



# The J. Hillis Miller Reader

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Edited by

JULIAN WOLFREYS



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## *Preface*

J. Hillis Miller and Julian Wolfreys

Tell you my author  
I knew his hand  
Susan Howe

*The J. Hillis Miller Reader* gathers edited essays from fifty years of a remarkable career. From 1955 to the present, as many facets of J. Hillis Miller's critical interests as it is possible to represent in one volume are offered here: essays on Victorian literature; on modernism and twentieth-century British, North American and European writers; on philosophers, poets, and novelists; on ethics, poetics, politics, and aesthetics, on the disruption within writing that is the performative speech act, and on the demands of the act of criticism and what Miller calls good reading. There is, there can be, no introduction to such a diverse and heterogeneous body of work that is justified, so it is enough to say read J. Hillis Miller, but first understand what Miller means by reading before you attempt to read him.

The choice of pieces for the reader was by no means easy, and a balance, doubtless precarious, has been sought between providing a comprehensive view (one among many others) and offering the reader of this volume a detailed sense of the subtleties of Miller's thought and the close, careful scrutiny that he gives to the texts of others, whether Kant or Kafka, Derrida or de Man, the university today or the work of trope in linguistic and literary structures. In most cases, the essays have been edited from their original length, in order to be able to include twenty-two chapters. At the same time, responses have been included, commissioned from a number of leading critical voices, in order that the reader might find illuminated the profound, wide-reaching effect of Miller's reading and writing in so many ways and in so many areas, in what we call literary studies, the humanities, literary theory, the university. This effect is without parallel, and has both touched and called so many of us, who read, who write, and who teach, not merely as a profession, but from a sense of calling and in response to that calling issued from every page, in the turn of every phrase, and across the years.

Where essays have been edited, I have sought to maintain the contours of an argument, even though, inevitably, details have been sacrificed. On several, though not all, occasions, I have supplied a brief footnote to indicate in

paraphrase the focus of the excised material; though doubtless there can be no justification for such a procedure, I have offered paraphrase where the elided passage can be read as offering a significant transformation of the argument rather than functioning in a purely illustrative manner of an argument in which it is embedded. (However, I would, in any case, urge the reader to locate the original versions in every case; even supposing my paraphrase to be more or less in keeping with what has been removed, it is in the very nature of language that, in my effort at fidelity, I will have betrayed the other to which I am responding.) This occurs usually when a paragraph or more than a paragraph has been deleted. Because the motion of Miller's analyses is so densely enfolded at every point, in every line, it has often been the case that I have removed only a line or two, often merely a phrase. Where this has happened, no ellipsis has been included so that the page not look untidy and the eye distracted. As a rule of thumb, an ellipsis is included only when three or more lines of text have been removed. The ellipsis fills the place of the missing lines within paragraphs. When a paragraph or more has been cut, then the ellipsis appears in square brackets in the place of the missing paragraphs.

Julian Wolfreys  
April 2004

It is a great honor to have a J. Hillis Miller Reader, especially one gathered and edited by so distinguished a scholar, critic, and theorist, my friend Julian Wolfreys. Except for one or two suggestions I made, the selections in this reader have all been made by Julian Wolfreys. I have found it extremely interesting to see the implicit portrait of myself generated by the choices made in this reader. As I say in the interview that completes this volume, my interest in literature over the years has been primarily focused not on the generation of theoretical paradigms but on the act of reading specific works and attempting to account for their singularity, peculiarity, or strangeness. That remains, even now, what most interests me about literature.

J. Hillis Miller  
April 2004

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Finally, the person to whom I owe that which is the most impossible debt is J. Hillis Miller. His support for this project has been unqualified, and this is only the smallest measure of his generosity, his patience, and his encouragement, from all of which I have benefited in ways beyond the possibility of words to express. The limit of words is perhaps the most appropriate indication, the indirect trace of that which is without limits in Hillis. Even though it may not be apparent in my own work, there can be no doubt that I feel I have learnt much from his writing, his acts of good reading, and I have gained immeasurably from his friendship.

I gratefully acknowledge permission to reprint Derek Attridge's essay, 'Miller's Tale,' which has been published in a different form in *Journal for Cultural Research*, 8:1 (April 2004): 115–21.

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*Introduction: responsibilities of J  
or, aphorism's other*  
Julian Wolfreys

Our main business in the coming years will be to teach people to read – to read all the signs, including those of the newspaper and of the mass culture surrounding us, as well as those signs inscribed on the pages of the old canonical books. In the coming years an informed citizenry in our democracy will be one that can read and think clearly about all the signs that at every moment bombard us through eye and ear. Figuring out the best ways to ensure the existence of this citizenry will be a great responsibility but also an exhilarating opportunity.

J. Hillis Miller

My selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things . . . is incommunicable by any means to another man.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

and what if, resonance in this other language still leading you astray, I liked words *in order to be-tray* (to treat, triturate, trice, in-trigue, trace, track).

Jacques Derrida

✍ You start with the event of reading, which is neither illusory nor arbitrary, but is something that occurs when you read, and you go on from there.

You can learn quite a lot about reading from J. Hillis Miller. Among so many things into which you might gain insight, if you attend with patience, diligence, care, and responsibility to only one or two threads drawn from the vast weave of fifty years of publication, of reading and writing, of response and responsibility, is that, in the act of reading, there is always the singular encounter with the other, with others. Or, perhaps more accurately, there is always the chance of that encounter. One can never be certain, ahead of the event. As Miller's lucid, eloquent, engaged prose makes plain, if otherness is missed in what to all intents and purposes looks like an act of reading, no amount of elucidation after the fact will ever explain it to the reader who has missed that momentary passage. This is true whether one is speaking of a novel, of poetry, of 'deconstruction,' so-called, or criticism in general. Each of J. Hillis Miller's texts are comprised of so many singular encounters with or experiences of the other in their acts of reading, but they also comprise, equally, so many articulations of the other, of innumerable others, for which each and every good reader of Miller is

responsible. Yet nothing can be more certain than the fact that, in the effort to be responsible, the reader of Miller may, to speak in litotes, have got it wrong.

This is not to impugn the intelligence of the reader; it is though to suggest a certain deceptive and therefore disabling force that underlies the apparent calm of any text by Miller. Perhaps this can best be explained, in the manner of an introduction, through illustration as analogy. Were I to seek the appropriate metaphor or image for Miller's texts, it might be that of a still, shimmering surface of a lake. The tranquillity and composure of that lake remains for the most part undisturbed, offering to those who contemplate it an apparently unruffled play of light and shade, mediating rather than merely reflecting the composition, the structure and form of whatever is glimpsed on or across the surface. Something emerges without warning, however, from the darkness that the surface calm belies, disturbing irrevocably the illusion of placidity and liquid unity. Or, to continue this metaphor, there is that other effect. You are out on the lake, moving across its surface or remaining relatively still at one point (the point is illusory; you only imagine a point in the otherwise unbroken surface). An agitation begins, imperceptibly at first, gradually building to a swell of irresistible proportions, in the midst of which you find yourself thrown around, disoriented, capsized even. To bear witness to this is – hopefully – to become an approximation of the reader Miller desires, to be translated by one's having been touched by the aphoristic pulsing of the other (and this *is* aphoristic, as I shall show). However, supposing one (believes that one) has read aright, even to the smallest degree, this is not to say that reading has come to an end or that the responsibilities entailed in any act of reading have been fulfilled. In recognition of these, I hope my reader will allow me what might appear a brief, perhaps somewhat elliptical reflection. These will take place through a consideration of what the title of this introduction – *responsibilities of J or, aphorism's other* – puts to work as a means of opening oneself to a dialogue with the others in the text of J. Hillis Miller.

A question arises from the title. I can imagine it: why speak of aphorism at all, let alone address it through this strange phrase, *aphorism's other*, which appears to have imposed itself on me, when writing an introduction to a collection of essays by J. Hillis Miller? What is it about aphorism that appears an appropriate figure for addressing Miller's criticism? The second part of my title involves a double genitive. On the one hand, it announces that other, that singular example without example and experience of the other, which we call aphorism. In this sense, the aphorism, every aphorism, is other because it arrives, it *calls* (I will return to the call, below); but the supposed or hypothetical place from which it arrives, the guise, persona, in which it comes to call, that which we might want to identify as the 'style,' 'tone,' or 'voice' of the aphorism's origin (supposing there were such a thing) in order to give location or identity – these are unlocatable, unidentifiable, perhaps even radically undecidable. Every aphorism, it might be said, is different from every other aphorism; every

aphorism is wholly aphoristic and therefore singular. It departs from an unlocatable horizon, being other than that, even as it gestures towards the illusion of a horizon, which its inscription inscribes rather than merely describes. Aphorism is thus always already double, and in being double, opens abyssally. It doubles itself for, arriving under cover as elliptical or occluded knowledge, aphorism ‘does’ something with words, it is performative within and other than its glacial, yet provocative placidity.

On the other hand – there will, by the way, be more than two hands; and these will have been multiple, diverse, heterogeneous –, there is remarked the other that the performative we call aphorism gives place to, that which, in the place of the aphorism, takes place. This place, however, is strange, a place, if it is one, concerning the very ground of which one cannot have knowledge, let alone be certain concerning its existence. The aphorism is thus a singular manifestation of the *atopical*, and ‘this strange locus is another name for the ground of things . . . *something other* to any activity of mapping’ (Miller 1995, 7; emphasis added); neither absolutely groundless nor firmly grounded, but *something other*, a ghostly passage or, for want of a better phrase, a ‘tropological entity’ (Hamacher 2004, 178). What might be considered the appropriate ground then? From which location do I begin, if mapping is impossible? What is the ground on which I build or embellish, in order to produce either structure or counterpoint? And what is it in Miller’s work as so many singular attestations of the other that calls to me, to us, to so many readers over the years? What is it that comes, returns, continues to come unceasingly, and promises to come? What is it within the act of reading in Miller’s writing that, as the encounter with an other, signals the promise of the to-come? What is that arrives, often with the lightning flash of aphorism or insight, or what Jacques Derrida has called, with regard to aphorism, the *trait d’esprit* (1989, 123)<sup>1</sup> in a manner that, in being just this compulsive call, is both command and gift?

✍ Each form of repetition calls up the other, by an incalculable compulsion.

It is not for me to answer these questions definitively, at least not here, not with the patience they demand, in the space and time of an introduction. Indeed, this inaugural proliferation of queries<sup>2</sup> and interrogations will have been only the first in a series. Such inquiries are part of a structure that informs and disorders the place of the introduction; the ineluctable, iterable arrival and gesture of adumbrated semaphore in the guise of questioning signals the absence of any justifiable introduction, which absence comes to be filled by the endless demands for (and of) response. What might be suggested in the face of such activity, and as one response to the other’s impossible demand, is that the *trait d’esprit* is, it can be imagined, the trace of the wholly other, that which is not only singularly atopical, involved with an undermining of topographical certainties, but also temporally disruptive from within any supposed present,

and having to do with the unbearable time of reading: 'in one way or another the wholly other is ghostly and takes the form of an apparitional promise. The tout autre is something already there, a revenant from some immemorial past, and yet heralds or invokes or demands a future . . .' (Miller 2001a, 2) What comes to me from some unmappable locus as the aphoristic remains remains to be answered. In the face of the other's arrival or return, if such a thing takes place, there is no proper time. It may be that the *trait d'esprit* which countersigns aphorism gives rise to 'a consciousness of temporality,' and this consciousness gives us to reflect that there is no proper time, even though we remain attentive to its possibility.<sup>3</sup>

Let me, therefore, as a bare acknowledgement to the glimpse of what I will call provisionally J. Hillis Miller's *trait d'esprit*,<sup>4</sup> single out three words as traces of that which arrives aphoristically, and which calls. These traces set up a particular resonance, and find themselves insistently reiterated in the work of the subject of this volume, while also, already, circulating in this introduction: *other*, *performative*, *topos*. As with the question or, more properly, the admission of a difficulty in the face of the demand of the question, it is not my intention here to analyse these words, to give them much space beyond their having been remarked. That they arrive and return insistently must be enough. But what is remarked here is the recognition that I am called upon by the other. I am addressed by each and every other, in each of these figures, and find myself repeating these figures, a few among many. In repeating, I am obliged to respond, if not to them (for, once again, there is not the space to do them justice), then to what is announced in their arrival. The other(s) arrive(s)<sup>5</sup> to call me by some 'incalculable compulsion' (Miller 1982, 9) to responsibility. Whatever this responsibility is, it is without doubt more than one, even if, at the same time, it is less than this. It is, furthermore, endless, 'forever impossible' (Miller 2001b, 214). Such inescapable impossibility may well reside in the fact that, even in the sketched gesture that is reiteration, there is still to be read a 'search for grounds', which nonetheless 'finds its groundless ground, its *abgründlichen Grund* . . . That thought was there waiting for me (but where is "there"?)' (Miller 1985, 433). Where is *there* indeed, when there is no *there there* as such. I am not sure therefore that I can even begin to identify correctly where precisely the responsibilities lie. So, for now at least, it is enough – and also never enough – to locate responsibility in a graphic mark, a sign or trace, as encrypted as it is readable, which, on the one hand, offers a name for responsibility, while, on the other hand, offers to stand in for the impossibility of either of limiting responsibility or speaking of a limited responsibility. In this, to hazard a performative gesture (and to risk also the chance that the performativity of the inscription will have been missed), it has to be said that '[t]he moment is, so to speak, its own image. It is haunted by itself as if it were its own uncanny *revenant*. The moment is single, and yet it is imperceptibly doubled within itself' (Miller 1985, 432). Another way to remark what takes place here is to suggest

that the critical repetition involves an action whereby the 'second [act of writing] is . . . [the] "counterpart" [or counterpoint of the first writing] in a strange relation whereby the second is the subversive ghost of the first, always already present within it as a possibility which hollows it out' (Miller 1982, 9). Acknowledging this, and thereby conceding that which is also, already, admitted – and therefore doubled, divided –, I will turn back to my title even as it returns to me, in order to move on, by taking responsibility for *responsibilities of J*.

What exactly is being articulated in this phrase, *responsibilities of J*? Who, or what, is *J*, supposing even that this single letter stands (in) for an identity, that it is the sign of an identity, however encrypted or however transparent? What are *J*'s *responsibilities*? Does this mark, this *trait*, sign or assign responsibility, does it stand in for the promise to be responsible? Or does it in some manner dictate or demand responsibility? Certainly, this merest figure, at once both readable and enigmatic, invites as much as it resists reading, and '[t]he reader can never know any of these secrets' (Miller 2003, 30). As I have just rewritten the phrase, wherein there appears the *turn* of phrase (and which thereby turns the screw on translation's responsibilities), *responsibilities of J* is translated, not quite symmetrically, as *J*'s *responsibilities*. So, another double genitive appears, one that is, of course, already in place in the former version through the articulating fulcrum of *of*. On the one hand, as you can no doubt read, this expression, which perhaps aspires if not to being an aphorism then at least to some axiomatic status, announces itself in different hands; to the ghost of one hand in the hand of the other we might say, in which there is that visible-invisible touch of discontinuous relation without relation, 'a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions' (Miller 1982, 2–3). The phrase with all its possible repetitions announces therefore the responsibilities that are *J*'s – who, or whatever, *J* might be. On the other hand, it also gives us to understand those undeniably inscrutable responsibilities traced in the very letter *J*, which, in seeking to read them, I will have *be-trayed*. And this, it might be said, is the double bind of writing and reading, the double bind that finds itself re-marked, traced, and treated in *J*, from one *J* to another, between the *J*s. Or, in another language, recalling another *J*'s remark,<sup>6</sup> in the *jeu* between that *J* (hear this in French) which is an other and the *Je*, which, touched by an other, that other *J* that, aphoristically calls on and in me/*Je*, inscribing me every time I write and read and every time *I* is written with that gift which is also the call to responsibility. (Just because you can no longer hear the other *J*, that *J* which is the multiply other in and of the Greco-Latinate-English *I*, as you can in a certain fashion in French, does not mean to say that *I* is not haunted by *J* for all that.) For, if the question of *J* is indeed one of the *trait d'esprit*, it is also one of the *jeu d'esprit*, wherein '[t]he act of trying to understand repeats the enigmatic, unknowable event that is the object of anxious interrogation'. An act such as this is 'a way of doing things with words rather than the

constative expression of achieved knowledge' (2001b, 214). The critic's act of response in its responsibility seeks to personify, if only through the inscription of *I* and at least in part, as a means of economizing on the abyss (Derrida 1987b, 37)<sup>7</sup> of *J*, as it were, as a way of opening the encryption that is *J*. And, to re-cite in other words the assertion just cited in a gesture of haunting citation concerning performativity, such personifications or 'prosopopoeias . . . are potent speech acts. They have to do with doing rather than knowing' (Miller 1995, 8).

✍ Yet another mode of character reading is displayed, with an explicit reference to hieroglyphs.

Yet where am *I*? Where is *I* to be found, on what ground, as you open this volume to this page? Or, to put this another way, what are the grounds for saying, writing *I*, except that call of *J*? Do *I* accept the call of *J*, and how do *I* know it is meant for me? *I am* is, in Miller's own words, 'suspended always on a vibrating tightrope over the abyss of its own impossibility' (1998, 157). Moreover, in having to acknowledge seriously, in the face of my subject's writing, the 'impossibility of criticism in the sense of [the impossibility of criticism's ability to effect] a demonstrable decoding of meaning' (1998, 157), *I* have to take responsibility and admit that *I am* faced with an impossible task. But the very fact that it is impossible in no way alleviates the responsibility *I* have in attempting this commission. The assignment (admittedly self-imposed or at least seemingly so) is multiple. It is not simply one. It is not only, merely, the question of writing, or attempting to write this introduction, though, it has to be said, there can be no doubt that this, in itself, is great enough. No. The task involves a series of obligations and responsibilities, all having to do in some manner, more or less directly, with the fraught question of reading, along with a number of related matters. And all of this is written – take it as read – in the letter *J*. *J* calls and thus names me, *J* taking place every time *I* respond, *I* is written. To call, as we know, is to name, and naming, as *J* has occasion to remind us, 'is an initiatory performative utterance, a "calling."' *I* find myself called, but '[t]hat calling is based or *grounded* on nothing but the call from the other that impassions me' (emphasis added), hence the very nature of what you are reading, because '[t]his call *I* respond to in another calling, for example in writing an essay or a book'; or, indeed, what is called an introduction. This act of writing, which is also one of reading, in turn 'constitutes another demand for response. It is a demand for which *I*, as the one who has first responded, must, and hereby do, take responsibility' (2001b, 215). Yet this can always be missed. Even my attempted maneuver, my opening strategy if you will, of announcing my obligation, itself intended to be both a response to and a reading of what is at stake in the writings of J. Hillis Miller, runs a risk here: the chance of its being read (misread, not read at all), as being merely a formula, just a gambit and not



the necessary admission of what takes place in a place such as an introduction when one is seeking, without totalizing summary or synthesis, to respond to the other, to the wholly other and to every other.

Yet, despite – indeed, because of – this, in being faced; *no*, more accurately, in attempting (impossible scenario) to come face to face with every other and the wholly other that is the text, and signed in the name, of *J. Hillis Miller*, what can be said in the face of every other and the wholly other, which is every text, every inscription of a critical singularity? It has to be admitted that the ‘wholly other otherness of the other’ arrives ‘as a perturbation . . . in language’ (2001b, 269), and, moreover, ‘individual works, even those by the same author, must be read as a unique testimony to otherness’ (2001a, 3). Thus *I* read as a short-hand encryption for this perturbation, this singularity and otherness, the figure or siglum *J*<sup>8</sup> that appears to say everything and all the rest; and all the while this being, I would like to imagine, a figure for a particular, singular revenance, an arrival that is a return, as well as a disclosure that nonetheless retains its secrets. What is it about *J* that authorizes me to say this? What takes place in the passage between *I* and the other, between *J* and *I*, between *J* and *J*? It is of course the case that ‘argument cannot pass from here to there [or from there to here, even though, you will recall, we cannot say where *there* is or, for that matter, if it is possible to speak, ontologically as it were, of a *there is*, an *il y a*, which is not, first and foremost, the deconstruction of ontology, through the spectral passage of the other haunting the phrase *es gibt*] without the help of . . . quotations. This happens according to the law of each text’s dependence on other texts’ (1998, 161). Every time I write – and all the more so, whenever I write *I–J* haunts and disables, even as it makes possible, authorizes, and demands my response. Thus *I* – as the column of a haunted house, an architecture in ruins. Reading, responding to, accepting the *responsibilities of J* discloses the necessary ‘substitution of language for consciousness, figural for literal, interliterary for mimetic generation of meaning’ (2000a, xviii), so that consciousness – that false consciousness at least to which I ascribe through certain assumptions concerning *I* – ‘may be a function of language, a fictive appearance generated by language, rather than something language describes or reflects’ (2000a, xv). So reading gets going by opening itself to that somewhat ‘mazy’ motion always already underway, and it is this motion that is caught for me in the singularity, and in the singular call, of the letter *J*. *J* gives; it gives (to) *I*; *J* lends *I* a hand, as it were, even though this hand has long since become invisible, a ghost writer causing *I* to appear, in part at least by disappearing under the sign of the phallic illusion of the Greco-Latinate-English column, and recognizable as that phantasm named by Miller ‘the “consciousness of the author”’ (2000a, xv). Thus *I* is doubled and divided from within. At most, ‘a sequence of disconnected evanescent persons’ (as Miller has it in the essay on Thomas Hardy in the section on nineteenth-century literature), the surety of *I*’s ground is disrupted from within itself, from within the ‘itself’, ‘haunted by itself,’ to recall and be