

An Interview with J. Hillis Miller*

Conducted by Shan Te-hsing

ABSTRACT

Conducted in June 1990 and revised extensively by the interviewee J. Hillis Miller himself, this interview (with its nineteen questions and answers) focuses on some issues of special interest to students of English and American literature as well as literary criticism and theory. Dialogic and interactive by nature, it remarks Miller's development first as a student of New Criticism and then as an eloquent proponent of Criticism of Consciousness (as proposed by Georges Poulet) and later of Deconstruction (as proposed by Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man). Also dealt with in the interview are his position in and relationship to the Yale Critics, his significance in the institutionalization of American literary theory, his discussion about New Historicism, Cultural Studies, etc., his observation about the so-called age of digital reproduction, and his interest in the ethics of reading, the performative and inaugural function of works of literature, as well as the translation of theory (especially Deconstruction) into other disciplines, languages, and cultures.

KEY WORDS

J. Hillis Miller

Criticism of Consciousness

Jacques Derrida

the ethics of reading

apotropaic effect

translating theory

interview

Deconstruction

the Yale Critics

critique of ideology

the performative

* This interview was conducted in June 1990. The interviewer, then a Fulbright Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, would like to express his thanks to Prof. J. Hillis Miller, UCI Distinguished Professor, University of California at Irvine, for his painstaking revisions of the interview.

Shan: Let's begin with what you called "the odd status of prefaces" as "both foretaste and aftertaste," "first and last at once." As a preface to this interview, looking back on your own career, how would you periodize it? What specific significance do your encounters with Georges Poulet and Jacques Derrida have on you both as an intellectual in general and a literary critic and theorist in particular?

Miller: It is a hard question to judge, to interpret, one's own so-called development. I think I am not all that different from where I began. The specific motivation for my interest in literature goes back to 1945 when I shifted at Oberlin College, where I was an undergraduate, from physics to the study of English. My motivation then was curiosity and puzzlement about what seemed to me then and still seems to me now the oddness and strangeness of literature. It seemed to me to need some explanation, some accounting for. And I also liked very much to read. I decided I would rather read Dickens than learn more about physics. That remains my motivation.

I still think works of literature strange and that they take some accounting for. Insofar as I have changed, I hope it has been primarily in learning how to be a better reader.

My first training in how to do reading was through the American New Criticism which I encountered at Oberlin. It was not so strongly present at Harvard where I did my graduate work. At Harvard I learned mostly a respect for the facts of literary history, but not very much, I have to say, that was or has been helpful to me in the work I did then or later, except that I was allowed to work on my own. The critics that I found most interesting at Harvard were not the mainstream American New Critics like Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, or Allen Tate, though I read them, but Kenneth Burke, William Empson, and I. A. Richards, though they were generally not taken very seriously by any of my teachers at Harvard. They were critics I discovered on my own and through other graduate students. I found them very interesting and still do. To them were added G. Wilson Knight's books and Ezra Pound's *A B C of Reading* — both important for me. I remember that those books gave me ideas about how one might talk about those peculiarities of literature that I mentioned at the beginning. By those peculiarities, I mean anomalies and oddnesses, pieces that don't seem to fit. These are like the anomalies scientists find in the data they are studying that lead to further investigations and new hypotheses. My dissertation, which has never been published, was on Dickens. It was called *The Symbolic Imagery of Charles Dickens*. It was Burkean through and through. I studied

not just the pattern of images of the novels, but the way they form what Gerald Manley Hopkins called an *undertext*. A symbolic action is going on behind the scene in which the reader participates in reading the book. That is a Burkean idea.

Later on at Johns Hopkins I encountered Georges Poulet as a colleague and began to read his work. I found his criticism admirable as a way of dealing with the whole work of an author, for example, an author like Matthew Arnold who doesn't yield well to the techniques of close reading. My motivation was not so much an abstract interest in theory as such as an interest in the practical question of how Poulet's methods of reading might help me to read my Victorian authors. I still think Poulet is a wonderful reader. I define a "wonderful reader" as someone who notices things other people fail to see, even things that go against the reader's theoretical presuppositions. For a while it seemed to me that the hypothesis of a unitary consciousness, persisting in the author through all his diversity, would allow one to do something in criticism that critical presuppositions either about organic unity or about attention to single words abstracted from the author do not allow one to do.

I would say the same thing about Derrida and de Man, both of whom I met at Johns Hopkins. Each has had the same kind of importance for me that Kenneth Burke did. They attracted me not so much as theoreticians in the sense of critics who have general theories, but as extraordinary readers in the specific sense of seeing things in Mallarmé, or Plato, or Poe that no one else has seen. Derrida has written brilliantly about a long list of authors, including even Joyce—de Man about Rousseau (he was a Rousseau specialist), Rilke, Wordsworth, Yeats, and so on. I have been not so much influenced by the theoretical presuppositions of Derrida and de Man, as by their strategies of reading, if that distinction may be made. There is an asymmetry between reading and theory, even though there's no reading without some theoretical presuppositions, however sketchy or implicit. Real reading always finds things that theory doesn't predict. So you can't learn how to do good work in literary study by memorizing somebody's theoretical assumptions. What's exemplary in Derrida, de Man, Poulet, Burke, and Empson is their intelligence as readers. Their theoretical assumptions allow them to see things in texts that other people haven't seen. In admiring that I remain faithful to my beginning despite changes and evolutions. This continuity is in my mind at the moment because I have been proofreading three volumes of collected essays that go all the way back to the early fifties'. These are

coming out in '90 and '91 from Harvester-Wheatsheaf in England and then from Duke University Press, so I have recently had the partly pleasant and partly painful experience of reading a lot of my old essays.

Shan: What's the effect of your Protestant heritage upon you?

Miller: It's hard to answer that question. I was brought up in a Protestant family, but not one all that puritanical or rigorous. Protestantism taught me that the most important experience, if I may dare use that out-moded word, may be to some degree private. Protestantism holds that every man is his own priest. Spiritual experience is your own unique experience. Seventeenth-century Protestant autobiographies emphasize privacy—as well as the notion that experience may be unique or strange. The emphasis is on the significance of the different. My share in that tradition may have had something to do with the interest I had when I began studying literature in the peculiarity and non-generalizable strangeness in particular works of literature.

Shan: What kind of anxiety of influence did you feel in your relationship to your immediate predecessors in the field of English and American literature, for instance, Douglas Bush, the director of your Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard? And how would you imagine yourself as a source of anxiety of influence to later students of literature?

Miller: I am, let's say, "self-confident" enough not to be consciously anxious about my immediate predecessors. As I've always told my students, with half a wit you can write a better essay about Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears" than anybody else has written before. So I haven't worried too much about my immediate precursors. I might have worried a little bit more about, let's say, Empson, or Burke, the extraordinary gift as a reader the young William Empson, for example, had. His *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was written as a series of undergraduate papers for his tutor I. A. Richards. That is something to be envied and to be curious about. Could you or I in any way hope to come up with that sharpness of insight and that wonderful ability to express oneself?

You ask me whether I can imagine myself as a source of anxiety of influence to later students of literature. I don't know about that. I have been attacked by some younger critics. That is a high honor. (Laughter). I am glad to be in that situation. I do mind being misrepresented, but I don't mind being thoughtfully disagreed with. And I am glad to say that's happening.

Shan: You, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, and Paul de Man have

been grouped under the same denomination of "Yale Critics." What's your response to this grouping? In your opinion, what are the major similarities and differences between you and the other three?

Miller: I would add Derrida to that group. Derrida taught, as you know, for many years every year at Yale for a few weeks. He was included along with the other four in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, which is sometimes seen as a manifesto of the Yale critics. I had something to do with the invention of this so-called group through a review in *The New Republic* about 1975. Inventing something called "the Yale critics" had the advantage of giving us perhaps collectively more leverage than we might have had alone, publicity both good and bad. But nothing of that sort goes on forever. By the time I decided to leave Yale, the usefulness of the grouping had probably come to an end. Like any such group, it never was a nest of singing birds all uttering the same tune. It's easy to see that Hartman and Bloom are different from de Man and Derrida, perhaps less easy to see that there are differences between de Man and Derrida. They differ in their critical procedures, in the authors they read, and even in their basic presuppositions. I differ from all four of the others. But nevertheless it was a group of critics who were bound together by a certain irreverent attitude towards previous modes of criticism. All attempted in one way or another to innovate not only in critical theory but also in ways of reading. I would say the same thing about Hartman and Bloom as I have said about de Man and Derrida. I value them for their sharp eyes for details in particular works of literature, rather than for their big theoretical assumptions. Both Bloom and Hartman can be wonderful readers. I stress that because though I have been involved in all my career in making literary theory respectable, institutionalized, sometimes I feel that we have succeeded a little bit too well. Theory sometimes may have become too much an object to be studied in itself rather than used as the implement to make better reading possible, to make works of literature more available not only to students, but also to ordinary people. Theory for me is instrumental. It is not an end in itself.

It would take a long time to talk about the differences between me and the other four. As opposed to de Man and Derrida, my own work might appear to be much more habitually the reading of particular works of literature. But that distinction does not entirely hold. The theoretical formulations Derrida and de Man make are always made in the course of reading some text or other. For example, when de Man says that "the paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction,"

followed by the allegorization of that deconstruction, "a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration," that's presented as a universal theoretical statement. On the other hand, it is made in the context of reading Rousseau's *Julie*. It would have been impossible without that context. The essay is a reading in the course of which this theoretical statement is made. The same thing can be said of Derrida. *Of Grammatology* is also a reading of Rousseau, as well as a major theoretical work. To study Derrida, de Man, or me, Hartman, or Bloom as simply makers of literary theory is to abstract theoretical statements from the work of reading and thereby to falsify that work. Here is an example of that opposition between theory and reading I was talking about. All five of these critics are different from one another. Hartman much more than any of the other four is anxious to save the text, save something. He is the preserver. Bloom has his own powerful irreverence. He says, for example, that the New Testament, especially the work of St. Paul, is an extraordinary case of misreading, the misreading of the Old Testament. His most recent book argues that the "J" writer of the Old Testament was a woman. For me, Bloom's revisionary ratios and his notion of the anxiety of influence are in themselves much less interesting than the kind of reading of Browning's *Childe Roland* or of Shakespeare's plays that those presuppositions facilitate. They allow Bloom to see things that have not been seen before by critics. Bloom's importance for me is the way he opened up for me certain late Victorian authors I did not understand or appreciate as much as I should have. I caught Bloom's enthusiasm for those authors—Ruskin, Pater, Rossetti, Swinburne, and even Wilde. Bloom has admirable understanding and perception of those writers. Bloom turned me back to read Ruskin, Pater, and Rossetti. I owe that to him.

Shan: You have long been regarded as one of the leading deconstructionists in America and you emphasize deconstructionisms in plural. Would you enumerate some of the major versions of deconstructionisms? What do you think are your position in and specific contribution to these varieties of deconstructionisms? What is the future of deconstructionisms?

Miller: One reason among others why you can't answer the question "What is deconstruction?" is that "it" is a lot of different things. Differences between de Man and Derrida, as well as development and heterogeneity within each, means that neither can be the basis of a univocal definition of "deconstruction." But now deconstruction is whatever it has been transformed into by whoever reads it. This includes even the base parody of it

one encounters in the mass media. What those journalists say is one of the things deconstruction is, though what the journalists say is an ideological deformation. What they say has no relation to the work of Derrida and de Man, or to my work, but it's a form deconstruction has taken. Much more interesting is the appropriation and transformation, you might say the "translation," of deconstruction into a variety of disciplines and in different countries.

There are two ways to talk about this. One way would focus on the effect of deconstruction in various disciplines. So-called "deconstruction" is different in each one. The other way would focus on the worldwide transformation of deconstruction as it is translated, read, and used in other countries. I shall talk a little about the first one. Every young critic who is in one way or another influenced by the work of the older deconstructionists makes something different of it. "Deconstructionisms" even exist in forms of criticism that are apparently hostile to deconstruction, for example, in the New Historicism. The latter would be impossible without deconstruction. I think many New Historicists would agree with this. Many New Historicists have appropriated the ideas or the procedures of deconstructionisms and used them for their own purposes. The same thing has happened to deconstructionisms in other disciplines further away from literary study — architecture, legal studies, even in creative writing, in painting. And certainly in philosophy itself. As you know, Derrida is a philosopher. His initial influence in the United States was primarily on literary study. Recently that has changed, and he is beginning to be influential in American philosophy. Deconstructionisms are strongly influential in religious study. Mark Taylor, of Williams College, is the best-known of the people in religious study influenced by Derrida. But there are many others. In each of those fields something happens to deconstruction. What is deconstruction in architecture? To answer that would take a lot of explaining. A fair number of important Post-modern architects have read deconstruction, primarily Derrida, and have appropriated it for their own uses. The best essays on this are by Derrida himself, one on Peter Eisenmann, the other on Bernard Tschumi. Both essays are in Derrida's *Psyché*. Both essays have helped me to understand what might be meant by deconstructive architecture. It's not a matter of designing buildings that fall down, but of a resistance to classical architectural ideas of evident grounding and of shapely, balanced, organic form.

Women's studies, finally, is a new discipline where deconstruction has

been both assimilated and rejected. Here too "deconstructionisms" have been transformed by being put into a different context.

I spoke of the transformation in other countries. Deconstruction was at first primarily appropriated in the United States for literary studies. Derrida's influence, and de Man's too, throughout the world go primarily by way of the United States. When Derrida goes to Moscow or goes to Japan or elsewhere, his audience has probably more read his work in English translation than in French. That was certainly the case in Moscow or in Tokyo, because more people there read English than read French. So Derrida has been transformed twice, once by being made into an English author, and second by being assimilated in other countries through these translations. We hope a selection of Derrida's writings will be published, in a series of works of Western theory, in the People's Republic of China. This will probably primarily use the English translation for the basis of the translation into Chinese. I have been to a fair number of places—South America (I was in Uruguay and in Argentina several years ago), Japan, the People's Republic of China, Australia, the Soviet Union—everywhere I go, I find people who know the work of deconstruction and even know my own work. But in each place deconstruction inserts itself into different local intellectual, social, and institutional situations. Particularly in those countries where it has been translated it has changed. I think that's not only to be expected but good. I hope it has happened and will continue to happen in Taiwan, Republic of China.

Matthew Arnold said "the future of poetry is immense." I would say the future of deconstructionisms is immense, primarily through this process of diffusion, dissemination, and transformation.

It's hard for me to be self-conscious about my own position and specific contribution. I have been interested in the question of what use is deconstruction in America in the teaching and interpretation of literature and especially in the interpretation of works of American and English literature. I am also interested in the implication of deconstruction for another area I might have mentioned, a separate field or discipline, the discipline of composition teaching and study. A friend of mine, Jasper Neil, a specialist in composition theory and teaching, has written a book on Derrida. A lot of people who are not teaching English literature primarily, but teaching English composition, studying the acquisition of the ability to write English well, are much influenced by deconstruction and especially by Derrida. I have been interested in trying to help that, to facilitate it. So I have been

a mediator in this area.

In my own work, I have tried to figure out things for myself. I have been especially interested not so much in the development of theoretical formulations as in the testing out of these in the actual reading of particular works by way of asking a question: if a certain "theoretical" insight in deconstruction has force, what would follow for my reading of such and such a work in my own field? To say, "I begin reading with the suspension of all theoretical presuppositions" is only to have implicit rather than explicit theoretical assumptions. One of the most important things deconstruction has done is to bring out into the open some of the theoretical implications of normal institutional practice in the humanities. An example is Derrida's interrogation of the assumptions of art history in *La vérité en peinture*. I have recently written an essay on Gerald Manley Hopkins, the first I have written on Hopkins in a long time. In thinking about Hopkins again, I found myself wanting to ask whether there is any feature of Hopkins's poetry that you should call performative rather than constative. Is there a way in which Hopkins sees poetry and writes poetry that does something rather than simply describing something? That is a question I learned to ask because of the interrogation of speech-act theory by Derrida and de Man. They put in question and also use the opposition between performative language, which does something, and constative language, which names something. But I didn't know what the answer to my question about Hopkins was going to be until I did the work of re-reading Hopkins. For me it was a surprising answer. That essay has been published in *The Notre Dame English Journal*.

Shan: Words such as "deconstruct," "deconstruction" have now even entered into mass media. On the other hand, in his recent letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, your colleague at the University of California, Irvine, John Rowe, says that, like natural science, deconstructionism is a discipline to be studied diligently. What do you think about the popularization or vulgarization of these words? What effect would this popularization or vulgarization bring about?

Miller: It is a mistake to think that a term in literary studies has to be immediately understandable just from the term itself, that you can be totally ignorant of so-called deconstructive writings, not even having read any word of them, and write intelligently about them, as the man in the *Los Angeles Times* seems to think he has done. It is a free country and he is free to write what he likes, just as he would be free to say "there isn't any such thing as a black hole — the idea of a black hole is an absurdity" — without knowing any-

thing at all about astrophysics. I think maybe that's the point John Rowe was making. It's a good idea to know what you are talking about, to read things you haven't read or studied before you start discussing and making harsh judgments of them. That seems sensible to me.

There is an interesting difference here. Within our culture it's assumed that scientific theories are not going to be comprehensible by the layperson. I read an article in the *New York Times* a couple of days ago by someone who had attended a conference on quantum mechanics. This reporter said in effect: "I have read all these papers or listened to them, but I came away without any glimmer of an idea of what quantum mechanics is, even though these were papers that attempted to explain it." It was a kind of boast. But it was not meant to suggest that "quantum mechanics is nonsense because I can't understand it." Far from it. It's assumed that such things as quantum mechanics are disciplines ordinary people who are not scientifically trained, don't know mathematics, cannot understand. That in no way disqualifies science.

Quite different assumptions are made about the humanities. It is assumed that in the humanities anybody can understand and make judgments. People think: "If I don't understand it, it must be nonsense." One sees why that is. Everyone is supposed to have as part of his or her heritage the ability to read literature. Therefore we all presume we understand whatever is said about it. I am afraid this is not the case. My defense of the difficulty of literary theory and literary interpretation is the manifest difficulty of literature itself. It just doesn't seem to me that *King Lear* or any other major work of literature, even one which is or was popular, say *King Lear* or *Bleak House*, is all that easy to understand. Everybody ought to read *Moby Dick*, but it's a mistake to presume that without any trouble you are going to be able to say: "*Moby Dick* means so and so." The book is manifestly difficult. That's why we want to teach reading in school: to give people some ability to read so they can read critically for themselves — not just literature, but newspapers, advertising, political documents, and so on.

You ask about the popularization or vulgarization of "deconstruction." I began by saying one would have to say that journalistic falsification is one form it takes. As I said, it is a free country. It would be better if these journalists and academics had actually read it before they attacked it. But there's nothing that forces them to do that, just as there would be nothing to prevent someone from saying something absurd about black holes without knowing anything about astrophysics.

Shan: You proposed recently that reading, teaching, and writing about literature are performative, that is, they make something happen. Are there criteria for us to judge these performative acts as strong or weak, good or bad? Whether these criteria are themselves the results of other performative/non-literary acts? Can this assertion of performative function be seen as a leap of faith? To be more specific, what is the performative function of deconstructionism(s), if we place it/them side by side with other schools of criticism, say, New Criticism on the one hand and New Historicism on the other?

Miller: It's difficult to measure such performative effects, just as it's difficult to explain how other performative speech acts occur or are effective. Take, for example, the American "Declaration of Independence." The "Declaration of Independence" was effective. It made something happen. It established the United States of America. How could you have told beforehand that this particular piece of performative language would work? I do not know. I am saying that there's something unpredictable and very difficult to measure in speech acts. One shouldn't be surprised and dismayed by that. It shouldn't disqualify the notion that reading, writing, and teaching make something happen. Something happens at a very local level in the classroom, but in a way that is hard to measure. Someone listens to you when you teach a book, or talk about the book with friends, or someone reads the book himself or herself, and afterwards in some way all are different. The reading is inaugural. It starts something. Measuring that would be extremely difficult.

Evaluating it as good or bad would also be extremely difficult. That worries me. I think one has to face this difficulty. It is not possible to take a poll and discover that five hundred thousand people have read "Bartleby the Scrivener" and it has done such and such for them and of that such and such 55% was good and 45% bad. It's particularly difficult with the question of good and bad. It's possible that works on the whole seem to have a good effect in a normal case may in a particular case actually have a bad effect. One could imagine someone reading Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, who would look upon it as a relatively positive life-affirming work. But the book compares Clarissa Dalloway's party-giving with Septimus Smith's suicide. I can imagine somebody reading the book and drawing from it the conclusion that it's better to imitate Septimus and kill yourself. That would be a bad effect. I don't see how you can guard against that possibility. Works of literature are unpredictable and even sometimes dangerous. I think

this feature of literature can't easily be controlled by teaching. The stronger and the more potent the work is, the more uncertain its effect. Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, is deeply troubling. You can't make a canon of works that can be predicted to be ethically good in their effects when read. You have to take your chances.

You asked whether deconstructionisms have a special performative function in comparison with New Criticism or New Historicism. I would say yes. My answer would take a while to develop. Insofar as deconstruction teaches good reading, it also teaches at the same time what I call "critique of ideology," that is, awareness of ideological formulations, therefore the ability to resist such formulations in real life. So the ability to read well is a major civic accomplishment. My opinion, my conviction, my strong belief is that so-called deconstruction as a mode of reading teaches this resistance to ideology. Ideology I define, after de Man, as the confusion of linguistic with phenomenal reality. Therefore it is a civic good that that kind of teaching should occur. I like New Historicism and New Criticism insofar as they are sort of like deconstructions. (Laughter). Deconstruction is good reading, and it can be defended in that way. A good reader expects works to be complicated and heterogeneous. Such complexities go against traditional canonical readings of canonical works. Insofar as New Historicism or Cultural Criticism is also critique of ideology, I view them as doing the same work. Good work of this sort in "cultural studies" is being done in the interpretation of popular media, television, or cinema.

Shan: Could you guess at the performative effect of your essay on "Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams" contributed to *Columbia Literary History of the United States* on the readers' re-cognition of these two poets and American literary history?

Miller: I have no idea what performative effect my essay has. I hope my readers learn something from it that changes their lives—for the better—in however small a way.

Shan: Why did you find it necessary to address the problem of New Historicism in your 1986 MLA Presidential Address? How would you reconsider the case today?

Miller: I wouldn't answer any differently, though that was a moment in the development of literary study when there was a massive shift to the study of the historical relationships of literature. It seemed to me something I needed to talk about. I wanted to say the attention to history is good as long as the responsibility to read the work of literature is not forgotten, along with

the reading of the historical context in which the work is embedded. I still think that's true. Most "new historicists" and cultural critics probably will agree with me about that. Not all would agree, however, with my contention that the procedures of reading that ought to be employed are those of rhetorical reading, that is, so-called deconstruction. So I have tried to think out the relationship between deconstruction and new historicism or, more broadly, the relation between deconstruction and the whole spectrum of cultural criticism. Happily, some constructive give-and-take has since then taken place in this area.

Shan: Why is your recent concern with ethics—for instance, the ethics of reading, the ethics of narration? Is it a turning away from deconstructionisms or a further exploration of their potentials? How would you account for this change from a "deconstructive angel" to an upholder of ethics? In short, do you think that you have become more and more ethical, political, and historical?

Miller: No, I don't think it is a turning away from deconstruction at all, but a further exploration of its potential. It's a response to a challenge to deconstruction by people who say that it is concerned only to elaborate theory, that it has no political or social concern. I wanted to show that is not the case. So I began thinking about the question of the ethical dimension of the act of reading and teaching. I did not become suddenly interested in ethics, politics, and history, but I became more overtly concerned with those. Neither I, nor Derrida, nor de Man, has been unconcerned about history or politics. Throughout Derrida's work also there's concern for historical questions—from *Of Grammatology* on. To say that it is absent from his work is simply false. So I have myself not become more ethical, political, and historical, but there's a context now in which it's useful to attend directly to those questions. De Man in an interview printed at the end of *The Resistance to Theory* given just a few months before he died was asked about history. What about "the frequent recurrence of the terms 'ideology' and 'politics' we have noticed recently..." said the interviewer. De Man answered, "I don't think I ever was away from these problems, they were always uppermost in my mind." That's a surprising answer for someone who is supposed to be a-historical, but the confirmation of his interest in history, politics, ideology is everywhere in de Man's writings, even in those recently discovered wartime writings when he briefly gave his support to nationalist and organicist views of literary history he was later so concerned to challenge. But the concern with history and politics is continuous in his work.

Shan: As one of the major mainstream Anglo-American male critics, what's your attitude toward minority literature in the United States of America, third-world literature, and feminist literary criticism or even feminist literary canon/history?

Miller: I think I have already partly answered this question. Like women's studies, African-American studies, for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have been strongly influenced by deconstruction. But it has been changed when it has entered into a different polemical field and been appropriated there. "Minority literature," "third-world literature," "post-colonial literature" are perhaps the right terms to use now. But I think they are soon going to be outmoded. We are entering into a new period in literary study generally in which the domination of literary studies in schools and universities by the traditional Western national literatures is going to be changed into a broader multi-lingual, multi-ethnic mode of study. In this new way of studying literature, it won't be a matter of minority against majority, or of marginalized against dominant or hegemonic, but of various ways of studying side by side literature in many different languages from many different cultures. I think that is already happening in the development of so-called cultural studies. All the names for such study have an imperialistic or Eurocentric resonance. To speak of "post-colonial studies" or of "ethnic studies" is already to beg a lot of questions. As yet we have no better names than that.

To be specific, in California, beginning in grade school, the study of three languages ought to be obligatory: English, Spanish, and at least one Asian language. Many of the latter are spoken in California, and all have a claim. But I don't think that poses an insoluble problem. It should be necessary to study Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, or some other Asian language. It ought to be obligatory. California belongs to what is called the Pacific Rim, and knowledge of at least one of these languages is going to be a necessity. I don't see that as a secondary thing, but just as important as learning English. It doesn't mean that English language and literature should not be taught, but they should be taught side by side with the language and literature of at least one Asian Pacific country. And how can we live in a state where so many people know Spanish, are Hispanic in origin, without learning Spanish language and literature? The time to do that is not in the third year of university study, but in grade school—it's so much easier at that stage. I have a utopian hope that this will happen in California. We take for granted that all over the world everybody is learning English. I think it's time we

started learning Chinese. It would be good for many reasons.

Shan: Let's come back to a basic question: Why do human beings tell and listen to/read/watch stories at all? What specifically is the apotropaic effect of literature as you define it?

Miller: That's a difficult question. Why do people tell stories or listen to them? It's a universal habit to tell stories or, these days, to watch them on television. That suggests to me that there are certain things that can only be said by way of stories. I think it's obvious what sort of things these are. Complex feelings can best be expressed in narrative which can embody those in a way that is not entirely logical. *Oedipus the King*, for example, in the structuralist reading, has to do with the origin of civil society in something precivil. The play dramatizes the relation between nature and culture. It focuses on the question of incest. As the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss says, the prohibition against incest is neither natural nor cultural. You can't say it's culturally determined because it's universal. Every culture has a prohibition against incest. To be human is to have the prohibition against incest. Therefore, it is natural to all human beings. The form may be different in different cultures, but nevertheless the prohibition is there. On the other hand, you can't say the prohibition against incest is natural either, since animals don't have it. So this prohibition breaks down the culture/nature opposition.

Oedipus the King, in its dramatization of this problem, is an example of stories that allow us to confront and come to terms with problems that can't be logically resolved. It's perhaps not surprising that the theme of incest is an important one in literature, in *Oedipus the King*, but also in Faulkner, in Shelley, and even, obliquely, in Hardy. The great subject of novels, it is often said, is courtship and marriage. That is certainly true. But novels also more often than one would expect have to do with incest. If we could really resolve the problems that narratives pose for us or allow the reader surreptitiously to confront, then we would reach a point where we wouldn't need stories anymore. I don't think that will ever happen. If we need stories in order to confront things that we can't in any other way easily confront, then we will always need more stories. No one final story could satisfy our need for stories. In that sense you could say that stories are apotropaic. They are ways of warding off the stark confrontation of a double bind, for example, that inherent in the prohibition against incest. On the one hand, too much marriage between close relatives is bad. On the other hand, there is the danger of too narrow a definition of people who can marry. The theme of

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is not simply incest, but the relation of incest to miscegenation. Already in the Bible that is an important topic. There has to be just enough exogamy, that is, marriage with people outside your own tribal group, to renew the bloodlines, but not too much or the culture breaks down. It's difficult to resolve that double bind, so you continually have more and more stories about it in many different cultures. So stories are apotropaic. They put off the direct confrontation of an irresolvable paradox. But perhaps what's really warded off is death. I agree with Walter Benjamin when he says, "What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about." We need more stories to hold off death—a lot of stories, as Scheherazade postpones her death by storytelling in *The Arabian Nights*.

Shan: You sometimes say that a novel or a character persuades you that it is real. I wonder how a novel or a character persuades you? How do you pinpoint the exact moment of being persuaded, coming from a somewhat passive "willing suspension of disbelief" to "willing acknowledgement of belief," if we can have such a coinage?

Miller: I am easily persuadable. One of the magic aspects of novels, for me, even of something on television or in cinema, is the instantaneous way I get swept up into the story. There is an odd fact about this for me. The moment a character comes alive for me is often not by way of elaborate psychological description, but by way of some figure of speech, some little detail that makes a character come alive. I wonder whether that may not be true in the real world too. That is to say, a person has a powerful presence as a particular person not because we have a full psychological understanding of her or him, but from certain little things the person says and little ways of behavior. I think great novelists know that and make use of it. It's most obvious in Dickens, but in all so-called realistic novels the moment in which the character comes alive is often the moment in which the personage is described in some figure of speech. One example is Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Jim is initially described as being "an inch or perhaps two under six feet tall, and he came toward you with his head down like a charging bull." That image of the "charging bull" contains for me all of Jim. The rest of the novel just fills out that image.

Shan: One critic remarked in 1987 that "he [Miller] prefers to publish long studies at regular intervals and has never, interestingly enough, published a collection of essays." This statement is still valid today. It seems that you have some goal in mind before writing a book. Yet in your preface to *The*

Linguistic Moment, you write, "If I had known already from the beginning where I was going to arrive through the act of writing the book, I would not have needed to write it." And you have your own hypothesis about Trollope's continuous production of novels. I wonder whether that hypothesis is actually derived from your own experience of writing one book after another, after another . . .

Miller: I am about to publish three volumes of essays. This is primarily because a publisher, Harvester-Wheatsheaf in England, asked me to gather uncollected essays. The essays were not written with that in mind. I'm not sure, however, that the era of the old-fashioned integrated book developing a single argument is not over. But I always have a long-term project in which I want to think something through. That takes a period of time and a lot of pages to do. I begin more with questions than with answers. If I knew what I was going to do, it wouldn't be interesting to do. I hope some day I can write a book on Anthony Trollope. I don't know exactly what I am going to say. I am fascinated by Trollope, but if I knew what I would say about him, it wouldn't be worth doing. My hypothesis about Trollope's continuous production of novels because he remained unsatisfied by each one is perhaps drawn from my own experience. I go on because I'm not quite sure where I'm going. I still haven't answered all those questions literature raises for me.

Shan: In *Fiction and Repetition* you tried to interpret novels "in part through the identification of recurrences and of meanings generated through recurrences." Can you apply the same interpretive strategy to yourself and say something about "criticism and repetition?"

Miller: One of the things I was not aware of until I began putting together these three volumes of my old essays is that there are certain authors I return to, Thomas Hardy, for example. I wrote a book on Hardy, but in one of the new collections of essays there are five additional essays on Hardy, mostly on his poetry — essays I have written over the years. I don't seem to be able to keep away from Hardy. I keep coming back to his poetry and writing about it. That obviously is a kind of repetition with difference. But it's not really repetition, because I have the feeling I haven't really quite got Hardy. Gerald Manley Hopkins is the same. There are a series of authors I keep coming back to. If I keep asking to some degree the same questions, I do not yet have real answers to them. If I did, I wouldn't go on with that author. It is because I haven't got answers that I do go on.

Shan: What is the function of criticism/theory at the present time?

Miller: Its function is what I have said — to teach good reading for the purpose of educating us all so that we can get the good out of literature and resist the bad things that can be done to us by language and other signs, not only by mass media, but also by other forms of signs with which we are surrounded. That's why the study of film and television is so important. But reading *King Lear* may be not all that different from a serious study of popular literature. Reading is an enormous intellectual pleasure. Criticism and theory make that pleasure discriminating. But criticism and theory have a profound civic function, all the more so in these days when so many things are changing so rapidly, in part through technology.

Shan: You were born in a pre-TV era and now find yourself in an information society. With the development of technology, what is the future of reading? What role can a professor of literature play?

Miller: Watching television or the cinema are forms of reading, in the large sense of that term. We are on the verge of radical social and technological transformations. They will make it possible, for example, to have access to large bodies of literature stored in databases so that we can read them on computers. That seems alarming to some people. They feel we are not doing serious "reading" unless we have a book in our hands. That for me — to be able to take all of Trollope's novels to my summer house in Maine in one CD-ROM and be able to have a major library resource there — I find that very attractive. Such digital resources will free readers from dependency on large libraries. The democratizing power of the computer means that soon the smallest junior colleges will be given access to enormous library resources without having to have the library physically there. The concentration of major research collections in a few big universities is anti-democratic. So I see the new computer technologies as inherently democratic, or at least tending to be so. They make cultural materials available to many more people.

You will also soon be able to do research on the computers in interactive multi-media. "Interactive" means you can do things to it. "Multi-media" because sounds and pictures — even video — can be stored in the same databases. I have learned to make my notes on the computer rather than by hand. They are stored there and you can copy them again and do whatever you like with them. The gain in instant access to many more materials outweighs the disadvantages. Particularly as computers become smaller and smaller. We are soon going to be able to have something in our hands about the size of a big book that will give us access to the equivalent of the Weide-

ner library at Harvard. I think that is a good thing.

As I've suggested, we are moving toward a new regime of signs that will be not so much purely visual as what I have called a multi-media realm that mixes visual with alphabetic and auditory signs. For better or for worse, one part of Western culture that has been most transferable around the world is popular music. Popular music carries lyrics and other semiotic features, like the pictures and texts on the album covers. These messages are something that has to be read, something that is being read and understood all around the world. And to say this is not worth our attention because it's popular and commercial, the commodification of art, I think that is a mistake. Popular music needs to be studied and understood. Computer technology will soon allow us to bring music, video, and words together on the same disk, for example, in multi-media papers that students will soon be writing for us. There are great advantages in that for cultural studies. In fact, cultural studies might be said to anticipate ways of study that will soon be far easier with the computer. So I think professors of literature had better become computer-literate. I have just attended a conference in England on Technology and the Humanities, where I learned about the recent developments in this area. I welcome them.

Shan: In your interview with Robert Moynihan, you said, "If you have Kenneth Burke, you don't need either the New Criticism, or Todorov, or Roland Barthes, Marcel Raymond, or anybody else." Why did you confer such a high position on Burke?

Miller: Yes. I would say to anyone, "Well, if you don't like Derrida, you find him difficult, in some way alien, read Burke." Burke has an eye for things that nobody has noticed in works of literature, philosophy, and other texts. I should also say that it's difficult to be Burkean. It's difficult to imitate Burke's procedures in criticism. You have to learn from him indirectly. Burke is now over 90 years old and still going strong. He taught me something about how to read that I found of inestimable value, namely, to have an eye out for things that are apparently anomalies in a work. It's not Burke's big synthetic theories that I like, but Burke as a reader. I am glad to be able to end this interview by hailing Kenneth Burke as a great man. There's no news about that, but I'm happy to salute him here. Like Derrida, who has enormous influence on many different fields, Burke has been read by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and so on, as well as by people who study literature and philosophy. He is not all that fashionable today. When you discover him and learn from him, you have the feeling

that you alone are able to read him and find something interesting, that he belongs to you, but actually hundreds and thousands of other people in different fields are doing the same thing.

Shan: You define the linguistic moment as “a form of parabasis, a breaking of the illusion that language is a transparent medium of meaning” and as a moment “when they [poets] reflect or comment on their own medium.” As a postface to this interview, what would you say about the linguistic moment of an interview?

Miller: Well, it's obvious that interviews involve a moment of self-reflection, a pause, a parabasis. It's a different thing to talk about your work, your placement in a historical development, as opposed to doing it. If you don't worry about that moment of self-assessment too much, it doesn't paralyze you. But you are right — an interview is a form of parabasis.