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Symplokē, forthcoming

The Angel as Host

J. Hillis Miller's Last Flight

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 turn to the ethical turn, the affective turn to the cognitive turn, the new materialist turn to the environmental turn—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, perhaps, the force of an event at the time and deserves to be revisited today.

This agon, or contest, 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 of the agon, 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." The talk, titled "The Deconstructive Angel," (1977) offered a critique that was itself a mirroring reply to a prior deconstructive reading of Abrams' work. The "angel" who had "deconstructed" Abrams's humanistic "metaphysical presuppositions" (Miller 1972, 6) in an incisive review of *Naturalism Supernaturalism* (Abrams, 1971) was a younger but increasingly influential critic: a Professor at Yale 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)—named, J. Hillis Miller. 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 binaries that structure the western philosophical tradition like, origin/copy, form/ shadow, unity/fragmentation, sameness/difference, stretching to deconstruct via an ago that was not one but plural, the opposition between literature and criticism as well.

The Agon: Mimesis contra Difference

The agon was thus 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

mean that the theoretical stakes had practical consequences. In question were, in fact, venerable

institutions like the Western canon, for instance, but also the stability of disciplinary boundaries,

nationalist approaches to literary history, and by extension the status of cultural otherness,

multilingualism, comparative perspectives etc. 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 postcolonial

studies, 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 fifty years

later, periodically resurfacing in the same journal where it started—a shadow of the "original"

controversy.[1] 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 etc.) that have further disseminated theoretical practices in different areas of

humanistic study thereby showing "what is wrong with antitheory" (di Leo, ed. 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

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

continue to critique, overturn, dissolve etc. binaries like male/female, homo/hetero, self/other, subject/object, literary/pos-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 February 7, 2021, at the venerable age of 92—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 J. Hillis 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 continuities 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, 659-674) 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).[2] Its driving *telos* is to shift understandings of mimesis traditionally restricted to aesthetic realism and the metaphysics of representation deconstruction is up against toward a more differential,

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[2] The mimetic turn internal to *homo mimeticus* is transdisciplinary and collaborative in scope. In addition to J. Hillis Miller for literary theory, it involves contributions of key figures in areas as diverse as continental philosophy,, political theory, , feminist philosophy, posthuman studies, among other perspectives constitutive of the "mimetic condition," see Lawtoo (2022). For a representative sample, see Nancy and Lawtoo (2022), Cavarero and Lawtoo (2021), Hayles and Lawtoo (2022), 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/

linguistic but also affective and relational conception 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' account of the mirroring logic of the "gift" (giving-receiving; receiving-giving) is already a mimetic logic (1977, 445). In what follows, I shall 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 Abrams vs. Miller 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,"[3] as he kindly agreed to be interviewed and invited me to his private home on Deer Isle, Maine on September 6, 2018—hence the title, "The Angel as Host."

Homo Mimeticus on Deer Isle: The Re-Turn of Mimesis

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[3] As a rule, I refer to the formal last name "Miller" throughout; I retain "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 2018c) that prompted this more theoretical supplement. The occasional repetitions in the section that follows foreground Miller's differential theoretical supplements to the mimetic turn.

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: Theory and Criticism* I currently lead at KU Leuven, Belgium. This critical and theoretical project was, in many ways, the outcome of a practice of reading that had unknowingly started under 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 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 model to school myself in the "art of interpretation" (Nietzsche 1996, 10), I was already close to a philologist who had directly in-formed Miller's early writings in general and his critique of Abrams in particular—not to speak of figures like Foucault, Derrida, or Deleuze that still inform 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) that would then be followed by a filmed, or cinematic version, whose echoing title entailed a repetition with a difference and read, "The Critic as Mime" (Lawtoo 2018a).[4] In a characteristic deconstructive irony that characterized J. Hillis 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

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[4] From host to mime, 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 *symplokē* (Lawtoo 2018b). For other cinematic recordings of Miller's ' performative readings, see Kujundzic (2011) and Van Dam (2017).

shadow, phantom, or supplement to the written traces we had already left behind but had not

appeared in print as yet when we started filming—and in the end, the cinematic phantom came

first but would not 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 (see Miller 2017,

2018a)—an iteration that informs my choice of "primary texts" in what follows as well.

Both versions of the interview turned out to be amongst 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 feel like a testament 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. 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 all too human

tendency to fall under the telepathic or hypnotic spell of hypermimetic simulations in the digital

age, Miller now considered "very important" (Lawtoo 2018a). 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,

105-122, 191, Lawtoo 2019, Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 106-107)—we took a less "original"

concept closer to the origins of western thought in general as "Ariadne's Thread" or "story line"

(Miller 1992) 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 century, 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.[5] This mimetic turn, as

we turn to see, is not narrowly realistic but is performatively, dramatically, and above all,

ironically at play in J. Hillis 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 on screen taken from the cinematic version of our interview, "The Critic as Mime,"

shot on September 6, 2018 (Labor Day) in Hillis' private 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 Miller and Abrams initially staged, perhaps in

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[5] 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, a minor tradition that has in Nietzsche a primary representative and finds worthy successors in Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard, and, we should add, this metaphor is far from "transparent" and opens up numerous interpretations. In an overturing 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 theory. See Lacoue-Labarthe (1989), Gebauer and Wulf (1995), and Lawtoo (2013, 2016, 2019).

unnecessarily antagonistic terms at the dawn of the theory wars.[6] 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 60 years, and now urges us to pay the same critical attention for 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, Corby, 2017, 2; see also

Miller 2017). 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 can the powers of mimesis 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 and require attention to both sides of the new

medium Miller and I were experimenting with. Having the written version already behind us, we

both agreed not to follow a pre-established 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

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[6] 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 as he 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 entails (Miller and Lawtoo 2020, 106).

and asking questions on my own; plus, I was meeting J. Hillis 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 direct view on the bay.

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

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 at 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.

Figures 2, 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 to our respective geographical locations. But Hillis' 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 Louis Borges' 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 the above. It thus generates the familiar but paradoxical effect of radically

amplifying the overview over 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 Baudrillard was perhaps too fast to conclude in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), but neither does it simply "represent" it, as 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 increase 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 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.

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

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, and 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 as much space as it does 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, "Ile-Au-Haut." Thus, he asks: "Why is it called Ile-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. Hillis 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…Ile-Au-Haut;" and then shifting perspective again from the map to the ship in the sea, he turned to the key word Abrams' mimetic theory, in his view, had mistakenly "taken for granted:" namely, "language" (Miller 1972, 10). Thus, he added, laughing: "The local pronunciation is *Ile-a-hut* [laughter]…All these names. It's like Detroit. It should actually be *Détroit* [as in the French original pronunciation, meaning straight]." 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 U.S. city. Over the decades, I have come to appreciate the sophistication of unstated deconstructive readings of the copy/original binary opposition 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 (see Miller 2017, Lawtoo 2016).[7] 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 where 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, J. Hillis 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. The reader can retrace the journey for herself, 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

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[7] 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.

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, Hillis selected a minor, seemingly marginal moment in the

play itself but, in a seemingly casual gesture, chose not only to analyze it but, rather, 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,
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> in *King Lear*, at the end of the play…I was in the process of butting my shirt—hard to do
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> with one hand. I remembered this moment when Lear at the end of his life says, 'prey
>
> 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 at play

in his performance that calls attention to the critic's own self-referential dis-position. At the age

of 90 and with a hand paralyzed since youth by polio—Miller typed all is 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 felt, 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."

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

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 readings to perform. For instance, after this moment of identification with Lear's tragic *pathos*, Hillis introduces a moment of perhaps not comic but certainly ironic *distance*. Why is that so?

As any reader of J. Hillis Miller knows, a subtle often imperceptible irony is a distinctive characteristic of his written style. His critical interests 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 was discovering that irony was equally at play in Miller's

oral performative style going as far as touching the heart of a Shakespearian 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 felt, 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 with the agon with which we started. Contra Miller, in "The Deconstructive Angel" M. H. Abrams had, in fact, cited the very same passage from *King Lear* but with 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, 'Prey you undo this button.'" (1977, 433). The mirroring repetition could not be clearer; the doubling echo still audible across the stretch of time (over 40 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 I group under the rubric of "mimetic agonism" (Lawtoo 2023). As stated from the beginning, the deconstructive angel and the critic as host are not always as antagonistic as they appeared to be on that panel. 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 this fast-disappearing art today.[8] 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

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[8] Historically, Miller's deconstruction of the host/parasite binary brilliantly demonstrated the destabilizing (im)properties of language and turned out to be the most influential of the two essays in the end. At the same time, Abrams' 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. 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: "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 whether you *can* mean words to 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.

I ask Dorothy [his spouse]…but I don't say, 'prey you, undo this button [laughter].'" At two or, if you're watching/reading the interview, at 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 (see Lawtoo 2013, 3-8).

Supplementing Miller's former colleague at Johns Hopkins University, René Girard, who tends to limit mimesis to desire (or mimetic desire)[9], 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

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[9] I first articulated my differend with Girard in Lawtoo (2013, 281-305), 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, 103-04).

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*; J. Hillis Miller's brilliantly demonstrated it via a performative critical reading that generates *pathos*. Still he 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 and calls for non-anthropocentric accounts of the performative powers of mimesis that are not limited to human behavior. Once again, Miller dramatized this point in an 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 (1987, 34). I echoed this insight in order to make explicit what was already implicit in Hillis' 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, while 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 his starting point from the referential world as he gives the example of the animals that give the name to the island. In fact, Miller 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 turn of attention to nonhuman forms of imitation need 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, Jacque Derrida, for devoting only a "very minor" attention to climate change (Lawtoo 2018a). Should global warming and polar caps melting continue at this speed, as it is very likely, Miller is fully aware that "this house would not be around anymore. It would be more clam flats."

Figure 6: Coast of Deer Isle with traces of changing water height, *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 (see Connolly 2017, Chakrabarti 2021). This is a point Miller also explicitly makes in 2016 in his reflections at the "twilight of the Anthropocene" as he writes:

> 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, 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's career had 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 call against the all-too-real dangers of post-truth, climate change, and considering very carefully the power of referential facts. There is not necessarily contradiction; both Abrams and Miller already agreed on this point. If 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). 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 [sic] wanted it to mean" (Miller 1987, 9). This fundamental agreement is 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 amongst 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' 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 in guise of conclusion: 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 Miller repeatedly returned to
Hardy in later books for he considered him "one of the greatest poets writing in English" (2005,
140). Still, the specific choice of a poem by a realist Victorian author to bring mimesis into 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 of restricting our reframing of mimesis within a traditional
view of realistic representation of reality both Miller's deconstructive or rhetorical reading and
my take on *homo mimeticus* was 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
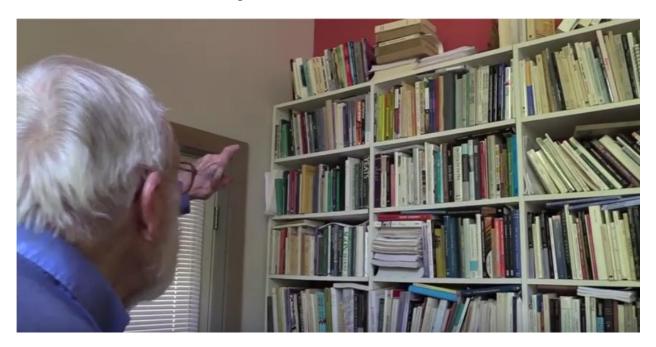inversions the critic as host would perform this time.

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

Picked from an impressive private library with volumes accumulated over a lifetime overflowing
from packed shelves, the specific choice of the poem did not seem promising at first either, for
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.""

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

I was far from being completely convinced despite the rhetorical emphasis on mimesis, or rather,

because of the dominant emphasis on the *representational* mimesis the *homo mimeticus* project

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)

We are, indeed, in the sphere of mimetic realism Miller had so effectively critiqued in the review

of Abrams' *Naturalism Supernaturalism* that had sparked the MLA debate in the first place.

Hillis 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."

Figure 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, after all? 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 ("mother's mothers"), from reflections to refractions ("hands behind hands"), all framed in a "mirror" that appears to simply redouble reality, reflecting what Miller 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 of 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 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 the philosophical *logos* internal to Plato's metaphysics based on ideal Forms (or

eidos) for the ancients, 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*, J. Hillis 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. Miller's 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], typically Hardy ending:"

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

There is indeed a tragic mimetic *pathos* at play in this final stanza, but J. Hillis 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." 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 was 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 on not only on the referential old objects in the world of phenomena, but also, and more importantly, to the phenomenological inner experience of the 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, closer to home, and in the process old metaphysical binaries like fiction/reality, inside/outside,

intrinsic/extrinsic, text/context, writing/speech, speaking/reader, no longer hold. In the process, Miller's reading of "Old Furniture" setts up an opaque, not transparently realistic but nonetheless illuminating mirror whose shape is "the same" yet, as we go through the looking glass, continues to generate 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" (qtd. in "Hardy" 142)—though Miller is always very careful not to conflate the speaker with the author. Thus, he specifies that he "does not know how Hardy was like." As he had already noted in one of his essays, the "Hardy" that emerges from his dramatic monologues is radically heterogenous, "a sequence of disconnected evanescent persons" that reveal an identity that is "no one" (2005, 143) in particular. Hardy himself remains thus an elusive phantom difficult to capture. What Miller knows well, however, is the experience of *reading* Hardy's poetry 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, no 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" (no p.).[10] 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 which 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" (*ex-perience*, etymologically, sea crossing). Unsurprisingly for those familiar with

Miller's admirable readings, the singular-plural meaning of the poem did not lay 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

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[10] 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' 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.

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 theory. This performative reading reflected what J. Hillis 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 in 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.
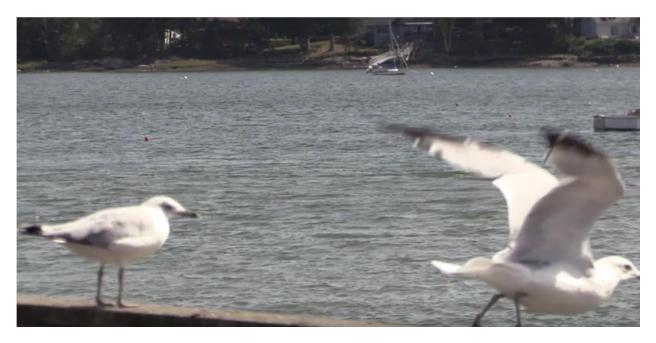

Figure 10: Seagull taking flight on Deer Isle, *The Critic as Mime* (2018)

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