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Lawtoo, N.

### Citation

Lawtoo, N. (2023). The angel as host: J. Hillis Miller's last flight. *Symplokē*, 30(1-2), 223-251.  
doi:10.1353/sym.2022.0015

Version: Publisher's Version

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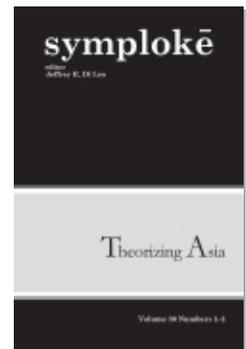
## The Angel as Host: J. Hillis Miller's Last Flight

Nidesh Lawtoo

symploke, Volume 30, Numbers 1-2, 2022, pp. 223-251 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sym.2022.0015>



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## THE ANGEL AS HOST: J. HILLIS MILLER'S LAST FLIGHT

NIDESH LAWTOO

A critical and theoretical agon staged during an MLA panel on "The Limits of Pluralism" in 1976 shook the foundations of literary study, generating a spiraling vortex that, after numerous turns—from the linguistic to the ethical, the affective to the cognitive, the New Materialist to the environmental—continues to cast a shadow on the present and future of criticism and theory. While theory has long been proclaimed dead since then, it has not ceased to resurrect, albeit under different masks that are still genealogically indebted to what had the force of an event at the time and still deserves to be revisited today.

This agon involved the confrontation of two exemplary literary critics who represented antagonistic methodological principles in theory but also shared a number of assumptions about the importance of pluralism in their critical practices. On one side, the eminent critic M. H. Abrams, still known today for his landmark study on romanticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), offered a strong critique of a then rising and already notorious school of criticism known as "deconstruction." His talk, titled "The Deconstructive Angel" (1977), offered a critique that was itself a mirroring reply to a prior deconstructive reading of Abrams's work. The "angel" who had "deconstructed" Abrams's humanistic "metaphysical presuppositions" (Miller 1972, 6), in an incisive review of Abrams's *Naturalism Supernaturalism* (1971), was a younger but increasingly influential critic, Yale professor J. Hillis Miller, who had already made a name for himself as a Victorianist and modernist critic in a series of anti-metaphysical books published in rapid succession—*The Disappearance of God* (1963), *Poets of Reality* (1965), *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1971). Miller's reply was a dazzling tour de force titled "The Critic as Host" (1977). In a virtuoso deconstructive performance, he demonstrated that far from being "parasitical," as Abrams (quoting Wayne Booth) had asserted (1976, 458), the deconstructive critic can serve as a generous and welcoming "host" as well, one who sets in motion the pluralist play of interpretations based a symbiotic linguistic interplay that breaks down boundaries that simply divide critic and host, and, by extension a series of other metaphysical oppositions that structure the Western philosophical tradition, such

as original/copy, form/shadow, unity/fragmentation, and sameness/difference, stretching to deconstruct via an agon that was not one but plural, the opposition between literature and criticism as well.

In the past, as both Miller and Abrams made clear, such oppositions often hinged on the ancient but also modern concept of “mimesis” understood as a stabilizing representation of reality rooted in Platonic metaphysics, that is, the Western metaphysics of presence deconstruction was up against. And yet, at a closer genealogical look, starting since the 1960s and 1970s, deconstruction and its feminist, postcolonial, and queer supplements also paved the way for a different, more relational, troubling, and destabilizing conception of *homo mimeticus* that is currently informing the transdisciplinary field of what I propose to call “mimetic studies” (Lawtoo 2022, 11–40). Since Miller, in his last years, was among the first to join forces with this “mimetic turn, or re-turn of mimesis” (Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 94), I now set out to restage the agon between mimesis and difference in his company one last time in view of foregrounding his inimitable performative contribution to mimetic studies.

### *The Agon: Mimesis contra Difference*

Back in 1976, despite the new pluralist perspectives emerging in literary studies, or perhaps because of them, the theoretical agon was clearly staged: humanism contra deconstruction, metaphysical contra anti-metaphysical criticism, or, as the accusation went, a “logocentric” approach centered on a “mimetic” reading of literature as a “straightforward mirror” (Miller 1977, 44; 1972, 10), on the one hand, and a “graphocentric” reading tracing the “endless play” of a linguistic “différance” without “organization” (Abrams 1977, 430, 429), on the other. The intense rhetoric of the debate mirrored the intense critical stakes of the agon. At stake were, in fact, nothing less than the metaphysical, epistemic, and aesthetic principles that *in-form* (give form to) the pluralist methods of close reading at the foundations of literary study, a method of reading as an art also relevant for history, philosophy, art history, film and media studies, and other interpretative practices that, to this day, remain perhaps the distinctive feature of the humanities more generally. This also meant that the theoretical stakes had practical consequences. In question were, in fact, venerable institutions like the Western canon, for instance, but also the status of the author, the reliability of language, the stability of disciplinary boundaries, stretching to include nationalist approaches to literary history, and by extension the status of cultural otherness, multilingualism, comparative perspectives, and so forth, all of which had the potential to overturn hiring practices, teaching curricula, and methods of interpretations for decades to come. As Abrams foresaw at the opening

of his talk: “Who can predict how many others will be drawn into the vortex before it comes to an end?” (1977, 425).

Published in the then recently founded journal *Critical Inquiry*, the vortex quickly picked up speed. If it spiraled into the “theory wars” that dominated the 1980s, the effect of the vortex was to fuel the rapidly expanding field of “theory” that, under different masks—from deconstruction to New Historicism, feminism to queer theory, critical race theory to post-colonial studies to queer theory, among other schools—dominated the twilight of the last century. Despite the multiple proclamations of the “death of theory” at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the question of what “reading” entails in its relation to “knowledge” is still at the center of debates nearly fifty years later, periodically resurfacing in the same journal where it started—a shadow of the “original” controversy.<sup>1</sup> But the vortex also expanded its reach in a so-called post-theory age driven by an increasing number of new “turns” (ethical, affective, cognitive, materialist, neuronal, environmental and, we shall add, mimetic) that have further disseminated theoretical practices in different areas of humanistic study thereby showing “what is wrong with antitheory” (Di Leo 2020). Well after the linguistic turn and under new conceptual identities, “theory” continues to inform critical turns that are perhaps no longer operating under the mask of the “sign” or “deconstruction” but continue to critique, overturn, and dissolve binaries like male/female, homo/hetero, self/other, subject/object, literary/post-literary, mind/brain, affect/emotion, human/nonhuman, global/planetary, to name just a few. There is thus considerable intrinsic critical interest in revisiting the emergence of a vortex that played a key, and now often forgotten, role in setting in motion theoretical storms that are still raging today. And this interest is redoubled by an equally significant extrinsic historical fact: J. Hillis Miller sadly passed on 7 February 2021, at the venerable age of ninety-two—an event that marks perhaps both the end of an era in literary studies and the beginning of new perspectives for critics, readers, and theorists to come.

Intended as a tribute to Miller’s memory, I suggest that the agon between the “deconstructive angel” and the “critic as host” may not always have been as clear-cut as it initially appeared to be—the all-too-visible agonistic opposition between the two exemplary critics masking a less visible yet no less significant mimetic continuity between Abram’s “angel” and Miller’s “host.” I say “mimetic” not only because in recent years there has been a re-turn of attention to this “untranslatable” concept (Cassin 2014, 659–74) that, from the beginning of philosophy with Plato and Aristotle, went well beyond simple realism, but also because in his final years Miller actively contributed to what we started to call, for lack of a more original term, a “mimetic turn” or re-turn to mimesis constitutive of a thoroughly imitative species qua *homo mimeticus* that casts a

long shadow on the digital age (Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 94).<sup>2</sup> Its driving *telos* is to shift understandings of mimesis traditionally restricted to aesthetic realism and the metaphysics of representation that deconstruction is up against toward a more differential, linguistic, but also affective and relational conception of mimetic performativity caught in immanent processes of becoming other. He did so with characteristic brilliance and generosity in both written and oral form, thereby continuing to undermine a binary between mimetic and anti-mimetic approaches that, for him, had never been stable in the first place. As Miller had already put it, addressing Abrams at the same table: “Both readings [the mimetic and the deconstructive] are at the same table together, bound by that strange relation of reciprocal obligation,” which, like Marcel Mauss’s account of the mirroring logic of the “gift” (giving-receiving; receiving-giving), is already a mimetic logic (1977, 445). In what follows I will thus take the mimetic turn and the mirroring exchanges and inversions of perspectives it entails as a reflecting table, so to speak, for tracing a last, culminating snapshot of Miller’s critical and theoretical career.

My approach will be Janus-faced. On the one hand, in the pluralist and communal spirit that animated the debate almost half a century ago, I draw on referential biographical (and in this simple sense mimetic) examples taken primarily from what is, to my knowledge, the last interview J. Hillis Miller gave. On the other hand, I pay specific interpretative attention to the performative dramatizations (and in this complex sense mimetic) of theoretical principles the deconstructive angel playfully and artfully staged between the lines, or acts. Hillis did so in his generous role of “host,”<sup>3</sup> as he kindly agreed to be interviewed and invited me to his home on Deer Isle, Maine, on 6 September 2018 – hence the title, “The Angel as Host.”

### **Homo Mimeticus on Deer Isle: The Re-turn of Mimesis**

To situate the context of the interview, I hope I will be forgiven if I start with a few biographical notes. J. Hillis Miller was on the top of my list of intellectual models and precursors I wanted to interview for a transdisciplinary ERC project titled *Homo Mimeticus*, whose main ambition was to develop a new theory of imitation attentive to the dynamic interplay between “sameness and difference” (Lawtoo 2022, 93–125). This critical and theoretical project was in many ways the outcome of a practice of reading that had unknowingly started in the shadow of Miller’s intellectual influence almost thirty years ago. As I later found out, via a form of delayed decoding, the first teachers I had as an apprentice critic in the 1990s at the University of Lausanne had been friends and students of Hillis’s back in the 1970s. I was thus located at two removes from the

“original” critic as host, so to speak. And yet, under the influence of another model qua reader who served as a main teacher to school myself in the “art of interpretation” (Nietzsche 1996, 10), I was already close to a philologist who had directly informed Miller’s early writings in general and his critique of Abrams in particular – not to speak of figures like Foucault, Derrida, or Deleuze who still inform and transform critical theory today.

The interview turned out to be double in the end: given the focus on mimesis and the doubling it entails, Hillis and I had agreed on publishing a written version, titled “The Critic and the Mime” (Miller and Lawtoo 2020), which would be followed by a filmed version whose echoing title entailed a repetition with a difference and read “The Critic as Mime” (Lawtoo 2019a).<sup>4</sup> In a characteristic deconstructive irony that characterized Miller’s distinctive signature, the written (printed) version came thus “first” chronologically, in the sense that we finalized it in the spring of 2018, whereas the oral (filmed) version came “second,” as it was shot in the fall of the same year. The latter was intended as a cinematic shadow, phantom, or supplement to the written traces we had already left behind but which had not appeared in print as yet when we started filming. In the end, the cinematic phantom came first but would not have appeared in the first place without the written “original.” Indeed, new media that redouble and supplement the experience of writing continue to destabilize the fraught distinction between “original” and “copy,” “writing” and “speech,” “literary” and “post-literary” texts or media, as Miller iterates with increasing insistence in his last writings<sup>5</sup> – an iteration that informs my choice of “primary” texts in what follows as well.

Both versions of the interview turned out to be among Miller’s last – perhaps the very last – statements on the importance of reading in the strong rhetorical, or philological sense: a warning to slow down in an age haunted by increasingly faster new media “simulations” effective in spreading “lies,” rising “(new) fascist” movements, threats of nuclear escalations, and rapid climate change in the “age of the Anthropocene” (Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 113, 109). These double interviews both feel like testaments on reading. They might even serve as a last testament on Miller’s take on unreadable inner experiences at play in the phenomenology of the reading subject. Together, they certainly testified to Miller’s increasing concern with the performative powers of mimesis that went beyond linguistic speech acts to form and transform bodies, affects, digital and nonhuman subject matters now central to mimetic studies.

In light of the debate with Abrams in particular and Miller’s entire corpus in general, the thread of mimesis might indeed appear as a counterintuitive choice to readers familiar with his work. Yet, in light of an exponential growth of the all too human tendency to fall under the

telepathic or hypnotic spell of hypermimetic simulations in the digital age, Miller now considered it “important to study” (Lawtoo 2020, 117). Consequently, rather than starting from the by now much iterated Derridean concepts of “*différance*,” “the trace,” the “supplement,” “repetition,” and so on—which by the way, are all mimetic concepts in the sense that already for Derrida they entail a form of doubling, albeit with a *différance* (Derrida 1981, 105–22, 191; Lawtoo 2019a, n.p.; Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 106–7)—we took a less “original” concept closer to the origins of Western thought in general as “Ariadne’s Thread” or “story line” into the labyrinth of Miller’s writings. Its general goal was to trace the major turns in an impressively heterogeneous career as one of the most distinguished literary critics and theorists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, moving from the linguistic turn to the ethical turn, the environmental turn to the digital turn, to what we came to call the “mimetic turn” (Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 94), which is not a simple return to what Miller had critiqued in Abrams in terms of “straightforward mirroring” (1972, 11)—far from it.<sup>6</sup> This mimetic turn, as we turn to see, is not narrowly realistic but is performatively, dramatically, and above all ironically at play in Miller’s last reflections qua cinematic impersonations on the role a critic as mime never stopped to play.

I will thus focus on reading as best as I can some examples in Miller’s latest critical performance onscreen taken from the cinematic version of our interview, *The Critic as Mime*, shot on 6 September 2018 (Labor Day), in Hillis’s home on Deer Isle, Maine. As Miller was the first to point out in *The Ethics of Reading*, “the choice of examples, . . . and their ordering, is never innocent”; each critic “must take responsibility for them” (1987, 11, 2). In this case, these examples have been chosen to illustrate, among other things, Miller’s own exemplary practice of reading. They are also revelatory of a re-turn to mimesis that straddles the distinction between “mimetic” and “deconstructive” reading that Miller and Abrams initially staged, perhaps in excessively antagonistic terms, at the dawn of the theory wars<sup>7</sup>—though such an excess had contagious properties that reach into the present. They also provide a timely, or perhaps untimely, occasion to practice the art and ethics of reading via a cinematic medium in the company of the critic who served as a model for so many generations of literary scholars over the past sixty years and who now urges us to pay the same critical attention to post-literary texts as well. Miller puts it clearly: “We need to use what I call rhetorical reading to understand what is going on in specific examples of those new media” (Miller, Callus, and Corby 2018, 2).<sup>8</sup> As the repetition in my quotes already suggests, Hillis was very fond of “examples.” And logically so, since they furnished him the textual material necessary to perform his own exemplary readings. “I urge you to give me some examples” (Miller and Lawtoo 2020,

110), he told me at some point in our dialogue. And he did so at one of the few moments in our dialogue where we happened to have a friendly disagreement on how deep in the embodied materiality of the subject the powers of mimesis can go. I could not have agreed more with this performative imperative then, and I still wholeheartedly agree now.

### *In Praise of Examples: The Isle and the Simulacrum*

My examples are as linguistic as they are embodied. As such, they require attention to both sides of the new medium Miller and I were experimenting with. Having the written version already behind us, we agreed not to follow a preestablished set of questions, or script, in order to have the freedom to improvise and let the dialogue unfold. I was initially nervous, as I was both filming and asking questions on my own; plus, I was meeting Miller in person for the first time. Still, from the moment he opened the door, my host immediately put the visitor at ease, as he welcomed me with both generosity and informality into his private study with a direct view on the bay.

We had only one day to shoot, so I was mindful of time, but Hillis started by calling my attention to space. He pointed to some of the islands we could see across the bay to orient the newcomer, and then immediately turned to a big old map of Deer Isle hanging on the wall. Luckily, I was fast enough to catch him on camera, for the unplanned mimetic performance qua reading lesson had already started: “We’re right here,” he said, pointing to his home on Sunshine Road, whereas “you’re out here somewhere,” he added, pointing to the location where I was lodged, a few miles away.



Fig. 1. J. Hillis Miller’s home on Deer Isle, Maine, *The Critic as Mime* (2018).



**Fig. 2.** Map/simulacrum of Deer Isle with J. Hillis Miller in *The Critic as Mime* (2018).



**Fig. 3.** Map/simulacrum of Deer Isle with J. Hillis Miller in *The Critic as Mime* (2018).

The move was casual and informal enough. Apparently, the host was merely informing the visitor to Deer Isle as our respective geographical locations. But Hillis's deft use of a map as an example to introduce, or rather frame, an interview on mimesis was, of course, not innocent.

A map redoubles the outlines of a territory via a form of mimesis that is not simply realistic in the sense of a "straightforward mirror" — lest the

map redoubles the territory itself, as in Jorge Luis Borges's famous story "On Exactitude in Science." Rather the map's doubling entails an abstract, highly selective, and proportionate reduction of the territory delineating and delimiting it from above. It thus generates the familiar but paradoxical effect of radically amplifying the overview of the territory—be it a city, a state, or as in this case, an island—by a formal and abstract delineation. At one remove, if one can read a map (and that reading requires some training too), the simulacrum increases the reader's capacity for orientation in real space. Hillis's indication on the map was, indeed, not simply "mirroring," or referential. It was indexical in the double sense that it was pointing, with the index, to a locational space (here) that is dependent on context to be located. More generally, Miller was implicitly indicating—via a performative gesture inviting plural interpretations—that the printed copy, or simulacrum, may be more effective in locating us in space than the direct referential gestures to the world outside. The simulacrum should not be confused with the territory, to be sure; it certainly does not "replace" it, as Jean Baudrillard was perhaps too fast to conclude in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), but neither does it simply "represent" it, as Erich Auerbach influentially argued in *Mimesis* (2003). Rather, the map supplements the isle by zeroing out and providing abstract coordinates for orientation that can be put to effective indexical and practical orientational use.

There is already a paradox of mimesis at play in this opening frame. An abstract reduction of size via a simulacrum can generate an increased insight into reality "itself"; the smaller the map, the bigger the territory, the wider the overview. It is, in fact, only after identifying locations on the map of Deer Isle, pointing to smaller islands that surround it, that



Fig. 4. View on Big Freeze and Little Freeze, Deer Isle, *The Critic as Mime* (2018).

Hillis returned again toward the transparent window with a direct view over the ocean. I was now placed in a position to recognize and locate the smaller islands across the bay: "this is Big Freeze and behind the trees it's Little Freeze," he pointed with pleasure and satisfaction at the beautiful islands through the window.

Mimesis, the copy, or the simulacrum, in other words, had already preceded the original referent. And the deconstructive angel was already at work, or rather, at play. As noted, it was Labor Day and thus a *holy-day*. Indeed, we did not consider this encounter work—if only because, for both of us, reading was always already play.

And yet, mimesis is always more than double, for it concerns space as much as time. Thus, in a characteristic ironic twist that redoubled the indexical turn to the simulacrum to identify our referential locations, Hillis started commenting on some of the names on the map as he revealed the etymology of another, bigger island further away called *Isle au Haut*. Thus, he asks: "Why is it called *Isle au Haut*? Because it is rather high." Hillis knew I spoke French, so he didn't need to spell out that the "island" was "high," counting on a shared second language, but he changed perspective, this time, in both spatial and temporal senses. I have to admit that at the time this welcome started to look like a geography lesson, but with the benefit of theoretical hindsight it turned out to be another performative mimetic lesson. The critic as host continued as follows: "If you were coming in from the ocean by ship [as the first explorers did], the first thing you really see would be the top of . . . *Isle au Haut*"; and then shifting perspective again from the map to the ship in the sea, he turned to the key word that Abrams's mimetic theory, in his view, had mistakenly "taken for granted," namely, "language" (Miller 1972, 10). Thus, he added, laughing: "The local pronunciation is *Isle a hut* [laughter]. . . . All these names. It's like Detroit. It should actually be *Détroit* [as in the French original pronunciation, meaning 'strait']." And he concluded: "The United States is full of French names that are almost always anglicized." The perspectives on places and pronunciations of names differ, but Miller's theoretical point about mimesis remains the same: if the "original" French pronunciation is lost in the temporal deferral since the French explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac founded Detroit in 1701, the differing English "copy," "simulacrum," or, to use another term crucial to Miller's critique of Abrams, "translation" has since been repeated or iterated so often over time that it has turned into the "original" pronunciation of a distinctly recognizable US city: Detroit. Over the decades I have come to appreciate the sophistication of unstated deconstructive readings of the copy/original binary that, in the wake of Nietzsche's overturning of Platonism, destabilize Western metaphysics. I even redoubled some of these moves myself with Nietzsche's theory of mimesis as a primary case study

(see Lawtoo 2013, 27–83), subsequently redoubled by another shared interest in a nautical author fascinated in the *homo duplex*, namely, Joseph Conrad.<sup>9</sup> And yet, this was by far the most playful, deceptively informal, and sophisticated deconstructive *performance*, or improvisation, I had ever witnessed *in vivo*. Literally only a few minutes had passed since first meeting a legendary figure I had been waiting so long to encounter; yet the critic and the mime were already having a great time.

### ***Dramatic Impersonations: From King Lear to the Anthropocene***

As we sat down at the shared table and the interview unfolded, Miller punctuated the dialogue with a number of performative utterances that continued to problematize not only the traditional distinctions between copy and original, shadow and origin, truth and lies, but also fiction and reality, sympathy and irony, tragedy and comedy, among other binaries we connected via the Ariadne thread of mimesis. Readers can retrace the journey for themselves, but I provide some additional examples to bring out the contemporary significance of *re-tracing* mimesis. For instance, at some point, in the context of a discussion about the waning importance of literary classics for digital natives, Miller made a moving and revelatory reference to a classic literary author and text, namely, Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Mimesis was thus implicitly at play, for what is a classic if not an example other authors—and perhaps, at one remove, readers too—tend to imitate? In characteristic fashion, Miller selected a minor, seemingly marginal moment in the play itself but, in an apparently casual gesture, chose not only to analyze it but also to dramatize it. This double gesture reveals a type of mimesis that cuts both ways: on one side, it performatively exemplifies the author's critical reflection on a fictional character who finds a mirroring counterpart in the reader's own embodied reality; on the other side, it displays, between the double citations, how a silent mimetic agonism with Abrams could be informally replayed with destabilizing theoretical effects. My host set the stage as follows:

I was thinking speaking of mimesis, just this morning, of a great moment in Shakespeare, in *King Lear*, at the end of the play. . . . I was in the process of buttoning my shirt—hard to do with one hand. I remembered this moment when Lear at the end of his life says, "Pray you undo this button."

With characteristic succinctness, Shakespeare renders this moment of pathos via a type of dramatic mimesis that casts light on Lear's tragic ending. As Hillis comments: "He [Lear] was a frail old man and needed

help in getting his button undone. . . . Very moving, I mean, terrific. And it's special to Shakespeare." A classic example for future writers to imitate, no doubt.

And yet, at the same time, and without contradiction, Miller's dramatization or impersonation of this moment hints to a second, doubling but no less important mimesis, namely, the one at play in his own performance calling attention to the critic's own self-referential dis-position. At the age of ninety and with a hand paralyzed since youth by polio—Miller typed all his books with one hand, doubling an already inimitable feat—the critic as mime balances this moment of tragic recognition with a light, playful, perhaps ironic, yet not less deeply moving, mimetic distance, as he touches his shirt and, while he repeats Lear's lines, admits, laughingly: "I have some sympathy with these buttons on my shirt . . . not that easy to do with one hand."

Shakespeare's phrase is thus as reflective of the literary character as it is of the critical reader. Hence, the double-edged mimetic relevance of the classic example in question. A classic is timeless, after all, and always relevant to the present open to endless reinterpretations, which can be as critical as theoretical, opening up new questions for each new reading to perform. For instance, after this moment of identification with Lear's tragic *pathos*, Miller introduces a moment of perhaps not comic but certainly ironic *distance*. Why is that so?

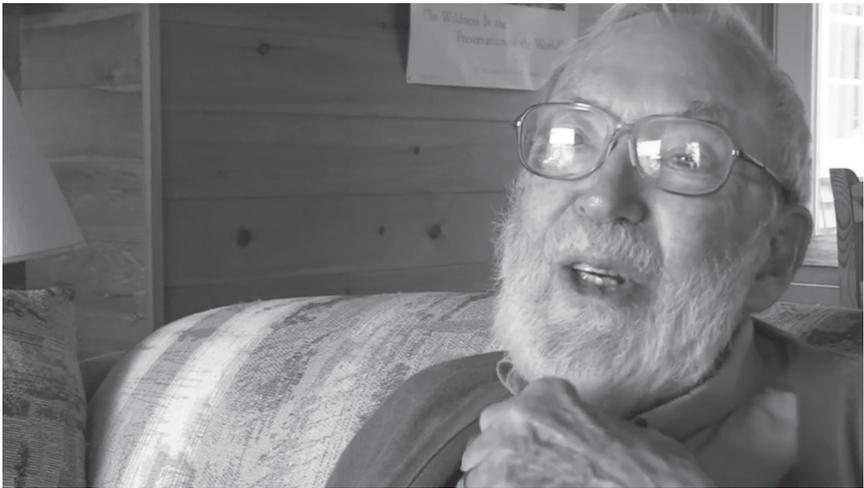


Fig. 5. J. Hillis Miller dramatizing *King Lear*'s "Pray you undo this button," *The Critic as Mime* (2018).

As any reader of Miller knows, a subtle often imperceptible irony is a distinctive characteristic of his written style. His critical interest in authors from Arnold to Nietzsche, Conrad to de Man, for instance, provided him with numerous examples of irony that punctuate his penetrating readings. But now I could witness that irony was equally at play in Miller's oral performative style, going as far as touching the heart of a Shakespearean tragedy. What function, then, does irony play in a performative reading of a tragic scene? If we recall the agon with which we started, there is certainly no "univocal" (Miller 1977, 441) answer to this question that opens up pluralist possibilities. I attempt a few: perhaps it helps avoid an easy and straightforwardly mimetic conflation of the fiction/reality differend Miller cautioned Abrams against and worked throughout his career to deconstruct; perhaps it points to the limits of human sympathy with characters who are, after all, the product of linguistic rhetorical constructions or fabrications the art of criticism analyzes from a distance that does not exclude *sym-pathos* but nuances it via the power of a critical *logos* nonetheless; or perhaps it introduces a phenomenological distance in the reading subject that is vital to confronting tragic, deeply moving, and universal experiences of pathos that transgress the fiction/reality, inside/outside, intrinsic/extrinsic binary—or perhaps all of the above, and more.

Notice, in fact, that there is a hidden play in Miller's particular choice of example that goes beyond the logic of referential mimesis yet is mimetic nonetheless and generates destabilizing mirroring effects on the agon with which we started. Contra Miller, Abrams had, in fact, cited the very same passage from *King Lear* in "The Deconstructive Angel" but with a rather different, or rather opposed, critical intention. As Abrams puts it in reply to the multiplicity of perspectives opened up by Miller's deconstructive readings: "I claim to know precisely what Lear meant when he said, 'Pray you undo this button'" (1977, 433). The mirroring repetition could not be clearer; the doubling echo is still audible across the stretch of time (over forty years). In Miller's temporally distant repetition of Abram's Shakespearean citation, the agonistic perspectives that traditionally opposed the humanistic and deconstructive critic seem to coincide momentarily, generating mirroring effects that are constitutive of intellectual confrontations with predecessors that are not simply opposed but also copied in the very act of opposition and which I group under the rubric of "mimetic agonism" (Lawtoo 2023, 45–54). As stated from the beginning, the deconstructive angel and the critic as host are not always as antagonistic as they appeared to be at that shared pluralist table. Both are, for that matter, formidable readers of texts who take very seriously the art of interpretation, critical masters

who, to the present reader, illustrate different but equally important principles to re-learn the fast-disappearing art of reading today.<sup>10</sup> And yet, mirrors and echoes entail repetitions with a difference. Miller's mimetic performance of Lear, in fact, supplements, half a century later, and not without irony, a plurality of interpretative possibilities that do not allow us to claim with univocal precision what this quote actually signifies in this context. Miller's performance of Lear's tragic pathos opens up mimetic identifications supplemented by an ironic distance that destabilize univocal readings and ultimately play in favor of the critic as host.

Rather than adjudicating between a deconstructive/mimetic opposition that is not one, let us continue to trace the sudden oscillation from pathos to distance, distance to pathos in Miller's performative reading, which is at the heart of what I take to be the troubling experience of mimesis. Miller performs this pendular oscillation as follows: "Sometimes I get really stuck and I ask Dorothy [his spouse] . . . but I don't say, 'Pray you undo this button [laughter].'" At two or, if you're watching/reading the interview, three/four removes from Shakespeare, this is a personal, deeply moving, but also self-ironic moment of pathos in Miller's performance that generates sympathy in viewers and readers as well. It certainly had this effect on me as he "originally" performed it. But at the same time, the critic as mime is also pointing to the value of irony in supplementing a critical point about mimesis perfectly in line with *homo mimeticus*. It is, in fact, my contention that a mimetic identification with a tragic fictional character can indeed reflect a shared condition of dependency that generates sympathy (or *sym-pathos*, shared suffering) with figures on the side of fiction. And yet, this mimetic identification is never complete or absolute; fiction should not be confused with reality, and reading requires a distinct ability to see irony, including self-irony, so as to preserve some critical distance from the author, the text, characters – and perhaps from ourselves as well, on the side of life. This oscillation between mimetic and anti-mimetic drives, pathos and distance, or, to use a Nietzschean concept, this "pathos of distance [*Pathos der Distanz*]" (2003, 12), is indeed the palpitating heart of the theory of mimesis I advocate.<sup>11</sup>

Supplementing Miller's former colleague at Johns Hopkins University, René Girard, who tends to limit mimesis to desire (or mimetic desire),<sup>12</sup> I have been arguing that *homo mimeticus* is a porous, relational, and embodied subject that, contrary to the picture of *Homo sapiens* inherited from the subject of *Aufklärung*, is open to the (will to) power of *all* affects (or mimetic pathos), be they real or fictional, literary or cinematic, human or nonhuman; and yet, at the same time, this pathos can, in specific contexts, be balanced by anti-mimetic reading skills that encourage critical,

theoretical, and ironic reflections from a critical distance. I spell out this oscillating moment with the abstract language of theory on the side of *logos*; Miller brilliantly demonstrated it via a performative critical reading that generates *pathos*. Still his patho-logical lesson remains the same and operates on both sides of the pathos/logos opposition.

Now, the type of critical distance internal to the mimetic turn is especially needed in an age in which not only the pathos/logos opposition but also the nature/culture binary no longer holds, calling for non-anthropocentric accounts of the performative powers of mimesis that are not limited to human behavior. Once again, Miller dramatized this point in exemplary fashion. Early in the discussion, we addressed Aristotle's definition of humans as the most imitative animals in the *Poetics*. As he famously puts it, humans are "thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis take [their] first steps in understanding" (Aristotle 1987, 34). I echoed this insight in order to make explicit what was already implicit in Miller's opening reading of the map, namely, that the mimetic turn does not entail a return to a transparent window onto the real but, rather, casts new light on the human, all too human tendency to imitate others, for both good and ill. And yet, humans' mimetic faculty is distinctive but not unique. As figures like Nietzsche, Benjamin, Caillois, and others have shown, its genealogy can be traced back to animal mimicry. Thus, Miller is careful to supplement Aristotle, as he adds: "so is it natural for monkeys and other animals to imitate . . . it's not exclusively human." And subtly deconstructing anthropocentric tendencies that still tend to delimit mimesis exclusively to human activities concerned with realistic representations of reality, he takes as his starting point the referential world as he gives the example of the animals that give the name to the island. In fact, Hillis recalls seeing a doe with a fawn outside the window: "And the mama deer was clearly teaching the baby-deer which were the best flowers: 'This one is really tasty; this one, not so much' [laughter]." Mimesis as we were redefining it, then, cuts across the human/nonhuman binary, and the mimetic *re*-turn of attention to nonhuman forms of imitation needs to go beyond anthropocentrism in an age problematically called "Anthropocene," which introduces one of the latest turns in Miller's critical career.

Living on an island, J. Hills Miller was painfully aware of the threat of rapid climate change, species extinction, polar caps melting, hurricanes, ocean acidification, and rising waters among the numerous pathologies of anthropogenic global warming. He even faulted his most influential model, Jacques Derrida, for devoting "very minor" attention to climate change (Lawtoo 2019a, n.p.). Should global warming and polar caps melting continue at this speed, as is very likely, Miller is fully aware that "this house would not be around anymore. It would be more clam flats."



Fig. 6. Coast of Deer Isle with traces of changing water height, *The Critic as Mime* (2018).

Being at the center of an age in which humans serve as geological forces on the planet also means that—in a mirroring inversion of perspectives new generations of critics need to urgently start thinking through in order to act before it is too late (and it’s already quite late)—humans will be inevitably “decentered” by the nonhuman “planetary” forces they thoughtlessly set in motion.<sup>13</sup> This is a point Miller also explicitly makes in 2016 in his reflections at the “twilight of the Anthropocene”:

We are experiencing global climate change that may soon make the species *Homo sapiens* extinct, after putting our coasts and coastal cities under water (New York City, for example, not to speak of Florida and my coastal home on Deer Isle, Maine). (Cohen, Colebrook, and Miller 2016, 127)

This is an (un)timely warning whose urgency has only increased and is bound to escalate in years to come. While Miller had consistently guarded against the metaphysical risks of relying on texts as mirroring representations of reality and opening up multiple interpretative possibilities, he ended his career sounding the alarm against the all-too-real dangers of post-truth and climate change, and was considering very carefully the power of referential facts. There is not necessarily a contradiction; Abrams and Miller already agreed on this point. On the humanistic side, Abrams somewhat critically pointed out that Miller was serious in the multiplicity of interpretations in Nietzsche’s perspectival sense, but he was “not serious about deconstruction, in Hegel’s sense of

‘serious’; that is, he does not entirely and consistently commit himself to the consequence of his premises” (1977, 437). On the deconstructive side, Miller reframed this critique by specifying that he had always objected to the “assertion that deconstruction removes all grounds of certainty or authority in literary interpretation,” allowing the “reader, teacher, or critic . . . free to make the text anything he wanted it to mean” (Miller 1987, 9). This fundamental agreement beyond humanistic/deconstructive fences is now welcome. It is a joint reminder in the age of post-truth that reading is a difficult art with its own internal constraints, which, as Nietzsche was among the first to recognize—and consistently so—urges humans to “stay true [*treu*] to the Earth and do not believe those who talk of over-heartly hopes [*überirdischen Hoffnungen*]!” (2008, 12)—a performative imperative that leads us to the final mimetic example.

### *J. Hillis Miller’s Final Example: “I See the Hands of the Generations”*

As the dialogue was coming to an end, I had the impression that such performative deconstructions unfolded spontaneously, without much premeditation. They were certainly not following a prescribed script. Rather, they seemed pushed to the surface of Miller’s consciousness by a lifetime spent practicing close rhetorical readings. These interpretative forces, not unlike a huge iceberg, appeared to lay underneath the surface, but unlike traditional topographies of the unconscious based on the repressive hypothesis, Miller’s topographies of reading could access these forces directly and make them fully available to conscious reflection, already part of a *dia-logos*. On a more personal, perhaps confessional note, Hillis’s awareness of his own vulnerability and finitude, as the example from *King Lear* already indicated—the indexical gesture initially pointing to external simulacra and referential islands, eventually turning inward, to the elusive sphere of the self—did not escape the scrutiny of his readerly consciousness. On the contrary, he explicitly took a final example to address—albeit in opaque ways that require interpretation or, as Nietzsche put it, rumination—unreadable inner experiences to come.

Having left the trajectory of our dialogue open, we had agreed to provide at least one literary example of mimesis to close-read. Having started his career with a specialization in Victorian literature, Miller opted for a realist author who had occupied him since the beginning of his career to bring our dialogue (and perhaps more than that) to an end: Thomas Hardy. Early in his career, in fact, Miller had devoted a book to this Victorian novelist and poet titled *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (1970). The choice made thus scholarly sense, especially since in later books Miller



Fig. 7. J. Hillis Miller's library, Deer Isle, *The Critic as Mime* (2018).

repeatedly returned to Hardy, whom he considered “one of the greatest poets writing in English” (2005, 140). Still, the choice of a poem by a realist Victorian author to further the mimetic turn in the twenty-first century surprised me at first, and for both critical and theoretical reasons. Critically, I feared the risk of falling back to the archival literary history Miller had so effectively debunked in the past. Theoretically, I worried about restricting our reframing of mimesis within a traditional view of realistic representation of reality that both Miller's deconstructive or rhetorical reading and my take on *homo mimeticus* were up against. Had the reader in question been a different one, I would have been seriously worried. In this case, I was more curious about the kind of mimetic inversions the critic as host would perform this time.

Chosen from an impressive private library with volumes accumulated over a lifetime overflowing from packed shelves, the specific poem did not seem promising at first either. Its title, “Old Furniture” (1917), did not exactly trigger romantic inspirations. Having perhaps sensed my disappointment, with his characteristic smile, Hillis told me, in a reassuring tone: “It really is a poem about old furniture; it's mimetic of old furniture.” And to minimally contextualize his literary choice, he added: “I'm finishing an essay . . . called ‘Hands in Hardy and James.’ It's a question of the representation, *mimetic* representation of hands.”

I was far from being completely convinced, despite the rhetorical emphasis on mimesis, or rather, because of the dominant emphasis on the *representational* mimesis my theory of *homo mimeticus* seeks to go beyond. But by then Hillis had already started reading Hardy's “Old Furniture” aloud, reassuring me that he was not going to “read it all”:

I know not how it may be with others  
 Who sit amid relics of householdry  
 That date from the days of their mothers' mothers.  
 But well I know how it is with me  
 Continually.

I see the hands of the generations  
 That owned each shiny familiar thing  
 In play on its knobs and indentations,  
 And with its ancient fashioning  
 Still dallying:

Hands behind hands, growing paler and paler,  
 As in a mirror a candle-flame  
 Shows images of itself, each frailer  
 As it recedes, though the eye may frame  
 Its shape the same. (Hardy 1917, n.p.)

We are, indeed, in the sphere of mimetic realism that Miller had so effectively critiqued early on, in the review of Abrams's *Naturalism Supernaturalism* that had sparked the MLA debate in the first place. Many decades later, nearing the end of his career, Miller drove this counterintuitive referential point home. Thus, referring to the old furniture in his own house, he adds, in a more subject-oriented, phenomenological mood: "What happens to me when I read it? I think of the furniture of the sort that we have."



**Fig. 8.** J. Hillis Miller reading Thomas Hardy's "Old Furniture,"  
*The Critic as Mime* (2018).



Fig. 9. J. Hillis Miller showing old furniture (Thomas clock),  
*The Critic as Mime* (2018).

Hillis repeats the point, but he does so with an ironic smile I have by now learned to recognize: “It’s mimetic. It’s really about old household furniture. It’s called ‘Old Furniture!’” And so, I play along to the ticking of time of a Thomas clock whose mimesis of time passing is not visible in space but audible in time—ticking our time away: tick-tock, tick-tock.

After all, why resist this referential, or mirroring, reading? Why shouldn’t a realist poem titled “Old Furniture” not simply be about old furniture, in the end? Even the words on the page appear to conform to the subject matter, supplementing an uncanny metaphysical depth to this late Hardy poem. All the traditionally mimetic tropes are indeed at play: from repetitions to reproductions (“mothers’ mothers”), from reflections to refractions (“Hands behind hands”), all framed in a “mirror” that appears to simply redouble reality, reflecting what Miller, contra Abrams, had critiqued as the “straightforward mirroring” (1972, 10) characteristic of mimetic realism. And yet, upon reflection the refraction is far from transparent; the images are far from unitary and stable. The words at play in the poem, in fact, set in motion a mirroring chain of images of withdrawal in which hands “grow paler and paler” in an endless regress. Thus, they recede from the original source of light—a “candle-flame” itself receding in time—and find themselves far removed from the unstable and flickering “origin,” indeed. Still, according to the paradoxical logic of the return of mimesis we are by now familiar with, as these mimetic images of hands “recede” in time reflecting the passing of “frailer” “generations” in a game of vanishing ghostly simulacra, generating phantoms of

phantoms, it is the task of the critical eye to frame in a strong reading, something essential of the “candle-flame” remains: “Its shape the same.” The hands of generations change in an interplay of receding phantoms, but the shape that animates them in the reader’s mind remains the same.

In a destabilizing interplay of sameness and difference, original and copies, reflecting receding images mirrored in a stable, immutable shape, there is, indeed, an entire history of metaphysics at play between the lines of a seemingly unassuming mimetic poem about old furniture. And what is unveiled in this movement of withdrawal is a metaphysics of appearing and disappearing through reflections and refractions of a being in time that would not pale if set up in a mirroring comparison with philosophical theories of mimesis from antiquity to modernity. Think of the *logos* internal to Plato’s metaphysics based on ideal Forms (or *eidos*) for the ancients, or Nietzsche’s “overturning” (or *Umkehrung*) of Platonism for the moderns, or Heidegger’s unveiling of the withdrawal of truth (or *aletheia*) for more contemporary readers that contributed to the linguistic turn in the past century.

And yet, in his performative reading of the poem, which was, of course, from the beginning, already an interpretation from a temporal *distance*, Miller also introduced a change of tone, which is also a change of affect, or *pathos*, constitutive of the mimetic turn. It can be registered in his voice as he reads the final stanza and introduces an additional mimetic twist, or mirroring, to his performative reading. His mimetic turn reflects a turn in the poem itself and, at one remove, in his interpretation as well. It is performed via a characteristically playful but not less profound inversion of mood, as he continues: “And then he [Hardy] ends . . . [Miller laughs], typical Hardy ending”:

Well, well. It is best to be up and doing,  
The world has no use for one to-day  
Who eyes things thus – no aim pursuing!  
He should not continue in this stay,  
But sink away. (Hardy 1917, n.p.)

There is indeed a tragic mimetic *pathos* at play in this final stanza. Still, Miller’s performative reading sets up, for the second time, a rhetorical *distance* as he comments on the poem’s formal structure: “It’s not that easy to read,” he says, referring to the poem’s formal pattern. “It’s not that rhythmically or alliteratively beautiful.” Why is that so? Miller’s hypothesis is that this is a “deliberate” choice on the side of the old Hardy. He suggests that perhaps Hardy, in this late poem, wanted to “give you a sense of this special experience . . . of the old furniture. And he thought that if he made the poem too beautiful that would not work. . . . Therefore it deserves to be put in a form that is used only

once, for that experience." Here Miller comes close to what Abrams had defined as the task of "humanistic" reading deconstruction was up against.<sup>14</sup> In our language, it's a reading based on a typical case of mimesis, correspondence, or adequation not only between language and the referential world "itself," then, but between content and form, the material form of furniture and the linguistic form of poetry.

This is certainly an intrinsic part of the poem's mimetic power, but is that all there is to it? As the reader might already suspect, is the "experience" of seeing old furniture all that "special" after all? So special to turn it into a paradigmatic example of rhetorical reading after a career spent carefully tracing the most destabilizing and unreadable texts in Western literature? Miller is the first to go beyond this mimetic reading. His choice of the concept of "experience" is, of course, not innocent; neither is the choice of this particular poem. It allows him to shift perspective, once again, and complicate this seemingly straightforward referential reading via a mirroring inversion that has been constitutive of his work since the beginning and continued to preoccupy him until the very end. Thus, he adds another layer of mimetic reflection on a poem about mimesis that turns the mirror not only toward the furniture outside, nor solely to the words on the page, but toward the reading consciousness of the speaker inside. "What's also mimetic about this poem," Miller continues, "is the mimesis of the speaker. I don't know what Hardy was like, but there is a lot about the 'I'" ("I see the hands of the generations," etc.). The mirror of mimesis, then, is also a self-reflecting mirror that overturns perspectives, implicating the reading consciousness in this game of receding hands in time, urging readers of the poem to reflect not only on the referential old objects in the world of phenomena, but also, and more importantly, on the phenomenological inner experience of the reading subject. As Miller continues: "In literature most mimeses have some 'I'; there is an intervening subjectivity. . . . It embodies the subjectivity of the person who is speaking the poem." The reading has indeed come full circle, or closer to home. And in the process, old metaphysical binaries like fiction/reality, inside/outside, intrinsic/extrinsic, text/context, writing/speech, speaker/reader, no longer hold. In sum, Miller's reading of "Old Furniture" sets up an opaque, not transparently realistic but nonetheless illuminating mirror whose shape remains "the same" yet, as we go through the looking glass, continues to generate a spatial/temporal *différance* at play in what is each time a singularly unique inner experience.

And so, in the end, we are left to wonder: whose "I," or subject, is at play here? Who is "speaking the poem"? The speaker, of course. Perhaps even Hardy himself, who, as Miller notes, was already old when he wrote this poem meditating on this "special experience" via his privileged form of the "dramatic monologue" (quoted in Miller 2005, 142)—though Miller

is always very careful not to conflate the speaker with the author. Thus, he specifies “I don’t know what Hardy was like.” As he had already noted in one of his essays, the “Hardy” that emerges from his dramatic monologues is radically heterogeneous, “a sequence of disconnected evanescent persons” that reveal an identity that is “no one” (143) in particular. Hardy himself remains thus an elusive phantom difficult to capture, precisely because the shape of this “I” is *not* the same. What Miller knows well, however, is the experience of *reading* Hardy’s poetry itself by paying close attention to the rhetorical interplay on the words on the page—not only to *what* they say but also to *how* they are said. And what he does say about Hardy, in the end, is a passing phrase that can easily go unnoticed, a phrase dramatized in a form that is mimetic (rather than diegetic) and thus blurs the line between the “I” of the speaker/poet and the “I” of the reader. At the dawn of his career, in the preface of one of his first books written under the influence of phenomenology, Miller had already stated: “Criticism demands above all that gift of participation, that power to put oneself within the life of another person” (1965, n.p.). And he specifies: “If literature is a form of consciousness the task of the critic is to identify himself with the subjectivity expressed in the words, to relive that life from the inside, and to constitute it anew in his criticism” (n.p.).<sup>15</sup> One of the classical terms for this form of “participation” or “identification,” as Miller’s former colleague Georges Poulet had recognized, is indeed, “*mimesis*” (1972, 65).

A lifetime later, at the twilight of his career and with the history of the major theoretical turns from the 1960s to the 2010s under his wings, Miller returns to his youthful phenomenological preoccupations. He does so via a specific phrase characteristic of a performative reader that deliberately deconstructs, one last time, the distinction between self and other, fiction and reality, being inside the text and being *hors-texte* for an experience that is, indeed, special. Giving voice to the inner experience of the receding mimetic refractions of a speaker who “see[s] the hands of the generations” is a single, autobiographical—Nietzsche would say “confessional”—reading that, not unlike the mirroring images on the page, brings this special experience close to the reader. How? By translating Hardy’s last diegetic phrase into a mimetic phrase that brings this unreadable special experience home. After having read the poem, this “I” is called to testify. And what he says is: “It’s time for me to die.”

Perhaps, then, in the end, Hillis had indeed chosen a special poem to illustrate a special “experience,” after all. Unsurprisingly for those familiar with Miller’s admirable readings, the singular-plural meaning of the poem did not lie only in *what* it said but in *how* it said it: it did not dwell in the old furniture in the world outside, nor in its philosophical content or “matter” (*logos*), but it emerged performatively from its mimetic form



Fig. 10. Seagull taking flight on Deer Isle, *The Critic as Mime* (2018).

or “diction” (*lexis*) (Plato 1963, 392c)—if I may still borrow Plato’s rhetorical categories, which, by the way, are articulated well before his idealist metaphysics at the dawn of mimetic studies. This performative reading reflected what Miller also calls “a unique mimetic experience,” an unreadable inner experience the speaker was ready to confront, face to face, in the receding mirror of poetic language reflecting a life of being in time. This also means that after a breathtaking career as an exemplary reader who served as a model for generations of students, colleagues, and friends—mediating the art of reading for generations of phantoms to come—the deconstructive angel was ready to take his final flight.<sup>16</sup>

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**NIDESH LAWTOO** teaches philosophy and English at KU Leuven, where he leads the ERC project *Homo Mimeticus*. He is the editor of *Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought* (2012) and the author of a trilogy on mimesis: *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious* (2013); *Conrad’s Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (2016; Adam Gillon Award 2018); and *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth* (2019). His next trilogy, opening the transdisciplinary field of mimetic studies, is titled *Homo Mimeticus: A New Theory of Imitation* (2022), *Violence and the Oedipal Unconscious: Vol. 1, The Catharsis Hypothesis* (2023) and *Violence and the Mimetic Unconscious: Vol. 2, The Affective Hypothesis* (2023).

## Notes

1. See, for instance, Kramnick (2021) and Brenkam (2021).

2. The mimetic turn internal to *homo mimeticus* is transdisciplinary and collaborative in scope. In addition to Miller for literary theory, it involves contributions of key figures in areas as diverse as continental philosophy, political theory, feminist philosophy, and posthuman studies, and among other perspectives constitutive of the “mimetic condition.” See Lawtoo (2022). For a representative sample, see Nancy and Lawtoo (2022) and Cavarero and Lawtoo (2021), as well as the special issues of *MLN* 132.5 (2017), *CounterText* 8.1 (2022), and *Journal of Posthumanism* 2.2 (2022). See also <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/716181/results> and <http://www.homomimeticus.eu/publications/>.

3. As a rule, I use the last name Miller throughout but use Hillis when I want to stress the informal and friendly role he played as host—two sides of the same critic as host. This essay expands an in memoriam essay titled “An Exemplary Reader” (Lawtoo 2018b), which prompted this more theoretical supplement. The occasional repetitions in the section that follows foreground Miller’s differential theoretical supplements to the mimetic turn.

4. From host to mime, from artist to critic as artist, these essays on criticism find in Oscar Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist” a mimetic source of inspiration explored in a previous issue of *symplekē* (Lawtoo 2018a). For other cinematic recordings of Miller’s performative readings, see Kujundzic (2011) and Van Dam (2017).

5. See Miller (2017a), Miller, Callus, and Corby (2018), Miller and Lawtoo (2020).

6. In the context of developing an ethics of reading, Miller had specified: “Mirroring, reflection, or mimesis is a species of metaphor. It assumes a similarity between the reflection and what is reflected” (1987, 6). This is true in the dominant metaphysical tradition that informs mimetic realism. However, for a minor tradition that has in Nietzsche a primary representative and finds worthy successors in Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard, I should add that this metaphor is far from “transparent” and opens up numerous interpretations. In an overturning of perspectives, the interview remained true to my beginnings in the sense that I relied on Miller as an ally to bring mimesis back to its immanent, contagious, and differentiating powers furthered by contemporary mimetic studies. See Lacoue-Labarthe (1989), Gebauer and Wulf (1995), and Lawtoo (2013, 2016, 2019).

7. Unsurprisingly for the author of *The Mirror and the Lamp*, who had located his research within the romantic light of “expressive” theory (1953, 21–26), Abrams objected to Miller’s mimetic critique and replied: “I do not know how I gave Miller the impression that my ‘theory of language is implicitly’ mimetic, a ‘straightforward mirror’ of the reality it reflects, except on the assumption he seems to share with Derrida . . . that all views of language that are not in the deconstructive mode are mimetic views” (1977, 427). In our interview, Miller and I doubled down and overturned this perspective: we stressed that “deconstruction is a subversive mimetic practice” insofar as it fights *contra* mimetic realism with performative mimetic strategies, with all the differences deconstruction and rhetorical reading entail (Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 106).

8. See also Miller (2017a).

9. See Miller (2017b) and Lawtoo (2016). For a special issue including essays in memoriam of J. Hillis Miller, see *Conradiana* 50.3 (2018). This issue was actually published in 2022 and is only listed as 2018 due to the journal's backlog.

10. Historically, Miller's deconstruction of the host/parasite binary brilliantly demonstrated the destabilizing properties of language and turned out to be the most influential of the two essays in the end. At the same time, Abrams's insistence that a minimal faith in "the use of language to say what we mean" (1977, 438) provides the very ground for the debate to take place and remains a worthy, stabilizing reply. See also Abrams (1989). If I had to establish a ranking in this admirable mimetic agon, I would call it a draw—leaving the precarious balance open to different inflections depending on the interpretative perspectives at play. This is already implied by Miller as he states, at the end of his essay, that "neither the obvious reading nor the 'deconstructionist' reading is 'univocal.' Each contains, necessarily, its enemy within itself, is itself both host and parasite. The deconstructionist reading contains the obvious one and vice versa" (1977, 447). A romantic/Victorian way of putting this would be to say that they are mimetic doubles. Thus, if Miller turns to Lewis Carroll to supplement Nietzsche with the famous line "jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never jam today" (1972, 12), in a mirroring inversion characteristic of a mimetic agonism that cuts both ways, Abrams turns to Alice to ask Miller in turn, "'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things'" (1977, 428). The answer to both questions is provided by Humpty Dumpty, who, in Nietzschean fashion, puts it concisely: "'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that is all'" (428). These were indeed the stakes of an untimely agon that, in the digital age of increasing spread of lies or fake news by political "masters" qua (new) fascist/authoritarian leaders, remain more than timely today.

11. See Lawtoo (2013, 3–8).

12. I first articulated my differend with Girard in Lawtoo (2013, 281–305; 2016, 3–40), and I staged a mimetic agon qua duel between Girard and Derrida in Lawtoo (2019); for Miller's brief but revealing account of Girard, see Miller and Lawtoo (2020, 103–4).

13. See Connolly (2017) and Chakrabarti (2021).

14. As Abrams puts it: "By approximating what the author undertook to signify the reader understands what the language of the work means" (1989, 436).

15. In a subsequent preface to *The Disappearance of God*, written in 1975, Miller will critique his former methodological search for a "solid foundation, an origin, and a goal" predicated on a conception of "language as the mirror of a preexisting mind" (1965, viii, xi). He thus already "challenges any mimetic reading" (xi) in terms that mirror, *à la lettre*, his critique of Abrams. As Nietzsche might say, in every critique there is perhaps also "an attempt at self-critique." This leads me to supplement Abrams's claim that Miller is "not serious about deconstruction, in Hegel's sense of 'serious'" (1977, 437). It has been my contention that Miller is serious in the Nietzschean sense that he is a reader endowed with the (will to) power to overturn interpretative perspectives on both repetition (Miller 1985, 5–9)

and mimesis (Lawtoo 2013, 27–83)—generating mimetic repetitions with a difference this essay set out to trace.

16. J. Hillis Miller will be much missed—and by many—but the traces of his numerous writings remain the same, to be read and reread. I am forever grateful to Hillis for the inspiring richness of his rhetorical readings, for taking the time to perform them in our redoubled interview, and for his hospitality during our meeting on Deer Isle. This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement n° 716181 [HOM] *Homo Mimeticus: Theory and Criticism*). I am grateful to the ERC for its generous financial support, which made this encounter possible in the first place.

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