

J. HILLIS MILLER
LITERATURE, CULTURE,
THEORY AND
THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

The last of the founders of deconstruction — J. Hillis Miller — died in February 2021 during this pandemic. Miller was not only an accomplished teacher and researcher in Comparative Literature and English Literature and a theorist but a global figure in literary studies, rhetorical criticism and much else, including one of the major Western scholars of literary practice and theory in China.¹ *J. Hillis Miller: Literature, Culture, Theory and the World*, this volume, is timely as Miller deserves sustained consideration of his whole oeuvre. One of the threads in the collection is Miller's relation to, or pretext of, China and, more specifically, Miller's *An Innocent Abroad: Lectures in China* (2015). Miller saw literature as the centre of his concern, so culture, theory, ecology, nature and the world are related to that focus. In this Introduction, I shall give an overview, or arc of, Miller's work and then a brief discussion of the contributions to this collection and a sense of the shape or structure.

His small brief or even summa, *On Literature* (2002), according to Miller, arose out of different versions of a talk first given at the University of California, Irvine, for the Koehn Endowed Lectureship in February 2001 entitled, "On the Authority of Literature," which was especially important for chapter 4, "Why Read Literature?" then delivered at Baylor University and given as two lectures in China, which Wang Ning, a contributor to this volume, helped to arrange.² As an epigraph, Miller uses a translation of the last line of Paul Verlaine's poem, "Art poétique" [The Poetic Art; my translation here and elsewhere]], "And all the rest is literature."³ Verlaine dedicated this poem to Charles Morice, who had reviewed Verlaine in *La Nouvelle Rive Gauche* in December 1882 and a leading Symbolist who collaborated on books with Gauguin and Rodin, begins: "De la musique avant toute chose" (Of music before all things).⁴

¹ See J. Hillis Miller, "Western Literary Theory in China," *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History* 79. 3 (September 2018), pp. 341-353.

² J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xi-xii.

³ Miller, *On Literature*, [x]. See Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁴ Paul Verlaine, "Art poétique," *Jadis et naguère : poésies* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1884), p. 23.

To begin the eighth and penultimate stanza, Verlaine returns to music in a variation: “De la musique encore et toujours!” (Of music again and always!).⁵ (Verlaine 24). The last stanza, the first line of which Miller translates, shifts:

Que ton vers soit la bonne aventure
 Eparsé au vent crispé du matin
 Qui va fleurant la menthe et le thym...
 Et tout le reste est littérature.⁶
 (Let your verse be fortune telling
 Scattered in the tense morning wind
 That goes smelling of mint and thyme...
 And all the rest is literature.)

Verlaine, as Miller does after him, explores the fortunes of poetry, scattered on the wind, which smells of mint and thyme, and suggests the relation between poetry and the world — literature being all else. The verse tells a fortune within nature and the senses by the vast remainder of literature. This is no easy relation in the shifting winds of life and the world. Even the epigraph to this small but vital book in Miller’s oeuvre becomes a synecdoche and a metonymy in relating the part and the whole, displacement, and the world. The threshold between world and literature cannot be reduced to two basic sides of the world of fiction and the fiction of the world. This crossing or *χιασμός* may cross the limen or threshold and the space between world and literature allows Miller and all of us to explore both sides and the middle. The very tension allows for the interpretative work of writer and reader, critic and theorist.

In a rhetoric of temporality, Miller starts his book, beginning with remembrance, presence and prophecy all at once:

The end of literature is at hand. Literature’s time is almost up. It is about time. It is about, that is, the different epochs of different media. Literature, in spite of its approaching end, is nevertheless perennial and universal. It will survive all historical and technological changes. Literature is a feature of any human culture at any time and place. These two contradictory premises must govern all serious reflection “on literature” these days.⁷

The clarity of Miller’s writing is something that was much prized in French and English into the 1960s, and his clear prose in the service of

⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Miller, *On Literature*, p. 1.

exploring strange and difficult questions is a gift. Literature is about time and the end of time. Literature lives even as it dies. Miller can state a paradox elegantly. Here is his Attic style. Derrida is often Ciceronian or elaborate but has his Attic moments. One instance, Tom Cohen, quotes in his Introduction to a collection, to which Miller contributes, on Derrida and the humanities –Derrida says: “No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy.”⁸ Literature can be about freedom in the face of censorship or tyranny –it expresses in its texts but also in its contexts (institutions, history). A fine English stylist, Miller explores the textual and contextual aspects of literature throughout his long and distinguished career. He untangles the close and intricate connection of beauty and truth, aesthetics and ethics. He embodies and analyzes poetics and rhetoric: he is a keen interpreter.

Miller’s friendship with Derrida is something he has written about, including in *For Derrida* (2009). Both thought hard about literature. In his discussion of a new humanities and university, Derrida says about literature:

These new Humanities would treat, in the same style, the history of literature. Not only what is commonly called History of literatures or literature themselves, with the great question of its canons (traditional and indisputable objects of the classical Humanities), but the history of the concept of literature, of the modern institution named literature, of its links with fiction and the performative force of the “as if,” of its concept of *oeuvre*, author, signature, national language, of its link with the right to say or not to say everything that founds both democracy and the idea of the unconditional sovereignty claimed by the university and within it by what is called, inside and outside departments, the Humanities.⁹

Like Miller, Derrida sees literature in historical, conceptual, institutional, individual, conditional, democratic, educational and humanist terms. Derrida and Miller present their related but distinct “as ifs.” Once upon a time becomes what might happen in time. Literature and the

⁸ Jacques Derrida, “*Passions : ‘An Oblique Offering.*” trans. D. Wood, in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 23, quoted in Tom Cohen, “Introduction: Derrida and the Future of ...” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 10 and p. 23n19. See Peggy Kamuf, *The Division of Literature, or the University in Deconstruction*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Future of the Profession or the University without Condition (Thanks to the ‘Humanities,’ What Could Take Place Tomorrow),” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, edited by Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 52.