says "at such moments an author turns back on himself, so to speak, turns back on a text he or she has written, re-reads it, and, it may be, performs an act which can be called an example of the ethics of reading" (Miller ER, 15). In this sentence it is revealed that this moment is not a necessity in every text, as it may happen. But for Miller, or me, the deconstructive reader, who exactly pays attention to those moments, it means a necessity, a must, and the self-reading blindness of the chosen texts becomes the insight of the

German text, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, Werkausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982).

ethics of reading in his/my understanding. Since throughout he suggests keeping in mind that his "interest is not in ethics as such but in the ethics of reading and in the relation of the ethical moment in reading to relation in the sense of giving account, telling a story, narrating" (Miller ER, 15).

But being a deconstructor, Miller cannot give a relaxing conclusion of his reading of the Kantian ethics. In the last pages he discusses the performative act of promising offered by the Kantian categorical imperative. Unfortunately, the example Kant gives is one of false promise, which "does not exemplify that of which it is meant to be an example" (Miller ER, 36). Miller with great pleasure displays Kant's blindness or slip of the tongue concluding that in the end the good reader is to be confronted by not the moral law, not even a good example of it, but by the unreadability of the text. The promise is made in language, and it cannot promise anything but itself with its own unfathomed abyss. To quote Miller's judgment: "The example, he (Kant) assures us, will serve as the safe bridge between (the universal law) and (the particular case). Instead of that, the example divides itself within itself between two possible but incompatible readings and so becomes unreadable. The bridge which was to vault over the abyss between universal and particular law opens another chasm within itself" (Miller ER, 35). Thinking of the bridge-metaphor, we can remember the vault of New Criticism and it can be concluded that both of them, the modernist and postmodernist metaphors of reading, remain in the realm of figurative 'falsehood'.

Thus, in texts the ethical can be said to basically mean the introduction of a universal 'must'. As Miller summarises:

> In what I call 'the ethical moment' there is a claim made on the author writing the work, on the narrator telling the story within the fiction of the novel, on the characters within the story at their decisive moments of their lives, and on the reader, teacher, or critic responding to the work. This ethical 'I must' cannot... be accounted for by the social and historical forces that impinge upon it. In fact the ethical moment contests these forces or is subversive of them (Miller ER, 8).

Now, we can ask the question: why is it so important for the deconstructors to insist on the existence of such discursive modes, namely, the ethical, the social, the political or the historical, which sound quite odd in their rhetorical analyses? In his introduction, Miller says that his provocative choosing of the title and topic, 'ethics of reading' can be explained by the attacks on deconstruction, as it is often labelled as 'nihilistic', 'ahistorical', 'relativist', 'immoral' or 'negative' (Miller ER, 9). In spite of these mistaken, or at least awkward, polemics being aimed at calling against the rhetorical-

deconstructive reading practice, they obviously appear as a necessity in the course of the history of literary criticism and theory.

On the whole, as Jonathan Loesberg remarks "the most virulent charge against deconstruction [is] its aestheticism [which] stands as a vague synonym for imagining a realm of art entirely separate from social or historical effects and then advocating an escape into that 'unreal', aesthetic universe" (Loesberg 3). On the one hand, I think, the Yale-critics would answer that there is no escape beyond language and textual understanding. They would also say that they really do work hard as reading needs continuous efforts, and they should follow a must: a linguistic necessity, which can be called a hermeneutical or ethical imperative. On the other hand, deconstruction as a new mode of criticism (cf. new new criticism) appeared in the last few decades of the 20^{th} century, and the end of the previous centuries were similarly marked by the atmosphere of decadence—with the signs of nihilism, hedonism, pessimism and escapist fantasies.[3]

But there is a crucial difference between deconstruction and other decadent theories of art: it is its strong sense of responsibility. In *The Ethics of Reading*—following de Man's idea on the necessity of reading—Miller claims that "each reading is, strictly speaking, ethical, in the sense that it *has* to take place, by an implacable necessity, as a response to a categorical demand, and in the sense that the reader *must* take responsibility for it and for its consequences" (Miller ER, 59). And here the word 'reader' can not only refer to the writer and his invented figures, but also critics, teachers

[3] I especially find one period close to deconstruction in its ideas: English Victorianism with its central theorist, Walter Pater. The movement called the English *l'art pour l'art*, 'art for art's sake', which meant that a circle of the novelists and painters was basically centered around or related to Pater himself and all the members were also attacked due to their 'sinful' aestheticism. In spite of the differences between the two kinds of criticism, the question of the ethical in the aesthetical emphatically appeared in both of them. Let me refer to a particular work now: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Despite the scandaleous nature of the work with its welcoming of amorality, new hedonism, worship of art and Greek spirit in love (cf. homosexuality), it offers a puzzling ending. Dorian Gray wishes to remain handsome and pure, while his portrait, his 'magical mirror', is getting old and marked by his sinful deeds. In the end he tries to destroy the portrait, the only witness to his ugly and unjust life, but he dies while his portrait gets back the original purity and goodness of his youth. How can we interpret the ending? In Dorian's death we can claim the victory of art over life, but the villain is punished. Consequently, we can read the ending as a moral conclusion united with the perfection of art, which Wilde called the expression of "ethical beauty" (quoted in Ellmann 321). See "The New Aestheticism". In Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. NY: Vintage Books, 1988.

and students, since all of us are involved, must be involved, in the process of Reading. And in a later work titled *Victorian Subjects* Miller emphatically connects the problem of responsibility expressed in the ethics of reading with the obligation of teachers. Being a reader, the teacher is also obliged to submit himself or herself to "the truth of the linguistic imperative" of reading, that is, to "the power of the words of the text over the mind" (Miller VS, 255). In this sense the teacher is taken as a revealer, not a creator and the way Miller describes the teacher's ethical reading is similar to the Socratic method:

> The obligation of the reader, the teacher, and the critic would seem to be exclusively epistemological. The reader must see clearly what the work in question says and repeat that meaning in his commentary or teaching. He functions thereby, modestly as *an intermediary*, as a *midwife or catalyst*. He *transmits* meanings which are objectively there but which might not otherwise have reached readers or students. He *brings the meaning to birth again* as illumination and insight in their minds, making the interaction take place without himself entering into it or altering it. It would seem that the field covered by reading involves exclusively the epistemological categories of truth and falsehood, insight and blindness. (Miller VS, 237).

I am sure the tone of this description can be felt as being quite ironic, and we should remember that the Socratic method itself was based on irony. We can wonder if the deconstructors think it is impossible to Read—that is, to give a definitive reading of a text—what is happening in the seminars. The answer is 'obvious': reading is happening as it is bound to take place. Maybe, it sounds strange after all these theoretical analyses, but being a teacher of English literature[4] I agree with the Yale-critics, who work or worked as teachers, that the questioning Socratic way is useful in teaching. Certainly, all of us are aware of the fact that—like in the Socratic dialogues—the questions are directed. Yet in the ethics of reading they are directed not by the teacher, but by the text: its rhetoric and linguistic imperative. This makes it possible for every student to read the text in his or her own way, while the teacher acts as mediator and moderator at the same time.

I think that besides acting like a 'midwife' and encouraging the imaginative reading skill of the students, a good teacher needs something else—a sense of irony. Irony is needed to accept the students' different views

[4] Though I obtained my PhD-degree in philosophy (more exactly, in aesthetics), I teach history of English literature and literary theory at the Department of English Studies. Actually, the combination of my present occupation and my philosophical attitude has resulted in my interest in the rhetoric and ethics of reading.

on the texts, and so keep the varied lines of thought together. But this deconstructive irony means more than simply referring to a trope since it is an attitude, an openness towards reality, ethicity, reading, and teaching that is based on the ability of shifting points of view. It marks the ability of avoiding to claim this or that interpretation as the final one, while giving the experience of reading to each and every student. And I am sure it cannot be done without accepting that the final reading, Reading, is unattainable, which we should admit cannot be done without irony. I hope to have fulfilled my—hopefully, not a false—promise of discussing 'the rhetoric and ethics of reading', and you have been 'its' (and also my) good readers.

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