

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### HE DO DERRIDA IN DIFFERENT VOICES

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MILLER, J. HILLIS. *For Derrida*. New York: Fordham UP, 2009. Pp. 358. US \$32.

MILLER, J. HILLIS. *The Medium is the Maker: Browning, Freud, Derrida and the New Telepathic Ecotechnologies*. Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2009, Pp. 93. US \$27.50.

*For Derrida* is without doubt one of the most inspiring, affectionate, and instructive books to appear on Derrida's work in recent years—and there have been many. Alongside a handful of gifted critics and translators, such as Geoffrey Bennington, John Caputo, Nicholas Royle, and Michael Naas, Miller is unquestionably one of the great explicators of Derrida's thinking and this work offers a striking homage to the astonishingly complex legacy of radically counter-intuitive movements in Derrida's thinking.

*For Derrida* is a book made up of a series of distinct essays Miller has been working on since Derrida's death in 2004. Only the opening chapter, "A Profession of Faith," in which Miller lovingly depicts his "over forty years of unclouded friendship" with Derrida, was ever seen by Derrida. The rest of the chapters are responses to the late Derrida's later works, essays written specifically for various conferences around the globe that do not form a sequential pattern or story about Derrida's work.

Each chapter responds to a word, phrase or theme by tracing its various manifestations throughout Derrida's corpus: sovereignty, decision, *destinerrance*, lateness, *reste*, analogical apperception, *Mitsein*, performativity, refraining, irresponsibilization, autoimmunity, *se toucher toi*, absolute mourning, and so on. Though Miller admits that two key topics have retrospectively oriented his writings—Derrida's persistent thinking on death and his "wavering between a resolute quasi-solipsism and a conviction that some 'wholly other' or other may nevertheless break through those monadic walls and 'call' or 'command' us"—each chapter can be read by itself in isolation (xvii).

*The Medium is the Maker*, to complicate matters somewhat, Miller tells us, was originally meant to form part of *For Derrida* "but [had] been written too late for inclusion there" (44). Being that this statement follows on the heels of a reading of Derrida's "Telepathy", it can be taken with as much irony as the reader so wishes. This is so because "Telepathy" itself was intended to form part of the "Envois" to *The Post Card*, and was left out by what Derrida refers to in a pregnant phrase as a "semblance of accident" [*une apparence d'accident*]. What exactly does that mean? Miller thinks Derrida must have left it out of *The Post Card* "accidentally on purpose" because it could blow the lid off what was going on it, so to speak. Does *The Medium is the Maker* do the same for *For Derrida*? We'll get to that. At any rate, Miller's point in each work is consistently that it is dangerous to make generalizations about Derrida's work, "the only way to talk sensibly about Derrida is to eschew big generalizations about *différance*, 'grammatology,' 'Derrida's politics,' or whatever and to read him micrologically, line by line, word by word, and letter by letter, in order to try to figure out what he actually says about a given topic" (310). That is certainly no easy task, given the immense number of Derrida's published books, essays, and interviews. In fact it's practically impossible. Nonetheless, according to Miller, it is an exigent responsibility, however scandalous or obscene, that Derrida's work places upon each and every one of us. I would add here that micrological reading is something Miller practices only too well and that readers of his work would do well to remember that.

Miller is an expert at teasing out the absurdly persuasive logic of Derrida's writings and providing us with provocations for reading deeper and deeper into them. He's been at it for years. Excepting Georges Poulet's profound affect on his early books—*Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, *The Disappearance of God* and *Poets of Reality*—and the ghost of Paul De Man in so much of his best thinking and writing, Derrida's influence has been ubiquitous since at least the late 'sixties. Quite apart from the strong friendship and correspondence Miller and Derrida shared for over forty years, his faithful attendance at Derrida's seminars at Johns Hopkins, Yale, and UC Irvine since 1972, and innumerable essays and articles patiently explaining and clarifying Derrida's relevance to literary criticism, ethics, politics, religion, and so on, Miller's own work has been developing and pushing Derridean readings in directions Derrida could certainly never have imagined.<sup>1</sup> His pre-eminence as a scholar of deconstruction—Miller would call it "good reading"—is unquestionable and has

been there before Derrida, which some scholars have tended in the past to forget. “Contrary to the persistent rumour,” says Derrida, “Miller did not convert, one fine day, to deconstruction. The latter is already at work beginning with his first book. One has just to read” (“Justices” 228-61).<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter 5 of *For Derrida*, “Derrida’s Remains,” in which we find an exceptionally patient reading of the word *reste* in *Glas*, *Cinders*, *Archive Fever*, *Paper Machine*, *The Work of Mourning* and more, Miller points out what it means just to read Derrida, to read him justly, with justice in mind. “Reading Derrida is a way of letting something be done to me with words by responding responsibly to the demand Derrida’s works make on me to read them. Second, reading Derrida obliges me to do something with words in my turn, to intervene productively, performatively, in my own situation or context, on the basis of my response to the demand to be read Derrida’s works have made on me” (73).

398 This is a characteristic Millerian locution in which in the act of reading I find myself experiencing something of a double bind. On the one hand, I find myself in reading these works responsible for what I make of them. This is not simply a constative endeavour, in the sense that I either understand Derrida correctly or I don’t. It’s more than that. I find that in reading, in responding with the utmost care and concern for what it is I find in my reading, that something is being done to the I that encounters some thing or some other in reading. The experience of reading, quite simply, changes that I in the act of reading. Responding responsibly means allowing, “letting,” with what Derrida might call a non-passive endurance, that happen. It means being open to, hospitable to, and accepting of the event; it means being given over to the surprise of what comes by allowing the work to change your way of thinking. The second point or subtext Miller offers refers to the way reading not only changes me, but also the context of my surroundings. Writing this review, for instance, is the result of a change brought about in me by my reading of *For Derrida* and *The Medium is the Maker*. Reading Derrida reading Miller makes its own demands also, as Miller constantly points out in page after page, you must he says go back and read Derrida for yourself and find this out *for* yourself: “I can only recommend that my readers read and re-read *Le toucher*, as I [J. Hillis Miller] have done” (289). It does not therefore go without saying that Miller’s title refers to another double bind. He has written this book *for* Derrida in the sense that he is presenting it as a gift to Derrida’s memory and also in the sense that he is speaking for Derrida, through him, on his behalf, and even as him in an egregiously irresponsible way, for “Citation, followed by paraphrase, undermines as well as it celebrates” (293).

I claim that understanding what is meant by irresponsibilization is crucial to an understanding of what is remarkable about Miller’s response to Derrida in both *For Derrida* and *The Medium is the Maker*. Irresponsibilization is a word coined in the third chapter of *The Gift of Death*, “Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)”. Derrida has been discussing Kierkegaard’s famous reading of the Abraham/Isaac episode in *Fear and Trembling*—Abraham’s *me voici* to Elohim and his willingness

to kill his only begotten son—and hits upon an extraordinarily strange aporia of responsibility; says Derrida in a remarkable formulation: “far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility” (*The Gift of Death* 61). What does that mean? How can general ethics make you irresponsible? How do I get irresponsible by acting responsibly? Miller’s answer to these questions arguably preoccupies him entirely throughout these two books. Though it is perhaps irresponsible of me to make such a sweeping generalization. Nonetheless, I take it to be a major thread running through each one of Miller’s chapters. Miller argues that Derrida’s sympathetic commentaries on the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka and on Søren Kierkegaard read “as though Derrida were possessed by their ghosts and speaks for them, like a spirit medium” (206). Derrida effectually ventriloquises them in his work before pulling up at the brink of unacceptable paraphrase and asserts his “heretical difference”. Speaking through Derrida, through Patočka, through Kierkegaard, through Moses as amanuensis for God, relates Miller, is what happens when he attempts to speak about Derrida’s readings in *The Gift of Death* in his own voice. As if that were possible. Speaking of what happens there in one’s own name is one way to get irresponsible. “This happens by a form of speaking in tongues that can be called mechanical, prosthetic, mediatic, or mediumistic—all those printed translations on my bookshelves. Speaking or writing at all is a way to get irresponsible by becoming multiple, legion” (208). (“Legion” here, by the way, has a biblical-ethical resonance, as when in Luke’s Gospel a possessed man answers to the name of “Legion”.) Repeating in one’s own words what someone else has said through citation, paraphrase, summary, translation, etc., is always a form of performative interpretation, always a form of expropriation that alters what I have found there. “By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking,” Derrida says, “I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility” (*The Gift of Death* 60).

Another way to envision what Derrida means by irresponsibilization happens by way of decision, a choice we make to be responsible to one other over all those other others we are obligated to simultaneously. Abraham’s silent responsibility to Elohim, Jehovah, God, *le tout autre*, is hyperbolic, “a hyper-ethical-sacrifice,” made in silence, secret and sadness. Abraham’s decision, for Derrida, necessarily takes place, scandalously and obscenely, by recognising a complete incommensurability between a general ethics and an absolute ethics. To be responsible to my God is to be irresponsible to my family. I cannot be responsible to both at the same time and I can never say exactly what it is that I am responding to. I must make a decision that only I can make in a moment of secrecy and madness, absolutely, beyond the threshold of the ethical: “Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably” (*The Gift of Death* 68).

Derrida, we are told in Chapter 8, “Don’t Count Me In: Derrida’s Refraining,” had an odd relationship with the institutions he was associated with throughout his life. No one can doubt that he had a very keen sense of his responsibility to them, the

École Normale Supérieure and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, for instance, as well as to the various US universities he had visiting professorships with: Hopkins, Yale, NYU, etc. In one of the many comic moments in *For Derrida* Miller relates how subscribing to the letter to institutional protocols is always going to land you in hot water sooner or later. In his early days at the École Normale Supérieure Derrida was employed as an *agrégé-répétiteur*, a repeater, someone, in Derrida's words, who "should produce nothing, at least if to produce means to innovate, to transform, to bring about the new [*faire advenir le nouveau*]. He is destined to repeat and make others repeat, to reproduce and make others reproduce: forms, norms, and a content" (177). Says Miller, "The mind boggles at the thought of Derrida as a 'repeater'". How could Derrida follow to the letter such protocols? He couldn't. One can only imagine that Derrida must have been an appalling *agrégé-répétiteur*. "Though Derrida never defended himself by saying what I am about to say," Miller continues, "I think he would nevertheless have been justified in asserting: 'I have been an obedient student.

**400** I have done exactly what you told me to do. I have remained faithfully inside the institution or discipline of philosophy. I have repeated exactly and micrologically, and look what happened! The *system* disarticulated itself, deconstructed itself before my very eyes. My obedient reading revealed what the system depends on but that cannot be incorporated into the system, for example, the *pharmakon* in Plato" (179). However you see it the most responsible reading is always somewhat irresponsible, according to the laws of iterability, destinerance, adestation, performativity, etc. *Methode ist Umweg* [Method is detour], says Miller after Benjamin in the epigraph to this book: that, by the way, is just one of the reasons why Derrida is always late: "To reach the goal, to be on time, would be to be dead, so Derrida keeps talking, not to reach the goal, but to avoid reaching the goal" (71).

Anyone attuned to why this must be the case will also understand that in some sense "style is meaning", that the way I say something, as well as the *when* of that utterance, performatively produces what I have said, the meaning. *The Medium is the Maker* makes this condition even more explicit.<sup>3</sup> This book reads as an extended essay split into three short subsections: "The Boomerang Effect," where Miller traces the extraordinarily bizarre manner in which "Telepathy produces, right now, what it predicts"; "Mr. Sludge, c'est moi," a remarkable reading of Robert Browning's poem "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'"; and "Derrida as Medium", which focuses on the impressive and difficult rhetoric of Derrida's essay "Telepathy".

The most attractive quality of this slim volume is that it adroitly interweaves a close reading of Freud's telepathy fake lectures—"Dreams and Occultism", "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy", "Dreams and Telepathy", and "The Occult Significance of Dreams"—with Derrida, literary criticism, media culture and tele-technological advancements in communications, such as email, internet, fax, i-phones, etc. Of interest to Miller is "our everyday telepathy", the way in which pervasive tele-technological advancements in communications are taken for granted. However, says Miller, "We know, if we think about it, that our bodies, our nervous systems, and our

brains are penetrated, saturated, inundated, soaked, pierced through and through, at every moment, by an enormous cacophony of invisible electro-magnetic waves resonating at many frequencies and coming from an unimaginable number of different broadcasting sources.” All we need, of course, is a way, some kind of digital or electrical prosthesis like a radio receiver or satellite dish, for picking up signals and “*voilà*, the old dream of telepathy, of getting in touch at a distance, is fulfilled in the most hyperbolic way” (9). This telepathy effect, as it was for Freud and Derrida, is also fundamentally tied to an awareness of death, of ghosts, phantoms, disembodied voices in the ether. Miller tells us indeed that he has two recordings of Derrida, a copy of a reading of “Circonfession” and an interview given at Loughborough University, which he refuses to listen to because it would prove to him that Derrida is really dead.

I said earlier that *The Medium is the Maker* shares a common ancestry with Derrida’s “Envois” to *The Post Card* and “Telepathy” and I suggested that this is important for thinking about both *For Derrida* and *The Medium is the Maker* as two parts of the same project. My hypothesis was that *For Derrida* is so called because it ventriloquises Derrida, speaks for him. Speaking for the dead is what we generally associate with the word “medium” when it is used to describe a person rather than a thing (though the two are connected), someone through whom the voices of others come. Miller is doing just that in both books. He is speaking through Derrida and as Derrida, though in *The Medium is the Maker* the extraordinarily strange nature of this process is foregrounded: “Derrida raises Freud from the dead, just as Freud spoke, mediumistically and telepathically, for the quasi-patients who wrote him letters about their telepathic experiences, just as Browning was the medium through which (or through whom) Sludge spoke, and just as I speak here for Derrida and for all those others who speak through him” (43).

Anyone who has ever read Derrida’s “Envois” and “Telepathy” can attest to outlandishly weird and whimsical syntax of those fragmentary epistles, postcards, letters, maxims, and aphorisms. In both cases the reader encounters a series of voices, from Derrida, to a lover addressing his beloved, to Freud, to Derrida and back again. The reader is often left wondering just who is speaking at any given time, is it Derrida (one of the many) or Freud or Derrida as Freud, and so on, “so *fort*, so *da*”. Much of the fun in reading “Envois” and “Telepathy” stems from the fact that in miming Freud on telepathy Derrida is performatively recreating telepathy effects and drawing readers closer to the so-called postal principle: “it is because there would be telepathy that a postcard can always not arrive at its destination...everything I said about the postcard structure of the mark (interference, parasiting, divisibility, iterability, / and so on/) is found in the network. This goes for any tele-system—whatever its content, form, or medium” (“Telepathy” 226-261).<sup>4</sup> The medium is the maker, or better something within the medium, a ghost haunting the machine of the performative, infects, changes, reworks and reforms what is said in and through it. This is why, as Miller informs us, understanding “Telepathy” means understanding the rhetoric of “Telepathy”, its form and procedures. This means that readers also have to go back

to Freud, of course, in those fake lectures on telepathy, lectures that were never given perhaps because Ernest Jones was terrified that they would subtract from the status of psychoanalysis as an objective science. It also means that readers have to go back to Derrida, to read him closely, responsibly; it means going back to Derrida with the awareness that speaking for Derrida is no easy task. “Deconstructive reading,” says Miller, “is comic miming. It takes nothing away from the text and adds nothing to it, except irony, as in the insolence of a student who repeats back to the teacher exactly what that teacher has said, and as in the ironic insolence of my mediumistic citations of Derrida’s ‘Telepathy.’ These citations and my accompanying commentary implicitly claim to understand the essay better than Derrida did—an extremely risky claim” (71). Miller, though, is such an appalling *agrégé-répétiteur*.

The best thing that can be said about any work of criticism is that it makes you want to go back to the original text and read it for yourself, perhaps even for the second or third time to see what you’ve missed along the way. What Miller’s two books do for Derrida is to make you want to read Derrida for yourself, again and again. These books resonate with Derrida’s many voices and masks, and his characteristic charm and irony comes to life again in so many pages filled with the moments of Miller’s sensitive re-imaginings of conversations he’s had with Derrida over the “forty years of unclouded friendship”. Driven by his obligation to Derrida’s memory and to the remarkable vitality of his writing, Miller breathes new life into those works of Derrida’s that we thought we knew; and into those that we discover for the first time here and now, in this moment. Miller emphasises the immediacy with which those texts must be read. How, in order to do justice to the memory of Derrida’s legacy, his remains, we must read him again and again.

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## NOTES

1. For an extensive list of Miller's writings on Derrida's work up until 2004, see *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2005). Other works of specific interest to Derrida scholars include especially: *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002); *Others* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001); *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001); and *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).
2. See also Derrida's essay on Hillis Miller, "Le Parjure, Perhaps: Storytelling and Lying."
3. For an interesting discussion of this work in a recent interview with Barbara Cohen at University of California, Irvine, see: <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/icwt/fromheretothere/Sum08/hillis.html>. This can also be downloaded as an mp3. Miller also discusses his forthcoming book *The Conflagration of Community* in this interview.
4. Miller has also commented extensively on "Telepathy" in "Thomas Hardy, Jacques Derrida, and the 'Dislocation of Souls'".