

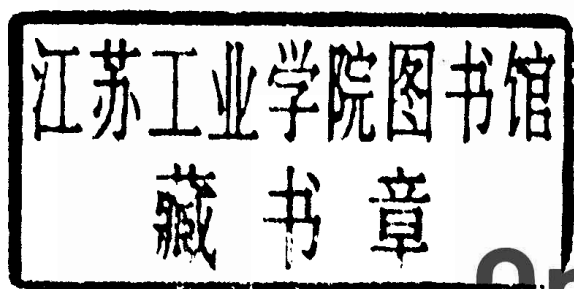
On Literature

J. Hillis Miller

Thinking in Action



J. HILLIS MILLER



On

Literature



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A preliminary version of some of the ideas in this book, especially those in Chapter 4, was presented as a lecture for the Koehn Endowed Lectureship at the University of California, Irvine, in February 2001. The lecture was called “On the Authority of Literature.” Subsequently, the talk was given as the first annual Lecture on Modern Literature for the Department of English at Baylor University in April, 2001. The lecture was then printed there as a pamphlet for local circulation. I am grateful to my host and sponsor at Baylor, Professor William Davis, for his many kindnesses. Different versions of the talk were given at two conferences, in August 2001, in the People’s Republic of China: at a triennial conference of the Chinese Association for Sino-Foreign Literary and

Cultural Theory, held in Shenyang, and at an International Symposium on Globalizing Comparative Literature, sponsored by Yale and Tsinghua Universities. I thank Professor Wang Ning for arranging these invitations and for many other courtesies. A German translation will be published as my contribution to a research project on “representative validity,” sponsored by the Zentrum für Literaturforschung in Berlin. I especially thank Ingo Berensmeyer, as well as other colleagues in Berlin, for the chance to try out my ideas on them. A Bulgarian translation will be published in a Festschrift for Simeon Hadjikosev, of Sofia University. I thank Ognyan Kovachev for inviting me, and for other kindnesses. Altogether, my preliminary ideas for Chapter 4 and for some other germs of this book have had the benefit of many helpful comments and reactions.

Finally, I thank the dedicatee of this book for suffering once more through my ordeals of composition. She had to endure my faraway look, my dreamy absentmindedness. I was dwelling again in imagination on the other side of Alice’s looking-glass or on the deserted island where the Swiss Family Robinson made such an enchanting home. It has taken me a good many months to figure out what to say about that experience.

Sedgwick, Maine
December 15, 2001

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One

FAREWELL LITERATURE?

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

What brings about this paradoxical situation? Literature has a history. I mean "literature" in the sense we in the West use the word in our various languages: "literature" (French or English) "letteratura" (Italian), "literatura" (Spanish), "Literatur" (German). As Jacques Derrida observes in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, the word literature comes from a Latin stem. It cannot be detached from its Roman-Christian-European roots. Literature in our modern sense, however, appeared in the European West and began in the late seventeenth century, at the earliest. Even then the word did not have its modern meaning. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "literature" was first used in our current sense only quite recently. Even a definition of "literature" as including memoirs, history, collections of letters, learned treatises, etc., as well as poems, printed plays, and

novels, comes after the time of Samuel Johnson's dictionary (1755). The restricted sense of literature as just poems, plays, and novels is even more recent. The word "literature" is defined by Johnson exclusively in the now obsolescent sense of "Acquaintance with 'letters' or books; polite or humane learning; literary culture." One example the OED gives is as late as 1880: "He was a man of very small literature." Only by the third definition in the OED does one get to:

Literary production as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the grounds of beauty of form or emotional effect.

This definition, says the OED, "is of very recent emergence both in England and France." Its establishment may be conveniently dated in the mid-eighteenth century and associated, in England at least, with the work of Joseph and Thomas Wharton (1722–1800; 1728–90). They were hailed by Edmund Gosse, in an essay of 1915–16 ("Two Pioneers of Romanticism: Joseph and Thomas Wharton"), as giving literature its modern definition. Literature in that sense is now coming to an end, as new media gradually replace the printed book.

WHAT HAS MADE LITERATURE POSSIBLE?

What are the cultural features that are necessary concomitants of literature as we have known it in the West? Western literature belongs to the age of the printed book and of other print forms like newspapers, magazines, and periodicals generally. Literature is associated with the gradual rise of almost universal literacy in the West. No widespread literacy,

no literature. Literacy, furthermore, is associated with the gradual appearance from the seventeenth century onward of Western-style democracies. This means regimes with expanded suffrage, government by legislatures, regulated judicial systems, and fundamental human rights or civil liberties. Such democracies slowly developed more or less universal education. They also allowed citizens more or less free access to printed materials and to the means of printing new ones.

This freedom, of course, has never been complete. Various forms of censorship, in even the freest democracies today, limit the power of the printing press. Nevertheless, no technology has ever been more effective than the printing press in breaking down class hierarchies of power. The printing press made democratic revolutions like the French Revolution or the American Revolution possible. The Internet is performing a similar function today. The printing and circulation of clandestine newspapers, manifestoes, and emancipatory literary works was essential to those earlier revolutions, just as email, the Internet, the cell phone, and the “hand-held” will be essential to whatever revolutions we may have from now on. Both these communication regimes are also, of course, powerful instruments of repression.

The rise of modern democracies has meant the appearance of the modern nation-state, with its encouragement of a sense of ethnic and linguistic uniformity in each state’s citizens. Modern literature is vernacular literature. It began to appear as the use of Latin as a *lingua franca* gradually disappeared. Along with the nation-state has gone the notion of national literature, that is, literature written in the language and idiom of a particular country. This concept remains strongly codified in school and university study of literature. It is institutionalized

in separate departments of French, German, English, Slavic, Italian, and Spanish. Tremendous resistance exists today to the reconfiguration of those departments that will be necessary if they are not simply to disappear.

The modern Western concept of literature became firmly established at the same time as the appearance of the modern research university. The latter is commonly identified with the founding of the University of Berlin around 1810, under the guidance of a plan devised by Wilhelm von Humboldt. The modern research university has a double charge. One is *Wissenschaft*, finding out the truth about everything. The other is *Bildung*, training citizens (originally almost exclusively male ones) of a given nation-state in the ethos appropriate for that state. It is perhaps an exaggeration to say that the modern concept of literature was created by the research university and by lower-school training in preparation for the university. After all, newspapers, journals, non-university critics and reviewers also contributed, for example Samuel Johnson or Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England. Nevertheless, our sense of literature was strongly shaped by university-trained writers. Examples are the Schlegel brothers in Germany, along with the whole circle of critics and philosophers within German Romanticism. English examples would include William Wordsworth, a Cambridge graduate. His "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" defined poetry and its uses for generations. In the Victorian period Matthew Arnold, trained at Oxford, was a founding force behind English and United States institutionalized study of literature. Arnold's thinking is still not without force in conservative circles today.

Arnold, with some help from the Germans, presided over the transfer from philosophy to literature of the responsibility for *Bildung*. Literature would shape citizens by giving them

knowledge of what Arnold called “the best that is known and thought in the world.” This “best” was, for Arnold, enshrined in canonical Western works from Homer and the Bible to Goethe or Wordsworth. Most people still first hear that there is such a thing as literature from their school teachers.

Universities, moreover, have been traditionally charged with the storage, cataloguing, preservation, commentary, and interpretation of literature through the accumulations of books, periodicals, and manuscripts in research libraries and special collections. That was literature’s share in the university’s responsibility for *Wissenschaft*, as opposed to *Bildung*. This double responsibility was still very much alive in the literature departments of The Johns Hopkins University when I taught there in the 1950s and 1960s. It has by no means disappeared today.

Perhaps the most important feature making literature possible in modern democracies has been freedom of speech. This is the freedom to say, write, or publish more or less anything. Free speech allows everyone to criticize everything, to question everything. It confers the right even to criticize the right to free speech. Literature, in the Western sense, as Jacques Derrida has forcefully argued, depends, moreover, not just on the right to say anything but also on the right not to be held responsible for what one says. How can this be? Since literature belongs to the realm of the imaginary, whatever is said in a literary work can always be claimed to be experimental, hypothetical, cut off from referential or performative claims. Dostoevsky is not an ax murderer, nor is he advocating ax murder in *Crime and Punishment*. He is writing a fictive work in which he imagines what it might be like to be an ax murderer. A ritual formula is printed at the beginning of many modern detective stories: “Any

resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental." This (often false) claim is not only a safeguard against lawsuits. It also codifies the freedom from referential responsibility that is an essential feature of literature in the modern sense.

A final feature of modern Western literature seemingly contradicts the freedom to say anything. Even though democratic freedom of speech in principle allows anyone to say anything, that freedom has always been severely curtailed, in various ways. Authors during the epoch of printed literature have *de facto* been held responsible not only for the opinions expressed in literary works but also for such political or social effects as those works have had or have been believed to have had. Sir Walter Scott's novels and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have in different ways been held responsible for causing the American Civil War, the former by instilling absurdly outmoded ideas of chivalry in Southern gentry, the latter by decisively encouraging support for the abolition of slavery. Nor are these claims nonsensical. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Chinese translation was one of Mao Tse Tung's favorite books. Even today, an author would be unlikely to get away before a court of law with a claim that it is not he or she speaking in a given work but an imaginary character uttering imaginary opinions.

Just as important as the development of print culture or the rise of modern democracies in the development of modern Western literature, has been the invention, conventionally associated with Descartes and Locke, of our modern sense of the self. From the Cartesian *cogito*, followed by the invention of identity, consciousness, and self in Chapter 27, Book II, of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, to the sovereign I or Ich of Fichte, to absolute consciousness in Hegel, to the I as

the agent of the will to power in Nietzsche, to the ego as one element of the self in Freud, to Husserl's phenomenological ego, to the *Dasein* of Heidegger, explicitly opposed to the Cartesian ego, but nevertheless a modified form of subjectivity, to the I as the agent of performative utterances such as "I promise" or "I bet" in the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and others, to the subject not as something abolished but as a problem to be interrogated within deconstructive or post-modern thinking – the whole period of literature's heyday has depended on one or another idea of the self as a self-conscious and responsible agent. The modern self can be held liable for what it says, thinks, or does, including what it does in the way of writing works of literature.

Literature in our conventional sense has also depended on a new sense of the author and of authorship. This was legalized in modern copyright laws. All the salient forms and techniques of literature have, moreover, exploited the new sense of selfhood. Early first-person novels like Robinson Crusoe adopted the direct presentation of interiority characteristic of seventeenth-century Protestant confessional works. Eighteenth-century novels in letters exploited epistolary presentations of subjectivity. Romantic poetry affirmed a lyric "I." Nineteenth-century novels developed sophisticated forms of third-person narration. These allowed a double simultaneous presentation by way of indirect discourse of two subjectivities, that of the narrator, that of the character. Twentieth-century novels present directly in words the "stream of consciousness" of fictional protagonists. Molly Bloom's soliloquy at the end of *Ulysses* is the paradigmatic case of the latter.

THE END OF THE PRINT AGE

Most of these features making modern literature possible are now undergoing rapid transformation or putting in question. People are now not so certain of the unity and perdurance of the self, nor so certain that the work can be explained by the authority of the author. Foucault's "What is an Author?" and Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" signaled the end of the old tie between the literary work and its author considered as a unitary self, the real person William Shakespeare or Virginia Woolf. Literature itself has contributed to the fragmentation of the self.

Forces of economic, political, and technological globalization are in many ways bringing about a weakening of the nation-state's separateness, unity, and integrity. Most countries are now multilingual and multi-ethnic. Nations today are seen to be divided within as well as existing within more permeable borders. American literature now includes works written in Spanish, Chinese, Native American languages, Yiddish, French, and so on, as well as works written in English from within those groups, for example African-American literature. Over sixty minority languages and cultures are recognized in the People's Republic of China. South Africa after apartheid has eleven official languages, nine African languages along with English and Afrikaans. This recognition of internal division is ending literary study's institutionalization according to national literatures, each with its presumed self-enclosed literary history, each written in a single national language. The terrible events of the mid-twentieth century, World War II and the Holocaust, transformed our civilization and Western literature with it. Maurice Blanchot and others have even argued persuasively that literature in the old sense is impossible after the Holocaust.

In addition, technological changes and the concomitant development of new media are bringing about the gradual death of literature in the modern sense of the word. We all know what those new media are: radio, cinema, television, video, and the Internet, soon universal wireless video.

A recent workshop I attended in the People's Republic of China (PRC) brought together American literary scholars and representatives of the Chinese Writers Association. At that meeting it became evident that the most respected and influential Chinese writers today are those whose novels or stories are turned into one or another television series. The major monthly journal printing poetry in the PRC has in the last decade declined in circulation from an amazing 700,000 to a "mere" 30,000, though the proliferation of a dozen or more new influential poetry journals mitigates that decline somewhat and is a healthy sign of diversification. Nevertheless, the shift to the new media is decisive.

Printed literature used to be a primary way in which citizens of a given nation state were inculcated with the ideals, ideologies, ways of behavior and judgment that made them good citizens. Now that role is being increasingly played, all over the world, for better or for worse, by radio, cinema, television, VCRs, DVDs, and the Internet. This is one explanation for the difficulties literature departments have these days in getting funding. Society no longer needs the university as the primary place where the national ethos is inculcated in citizens. That work used to be done by the humanities departments in colleges and universities, primarily through literary study. Now it is increasingly done by television, radio talk shows, and by cinema. People cannot be reading Charles Dickens or Henry James or Toni Morrison and at the same time watching television or a film on VCR, though some