



AMERICANA

E-JOURNAL OF AMERICAN STUDIES IN HUNGARY

VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 1, 2022

"ANALOGIES OF DECONSTRUCTION: J. HILLIS MILLER'S UNCANNY PEDAGOGY" BY PÉTER CSATÓ

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Abstract: The article focuses on theoretical texts from J. Hillis Miller's "middle period," written between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, at the heyday of the Yale school of deconstruction. Besides his multifaceted oeuvre, Miller's fame arguably rests mainly on the theoretical and critical work he produced as a "Yale Critic," alongside Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, with Jacques Derrida. The study analyses two of Miller's most influential (and controversial) texts in more detail: "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II" (1976) and "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism" (1979). The choice of texts has been motivated by the fact that they contain some of the most eloquent and lucid explications, via vividly imaginative analogies, of how deconstruction as a "method" works. Analyzing Miller's illuminating analogies of criticism, the paper demonstrates that his lucidity is bound to get in the way of the deconstructive enterprise he is supposed to promote, producing inconsistencies and anomalous arguments in his texts. I will argue, however, that the anomalies stem from the fact that Miller's pedagogical urge to share knowledge is stronger than his commitment to the actual practice of deconstruction. He must ground his explications in a coherent narrative to make them communicable, while at the same time he has to defend the deconstructive thesis that positing such grounding principles is constantly undermined by treacherous workings of language.

Keywords: literary theory, literary criticism, literary studies, cultural studies, deconstruction, American deconstruction, Yale school, rhetorical reading, figurative language, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida

The passing of J. Hillis Miller in February of 2021 marked the departure of the last living member of the Yale School of Deconstruction, as well as one of the most prolific, multifaceted, and long-standing literary critics of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. The value and extent of Miller's significance to the field of literary theory and criticism could hardly be overstated, what with a writing and teaching career spanning over six decades, a staggering oeuvre of more than thirty books, scores of scholarly essays, and a remarkable scope of expertise comprising such diverse fields as Victorian literature, Pouletian phenomenological criticism, deconstruction, and cultural studies. Miller's fame, however, arguably rests mainly on the theoretical and critical work he produced after he joined Yale University's English Department in 1972, and became one of the "Yale Critics," alongside Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, with Jacques Derrida as an honorary member—each of them a separate philosophical universe unto himself, as Miller's own eloquent description of them testifies ("Stevens' Rock, II 338-44).

While today's literary and cultural theorists still rely on the deconstructive strategies bestowed on them mainly by Derrida, de Man, and Miller, the approximately four decades that have passed since the heyday of the Yale school (from the mid-1970s through late 1980s) warrants a historically informed re-assessment of their work and its enormous impact on the study of literature in that period. While the present study cannot undertake such a huge task, it has been inspired by an incentive to revisit some of Miller's most influential (and controversial) texts from his deconstructive period, mainly "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II" (1976) and "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism" (1979). The choice of texts has been motivated by the fact that they contain some of the most eloquent and lucid explications, via vividly imaginative analogies, of how deconstruction as a "method" works. Analyzing Miller's illuminating analogies of criticism, I will demonstrate that his lucidity is bound to get in the way of the deconstructive enterprise he is supposed to promote, producing inconsistencies and anomalous arguments in his texts. I will argue, however, that the anomalies stem from the fact that Miller's pedagogical urge to share knowledge is stronger than his commitment to the actual practice of deconstruction. He must ground his explications in a coherent narrative to make them communicable, while at the same time he has to defend the deconstructive thesis that positing such grounding principles is constantly undermined by treacherous workings of language.

In 2011, looking back on his books and essays from his years at Yale (his "middle period") Miller reflects that he views these "earlier writings with some detachment, as almost having been written by someone else. I by no means, however, disown them. I wrote'em, and I take responsibility for whatever may have happened when they were read by others" (Dunne xii). Broadly speaking, my purpose in this article is to reflect on what "what may happen" when reading Miller's essays on deconstruction with contemporary eyes, and construing the consequences of his insistence on taking responsibility for what he has written and how he has written it.

In his obituary in *The New York Times* (Feb. 13, 2021), Clay Risen describes Miller as a critic who "helped revolutionize the study of literature . . . by applying the wickedly difficult analytical method known as deconstruction to a broad range of British and American prose and poetry." Risen's qualification of deconstruction as a "wickedly difficult analytical method" may sound somewhat dilettantish to professional ears, but it accurately testifies to the scandalous reputation deconstruction earned itself in the

American mass-media of the 1980s (Redfield 23). In his recent study of deconstruction in America, Marc Redfield cogently argues that despite the comparatively small number of American liberal arts colleges and elite universities, these institutions “garner most of the media attention and inspire endless books and articles about the crisis of the humanities, the liberal arts, and the university” (4). According to Redfield, it is in this discursive context that “theory”—which in the 1970s “came increasingly to refer to de Manian deconstruction” (2)—became “an academic and ultimately a public scandal” (4). Redfield also observes that in the mid-1970s, “the Yale Critics”—especially de Man and Derrida—became “the ultimate personification of theory as *scandal*” (4; emphasis in original). The media attention was ushered in by “angry opponents” in the academy especially of de Man’s work (most notably by Rene Wellek, M.H. Abrams, E.D. Hirsch, Gerald Graff) who accused him and his like-minded Yale-colleagues of a misguided intention to “destroy literary studies” and of promoting “language as a free-floating system of signs” (Redfield 4). De Man famously responded to the hostilities in his renowned essay, “The Resistance to Theory” (1982), in which he not only equates “theory” with *his own* theoretical persuasion (Redfield 4), but also argues that the hostile reactions to theory are, in fact, inherent to theory itself. De Man’s defensive strategy is performed as an act of deconstruction proper, by means of which he shrewdly appropriates his opponents’ position and neutralizes their attacks. This de Manian gesture could very well have been interpreted by his detractors as yet another example of a “deconstructor’s” dogmatism and arrogance.

Miller as a theorist, on the other hand, plays an entirely different language game: through vivid images, metaphors, and analogies, he seeks to explicate what the task of the (deconstructive) critic consists in. Even though Risen might have found deconstruction “wickedly difficult,” he seems to have a correct understanding of Miller’s role as “deconstruction’s great explicator” and “defender.” Miller’s explications arguably have pedagogical overtones, even though his analogies may not always be consistent. Paying tribute to Miller’s memory, W.J.T. Mitchell, senior editor of *Critical Inquiry* and a former student of the deceased, portrays a wise, jovial, supportive, and generous mentor, who “was always happy to return to the text alongside apprentice scholars and lead them into that marvelous labyrinth known as reading where he guided our searches for both the monsters and the hidden treasures” (Mitchell). Although Mitchell makes no specific reference, it is tempting to associate his metaphor of the labyrinth with Miller’s famous essay, “Ariadne’s Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line” (1976), and subsequent book, *Ariadne’s Thread: Story Lines* (1995). This intended or unintended reference gains a somewhat ironic resonance in a pedagogical context, since Miller himself does not seem to wish to assume the mantle of the omniscient sage, pointing readers/students in the right direction so that they can extricate themselves from the labyrinth: “The critic [teacher] . . . may experience the impossibility of getting outside the maze altogether and seeing it from without,” he contends, “giving it its laws or finding its law, rather than the impossibility of reaching a commanding center” (“Ariadne’s Thread” 73). Indeed, Mitchell only mentions how Miller led his students *into* the maze, not out of it, but the rather passive role he attributes to himself as a critic/teacher seems to preclude guiding the apprentice’s searches for either monsters or treasures. As Miller goes on to explain: Any terminology of analysis or explication is already inextricably folded into the text the critic is attempting to see from without. This is related to the impossibility of distinguishing critical and analytical terminology, the terms the critic needs to interpret novels from the terminology used inside the novels themselves. Any novel already interprets itself . . . The critic may fancy himself safely and rationally outside the contradictory language of the text, but he is already entangled in its web. (73-74)

This self-effacing rhetoric is echoed in his “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure, II” (1976), in which Miller poses perhaps the most fundamental question that can be asked of literary criticism:

Why must there be literary criticism at all, or at any rate more literary criticism? Don’t we have enough already? What ineluctable necessity in literature makes it generate unending oceans of commentary, wave after wave covering the primary textual rocks, hiding them, washing them, uncovering them again, but leaving them, after all, just as they were? (330)

The metaphoric has notably shifted from that of the maze to rocks and ocean waves, actuating a set of corresponding dichotomies such as solidity vs. fluidity, permanence vs. transience, stillness vs. motion, as well as stasis vs. dynamism. The implication is that criticism, albeit amidst ever-changing scenery, will always be a mere fleeting enterprise when measured up to the “primary textual rocks” of the literary canon, which by and large remain unaffected by the surging waves of criticism. Elsewhere Miller affirms this notion in more blatant terms when he states that a “poem means only itself, and any commentary falsifies it by turning it into something other than itself. Fearing the heresies of paraphrase and explanation, he [the critic] may be reduced to silence, or to repeating the poem itself as its only adequate commentary” (“Literature and Religion” 70-71). The logical entailment would be to deem criticism redundant, dispensable, extraneous in the face of the imposing literary rocks, but with a surprising twist in the logic of his argument, Miller declares that literature and criticism are, in fact, integrally linked to one another. In “Stevens’ Rock, II,” he first claims that “[l]iterature, however, has always performed its own *mise en abyme*¹ . . . Literature therefore needs to be prolonged in criticism. The activity of deconstruction already performed and then hidden in the work must be performed again in criticism” (331), then he goes on to add in no ambiguous terms: The reading of a poem is part of the poem. This reading is productive in its turn. It produces multiple interpretations, further language about the poem’s language, in an interminable activity without necessary closure. The boundaries between literature and criticism are broken down in this activity, not because the critic arrogates himself some vague right to be “poetical” in his writing, but because he recognizes it as his doom not to be able to be anything else. (333)

The rocks-vs-waves dichotomy is quickly abandoned to give way yet again to the metaphoric of the labyrinth vis-à-vis Ruskin’s image of a female spider (rather than a male Minotaur) at the center of the maze (or “midweb”). In Miller’s interpretation, Arachne gets conflated with Ariadne—much like the poet/writer with the critic—thus the latter, instead of showing the way out of the labyrinth, keeps on producing more labyrinth: “Ariadne’s thread makes the labyrinth, *is the labyrinth*” (337; emphasis added). Therefore, the “interpretation or solving of the puzzles of a textual web only adds more filaments to the web . . . Criticism is the production of more thread to embroider the texture or textile already there” (337). The analogies keep shifting in quick succession: the rocks and the ocean are of two different entities conjoined via metonymic contingency, which is followed by the postulation of an isomorphic relationship between Arachne’s and Ariadne’s jointly woven web to produce the (same) labyrinth, and finally criticism becomes “embroidery” on a “texture or textile already there.” The last analogy seems especially intriguing: textile and embroidery are two different entities, but they are interlinked by a bond that is more integral than that between rocks and ocean, but it is by no means isomorphic as the image of the labyrinth. Embroidery is basically decoration, not constitutive of the textile it embellishes, but the embroidered cloth is left with an indelible mark that enriches its texture in a unique fashion. In any case, embroidery certainly does not leave textiles “just as they were,” as is the case with waves and rocks.

Miller's analogies of criticism somewhat confusingly seem to oscillate between two opposing views of the critic's role: one that is defined by self-effacing passivity, which requires total submission to the metaphysical authority of the literary text,² and another which imputes (deconstructive) agency to the critic, but only to the extent that he/she can "rephrase" what he/she "finds in the work," which he/she "can only rephrase in allotropic terms" ("Stephen's Rock" 331), or repeat the "activity of deconstruction already performed" in the work. Either way, Miller's deconstructive narrative suggests that it is the interpretive text that is supposed to assimilate into the idiosyncratic language of the literary work, not the other way round. Nonetheless, it seems like an impossible feat to perform in critical practice. While the ontological merging of poet and critic / poem and interpretation might be conceived as a metaphysical thought experiment, ontologically the two kinds of texts still remain marked off from each other as different language games, and a seamless dovetailing of the two is unlikely.

Stephen W. Melville's remark proves to be relevant to our inquiry at this point: "[e]verything is right in Miller's statement—except that it cannot be said coherently" (169). And relevant for very similar reasons: Melville's issue with Miller's postulation of a "self-interpretive/self-deconstructing" text is that any statement about such texts is in fact a metadiscursive statement about criticism (or a specific critical stance). Everything is indeed right in Miller's arguments as long as we read them within the idiosyncratic metadiscourse of deconstruction. As soon as we move outside of it, and take a pragmatist/nominalist stance, Miller's claims turn out to be incoherent. In his analysis of Donald Davidson's theory of metaphor, Richard Rorty argues that the effectiveness of idiosyncratic figures is at least in part due to the fact that they elude the rules of well-established, entrenched language games. Rather than conveying a message, their function, Rorty contends, is to make an unexpected effect on the interlocutor/reader like "suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to make a face . . . or slapping your interlocutor's face or kissing him." In texts, metaphors are like "using italics, or illustrations, or odd punctuation or formats" (*Contingency* 18). "That one uses familiar words in unfamiliar ways . . . does not mean that what one said must have a meaning. An attempt to share that meaning would be an attempt to find some familiar (that is, literal) use of words—some sentences which already had a place in the language game—and to claim that one might just as well have *that*" (*Contingency* 18). Even though Miller would not regard himself as a truth-seeker or a purveyor of literal meanings, as a critic he must intend to share his insights with a community of readers, and he will have to formulate those insights within a vocabulary that, despite his insistence to the contrary, cannot be homologous with the literary text.

That this is a valid statement about Miller's own critical practice can be easily proven by taking a look at his "readings" in "Stevens' Rock, II"—purportedly a sequel to his reading of Wallace Stevens' poem, "The Rock"—and "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism," a close reading of William Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." As Redfield observes, these texts belong "to a group of essays that Miller published in the 1970s that use a close reading or a book review³ . . . as an occasion to survey the state of criticism and argue the case for Yale-style rhetorical deconstruction" (70). It looks as though Miller were never content to present a narrowly-focused close reading of a specific text, so he rather turns any specific reading situation into a comprehensive analysis of reading, interpretation, and literary theory *per se*. These texts read more like meta-theoretical analyses than literary interpretations, and in this capacity he must act more like a patient and sagacious educator than a poetic innovator. More than just advancing a critical interpretation of a specific literary text, he makes a point of carefully explicating the *modus operandi* of the underlying critical/theoretical discourse. Thus, not only is he *playing* the language game, but he also seems bent on expounding the very rules of that game.

“Stevens’ Rock, II” presents a prime example of Miller’s edifying endeavors, as he eloquently explains—relying on Nietzsche’s corresponding notions from his *The Birth of Tragedy*—the difference between two kinds of critics, to whom he refers by the epithets “Socratic” or “canny,” and the “Apollonian/Dionysian” or “uncanny.” Miller’s distinction is based on the degree to which critics are willing to deviate from conventional commentary and are prepared to take more daring approaches to literary texts, which test the boundaries of rationality and formal logic:

Socratic critics are those who are lulled by the promise of a rational ordering of literary study on the basis of solid advances in scientific knowledge about language. They are likely to speak of themselves as “scientists” and group their collective enterprise under some term like “the human sciences” . . . [which] has a reassuringly logical, progressive, quantifiable sound, “canny” in the sense of shrewd or practical. . . . The inheritors today of the Socratic faith would believe in . . . criticism as a rational and rationalizable activity, with agreed-upon rules of procedure, given facts, and measurable results. This would be a discipline bringing literature out into the sunlight in a “happy positivism.” (335)

Miller’s overt analogy between the Socratic critic and the natural scientist also suggests that such critics seek to operate within the “normal” paradigm of literary criticism, to use Thomas Kuhn’s terminology, which “requires common problems and methods, professional and institutional discipline, consensus that certain results have been achieved” (Rorty, “Derrida” 679). When a literary text presents an affront to “normalcy,” that is, the rule of logic, the Socratic critic’s task is to enfold the text in their own interpretive vocabularies and weed out its illogicalities by making the poem describable in accordance with the rules of their “canny” language game.

Miller concedes that uncanny critics seem to depend on logic just as much as their canny counterparts, if not more so. They submit the given text to a rigorous logical analysis, yet, Miller explains, “the thread of logic leads . . . into regions which are absurd, alogical. In a different way in each case, the work of the uncanny critics, however reasonable or sane their apparent procedure, reaches a point where it resists the intellect almost successfully. At this point it no longer quite makes rational sense” (336). Nonetheless, a critical text “resists the intellect” in a fundamentally different way than a literary text does (for example an elliptical poem, or a stream-of-consciousness narrative), for the uncanny critic’s path to “alogicality” leads through *logic*. The uncanny critic seeks to move beyond logic, thus he/she needs a stable meta-position to recognize alogicality in the first place, which enables them to revise and question the validity of logic by the very means of logic. What an uncanny critic does is more than merely *diagnosing* the alogicality of a literary text: he/she sets out to *demonstrate* through sinuous paths of *logical* argument that what appears sound and logical, in fact, lacks all logical grounding. In any case, the alogical remains a function of the logical, not least because the former merely denotes a nominal relation to latter, not some supra-logical, metaphysical realm unto itself. Miller’s reading of Wordsworth’s “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” offers a symptomatic example of this ambivalent relation to logic. What first catches Miller’s eyes is precisely the *logic* of the poem. He outlines a logical structure of “appositions and oppositions” as follows:

A surprising number of oppositions are present in the poem. These include slumber as against waking; male as against female; sealed as against open; [etc.] The invitation to interpret the poem in terms of oppositions is sustained in part by its syntactical and formal structure. . . . Formally the poem is organized by the opposition between the first stanza and the second. Each stanza sets one line against the next, the first two against the last two; each also sets line one against line three and line two against line four by way of the interlaced pattern of rhymes—abab, cdcd. (“On Edge” 21)

But as we can all suspect, this is just the beginning of the uncanny critic's journey; the logic is, of course, deceptive: "My account has been a little too logical, a little too much like Thales' account of the universe, an analogical oversimplification" (25). The question that arises at this point is: why is this oversimplification necessary then? Could we not just skip this stage in the interpretative process, once the critic knows well in advance that the inquiry will lead into regions which are alogical? Knowing this, why make the poem look even a *little* too logical?⁴ The answer, of course, is that the more logical the text appears to be, the more spectacular the demonstration will be of how it, "in fact," undermines logic. The distinction looks properly metaphysical: it differentiates between what text *appears* to be doing as opposed to what the text *is actually* doing. Although Miller makes a point of denouncing metaphysical methods of reading as opposed to "those methods which hypothesize that in literature, for reasons which are intrinsic to language itself, metaphysical presuppositions are both affirmed and subverted" (19), he keeps stumbling into metaphysical traps in the course of his explications.

Miller explicitly renders alogical impasse inevitable in the reading process by claiming that "[s]ooner or later there is the encounter with an 'aporia' or impasse . . . It is also the place [absurd and alogical regions] where Socratic procedures will ultimately lead, if they are carried far enough" ("Stevens' Rock, II" 338). There appears to be a tinge of metaphysical determinism in this latter statement: as if the interpretive path to the work had already been paved, and it merely depended on the critic's stance (canny or uncanny) whether he or she walks it to its full length, or stops short of the dark grotto of unverifiable statements into which the path allegedly leads. If sooner or later the critic is bound to stumble upon an aporia or walk into an impasse, it seems to be only a matter of critical perseverance to find it. As M.H. Abrams puts it in his famous polemic essay, "The Deconstructive Angel": "the infallible rule of the deconstructive quest [for Miller] is, 'Seek and ye shall find.' The deconstructive method works because it can't help working; it is a can't-fail enterprise; there is no complex passage or verse or prose which could possibly serve as a counter-instance to test its validity or limits" (435).

It is indeed somewhat perplexing to read quasi-essentialist claims in a professed anti-metaphysicians text such as: "the moment logic fails in their [the uncanny critics'] work is the moment of their deepest penetration into the actual nature of literary language as such" ("Stevens' Rock, II" 338). Miller's recurring apologia is that the uncanny critic merely seeks to *reveal* how metaphysical tenets deconstruct themselves in the given text, in which they are undoubtedly present. Prior to embarking on his elaborate interpretation of Wordsworth's poem, he defines the aim of his inquiry as no less than expounding that "in a given work of literature, in a different way in each case, metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself. They are undermined by some figurative play within the text which forbids it to be read as an 'organic unity' organized around some version of the *logos*" ("On Edge" 19). One wonders whether it applies just as well to "A Slumber," which does not seem to *forbid* Miller's initial reading of it as a logical and organic unity, even though it is a unity of oppositions. The seemingly trivial contradiction could, of course, be lifted if Miller stated that literary texts can be read in both ways, which, however, is already explicit in his setting canny and uncanny, metaphysical and deconstructive critics apart. Nonetheless, Miller is one step further than that: he vests the *text*, and not the critic, with the ability to either retain or undermine its own logical unity. He goes on to explicate how this process takes place:

The play of tropes leaves an inassimilable residue or remnant of meaning, an unearned increment, so to speak, making a movement of sense beyond any unifying boundaries. The following out of the implications of the play of tropes leads to a suspension of fully rationalizable meaning in the experience of an aporia or

boggling of the mind. This boggling sets up an oscillation of meaning. Dialectical opposites capable of synthesis may break down into the contradictory elements which are differences among the same. (19)

Terms and phrases like “inassimilable residue,” “sense beyond any unifying boundaries,” “suspension of fully rationalizable meaning,” “aporia,” or “boggling of the mind” are all of disruptive significance. Miller’s deconstructive narrative relates the process of the disappearance of external verifiability—the ground on which the interpretation of the text could be firmly based. Miller’s reading of “A Slumber” offers an overt example of how this narrative runs its full course undercutting the ground. This undercutting, however, is impossible without first positing the ground, if not as a given, then as a hypothetical point of reference. When, for instance, Miller relies on a large amount of psycho-biographical data about Wordsworth’s attitude to death (“On Edge” 21-22), he remains within the interpretive scope of verifiable philological data. In this case, the background against which the interpretive statements are verified is the large amount of biographical material available on William Wordsworth, including the diaries of his sister Elizabeth. If one allows that a biographical person’s diary, however poetically refined it may be, potentially contains “hard facts,” and if the corpus constituted by the Wordsworth-monographs is legitimized by their secure and time-honored places in the canon of literary history, one could not willy-nilly forget about them and *not* posit them, even though temporarily, as “grounds” in a given critical inquiry. Nonetheless, it is precisely the point of Miller’s deconstructive narrative: to convince his readers that even these ostensibly inescapable grounding factors give way to the undercutting current of “the play of tropes.”

Overthrowing, or at least putting in question, the authority of canonical monographs, however, should not necessarily coincide with overthrowing the power of logic, or more solemnly, of *logos*. Nonetheless, by taking these monographs to stand in a synecdochic relation to authority, therefore, by implication, to *logos*, they are rendered tropes themselves, and enter the very play which undermines their authority. The novelty in the deconstructive approach is that a hyper-logical argument reaches a point where the conclusions drawn cannot by any means be verified on the basis of any familiar epistemological tenets. Miller’s reading of Wordsworth’s poem reaches this point when he claims:

Whatever track the reader follows through the poem he arrives at blank contradictions. These contradictions are not ironic. They are the copresence of difference within the same, as, for example, time in the poem is not different from space but is collapsed into the rolling motion of the earth, or as Lucy in her relation to the speaker blurs the difference between virgin child and the missing mother . . . The two women, mother and child girl, have jumped over the male generation in the middle. They have erased its power of mastery, its power of logical understanding, which is the male power *par excellence*. In expressing this, the poem leaves its reader with no possibility of moving through or beyond or standing outside in sovereign control. The reader is caught in an unstillable oscillation unsatisfying to the mind and incapable of being grounded in anything outside the activity of the poem itself. (“On Edge” 28)

Miller is right in stating that no external factor can grant these interpretive findings any conceivable ground for legitimization. It is true that no rational explanation can account for how time and space can collapse into each other, or how a “virgin child” can be a mother at the same time, and the rhetorical matrix constituted by deconstructive criticism itself exempts the uncanny critic from having to rationalize the logical impossibilities he/she states. On the other hand, Miller’s expositions of the process through which the uncanny critic finally “arrives at” the alogical could not be more eloquent, coherent, and, ultimately, more logical. At the end of the day we are left with a curious narrative about a “self-deconstructing” text which is surprisingly teleological in nature. Miller, after all, has explained in advance how the deconstructive process will unfold, and he has managed to “demonstrate” that, lo and behold, he was right—seek and ye shall find. The story itself

may not have a happy ending, but the process of demonstration has been successfully executed, the lesson has been learned. And perhaps the most significant lessons Miller's deconstructive reading(s) might teach us lies in making us aware of the utter futility of the need for literary criticism, canny or uncanny, to couch its interpretations in the terms of a contradiction-free meta-vocabulary.

Finally, let me return to my initial claim that Miller's eloquent, lucid, and passionate explications of the deconstructive method are motivated to a great extent by a strong pedagogical urge. Indeed, his elucidating explanations sometimes can be so fervent that in a polemical exchange Eugene Goodheart dubbed Miller "the most ideological of deconstructionists" (*The Skeptic Disposition* 192). The debate between the two scholars was sparked by Miller's presidential address to the MLA in 1986, in which he defended deconstruction against critics from the "left" and the "right," and declared "the triumph of theory" ("Presidential Address" 284). Goodheart, who was mentioned in Miller's speech as a critic from the right, found the presidential address to be "little more than an expression of wounded vanity that his party is losing support in the profession" ("Hillis Miller and His Critics" 820). Goodheart's accusation was occasioned by the fact that after Miller conscientiously presented an overview of the then recent changes in literary and cultural studies, he proceeded to situate deconstruction at the crux of various disciplines such as "comparative literature, women's studies, programs in Afro-American literature, cultural studies, film studies, and critical theory as such" (285). In his response to Goodheart, Miller made no apologies for using "my presidential address to express my deepest convictions about literary study" ("Hillis Miller and His Critics" 821). Moreover, he felt it was his moral duty to do so:

It seemed to me that I had a moral obligation to say what I stand for and stand by . . . I also had, so it seemed to me, especially an obligation to encourage in its diversity the work of those younger scholar-critics who will take over our profession during the next decade. (821)

Miller addresses his audience "bound together by our shared profession as readers of literature, writers about literature, and teachers of literature" ("Presidential Address" 281), in his capacity as an educator rather than a theorist/critic. He appeals to his own responsibility as a pedagogue in expressing concerns for the future of the profession, and his plea for deconstruction pivots around his recurring notion of "good reading," which is the fundamental prerequisite of "good writing" (281). The circle of addressees (readers, writers, teachers of literature) in his MLA speech is symbolic in the sense that Miller—more than Derrida or de Man—always seems to speak to a wider audience, and recognizes it as his responsibility to share his explications. This sense of responsibility plays into the argument which he develops more substantially in *The Ethics of Reading* (1987): "I must take responsibility for my response [to the text] and for the future effects, 'interpersonal,' institutional, social, political, or historical, of my act of reading, for example as that act takes the form of teaching or of published commentary on a given text" (*The Ethics of Reading* 43). Reading—even deconstructive reading—does not take place in a social, historical, institutional vacuum: it is addressed to an audience of scholars, students, or "general" readers, whose response to the critic's response to the text, in turn, will have ethical motivations and consequences. No matter how subversive or "uncanny" a given reading is, as at the end of the day it must be a shared communal event.

In fact, Miller's highly original, and hence controversial, reading of Wordsworth's "A Slumber" is meant to be an example of "good reading," which, however, is sandwiched between pragmatic accounts of the state of literary studies in American higher education. The unsalutary changes in the discipline he discusses in 1979 seem to have stayed surprisingly and disconcertingly relevant in 2022: decreasing interest in literary studies,

hence, declining enrollments in literature departments, and “[t]hose fewer [students] are steadily less well prepared . . . They cannot write well. They cannot read well either” (“On Edge” 15). As a result, “many departments of English had been demoralized by declining enrollments and had begun to set their Shakespeareans and medievalists to teach classes in modern fiction, in film, or in continental novels in translation” (16). Miller, it seems, is worried about the dilution of the discipline of English literature, and urges a return to a meticulous study of texts through the heightened sensitivity and rigor of deconstructive readings. In other words, Miller is proposing a radically and subversively uncanny reading in order to further an admittedly *conservative* (or “canny”) cause: to restore and the profession of English letters to its former glory. William E. Cain makes a similar observation when he points out that

[d]econstruction does not generate a radically new literary history, and it is in fact difficult to notice that it has engendered any substantial changes in influence and reputation . . . The deconstructive critic awards high grades to Wordsworth’s writing because it reveals correspondences with his privileged modern authorities . . . [whereas he/she] might do well to ask why his or her method, for all of its ‘radical’ mustering of terms and insights, leaves Wordsworth’s authority and prestige so little changed . . . For Miller, “radical” interpretive possibilities are controlled and held in check by his conservative instincts, which preserve what a thoroughgoing deconstruction would threaten to undermine. (377-81)

Cain’s critique is justified insofar as deconstructionists have been both hailed and denigrated as “Newreaders”—to use M.H. Abrams’s sobriquet. Nonetheless, it has never been their professed intention to generate a “radically new literary history,” or a revision of the literary canon in a positivist sense. Miller opens his presidential address by noting a recent shift from “theory” to “history and politics” in literary studies, for which he claims to “have great sympathy,” adding a caveat: “but not when [this shift] takes the form of an exhilarating experience of liberation from the obligation to read, carefully, patiently, with nothing taken for granted beforehand” (283). Miller conceives of reading (in this qualified sense) as an obligation, not as a means of subverting or revolutionizing an academic discipline. The “contradiction” Cain is pointing out is no contradiction at all, as Miller’s “conservatism” is constitutive of his deconstructive disposition just as much as his innovative readings—it is all part and parcel of his uncanny pedagogy.

Miller finishes the paragraph about the primacy of “careful” and “patient” reading by adding: “I include in this obligation the scrupulous reading of texts of theory” (“Presidential Address” 283). This is a gentle reminder on Miller’s part that a “theorist,” just like any reader, has no privileged access to texts, even their own writings. It can also serve as a reminder to us, contemporary scholars, that a historical re-assessment of the work of the Yale critics must begin with the obligation of re-reading their texts scrupulously.

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NOTES

¹In an endnote to his *Philosophy Beside Itself*, Stephen W. Melville remarks in a critical vein, which is relevant to my inquiry as well: "I can make no sense of this statement as it stands; the best I can manage is the assertion that literature will always have performed its own *mise-en-abyme* (that is, will always be found to have done so)—but this is a statement about criticism and how it inevitably stands to its texts, and not about what literature is. Everything is right in Miller's statement—except that it cannot be said coherently" (169). ↵

²Besides the ones quoted above, another typical example is his succinct contention in his oft-quoted "The Critic as Host" after he has performed a deconstructive analysis of the dichotomy of host and parasite: "My little example of deconstructive strategy at work is meant, moreover, to indicate . . . the hyperbolic exuberance, the letting language go as far as it will take one, or the going with a given text as far as it will go, to its limits, which is an essential part of the procedure" (443). ↵

³"Tradition and Difference" (1972) a review of M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), and "Deconstructing the Deconstructors" (1975), a critique of Joseph N. Riddel's *The Inverted Bell* (1974) being two of the most notable examples. ↵

⁴As M.H. Abrams observes in his critique of "On Edge:" "The intrinsic anomaly of the deconstructive procedure is apparent: in claiming that a determinate interpretation is made possible by the text, Miller has already shown that it is possible, for he deconstructs a text that he has already determinately construed" (*Doing Things With Texts* 318). ↵