

## J. Hillis Miller (1928–2021)

J. Hillis Miller, who died in January 2021, was an American literary scholar who made significant contributions to critical trends as different as phenomenology, deconstruction and narrative ethics, influencing the direction of literary studies not only in the United States but also in many other countries around the world. Moreover, Miller contributed to studies of the novel, writing excellent books on Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Henry James. His *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (1970) is arguably one of the best studies of Hardy ever published.

What is perhaps less known is that Miller also made a significant contribution to Conrad studies. Offering some remarks in his memory, I will first comment on Miller's work on Conrad. Then I will add some more personal remarks on Miller's contribution to a research project I ran some years ago at the Centre for Advanced Study, Oslo.

Describing himself as a student of philology, Miller repeatedly stressed that in order to understand a literary text we need to study the text carefully. Over the course of a career that lasted from the mid-1950s until 2020, Miller turned, and returned, to Conrad's fiction, reading, rereading and discussing key texts in the light of theoretical developments to which he had himself contributed.

Miller's strong and lasting interest in Conrad says something about the narrative sophistication and thematic richness of Conrad's fiction, including its lasting appeal and remarkable ability to respond to different critical approaches and dissimilar theories of literature. When John G. Peters and I co-edited Miller's *Reading Conrad* (The Ohio State University Press, 2017), we were struck by Miller's demonstration of the ways in which Conrad's fiction responds to varying critical approaches, including those mentioned above.

In two chapters on Conrad in *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (1965), Miller uses a variant of phenomenological criticism in which the author's consciousness plays a key role. Discussing Conrad's consciousness as represented by *The Secret Agent* in particular, Miller finds that Conrad's fiction is possessed of a pervasive nihilism. This nihilism, however, is not static but dynamic, furthered by elements of narrative. These elements include irony, which, for Miller, is a key aspect of Conrad's fiction.

Miller's phenomenological criticism was influenced by that of Georges Poulet, who was a colleague of Miller's at John Hopkins's University. In 1972 Miller moved from Johns Hopkins to Yale University, where he participated in the "linguistic turn" towards deconstruction for which Yale came to be known in the following years. An essay on Conrad published two years earlier, "The Interpretation of *Lord Jim*", signals his critical move from phenomenology towards the variant of deconstruction he would later represent and defend. In this essay Miller argues that not only the indeterminacy of language but the interpretative activity itself – the act of reading – makes Conrad's works curiously indeterminate and open-ended. Miller shows that Conrad's narration incorporates, and in the case of *Lord Jim* even

necessitates, elements of interpretation, as Marlow and the other narrators attempt to understand Jim.

There is a link between Miller's essay on *Lord Jim* from 1970 and his chapter on this novel in *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (1982), an influential study often associated with the Yale variant of deconstruction. There is also a connection between both these discussions and narrative hermeneutics as represented by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. In *Truth and Method*, first published in German as *Wahrheit und Methode* in 1960, Gadamer argues that not only do we as readers interpret the same text differently; additionally, the text itself contains interpretative elements that influence the reader's interpretation. *Lord Jim* is an excellent example of such a text since the novel's characters and narrators give varying, in part conflicting, interpretations of the main character Jim. As Conrad as implied author asks the reader to compare and evaluate these interpretations, he also asks the reader to give his or her own. Even though Miller does not refer to Gadamer, his studies of *Lord Jim* are illustrative of key notions in *Truth and Method*.

Miller's phenomenological criticism as well as his variant of deconstruction were related to the impact of New Criticism in American (and also many European) universities. While Miller was attracted to New Criticism's insistence on close reading, he had problems with this trend's idea of a literary text's "organic unity". In an interview in 2002, he states that his reading of Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967) was a turning point for him, since it "liberated" him to see that a literary text can be characterized by contradictory elements yet remain a great work. For Miller, not only *Lord Jim* but also *Heart of Darkness* are examples of such literary texts, as is apparent in his contribution to *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties* (1985), an important volume edited by Ross C. Murfin.

Not all readers were persuaded by Miller's interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* in *Conrad Revisited*, and several Conrad scholars were provoked by his description of *Heart of Darkness* as a narrative process of "unveiling [that] unveils unveiling". Miller links the novella's narrative progression to a thematic development towards something ominous that has not yet happened, something apocalyptic. He argues that to ascertain whether *Heart of Darkness* is an apocalypse the critic would need to identify and discuss the converging figures of irony, antithesis, catachresis, synecdoche, aletheia and prosopopoeia. While elements of these rhetorical figures had been considered by other Conrad critics, Miller was the first to interlink the six figures in a critically productive manner, demonstrating how essential they are as constituent elements of Conrad's narrative method. Although, but also because, it was regarded by many Conrad scholars as provocative, this essay has proved influential.

If there is an important link between the analyses of *Lord Jim* that Miller published in 1970 and 1982, there is also a significant connection between his 1985 essay on *Heart of Darkness* and "Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?" This essay from 2002, a revised version of a keynote lecture that Miller gave at an international conference arranged in South Africa to mark the centenary of *Heart of Darkness*, focuses on Conrad's use of irony, elaborating the discussion of this rhetorical figure as a key narrative strategy in the novella. Yet there is one significant difference between the two essays: while in the former essay Miller writes of the narrative of *Heart of Darkness* as a general or unspecified process of unveiling, his interpretation of the same literary text in the 2002 essay makes him consider *Heart of Darkness* as a critique of imperialism.

Some Conrad critics were surprised by this keynote lecture, and the following essay, by a critic who was still considered a leading representative of deconstruction. Yet although, for Miller, a literary text refers to the world indirectly, this does not mean that it is not anchored in historical reality, nor does it follow that it is written in a historical and cultural vacuum. This said, there is, as already indicated, a significant difference between Miller's 1985 and 2002 essays on the same literary text. One way of indicating this difference is to refer to Miller's comment on, and critical use of, two "powerful indictments" of *Heart of Darkness*: while in an influential essay of 1977 entitled "An Image of Africa" the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe argues that "Joseph Conrad was a bloody racist", Edward W. Said concludes his discussion of Conrad in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) by noting that "the cultural and ideological evidence that Conrad was wrong in his Eurocentric ways is both impressive and rich". Miller comments that if these indictments render justice to *Heart of Darkness*, then we should perhaps not read – or write about or teach – Conrad's novella. However, he adds, "you could only be sure about this by reading the novella yourself ... no one bears witness for the witness, and no one else can do your reading for you".

This kind of trust in the reader is a distinctive feature of Miller's literary criticism. Proceeding to offer his own reading, he finds that *Heart of Darkness* is an extraordinarily rich and complex literary text in which Conrad innovatively combines a range of literary and narrative devices, including simile, metaphor, irony and repetition. Neither Marlow nor the frame narrator nor the characters escape the all-pervasive irony of *Heart of Darkness*. Although it is possible, as Miller notes, to read Conrad's novella as endorsing Eurocentric, racist and sexist ideologies, the combination of its literary and narrative devices leads him to conclude that *Heart of Darkness* is a "powerful exemplary revelation of the ideology of capitalist imperialism, including its racism and sexism".

Miller's concluding observation in his 2002 essay on *Heart of Darkness* establishes a link to key points argued in two significant essays on *Nostramo*. In "Material Interests': *Nostramo* as a Critique of Global Capitalism" (2008), Miller demonstrates how the novel's narrative discourse reveals how individuals are variously related to their surrounding community as it evolves through time. Both in this essay and in "Text, Action, Space: Emotion in Conrad's *Nostramo*" (2014), Miller's reading of the novel pays more attention to its historical context than in his earlier discussions of *Lord Jim*. This historical contextualizing, however, references not just crucial aspects of Conrad's time but also those of the world of the critic and his readers. Few if any readers of these essays will be unaware that Miller's words draw attention not just to the world of the late nineteenth century but also, and powerfully, to the world of today. Importantly, for Miller, a historical context is also an ethical context: we judge the characters and their actions in the light of the possibilities extended to them by the realities of their present day, but our attempt to understand their decisions reflects back upon the volatile ethical challenges we face in our own time.

It is a strong indication of Miller's lasting interest in Conrad, and thus also of his commitment to Conrad studies, that his two essays on *Nostramo* were written after he retired from the University of California, Irvine, where he worked from 1986 to 2001. This indication of interest becomes even stronger when we consider the key role that Conrad's fiction, and *Nostramo* in particular, plays in one of the studies he published late in his career. In chapter 7 of *Communities in Fiction* (2015), entitled "Conrad's Colonial (Non)Community", Miller revises the two essays just mentioned, expanding them into 82-page analysis divided into four

sections: “The Origins of *Nostramo*; Material Vision in *Nostramo*: As Conrad Does It; “Material Interests”: *Nostramo* as Critique of Capitalist Imperialism; and Ideologies of Love and War: Psychodramas of Intertwined Isolates in *Nostramo*”.

One conclusion reached by Miller is that, in contrast to Edward W. Said (to whose memory chapter 7 of *Communities in Fiction* is dedicated), Conrad as implied author of *Nostramo* does not believe in political alternatives to policies that are demonstrably bad as they cause conflict, war and human suffering. This does not mean that Conrad cannot imagine political alternatives but that any political alternative will become corrupted and unjust by the “incorrigible” flaws of human nature. “For the Conrad of *Nostramo*”, Miller concludes, “there is only the immense indifference of things, the silence and solitude of the Golfo Placido and of the distant Cordillera”.

Miller’s achievements in “retirement” were as remarkable as those at John Hopkins, Yale and Irvine. This is the case not only in regard to his many publications – at least fifteen books. These include, in addition to *Communities in Fiction*, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz* (2011), the only book by Miller that features a geographical name as part of its title. It is also the case as regards his work as a supervisor of PhD students, as a visiting lecturer, and as a participant in various research projects. His contribution to the project “Narrative theory and analysis” that I ran at the Centre for Advanced Study, Oslo, in 2005–2006 proved invaluable. He wrote excellent chapters for the three books (all of them published by The Ohio State University Press) in which the project resulted: *Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre* (2008; includes the first essay on *Nostramo* mentioned above), *Franz Kafka: Narration, Rhetoric, and Reading* (2011), and *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future* (2012). His contribution to *After Testimony* is linked to *The Conflagration of Community*.

Moreover, during the extended periods of time he spent in Oslo, Miller was the most generous colleague that anyone will come across. Always ready to listen to the other project participants’ ideas, and consistently constructive and encouraging in his comments, Miller contributed significantly to the good working atmosphere of the research team. He was, I remember, particularly interested in the work of the young team members, including two PhD students. I also remember that sometimes he would arrive in Oslo directly from the East – because he had been giving lectures in China. These lectures, incidentally, provided the basis for yet another book, *An Innocent Abroad: Lectures in China* (2015).

Writing this at a time of quarantine and lockdown, it is important to remember that there are some things that Zoom meetings and e-mail exchanges cannot teach. Those who have attended seminars and conferences at which Miller was present will be able to confirm that aspects of the man suggested in print became more visible in person. At conferences, Miller seems never to have “played hooky” and missed a session. In seminars and post-lecture discussions he was invariably humble and polite, attempting always to do justice to points of view different from his own, and to encourage younger participants to express their own views.

I want to close these remarks in memory of Miller by drawing attention to two aspects of his work that are linked to his lasting interest in Conrad. The first of these is his contribution to narrative ethics. In *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (1987), he claims that “there is a necessary ethical moment in the act of reading as

such”, and ethics, he goes on to observe, “has a peculiar relation to that form of language we call narrative”. There is a connection, albeit an indirect one, between the ethical moment in the act of reading and the ethical moment in the act of writing. This ethical moment is linked to an understanding of ethics as a place where the contest of values is presented, not where it is resolved. While this ethical moment is observable in all of Miller’s analyses of Conrad’s fiction, it becomes accentuated, and more explicit, in those published after 2000.

A thought-provoking 1995 essay on Miller by Walter Göbel is entitled “Modelling J. Hillis Miller: Slippage of Identity or Continuity in Flux?”. For me, Miller’s association with successive, and sometimes apparently irreconcilable, theoretical movements and critical trends involves no slippage of identity, but rather the continuity of a commitment to close attention to textual detail and to the ethical responsibility of the literary critic, a dual commitment that is anchored in a consistency of critical method. Even the involvement with different theoretical positions is founded on an underlying continuity: the continuity of an ethical impulse to examine any new perspective on literary expression that may have productive force.

The second aspect, whose importance has rightly been emphasized by my colleague Jeremy Hawthorn, is Miller’s concern with the state of the academy in general and of literary studies in particular. This aspect too is associated with, and arguably to some extent furthered by, his interest in Conrad. When Hawthorn and I co-edited *Narrative Ethics* (2013), Miller contributed a chapter entitled “Should We Read or Teach Literature Now?”. After having reflected on the diminished role of the humanities in higher education, Miller turns to W. B. Yeats’s “The Cold Heaven”, listing fifteen “things that might need to be explained” to a young reader of the poem. These “things” turn out to be perceptive and thought-provoking comments on a complex poem that is challenging to read and teach. Miller’s strong interest in pedagogy here blends into his lasting commitment to literary studies, and vice versa. Given that this essay is inspired by Miller’s “Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?”, his concern with the profession of literary studies is related to his reading of Conrad.

Miller’s combined interest in narrative form and narrative ethics partly explains why he continued to read, reread and write about Conrad. I have mentioned that he considered himself a student of philology, and his work on Conrad is consonant with a key point he makes in the first chapter of *Fiction and Repetition*. Literary criticism, he writes, “is nothing if it is not philology, the love of words, the teaching of reading ...” If literature matters, and if literary studies matter, Conrad was, for Miller, one of those authors who demonstrate that this is the case. Moreover, if Miller’s criticism helps to establish why literature matters, it also establishes, again and again, why literary criticism also matters. Miller’s understanding of narrative fiction, including fiction’s value for the individual as well as for the community, was exceptional. While he will be much missed by the Conrad community, we will remain grateful for his contribution to Conrad studies, which remains very much challenging and alive.

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