

Western and Chinese Poetics: An Interview with Professor J. Hillis Miller

Minru Li

Professor J. Hillis Miller received his Ph.D at Harvard University, and then taught at The Johns Hopkins University and at Yale University. He is now Distinguished Professor in the English and Comparative Literature Department at the University of California, Irvine, also Honorary Professor at Peking University. He was President of America Modern Language Association. As a main figure of deconstruction, he is one of the most influential contemporary critics, with 15 books published.

Dr. Minru Li got his MA from the Chinese Department, Sichuan University, in 1982. Then he staffed in the Chinese Department at Wuhan University for 3 years. From the end of 1985 to 1986, he was at Yale University as visiting scholar, with Professor Miller as his sponsor and adviser. Thus Minru Li became Professor Miller's first Chinese student. Now Minru Li is teaching in the Asian Languages and Literatures Department, the University of Auckland.

Professor Miller was invited to the University of Auckland to give a key-note speech at an international conference in July 1996, when the interview was made. The text has been proof-read by Professor Miller.

Li: My first question is about language. In classical Chinese poetics, there is a theory of language, which James Liu calls the paradox of language. That is, on the one hand, language is limited in expressing one's world, inside and outside; on the other hand, we have to use language to communicate. There is no way to get rid of it. Even the

statement of abandoning language itself is expressed in language. Therefore, in realising this paradox of language, classical Chinese poetics emphasises the meanings beyond the words. Could you tell me your opinions about this issue?

Miller: I would express it as an other than language that is present in language. That is, you need language to get to that border, beyond which there is something which is not linguistic meaning in the normal sense. You could call that the other of language with two senses of that genitive of. That is to say, it is the other that belongs to language and it's other to language, other than language. That "of" can be both subjective and objective genitives. You can say "the other of language," meaning something inherent in language. This something inherent in language nevertheless is other than language but also something that you need language to get to. Language can take you to a border, beyond which there's something unsayable. Nevertheless, you can only glimpse this unsayable by way of language. Moreover, you cannot, in my view, generalise about it as a single realm or thing or power or spirit or place. It's different for each writer. The way in which Henry James talks about an other of language is different from the way Proust talks. That's why one book I'm writing has as title 'Others'. I wanted that plural in order not to beg the question by assuming the existence of some single 'other'. As you know the word 'other' in English can be a name for the numinous, the mysterious, something beyond the everyday. Literature for me is one way to reach what I call "the others." Derrida, in one of his recent books, *The Gift of Death*, discusses at length an admirable expression for this. The sentence says: "Every other is wholly other (Tout autre est tout autre)." If you have a radical conception of the other of language, it would have to be something that is wholly other, completely other.

Li: I am quite interested in the concept of the other. It seems to me, there is something in it related to Western religious thought. Could you tell me about Derrida's religious opinions? According to post-

Modernism, God is dead.

Miller: Right. However, Derrida has written a long essay on religion recently and he published an earlier essay on what's called in our tradition, negative theology. As for deconstructionist's attitude towards religion, it is very hard to articulate this. I was once offered a position at the University of Chicago partly in the Divinity School there. I was at Yale then and I said to Paul de Man that really troubled me a lot, as I wasn't sure if I belonged in a Divinity School. He said—I have always remembered this—“Religious questions are the most important.” I think the answers that de Man gave and that I give to religious questions are to some degree negative. They are certainly not orthodox. That's undoubtedly true for Derrida, too. There are important differences among the three of us in this area. Nevertheless, it's simply not true to say that, Derrida, for example, has no interest in religion, or that he is an atheist, or that so-called deconstruction is intrinsically atheological. For example, a couple of years ago Derrida taught St Augustine's *Confessions* with great warmth and sympathy. He has said that St Augustine's *Confessions* is one of his favourite books. Within deconstruction, in different ways in each case, there's a negotiation with what I call “the others,” and it is incorrect to say that, for deconstruction, “it's all language.” This is an important point, often grossly misunderstood.

Li: But the difference between Chinese tradition and Derrida in terms of the others, it seems to me, is that the Chinese don't separate this world from the other world. If there is some other world, it is inside this world.

Miller: I know that, whereas for us the word ‘heaven’ would traditionally name something transcendent, somewhere a long way away.

Li: Exactly. That's why Pauline Yu said that the Western concept of metaphor is to use images in this world to express the other world figuratively, while the Chinese don't think in this way. What do you

think about that?

Miller: Well, yes, the Chinese way might be closer to the way Derrida or I think about the wholly other. We would resist localising of this otherness in some specific far off place. There may be some kinship. I think the difference would be that in China this is a normal way of thinking and speaking. It is built into everyday language, whereas it is not a normal way in European languages. You've got to twist European languages to make them say that, since "heaven" in English means a far off transcendent place (though it can also mean simply "sky"). If you use the word you cannot ignore this meaning. In the same way, the word "other" is used in a politically negative way within present-day cultural studies to describe the way an imperialist culture needs to define itself in terms of its superiority to some other subordinate culture. I would, on the contrary, want to reserve that word "others" for a kind of otherness that has a positive aspect. I have a problem in trying to write about this because what I say is be likely to be misunderstood. The word carries a current widespread meaning that I don't want, but it is not easy to go against current usage. It takes a lot of careful explaining, and even then you may be misunderstood.

Li: So, it sounds like you would agree with the Chinese saying that language is limited and inaccurate to express one's ideas. In other words, language, to certain extent, is misleading.

Miller: Yes. I agree.

Li: And on the other hand, we have to use language to reach something unsayable.

Miller: Poetry for me, let's say literature, is the use of language to get up to that border beyond which language fails and therefore to give the reader some kind of glimpse of what is beyond that border.

Li: Because of the limitation and misleading aspects of language, the

Chinese recognize that comprehensive analysis is almost impossible. The more you say, possibly, the less you can convey. Hence the best way is to keep silent. However, it is also impossible to be absolutely silent. Therefore, the Chinese tend to use very economic, succinct, and evocative discourse in their literature and literary criticism.

Miller: I don't think we have anything quite like that traditionally in Western languages. We tend to be more garrulous. I was using the notion of talking or using language as a way of reaching the other, whereas you were praising sparseness or succinctness or brevity or even silence. Your praise of brevity or silence might be very different from what I was describing. I mean Proust's novel is 3,500 pages long. It certainly isn't succinct or short or silent. Nevertheless, all those words are, it could be shown, for the sake of indicating what is beyond language. Henry James wrote a large number of novels with a similar goal. I think that's more traditional for us—to talk a lot in order to reach the borders of language. As you know there is a famous sentence at the end of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in which he says "Whereof one cannot speak one should remain silent." The *Tractatus* is Wittgenstein's first major book. It is very different from his later work, for example in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Just because he said in that first book that whereof one cannot speak one should remain silent didn't keep him from speaking precisely about those things whereof one should keep silent. So he didn't practice what he preached. (laugh)

Anyway, I don't think we have too much of a tradition of that praise of silence in the West, except in certain of our religions, for example, Quakerism. The Quakers go in for its silence, speaking only sparingly. They have respect for language as something you don't want to overuse. But most of our religions are all too talkative. (laugh) They don't have any problem using words.

Li: The second question is about reading. I was told that deconstruction is accused of "deconstructing" the distinction between

good reading and bad one. Therefore, every reading is correct in its own way. Could you tell me your opinion about how to judge whether a reading is good? What kind of criteria do you use in your judgment?

Miller: I think that characterisation of deconstruction is wrong. We so-called deconstructionists never said that. Another way to put this would be to say that there is an implicit claim made in my work when I write an essay about Proust or Henry James or any other writer (and in de Man's work or Derrida's work when they write about works of literature or other works) that what we say is true, correct readings. It should be remembered that though Derrida is often said to be just a philosopher, he has written a huge amount of literary criticism. Our implicit or often explicit claim is that we've got it right. That doesn't mean there wouldn't be other ways to write correctly about these authors. There is always more to be said than has been said. The appeal for me, of the work of those two friends and colleagues of mine, Derrida and de Man, is not their theoretical formulations but rather the force and interest and unexpectedness of their readings. On the one hand unexpected and on the other hand persuasive and seeming to me to be right. I remember that when I attended de Man's seminars I would know beforehand he was going to give a seminar on such and such a work that I knew. I would try to anticipate what he was going to say. I never succeeded in doing that. I was always surprised and yet always persuaded that he was right.

I think the criteria are easy enough to state: a good reading is one that most fully accounts for the complexities and implications and so on of words on the page. In other words, the authority for reading, for me, comes not from the reader but as a response on the part of the reader to a demand made by the text to be read in a certain way. That is the experience I have. It is quite the reverse of a domination by me as reader of the work. It's rather that the work puts a responsibility on me to explain it, to get it right. Though I have developed in my readings of certain authors that I've come back to

over decades, writers like Thomas Hardy for example, I don't repudiate my early readings of those authors. When you can demonstrate that a certain reading has simply missed something important then you can say that is a bad reading. It may be very difficult, it may be that you can always go further and you may never succeed in getting a reading that is fully satisfying, complete.

Li: The more you say, the more you are stimulated to say.

Miller: A good reader is the person who has an eye for the anomalies in details. I agree that it's a presupposition, a prejudice or assumption, an unprovable assumption, that literature, literary works in my tradition, are very strange and that they're not going to be easy to understand. Nevertheless, I make that hypothesis. I began doing college work as a physicist and shifted to literature in the middle of my second year at college. I did this in part because I was fascinated by how peculiar literature is. When I went to college, I found poems amazing, for example Tennyson. How could anybody use language like that? So my vocation for literary study was to some degree a transposition from science, a kind of scientific project to try and account for the oddness, as I saw it, in literature. The problem was to develop a language or to find a language that other critics had used that would allow me to say something about that aspect of literary works.

It is important to make this clear in order for me not to be understood to be saying what deconstruction is often falsely said to say, namely, that you can make a piece of literature mean anything you like. Reader response criticism, for instance, sometimes seems to say something like that, though I don't think Stanley Fish would quite put it that way. So-called deconstructionists, however, have never said that. I certainly would not at any time have said that. I have been interested in the idea that a given work of literature may contain contradictory elements, elements that may make it impossible to encompass that work in a single, coherent, logical

reading, a reading such the New Criticism taught me is the goal of criticism. Nevertheless, that does not mean you can make a given work mean whatever you want it to mean.

Li: So, if a good reading is unpredictable, and is closely related to the text. It seems to me that deconstruction is a common and traditional approach.

Miller: I think what is new in my work, as in Derrida's work, is what Derrida would call an anti-logocentric bias. That is a bias against expecting to find or wanting to find a completely coherent logical system. That is new. It's not unheard of in the past. It bears some relationship, for example, to Jewish traditions in interpretation of the *Old Testament*. I remember hearing Derrida once told me a great Jewish scholar, philosopher, and critic, Emmanuel Levinas, looked at his friend Derrida and said "Jacques, you remind me of a heretical cabbalist of the 14th century." In other words, Derrida seemed to Levinas very much inside the Jewish tradition but by no means orthodox. It's not consonant with the tradition. Nevertheless there is a relationship. In a somewhat similar way, my relationship is with, my roots are in Protestantism, but I am, to a certain degree, what you might call a heterodox Protestant. I was brought up as a Protestant and I share the suspicion of the idols, icons that goes along with being a Protestant. We Protestants don't like statues in churches because they claim to represent the divinity. I was brought up to believe, probably quite falsely, that the Catholic priests keep the Bible from their parishioners and don't allow them to read the Bible. We were told a good church is one with plain windows, not stained glass, transparent windows so you can look outside—because God is everywhere in nature. So there is some connection between my instincts in literary study and my own religious tradition, but in me that tradition has been turned, deviated.

Li: Could you make a summary of the criteria, one, two, three. . . .

Miller: I don't think you can because what might be a recipe for one

book wouldn't work for another one. The only recipe I can give is to say you have to read the new work with as open a mind as possible and expect it to be different from any other work you've read. A piece of advice I would give students would be to expect a literary work to be different from what the scholars or teachers say it's going to be like, including even what I say.

Proust is a good example. Proust has had the benefit of the most distinguished French literary critics since Proust's great novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, came out. I've read what many of these critics have written about Proust, and I've met many of these people and of course I admire them and their work. Nevertheless what they say didn't really prepare me for what happened, what I found, when I read Proust. I found things there that were not what I had been told I was going to find. That's an almost universal experience I've had with reading literature. If you take, for example, one of these little paperbacks of some great literary work that has an introduction by some expert, the relationship between the introduction and the paperback, and the introduction by the learned scholar, the specialist, and the text itself, is most often not that of harmony but that of disharmony. Even if I myself happened to have been the author of that essay. (laugh) So I tell my student: "Don't listen to me. Read the work for yourself." Of course you need to know biographical facts and so on, but there's no substitute for reading the work as best you can on your own, and with Proust I can tell you that's a job, 3,500 pages. So I think the best strategy would be to expect any literary work to be strange, to be prepared for that. Derrida and de Man are exemplary in this respect. They almost always are able to pick out something strange that nevertheless seems important. Derrida has a great gift for picking out something apparently peripheral in the work of a given author and making that the basis of a brilliant interpretation. For example, his use of the Rousseau's essay on the origin of language. Rousseau's essay hadn't even been thought important enough to be included in the standard complete edition of Rousseau, but it became the basis of Derrida's *Of*

Grammatology.

Li: Your opinion reminds me of T.S. Eliot's essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." It seems not different from his point of view that new works change the tradition. What I'm interested in is what's the unique viewpoint of deconstruction towards reading.

Miller: Well, Eliot is talking about poets changing a tradition. I don't suppose literary critics change their tradition but they may much change the way works in a given tradition are read. You'll never really quite read Rousseau in the same way again after encountering Derrida's reading. That's quite different from Eliot's idea that a new poem changes the whole tradition to which it adds itself. He hoped a different from Eliot's idea that a new poem changes the whole tradition to which it adds itself. He hoped *The Waste Land* would do that with the Western tradition. It seems to me a problematic claim, in a number of ways. I would be very happy to have deconstruction described as extremely traditional, conventional, pedagogically conservative, with great respect for learning and original languages. It's just that we found if you take that procedure, that methodology, seriously, you find some very strange things in works of literature that other people haven't seen before. That's the wonderful thing about literature. It's full of surprises. It'll last a whole lifetime, and then some.

Li: A few days ago you talked about that every good reading is a deconstructive reading. . . .

Miller: Sure. It's another way of putting what I was just saying. If you want to say deconstruction is traditional, pedagogical, conservative and so on, you can turn that around and say every good reading is a deconstructive reading. An example of that would be the work of William Empson or Kenneth Burke. Neither Empson or Burke were deconstructionists. The term didn't exist at that point when they were writing. Nevertheless I immensely admire their work. They have an eye for anomalies in works of literature and are able to

account for them. Empson's books, both *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and especially *Some Versions of Pastoral*, are wonderful works of criticism. I know he has a certain importance in China. I kept meeting people at Beijing University who had known Empson. Empson was an extremely gifted reader of poetry.

Li: If you were to call him a deconstructive reader, he would be upset.

Miller: He's dead. So, who knows? (laugh) He would say something unexpected in response no doubt. Nevertheless, I count him one of my predecessors, a strong influence on my work.

Li: How about Plato and Aristotle?

Miller: Well, I think that Plato and Aristotle are good examples of authors who turn out, when you read them, to be different from the usual accounts of them.

For example, the standard English edition of Plato's *Complete Dialogues* has been edited by Edith Hamilton. This edition little prefaces to each of the dialogues. When you come to *The Protagoras*, she (or whoever wrote that preface) says, well, you really needn't pay very much attention to all of the stuff at the beginning of the dialogue about other people than Protagoras, the frame story. The really interesting part of *The Protagoras* comes later on when Socrates is trying to refute the Sophist, Protagoras. If you actually read *The Protagoras*, however, you will find that all of that framing is absolutely fundamental to the dialogue, to the dialogue's meaning. The dialogue is extremely subtle and complicated. It certainly can't be summarised in terms of normal accounts of Plato, what Plato believed.

Li: But that's your deconstructive reading, not the. . . .

Miller: No. It's the reading any good reader ought to make.

I think I could, give me a little time for it, and I think I can persuade you that I'm right. That is to say that this is not a willful or inventive reading but it's what the text actually says.

As for Aristotle, Aristotle's *Poetics* is really a very strange work. It is by no means to be summarised by the normal accounts of Aristotle's theory of poetics. For example, he, Aristotle, says nothing irrational to be included in a tragedy, and he says that a good tragedy should be perspicuous, that is to say, you should be able to see through it. Then he chooses, as his primary example of a tragedy, *Oedipus the King*, a work that is irrational and lacks perspicuity. Aristotle, I think, was a great, very great, philosopher and critic. It's as though, like the best modern ordinary language philosophers, J. L. Austin, for instance, he chooses the example that puts the most strain or stress on the theory he's trying to work out. It's weak philosophers who choose examples that are easy to make fit their theories. Aristotle was a very strong philosopher and he knew that if he could command, dominate Sophocles' *Oedipus* he would be in business. However, I don't think the *Poetics* actually quite succeeds in doing that. It's a wonderful book, but not wonderful because it states a coherent, logical theory of poetry that can be reduced to a set of formulas about mimesis, representation, catharsis, and so on.

Li: You don't agree with that?

Miller: No, not if you actually sit down and read the book.

For example he says something very strange. He says a work of imitation must be not too big and not too small. He says just as an animal that's too small or too big can't live, so a poem has to be of a certain size, as big as possible so long as you can still take it in one view. Here is a moment when Aristotle the physicist or zoologist or other aspects of him as a scientist come in to define his sense of the literary work. When you try to apply this analogy that says a work of literature is like an animal to actual works of literature, it doesn't work. In particular it doesn't work with *Oedipus the King*, which is

just about the most un-see-throughable (if I can be allowed to put it that way, of all the literary works I know. It's the right size all right, but that doesn't make it possible to take it in at one view.

The two horribly irrational things that *Oedipus the King* is about are patricide and incest. These are very difficult to reduce to logical comprehensibility. How can we understand someone who kills his father and marries his mother? Or to put this another way, when you try to read *Oedipus*, you ask yourself what does Sophocles tell us about why these horrible things happened to *Oedipus*, why was he punished in this way. Apollo for some reason decided to make him suffer, but no reason is given for this. If you say the *Oedipus* story is for the sake of making things perspicuous, that is understandable, comprehensible, logical, *Oedipus the King* doesn't really succeed in doing that. Far from it. All it succeeds in doing is to give you a very strong sense of the incomprehensible. That can be demonstrated in detail in the language of the play. The language of *Oedipus* is very complicated and it gets more complicated toward the end, just when, according to Aristotle, everything ought to become clear through what he called the "discovery," or, in Greek, the "anagnorisis." Everything ought to be clear in the language or the play ought to be clear, but it's just at that point that Sophocles' play becomes the most incoherent and even sort of crazy, not only in *Oedipus*' speeches but in those of other.

Another example: on the one hand, Aristotle wants to make rhetoric, in a sense of figures of speech, simply a kind of adornment of language, an aid to persuasion; on the other hand, though its relegated to a subordinate part of the *Poetics*, he has an extremely sophisticated, subtle idea of figures of speech. He even recognises the figure of speech called "catachresis." Catachresis is a real problem for a theory of figurative language like Aristotle's. A catachresis, as in leg of a chair, or face of a mountain, is neither figurative nor literal. It therefore breaks down the distinction, on which Aristotle's whole theory of figurative language depends,

between literal language and figurative language. In order to have a theory of figurative language you have to have a theory of literal language. In order to say, to use one of his examples, the ship ploughs the waves, you have to know what “ploughs” means and you have to assume that the word ploughs means what it means and then it’s carried over to name the way a ship’s prow cuts through the waves. But catachreses, as Aristotle recognized, put that distinction in question. So Aristotle’s *Poetics* is much more complex than reduction of it to a few doctrines about mimesis and so on make it out to be.

Li: I have noticed that in your academic career, you have always been in change, from one criticism to another, could you tell me what are your central concerns in your career as a literary critic?

Miller: The answer is very simple. What I have always been concerned with in my professional work is to discover or invent ways to talk about what I find in works of literature when I read them. The changes that I have gone through from New Criticism, to criticism of consciousness, to deconstruction, then on to whatever it is I’m doing now, are really motivated by a desire to use whatever works at the moment. The central issue is how to figure out some way to talk intelligently about the strangeness I find in works of literature. I use whatever works best for that. I think also there is a development in the sense that I had initially thought of my vocation for literary study as having an ethical dimension. Much later I learned to use the terminology of ethics, that is, to think of the relationship of the reader to the work read as one of ethical responsibility. That gave me a vocabulary to talk about what happens in reading and, for example, to see the relationship between the narrator and the characters in a novel as being an emblem of the relationship of the reader to the work. It was a great piece of good fortune for me to discover speech act theory and the appropriation of speech act theory by Derrida. It was very helpful to me, if you think of literature as not simply making statements but as making

something happen, as being performative in the sense J. L. Austin used that word. The book on Henry James I am trying to do right now will be about speech acts in James. I've found a lot of speech acts in James' novels and am finding that approach a good way to talk about James' work. I'm really not a theorist for the sake of theory at all but remain focused on works of literature.

Yes, you need to know a lot of theory and you need to teach theory in order to help students follow what you're saying, but I don't teach courses in theory as such. That was true even with the seminar I taught this last winter, a course on irony. You would say irony is a theoretical topic but really my seminar was a course in reading. Its ultimate goal was to understand irony in literature. Theoretical texts must be read with the same responsibility and exigency which you would apply to a poem or a novel.

Li: So what kind of recent research are you doing and what books are you writing?

Miller: Well, I mentioned the James book. I have a number of books going on. There's one called "Black Holes," which is now pretty well finished. That has one section about current changes in the university and a long section on Proust. And then there's another book that I've been working on for years and years and that I have finally finished. It is called "Diegesis." "Diegesis" is a Greek word for narrative. Aristotle uses it. Diegesis is the word that would have been used in Greek to name a court room narrative or statement, that is the witness would present a diegesis or account of what he or she had seen. Structural narratologists, for example Gérard Genette, have recovered the word diegesis. My "Diegesis" is a book that talks about problems of beginning, middle, end and other problems of narrative continuity, with a lot of examples. There is a discussion of Aristotle's Poetics, which I was talking about a few minutes ago.

The fourth book is called "Others." It's a series of readings of particular literary and critical works. It's related to the idea of

anomalies in literature I mentioned earlier. It includes essays on Forster's *Howards End*, on Conrad, on otherness in Derrida, and so on.

Li: I notice that you're very productive. How could you do that, do you have some kind of secret?

Miller: Well, I think it is because I like to do it. I get up in the morning and write. I do it in the morning. You're a night owl, I'm the reverse. (laugh)

Li: It seems I should change myself into an early bird. (laugh). As far as I know you have been interested in Chinese culture and Chinese scholarship for a long time. Could you tell me something about your contact with the Chinese?

Miller: Besides the general interest in knowing about something so important, in early 50s, when I was in graduate school at Harvard, I took a course taught by Archibald MacLeish, an American poet, in which we read some translations of Chinese poetry.

Li: What kind of poems?

Miller: I remember one of them entitled *Wen fu*, which he had in a mimeographed translation. It was pretty superficial since MacLeish didn't know any Chinese but he was interested in Chinese poetry. We read the book of translations called *The White Pony*. My more recent interest began when I was invited to go with a group from the United States, a group from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences sent as a delegation to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing.

Li: In 1988. I remember that. You wrote to me and told me about this.

Miller: Right. That was the first time I went there, but I'd already

met Wang Fengzhen from CASS—Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He is senior researcher in the Institute of Foreign Literature at CASS. He had been in Irvine so I had met him there already. I met him again in Beijing. He was very kind to me there.

I lectured at Peking University and that's where I met my other closest friend and colleague there, a woman scholar by the name of Professor Shen Dan. The meeting happened this way. I gave a lecture on Hardy, on Hardy's poetry. To me it was impressive that there was a big roomful of people who could understand so well lecture in English. In my university, to our shame, we could not get such a big audience for a lecture in Chinese! Though my lecture was rather difficult the audience seemed to laugh at the right places, so they seemed to be following what I as saying. What really amazed me, however, were the questions asked by this Shen Dan in the front row. She said, at one point, "Well, that means that would be a catachresis," and I said, "Yes you're right." She was also very aggressive. She was, in the sense that she wanted to disagree with some of what I had said. I went up to her afterwards and said, "Where did you learn all this?" It turned out she had a Ph.D in linguistics from Edinburgh. She was made a full professor at a very young age in the English Department at Peking University, and I have kept in close touch with her over the years.

I also went on that visit (1988) to Xi'an, to a conference in Shandong Province, and also to Shanghai. I've only been back once, which was the most recent time, I lectured again at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and, as I have told you, the real occasion was that Shen Dan had miraculously succeeded in persuading the authorities of her university to make me an honorary professor. There was a ceremony, speeches, and so on. It was a great honour I have a close intellectual friendship with her, as well as with Wang Fengzhen. Wang Fengzhen and I are co-editors of a series. He is a specialist in Western literary theory and in introducing Western literary theory into China. His idea is to have a series of books with

ten or twelve essays by important theorists, twelve essays by Frederic Jameson, ten or twelve essays by Derrida, Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Edward Said, etc. The idea is that I would help select these essays and get permission from these people, since I know most of them. As I said, it was slowed down a bit, but now its apparently going forward again. Wang Fengzhen has contracts with several publishers. This series might have some importance. Each book would be translations of a dozen or so essays. In addition there will be a brief introduction by the person himself or herself. The idea is that each person will write his own introduction. Each book will begin with that. Or the introduction may be written by somebody else. In the case of Harold Bloom, we have an introduction by a man named Mark Edmundson of the University of Virginia, who was Bloom's student. But the most important thing is to make these essays available in Chinese and then see what happens.

Li: The Chinese are pretty interested in Western contemporary theories. They are eager to know about them. I am sure this project will be very successful. How about your trips to Taiwan?

Miller: I've been to Taiwan a couple of times, too. And I have several friends there especially in the *Academica Sinica*, which is sort of like CASS in the sense that people there don't teach. This last time I was in Taiwan for a conference at the south end of the island, at Sun Yat Sen University.

Li: What is your main interest in China?

Miller: My main interest I can specify very quickly. China is an enormous country with a huge population. It's going to be more and more important in the world. A huge number of very intelligent, active, and creative people in many fields live there so that it's a culture worth participating in. When I imagine work of my own being published in Chinese and read by Chinese people, it seems to me very interesting—and unpredictable. What will they make of it?

Li: I am sure the Chinese scholars will be interested in your work. By the way, you told me that you have a Chinese daughter-in-law.

Miller: Yes. My son Matthew is married to a Chinese American who was actually born in United States. Her parents came in 1949 from mainland China. She speaks Cantonese. So I have my granddaughter who is half Chinese.

Li: Also your daughter knows some Chinese.

Miller: Yes, Sarah knows some Chinese. I don't know how much she remembers now. She studied for two years, and she must have learnt, at a certain point, about one thousand or fifteen hundred characters and have known how to say simple things in Chinese.

Li: As for the current situation of comparative literature in China, Chinese scholars claim that the history of comparative literature has witnessed the emergence of two main schools: one is French school, represented by influence study, the other is American school, represented by parallel study. Now the history enters its third stage: comparison between the East and West, between two different cultures. What do you think about that?

Miller: I think that's a great idea. Absolutely true. And I think that it's probably the Chinese scholars who are best able to do that. I think more and more American departments of comparative literature will begin to have members who do Chinese, which has not traditionally been the case. This will take a while to develop, but I agree absolutely with the notion that this will be a third form of comparative literature and that it is the way we ought to go. I also believe that Chinese scholars are more likely to be able to do it well than Western scholars who choose to do Chinese. This change is only beginning, as you know, in the United States. American sinologists, the people who do Chinese, are beginning to develop an interest in comparative literature but it's quite new. I went to a conference at UCLA, which was attended by Leo Lee, Pauline Yu,

and other people. The core was a small group of people who do East Asian, who are in East Asian departments. Leo Lee has now gone to Harvard from UCLA. The people at that conference are nevertheless interested in developing that new kind of comparative literature. Traditionally Chinese departments in the United States universities have tended to be somewhat sequestered, off by themselves, and to a considerable degree isolated from other language and literature departments.

Li: I am trying to change this kind of situation. At least at the University of Auckland I might do that, because I have a close relationship and friendship with Mike Hanne, the Head of the Comparative Programme. We cooperate very well.

Miller: I think that's very important to do. The influence should go in both directions. The development of this new Comparative Literature has been impeded because the Western scholars spent so long doing Chinese that there was a kind of mystique about how much they knew. This led them in some cases to isolate themselves. Other parts of the university didn't know much about their discipline, so they tended to be secluded. That was true to a considerable degree at Yale but not completely. Stephen Owen was then at Yale and participated actively in the undergraduate "Literature Major." He then went to Harvard and participated in the founding of the undergraduate comparative literature programme there, a program which is open to theoretical questions. He is a rather special example of a Westerner who is a distinguished specialist in Chinese but who also knows something about Western literary theory and comparative literature.

Li: Sure. Yes, he is one of the scholars I admire. I love to read his works. James Liu is another good example, who also has a solid background of both Chinese and Western literatures and cultures.

Miller: So we need more people like that. But I do think that the actual Chinese scholars are the key here. I believe it is a wonderful

idea to develop comparative literature as a discipline within China, in the Chinese side of the United States universities, or the New Zealand universities, or in other universities on the Pacific rim.

Li: Since the Chinese scholars are eager to establish their own Chinese school of comparative literature, to establish their own theory of literature, and to make something unique of their own, one of the serious problems, to them, is lack of discourse. Traditional discourse seems out-of-date, while Western discourse, that is rooted in Western culture, seems not suitable to Chinese literature and literary criticism. What kind of suggestions do you have to your Chinese colleagues?

Miller: My advice is very specific. I can be pretty succinct about it. Yes; I think it would be a terrible mistake if Chinese scholars simply translated Western terminology and simply appropriated that and used it. It probably wouldn't work even if they tried to do it. I believe the solution to the problem is to take the richness and complexity of possibility in the Chinese language and develop that as a means of saying new things about literature. Just because there hasn't been a tradition in doing that doesn't mean that it couldn't be done. I think it would be a matter of developing and exploiting and even changing the Chinese language itself, using that as the basis, so that you would be saying things that would be difficult to say in English or French or German. That would be really interesting. But of course you have to have something you want to say. That would go back again to saying that I don't much like the separate sequestered development of theory as such. Good theory comes out of practice, out of reading literary works.

That's why simply appropriating Western terminology to talk about classical Chinese poetry really wouldn't work. You've got to use Chinese to do that. That doesn't mean, however, in spite of the fact that there's already a long tradition in Chinese of talking about that poetry, that there might not be new ways that could be

developed to talk about it. Now those ways might now be in some way influenced by Western procedures or terminology, but transformed to new purposes. Just as I would say, vice versa, there should be an influence on Western ways of talking about poetry of Chinese ways. It ought to go both ways: a cross-cultural influence. It would be a mistake to say, "Well, I want to go West to East," it should go both ways. That requires a lot more people, in the West who know Chinese. I see this as a challenging problem, but it's also clear to me that you don't solve that problem by just importing Western terminology into China and translating it.

Li: I think your point is very important. Don't regard this issue as a pure theoretical one. It is one of practice. If you have something new to say you will have some new words come out and then you would establish a new kind of discourse. By the way, do you have such a problem in your research?

Miller: Sure. I'm always having to use words like "other" that I spoke of earlier in ways that are not quite the same as the way that it's normally used. You have to take the word and twist it a little bit or extend it or move it into another area and so on. So you have to use on the one hand idiomatic proper English, but always stretching it a little bit in order to say something new. You get a lot of help from the writers themselves in doing that. Proust gives you the vocabulary to talk about Proust. Henry James gives you a lot of help in talking about Henry James. In our tradition at any rate, many great writers, who aren't exactly theorists, have a vocabulary of self-analysis which the critic can appropriate. Some don't. Thomas Hardy is not much help to his critics in this way, though even he has a degree of self-reflection, for example in the prefaces to his books of poems. James or Proust, both of them, were, however, very great literary critics as well as writers.

Li: Our interview will be over soon. Do you have some words to the Chinese scholars of comparative literature?

Miller: Well, I find it very exciting that comparative literature is developing as a separate discipline in China, that it has a place within the academic scene there, because I think that is an important development that should produce really good results. As you know, comparative literature in some Western countries is not very strongly institutionalised, in Switzerland or Germany for example. I find this new development in China very interesting and very promising. I hope it gets bigger and stronger. It will develop its own local traditions and protocols and so on and that will be good.

I am also glad to see that there are very bright young Chinese scholars who know English very well, who are really up to date on Western theory and ask difficult, challenging questions of it, who know all that is going on. That is a change, a very rapid change, and I'm sure it will continue.

Li: I am very happy to have had an interview with you. Thank you very much for your time.

Miller: Thank you.

