The ethics of criticism: J. Hillis Miller and the metaphysics of reading

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The ethics of criticism:
J. Hillis Miller and the metaphysics of reading

by

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J. Hillis Miller's contribution to the field of literary studies is considerable. He received his undergraduate degree from Oberlin College, earned his Ph.D. from Harvard, served as English Department chair at Yale and Johns Hopkins Universities, acted as president of the Modern Language Association, and is currently the Distinguished Critic of Comparative Literature at University of California at Berkeley. Moreover, his career typifies, incorporates, and participates in the radical changes in English departments, the "redrawing" of the "boundaries" of the literary field in the post-structuralist era. A study of his 16 books and numerous articles reveals a move from a phenomenologist "criticism of consciousness," to a post-structuralist brand of "deconstruction" which Miller aligns with "close, rhetorical reading," and, in his most recent work, to a defense of his emphasis on reading in a field which emphasizes reading less and less.

Miller begins his career as a phenomenologist at Johns Hopkins University where he seeks a unified authorial presence in Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels (1959), The Disappearance of God (1963) and Poets of Reality (1965). In the mid 1960s, Miller makes a post-structuralist break as he begins to explore the implications of an always already figurative language in The Form of Victorian Fiction (1969) and Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (1970). His work in the 1970s (primarily journal articles) attempts to reconcile phenomenology with deconstruction by re-allocating authority to the text. As he comes to recognize that meaning is unstable and chaotic, Miller's attention to the rhetorical elements of text allows him to "narrate" a text's heterogeneity and corresponding unreadability. In Fiction and Repetition (1982) and The Linguistic Moment (1985), Miller pursues a connection
between metaphysics, language, and literature, concluding that metaphysics resides only as a linguistic trope and that literature is "a search for [metaphysical] grounding" or a "testing of the ground." Criticism is always a demonstration of the way a text "deconstructs" itself. With the publication of *The Ethics of Reading*, (1986) and *Versions of Pygmalion* (1991), Miller explores the metaphysical implication of reading, plays with the relationships among language, narrative, and ethics, and concludes that ethics, and by extension any metaphysical category, cannot be separated from reading. In his most recent book-length publications, *Ariadne's Thread* (1992) and *Illustration* (1992), Miller refocuses his critical attention on the field of literary studies itself and develops a post-structuralist, close, rhetorical reading of reading and/or criticism in its own right.

Miller's dissertation, which was published in 1959 as *Charles Dickens and the World of His Novels*, looks closely at Dickens' narrative structure. Miller sees an important correlation between form, which he understands as narrative structure, and the underlying consciousness of the author. His study is both rhetorical and thematic; indeed, it seems particularly concerned with showing how the two are necessarily intertwined, how they are derived from, and dependent on, one another. His study focuses on the Dickensean theme of the search for identity, but, by ordering his chapters chronologically, Miller attempts to trace the development of Dickens' literary imagination, his "cogito." In his chapter on *The Pickwick Papers*, for example, he reveals the connection between Dickens' use of an editorial voice and its corresponding objective detachment on the one hand, and a "comic view of things" on the other (2). Even early in his career, then, Miller exhibits his commitment to the study of narrative structure and "close, rhetorical reading."
In *The Disappearance of God* (1963), Miller explores the thematic and narrative implications of a Victorian ideology inherited from the Romantics which accepts a subject/object dichotomy. Because writers appropriate and embrace the subject/object division, Miller reasons, they are no longer able to experience God as both “immanent and transcendent,” who can consequently be experienced only as an absence. He describes the “romantic project” as creating “through [the romantics’s] own efforts a marvelous harmony of words which will integrate man, nature, and God” (14); in seeking harmony, however, they necessarily acknowledge disconnection. Dichotomy creates disconnection, and this disconnection is reflected in the thematic and narrative aspects of Romantic and Victorian literature, in De Quincey, Browning, Emily Brontë, Arnold, and Hopkins. Miller assumes that the text reflects the authorial consciousness, is an embodiment of an ideological structure which, in this case, is the outward manifestation of an inner experience of isolation and “spiritual poverty.” The writers he discusses “all attempt, like the romantics, to bring God back to earth as a benign power inherent in the self, in nature, and in the human community” (15).

Like *Disappearance*, Miller’s *Poets of Reality* (1965) explores the implications of a dualistic ideology. In this case, however, he understands Modernist texts as constructed in confrontation with a dualistic, subject/object ideology. In contrast to the dichotomy he identifies as Romantic and Victorian in *Disappearance*, Miller identifies a Modernist ideology of connection: “In the new art these depths tend to disappear. The space of separation is turned inside-out, so that elements once dispersed are gathered together in a new region of copresence” (9). Everything is object and everything is subject. Important to this ideological shift, Miller reasons, is Conrad’s recognition of the connection between imperialism and the subject/object
dichotomy. He is convinced that Conrad's narratives “play out” the subject/object dichotomy to its logical conclusion and mark the beginning of the modernist aesthetic of connection as reflected in Yeats, Eliot, Thomas, Stevens, and Williams. As he does in Disappearance, in Poets Miller identifies an authorial cogito reflected in the thematic and narrative textual elements, makes historical generalizations, and seeks a totalizing, structuralist conception of an authorial consciousness.

The Form of Victorian Fiction (1969) is a compilation of a series of lectures given at Notre Dame University in 1967. This study reflects the gradual shift which has been appearing in his articles from privileging thematic to privileging rhetorical textual elements, that is privileging not the external but rather the “inner structuring principles of a work” (xi) which precede rather than reflect authorial consciousness. Form builds on the “disappearance of god” concept by exploring its ontological, in addition to its epistemological, implications. In his four chapters which look at a wide range of Victorian authors, Miller represents narrative time, intersubjectivity, and realism as derived from, in fact as embodiments of, one another. The prevalence of an omniscient narrator, for example, is both like and unlike a god: it is all-knowing but limited by a Victorian ideology which necessarily embodies human limits in experiencing time and in figuring interpersonal relations. Again, the text is a reflection of the author in that the interaction between self and community is embodied in the interaction of narrator and characters which, in turn, reflects back on the author’s cogito. But the questions Miller pushes are more ontological than epistemological, more rhetorical than thematic.

Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire (1970) explores the “outlining [thematic] threads” of distance and desire across Hardy’s literary and poetic texts. Distance is a struggle with language in its recognition that neither critic nor author can reach an
"extra-linguistic origin" nor "escape from labyrinthine wanderings within the complexities of relationship among words" (vii). Though Miller is still concerned with a "Hardy Cogito," he is skeptical about his ability to represent it as "origin" and recognizes the inevitability of "an endless interpretative process of deferred meaning" (xi). He does necessarily identify a thematic mode of existence which struggles to reconcile distance and desire, but he stops short of treating it as a "fixed celestial archetype of which each particular is an incarnation" (xi). Thus, just as Hardy’s texts attempt to negotiate between the contradictory themes of distance and desire, Miller’s too attempts to be paradoxically distant and close, ontological and epistemological.

After Distance Miller did not publish any book-length works until 1982 when he published Fiction and Repetition (1982). Those twelve years, however were extremely productive times, where, in numerous journal articles, he worked out his post-structuralist theories about close, rhetorical reading and unreadability, and came to embrace complexity and heterogeneity; indeed, much of his later book-length publications are elaborations on essays produced from 1970-1982.

As he tells us in Fiction and Repetition, Miller’s guiding principle of literary investigation is to be true to its "strangeness":

[T]he specificity and strangeness of literature, the capacity of each work to surprise the reader, if he can remain prepared to be surprised, means that literature continually exceeds any formulas or any theory with which the critic is prepared to encompass it (5).

As a sort of manifesto against theory per se, Miller’s celebration of, and surrender to, literary "strangeness," as well as his corresponding emphasis on close, rhetorical reading derive from seeing language as figurative rather than representative.
Miller’s most important paradigm shift is understanding language as always already figurative and literature as a necessarily conscious “playing with” or “deconstruction of” the figurative nature of language. This comes to have important implications for how he defines his role as a literary critic who “reveals how a text deconstructs itself.”

In his first book-length deconstructive work Fiction and Repetition (1982), Miller shows how Modernist novels present a deconstruction of realism. His interpretations of Lord Jim, Wuthering Heights, Henry Esmond, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, The Well-Beloved, Mrs. Dalloway, and Between the Acts are simply examples of loosing himself of the notion that meaning is “outside the words” and considering the implications of it being “within them” (141). Each interpretation is an example of a post-structuralist, rhetorical reading, each appropriate and derived from the text. Ultimately, Miller’s emphasis on “repetition” does not “ground” the texts in a totalizing conception. He does not, in other words, use the novels to prove that all novels use repetition to create meaning. In fact, his definition of “repetition” is sometimes troublesome and often sounds closer to “figuration” or “signification.” In his chapter on repetition he theorizes that meaning is often generated by repetition of contiguous and similar elements, rather than through any sort of traditional logocentric epistemology. That is, the repetitions present in a text are constructed against linearity, as elements which undermine logocentrism and thereby attempt to bring the reader to a world outside of, but necessarily always inside, the figurative web. Repetitions assert and deny authority, origin, meaning, and epistemologic grounding; they “vibrate among various possible configurations, since there is not a solid base on which to construct a definitive interpretation” (109).
As Miller explores in *Repetition*, the deconstruction of realism depends on the denial of linguistic mimesis; language can not be a transparent medium for communicating meaning. In his next book-length publication, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (1985), he concludes that literature is essentially meta-semiotic. The most important moments in literature are those which acknowledge and exemplify the semiotic nature of language, those "linguistic moments" where "texts reflect or comment on their own medium" (xiv). These moments, presumably, are "in one way or another a search for a ground within, beneath, above, before, or after time, something that will support time, encompass it, still its movement" (xvi). *Linguistic* typifies the brand of deconstructive criticism Miller advocates, which ironically grounds his emphatic denial of any epistemological grounding. Criticism should be the "repeating of the work of criticism already present in the poems themselves, that self-testing—as of a man jumping up and down on a plank over an abyss" (xviii).

In *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (1987), Miller explores the notion that ethics exist beyond epistemology and, by extension, exist only in a "performative" rather than a "constative" state. Language is endlessly referential, even in seemingly mimetic ethical discussions. In his discussions of "ethical parables," Miller explores the connection between the unattainable other, in this case "ethics," and storytelling. "Narrative," he writes, "like analogy, is inserted into that blank place where the presumed purely conceptual language or philosophy fails or is missing" (24). Building on his devotion to "literary strangeness" and his notion that reading is an act against logocentrism, Miller concludes that ethics do not exist without storytelling. The story, that is, functions as a parabolic catachresis for the ethical premise. Ethics are not derived
from "thematic dramatizations of ethical topics" but from the performance of them. The meta-semiotic, "linguistic/ethical moment" demonstrates the necessary connection between narrative and ethics; like language, ethics are endlessly referential and unverifiable. That is, a narrative which thematically treats ethics does not address ethics directly, but is rather an exploration of the ontological and performative nature of them. Reading, by extension, must have an ethical dimension in addition to its cognitive and epistemological ones. In reading a James narrative, one might question the ethical basis on which it stands. But reading is always already ethics, is always performative in the sense that it creates an ethical moment which, in turn, makes something else happen. The relationship, however, is not exactly causal because one defines ethics as they happen. They don't exist, in other words, without application.

In a continuation of Ethics, Versions of Pygmalion (1990), Miller explores the implications of his notion that ethics are essentially and necessarily connected to narrative. Like Pygmalion, readers must give life to the inanimate characters they are confronted with in a simultaneously constative and performative act which avoids epistemological grounding. Readers, writers, critics, and teachers must take responsibility for this act; the stories they choose are about characters whose actions reflect their process of understanding the story. That is, if ethics are indeed derived only from the performance of a particular text, Miller reasons, the text which is chosen will have important ethical implications. In his readings of What Maisie Knew, Kliest's "Der Findling," "Bartleby the Scrivener," Blanchot’s L’arrêt de mort, and James’ "The Last of the Valerii," Miller explores not the thematic representation of ethical issues within a work, but the ethical issues involved in the act of reading itself (17).
Both Ethics and Pygmalion use a "reading act" theory which understands reading as neither solely cognitive, nor solely political, nor solely social, nor solely interpersonal, and understands literature as not just an effect but also a cause. Reading derives a subversive power from suspended disbelief, a refusal to recognize the parabolic and/or catachrestic nature of language, and, most importantly, from an ignorance of the "performative power" of each reading act. The connection between ethics and storytelling bodes well for the social and political importance of English departments in the general sense, and close, rhetorical reading in the specific sense: "It there is not ethics without story and not story without prosopopoeia, then understanding that figure of speech is essential to an understanding of ethics and especially of the ethics of reading" (Pygmalion 13). Ethics and Pygmalion, then, are forums for Miller to show the political, ethical, and social utility of deconstruction, of attending to the rhetoric's literary, or any textual, "strangeness."

Though less directly "useful," Miller's two collections of literary essays, Tropes, Parables, and Performatives (1990) and Victorian Subjects (1990), amass his best efforts in rhetorical reading, each "entered history at a specific moment" and each is "the memorial record of a discrete event of reading, not a stage in some predetermined itinerary fulfilling a single 'research project'" (vii). Undermining Miller's emphasis of the separateness of each reading act is his consistent denial of epistemological certitude. Each reading is a testimony to the veiled "other" which exists only parabolically and is derived only from the performance of close rhetorical reading.

Narrative is a central feature of Miller's work in its implications and its applications. His critical pieces in both Tropes and Victorian Subjects are historical
accounts of his readings; he narrates the story of his reading process. He tells how a particular text forces him to read, where that reading act effects a response, and how it ultimately and necessarily ends in a constructive bafflement, parabolically close to the unattainable “other.” His texts, like the literary texts he studies, are stories about continually striving and inevitably failing to reach the “other,” are stories about the nothingness of existence: they are without a clear origin or governing telos, and they merely are “links in a chain” striving for “gradual clarification.” In his essay on *Heart of Darkness* from *Tropes*, he places himself next to Marlow as “another witness in my turn, as much guilty as any other in the line of witnesses of covering over while claiming to illuminate. My *Aufklärung* too has been of the continuing impenetrability of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” (193).

In his book-length contribution to the Bucknell Series in Literary Theory, *Hawthorne and History: Defacing It* (1991), Miller uses a close, rhetorical reading of “The Minister’s Black Veil” [MBV] to further collapse the distinction between realism and allegory. That is, central to Miller’s deconstructive reading of MBV is the sense that language is semiotically self-referential, within a closed system of signs, and therefore meaning is clearly different from and opposed to experience. In the essay, he concludes that the text is a parabolic example of the impossibility of unveiling, of the impossibility of escaping the symbolic realm. In the process, he remains fundamentally self-conscious about the “tools” he uses for understanding the text and collapses the traditional chasms between paradigmatic sets of binary opposites: history and literature, realism and allegory, veiling and unveiling, and, ultimately, reading and theory.

In his collection of theoretical essays, *Theory Now and Then* (1991), Miller further collapses the distinction between reading and theory. Though the collection
amasses his important theoretical essays from his “criticism of consciousness” era to his “deconstructive” era, the title is a pun, referring less to the progressive sense of theory “back then” as opposed to now, and more to the parsimonious sense that theory is needed or occurs “only now and then” to help one to read. Like ethics, theory exists only in its performance and is an aid to the reading process. “Theory,” he writes, “is nothing without the praxis and that reading is, the praxis that theory makes possible, though theory and reading are asymmetrical” (xi). Indeed, Miller’s “theoretical” essays are less theories per se than they are theories about theories, looking at the uses and limits of theories and continually emphasizing the practical rather than epistemological utility of their developments. Theory is the reader’s disposition which makes the cognitive aspects of reading possible. Finally, theory is both the most and least important aspect of Miller’s career. Most important because his, along with Derrida’s and de Man’s, wedding of post-structuralist notions of unreadability with the New Critical loyalty to the text create new vigor for close, rhetorical reading. Least important because it is only a means to the important end: the reading of a text.

In his most recent scholarship, Miller has turned his close, rhetorical reading in on itself. In his “Ariadne Project,” which begins with his 1978 essay, “Ariadne’s Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line,” and grows into *Ariadne’s Thread* (1992) and *Illustration* (1992), Miller reads the reading process, looking at the implications of the always already figurative language which critics and readers use to understand works of art. Indeed, any “understanding” of narrative is, as Miller continually shows in *Ariadne*, itself a narrative, which reaches, in turn, only a parabolic clarification. Essentially, *Ariadne* exposes the etymologically hidden assumptions implicit in narrative terminology: “line,” “character,” “anastomosis,” and “figure.”
Like narrative itself, the terms used to describe narrative are labyrinthine. Because they too find themselves in the figurative woods, he concludes that narrative fortifies itself with "line imagery" which, in turn, fortifies itself with the concepts of causality and logocentrism. Narrative is the figurative veil which allows us to "forget" that our alienated existence lies in the inescapable labyrinth of figure. "Narrative," he concludes, "is the allegorizing along a temporal line of the perpetual displacement from immediacy" (257).

In Illustration Miller explores the critical implications for the figurative labyrinth, specifically the theoretical implications for the growing "cultural criticism." The book is broken into two sections, the first, "The Work of Cultural Criticism in the Age of Digital Reproduction," is a general investigation of cultural studies, and the second, "Word and Image," is an "illustration" of his reading of various illustrations. Essentially Miller argues that cultural studies shoots itself in the foot when it relies on theory as mimesis rather than signification. In other words, he argues against studying artworks as "illustrations" of presupposed theoretical "texts." Like "words and images," theory and artworks are necessarily juxtaposed and do not "mean" the same thing. Instead, Miller argues that criticism can be both practical and political if it is a performative reading which recognizes difference and is, in turn, "historical" and "inaugural," as bringing something hitherto unheard of into the world" (55). Reading should be an identification of difference which "changes the society into which it enters, makes it, in however minute a way, begin again" (56).

In the second chapter of Illustration, Miller looks at Dickens' relationship with his illustrator Hablot K. Browne ("Phiz") and J. M. W. Turner's impressionistic paintings to "illustrate" his loyalty to semiology, concluding that image and text
perform in essentially the same way, and, are necessarily juxtaposed signs. Again, representation is not representation in the mimetic sense but in the semiotic sense. Word and text are "echoes" of one another. He attends to the "irreducible heterogeneity of works of art," figurative signs, rather than mimetic representations, of their historical economic, technological, class, and gender contexts of the works" (151).

The irony of Miller's career is that the more he becomes entrenched in the post-structuralist territory, the more resistant he becomes to theory per se. For Miller, theory is only as helpful as its ability to aid in the reading process, but, as I will explore in chapters three and four, reading itself is a slippery, metaphysical category. Before exploring the metaphysical implications of reading, however, it is necessary to understand Miller's theoretical movement from structuralism to post-structuralism, or specifically his movement from phenomenology to deconstruction. Consistent with Miller's emphasis on narrative, Chapter 2 is a story which emphasizes certain "theoretical moments" and ignores others. My central goal in chapter 2, however, is not to be historically accurate, but to use specific historical instances to point parabolically to general theoretical direction.
THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Criticism of consciousness was for me only a momentarily successful strategy for containing rhetorical disruptions of narrative logic through a dialectic method in criticism. Such criticism exerted that control by a constant reference back to the continuities of authorial consciousness as origin, end, and underlying logos of literature. My turn to the rhetoric of literature in *Fiction and Repetition* and the Ariadne project was...[a] return to an indigenous, abiding fascination with local linguistic anomalies in literature (*Ariadne* xv).

Miller was a physics major for his first two undergraduate years at Oberlin and, as a phenomenologist, his criticism is certainly an exacting science, dissecting the text to find the author, the essential element which, though it may formally differ from text to text (body to body,) is functionally the same and always present. But, as the introductory quote attests, Miller would have one believe that he has abandoned the scientific control in his gradual movement from structuralism to post-structuralism, phenomenology to deconstruction. His deconstructive emphasis on “close, rhetorical reading” clearly marks a return to the text guided only by an “indigenous, abiding fascination with local linguistic anomalies in literature.”

As I state in chapter 1, Miller began his career as a phenomenologist, or “critic of consciousness,” and, in the late 1960s, shifted his critical paradigm to become a deconstructive critic who emphasized “close, rhetorical reading.” Each of Miller’s critical pieces clearly states its critical presuppositions, what and how it’s trying to achieve. His theoretical shift, its continuities and revisions, then, is well-documented across his career. Though all his essays consistently contain an element of meta-criticism, his publishing focus seems to move from more overtly critical essays to
more overtly theoretical essays. Because Miller's emphasis on rhetorics is a controversial stance in the contemporary literary environment which is trying harder and harder to make itself politically and socially useful and/or productive, he is forced to continually defend his critical paradigms. Critical or meta-critical, Miller's essays are consistently practical and are always focused on important metaphysical issues about reading and criticism. Whether or not one agrees with Miller's philosophical infrastructure or the practicality of his critical paradigms, one cannot argue his commitment to the field of literary studies.

In the course of his theoretical development, Miller's most important paradigm shift is derived from the notion that language is a closed semiotic system built around difference and reference. He abandons the notion that language is mimetic and constative, and acknowledges that language is always already figurative, that words are signs alienated from the reality they endeavor to represent, and that words are signifiers which signify only other signifiers.

As a phenomenologist, Miller relied on the notion that signification permitted him access to the "other," an objectifiable authorial cogito. He is convinced that the "object" of any literary study is to articulate the "entirely independent" mind of the author as it is exposed in the literary text. In *The Disappearance of God* (1963), Miller writes,

> The comprehension of literature takes place through a constant narrowing and expansion of the focus of attention, from the single work of an author, to the whole body of his works, to the spirit of the age, and back again in a contraction and dilation which is the living motion of interpretation (vii).

This "living motion" of interpretation is actually quite static, moving vertically in the context for the construction of a text. The critic attempts to identify a telos and/or
origin for a literary text and, by extension, to fixate it as an outward manifestation of an inner consciousness, a mimetic representation of a personal ideology; the critic "understands" (rather than stands next to) the text by restaging the milieu for its production, pinpointed as authorial cogito.

In his first published article, "The Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins" (1955), Miller describes a text as a place where "the world of sense perception has been transformed, through its verbalization, into the very substance of thought, and, one may say, into the very substance of Hopkins himself" (293). Here Miller uses a sort of conduit metaphor for language wherein the author contains the "substance" of meaning in words, reflects an inner consciousness through a "verbalization" process. Through some sort of mystical substitution, the text "becomes" the author. The alienation implicit in signification is not acknowledged: language allows the authorial consciousness to be perfectly mirrored in the text and, further, critical language allows the critic to empirically demonstrate the continuities between author and text. Language is representative and mimetic, not, as he comes to believe later in his post-structuralist writing, always already figurative.

Even in his earliest essays, however, it's clear that Miller is uneasy about signification. His identification of an authorial cogito in a text is focused on trying to figure out how it got there and how a reader can recognize it. In other words, he becomes interested in identifying what and how a text signifies. In "Franz Kafka and the Metaphysics of Alienation" (1957), he writes,

They [Kafka's stories] are not symbolic, but perfectly literal embodiments of his inner life. They are the very form his consciousness takes when it has any form at all, when it ceases
to be a hollow shell filled with indeterminate energies careening in the void (296).

Understanding Kafka’s stories as “literal embodiments of his inner life” is clearly dependent on a structuralist notion of linguistic mimesis. But behind that structuralist notion, Miller is grappling with some important linguistic, epistemological, and ontological questions. This passage acknowledges the presence of signification in the creative process. He represents consciousness as alternately form and formlessness, and, by extension, defines form as determined and formlessness as “indeterminate.” This dichotomy points to a general recognition of the enigmatic power of signification, to the deconstructive notion that the author must contain consciousness or “meaning” within pre-determined linguistic signs. The “void” which Miller briefly attests to in the Kafka passage becomes the focus of his later deconstructive study, the unattainable “other” which he ambitiously pursues in spite of, but paradoxically in accordance with, his best epistemological and logocentric judgment.

In addition to, and certainly connected to, his changing notions about linguistic representation, Miller comes also to question the critic’s ability to account for the creative processes involved with the production of a text. To say that a text consciously or unconsciously reflects an authorial cogito, is to assume that such a cogito exists apart from language. Phenomenological criticism is faithful to the New Critical notion that a unified authorial presence exists, a “profound harmony” among passages and between complete works, “a unity in which a thousand paths radiate from the same center” (Dickens ix). As a result, it is explicitly focused on the author rather than on the text; indeed, the work becomes a means for understanding the author: “It is the embodiment in words of a certain very special way of experiencing the world” (Dickens ix). In his first meta-critical piece, “The
Literary Criticism of Georges Poulet" (1963), Miller describes the critic of consciousness as a "disinterested" observer: "The re-creation of the mind of the author in the mind of the critic is not performed for the sake of any selfish good it may do the critic, but entirely for the sake of the author criticized" (473).

Indeed, Poulet's brand of criticism served as an important model for Miller in the years they worked together at Johns Hopkins. In his article, Miller praises Poulet's loyalty to the authorial cogito, his insistence on structuring the authorial consciousness on its own terms. The critic articulates "the quality of the other mind in its purest form, not as it is modified by one content or another, but as it exists in itself." (480). The assumption here is that the author's mind has a subjective detachment, that it can be translated to an objective text, and that a critic can recapture that pure subjectivism. But, as Miller comes to realize, the subjectivity of the author and the objectivity of the critic are inevitably antithetical. In other words, criticism is inevitably and paradoxically opposed to reading in a Poulet model. In addition, from the retrospective point of 1991, Miller recognizes that even Poulet was conflicted by signification: "Poulet came to recognize, almost in spite of himself, the constative role of language in shaping consciousness if not actually making it" (Victorian Subjects viii).

Miller's confidence in a "unified authorial consciousness" is replaced by a confidence in heterogeneity. As Miller glimpses into the post-structuralist abyss, he recognizes the futility of his desire to re-construct a "criticism of consciousness" and to achieve complete identification with the authorial cogito. In his introductory paragraph to "Hopkins," Miller writes,

One of its [criticism of consciousness'] chief limitations is the necessity of describing discursively and seriatim what is really
the non-temporal interior world of Hopkins, the total context in which any single poem exists and has its real meaning (292).

In accounting for the phenomenal factors of a text's production, Miller comes to realize the infinitely heterogeneous variables which must be contained. In Dickens he writes, "A good novel, like the real world, must be less an organic whole than a collection of disparate parts which resists all our attempts to reconstitute it into a unity" (23). Even in his initial quests for a totalizing conception of an authorial consciousness, then, Miller begins to recognize the impossibility of homogeneity in narrative form. Paradoxically, Miller wants to simultaneously be loyal to and contain literary complexity. Complexity is that attribute of language which Miller does not want to lose and reading must be fundamentally opposed to logocentrism:

My argument is that the best readings will be the ones which best account for the heterogeneity of the text, its presentation of a definite group of possible meanings which are systematically interconnected, determined by the text, but logically incompatible. The clear and rational expression of such a system of meanings is difficult, perhaps impossible (Fiction and Repetition 51).

An interpretation without complexity will be vulnerable to be itself deconstructed, but complexity is inherently antithetical to his logocentric and epistemological ambitions. Even with an infinite heterogeneity, a text must still say something, and there must be limits to what a critic can say about a text because the critic must say something. Central to his later criticism is the notion of "unreadability," which claims that though a text offers many interpretative choices, it may be ultimately undecidable in meaning.

A recognition of the figurative nature of language, then, eventually leads to Miller's confidence that the goal of a reader is to come to the point of unreadability,
a double blind, a paradoxical recognition of paradox. In “The Figure in the Carpet” and “A ‘Buchstabliches’ reading of The Elective Affinities” (1979), for example, Miller reveals stories which exemplify his “linguistic moment” by allegorizing the paradoxical insistence and denial of completeness, continuity, and form.

For Miller, literature is catachrestic, the naming “in figure, by a violent, forced, and abusive transfer, something else for which there is no literal name and therefore, within convention of the referentiality which the story as a realistic novel accepts, no existence” (“Figure in the Carpet” 111). He describes “all realistic narrative [as] ‘unreadable,’ undecidable, irreducible to any single unequivocal interpretation” (111). Put simply, the meaning of a text is not simply itself, is not even itself at all; rather, the meaning of a text is that which only the text acts as a catachresis for. It would be spurious to say that a text represents something because the presence of the text points to the impossibility of representing the “other:” “Unreadability’ is something intrinsic to the words of a work, an effect of the rhetoric or of the play of figure, concept, and narrative in the work, an effect the words of the work impose on the reader, not an effect of reader response” (“Figure in the Carpet” 113). In “Character in the Novel” (1981), Miller goes so far as to suggest that fiction is always an allegory of the inevitability of misreading, a seemingly nihilistic performative which is actually an apotropaic denial of itself: “It is a throwing away of what is already thrown away in order to save it. It is a destroying of the already destroyed in order to preserve the illusion that it is still intact” (282).

If the text is a substitution, a forced filling of an epistemological void, then the critic is inevitably confronted with “unreadability.” For Miller, the critic should not try to be outside of the text. He wants to push a schematic hypothesis “to the point
where it fails to hypothecate the full accounting for the novel which is demanded in
the critical contact’’ (Fiction and Repetition 63). Ultimately, anything epistemologically
satisfying has not been pushed far enough and is not at all critically satisfying to
Miller. He is satisfied only when he is not satisfied. All criticism must be
deconstructed so that the text alone remains the original deconstructing force, the
elusive, unreadable and undecidable force. Deconstruction is a way of keeping a
text in a constant state of flux, refusing to give it any metaphysical grounding by
revealing its always already figurative nature. Therein lies the crux of his split with
the Geneva school: “A metaphysical method of literary study assumes that literature
is in one way or another referential, in one way or another grounded in something
outside language” (“On Edge” 101). Miller’s work often seeks the central paradox in
each work, the point where logocentrism simply no longer works as a prevailing
structure. His criticism exposes paradox and relocates it as a centralizing metaphor
for the work. The paradox points metonymically to the “other” which, presumably,
close, rhetorical reading exposes but does not objectify.

Concurrent with his recognition that language is figurative rather than
mimetic and that texts are infinitely heterogeneous, is Miller’s shift in critical focus
from a study in thematics, as is especially evident in Dickens and the “Dickensean
search for identity,” to a study in the rhetorics of narrative as begins to evidence
itself in Distance and Desire. It is much easier to account for an authorial cogitio as it
is represented in thematic elements than one as it is represented in rhetorical
elements. The former presupposes a mimetic critical language; the latter paradoxically
necessitates a critical point of reference outside of language. In other words, Miller
moves from focusing on the meaning of a text as is represented by the thematic
elements to an investigation of how that meaning is rhetorically constructed. This
meta-reading is much different from the "pure identification" he aligns himself with earlier because he tries to take an external point of reference. For example, in *Dickens*, Miller describes his approach as:

"to assess the specific quality of Dickens' imagination in the totality of his work, to identify what persists throughout all the swarming multiplicity of his novels as a view of the world which is unique and the same, and to trace the development of this vision of things from one novel to another throughout the chronological span of his career." (viii)

In exploring Dickens' "view of the world," his "vision of things," Miller focuses more on the objectified "world" and "things" than the "view" and "vision." That is, he focuses more on the thematic than the rhetorical elements in Dickens' novels. On the other hand, in his essay on *Mrs. Dalloway*, "Virginia Woolf's All Souls' Day: The Omniscient Narrator in *Mrs. Dalloway*" (1970), he writes, "The most important themes of a given novel are likely to lie not in anything which is said abstractly, but in significances generated by the way in which the story is told" (101).

This shift from thematics to rhetoric is important because it allows him to retain some loyalty to a "criticism of consciousness." But the overwhelming heterogeneity of figurative elements coupled with the influx of the post-structuralist writings of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man make a strong argument for linguistic entrapment in an always already figurative world, meaning constructed along linguistic difference, and a denial of telos. By abandoning a teleological focus of authorial consciousness, Miller frees himself to look at, and be objectively loyal to, what he calls "literary strangeness."

paradigmatic connection between signification and "close, rhetorical reading." Like the dualism/monism progression he represents in the movement from Victorian to Romantic to Modernist literature, Miller recognizes that the figurative nature of language necessitates a monistic theory of literary criticism. He comes to recognize the irreducibility of a text and shows he falls firmly on the new monism with the "insistence that a work of art means itself, rather than 'representing' anything" and that criticism too should do the same (567). A literary text must, by his definition, be irreducible, unsignifiable, and infinitely heterogeneous, yet the critical desire is to reduce, signify, and contain it. The "literary strangeness," which Miller wants to remain loyal to, must remain untainted by his epistemological desires.

In his most recent meta-critical work, Miller comes to question the terms which govern the epistemological aspects of his critical paradigm. In his most ambitious essay on narrative lines, "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line" (1976), Miller points to the labyrinthine quality of narrative terms. Because they too find themselves in the figurative woods, he concludes the logocentric basis of the line imagery fortifies itself with the concept of causality and, more importantly, schematizes the way that critics understand literature: "This principle holds the whole line together, gives it its law, controls its progressive extension, curving or straight, with some arche, telos, or ground" (158). Though the critic seems to reduce and achieve a telos, she is in fact using an equally figurative language for an equally catachrestic enterprise:

[T]he notions of 'example' and 'line of investigation,' moreover, are not unequivocal or logically transparent concepts on which my enterprise can be solidly based. Both are, in fact, figures, with all the uncertainty or equivocation that always attends any
effort of thought based on figure ("Nature and the Linguistic Moment" 441).

Miller's career, then, reveals a growing discomfort with language and leads to the conclusion that texts are ultimately unreadable because they are always already figurative representations. Even when his "line of investigation" is meta-critical, he's fundamentally skeptical about signification. He attempts to keep the literary texts from being grounded by denying his critical terms any metaphysical grounding. However, if the "other" is as allusive for critical authors as it is for literary authors, how can criticism expect to say anything about any literary text?

From his tenure as a phenomenologist to the present, Miller attempts to resolve the critical "double-blind" by an allegiance to close, rhetorical reading.

As different as Miller's theoretical presuppositions are from his earlier to his later career, his actual works of criticism look uncannily similar. In his collection of essays on Victorian literature, Victorian Subjects (1990), Miller points to the continuity in his theoretical development. There is not a "clear-cut shift", Miller explains, because his phenomenological "criticism of consciousness" relied on citation, "ironic displacement through citational miming" which is "already an implicit critique" and whose repetition is a "fundamental part of the strategy of so-called deconstruction" (viii). More importantly, the "asymmetry between theory and reading" derives from a loyalty to the texts rather than to the theoretical, totalizing presuppositions. Miller's emphasis on reading, either for a constative authorial cogito or a performative confrontation with unreadability, is the important continuity among his various paradigms. Indeed, it is reading which allows him to move from phenomenology to deconstruction relatively unscathed.

As a phenomenologist, an emphasis on reading allows Miller to remain faithful to both the author and his critical interests. He places "the act of
reading...prior to any criticism” (“Poulet” 471). Reading here is a sort of complete, “pure identification” of reader with author: “The plunge into a book is achieved only in the perfect coincidence of the reader’s mind with the ‘intimate indescribable’ of the author’s mind.” (“Poulet” 471). Reading is “not yet criticism”; criticism reflects back on the reading process as “the putting in order and clarification of the identification attained through reading” (“Poulet” 475). The idea of reading in “perfect coincidence” with the author’s mind, however, is problematic and paradoxical when one moves from reading to criticism. The criticism of consciousness strives to “participate” in the text, to mirror and enhance the phenomenal experience of reading with the goal of revealing an authorial cogito. The phenomenological goal of reading, in other words, is to reach an identification or overlap of authorial and reader cogito, but that can paradoxically only happen on the author’s own terms. Reading and criticism are antithetical because one is explicitly ontological and the other explicitly epistemological, a seemingly irreconcilable conflict is instrumental in his shift from a study of thematics to a study of rhetorics.

The movement away from authorial cogito to rhetorics re-centers textual origin, an emphasis on the generative rhetorics, the “specific shaping energy which generates form and meaning” as he describes it in “Three Problems of Fictional Form” (1968) (48). But by identifying origin, Miller again finds himself in the epistemology/ontology dilemma: if the only access a critic has to an authorial cogito is the literary text, how does a reader actually gain access to the authorial mind without objectifying it? How can it be simultaneously experienced and articulated?

One move Miller makes in the face of this double blind, is to move the reading process from outside to inside the text. He asserts the importance of what
he calls the "linguistic moment," "the moment when language as such, the means of representation in literature, becomes problematic, something to be interrogated, explored, or thematized in itself" ("Linguistic Moment" 450). It is the meta-linguistic or meta-rhetorical moment which allows the deconstructor to participate with, rather than objectively explicate, the authorial cogito because both critic and author understand "language not as a mere instrument for expressing something that could exist without it, but as in one way or another creative, inaugurating, constitutive" and the "rejection of unitary origin" (450). The important reading process is, in other words, not reader reading text, but character reading signifier (which the reader, in turn, reads.) In The Form of Victorian Fiction (1968), Miller writes that the expression of a particular authorial consciousness, the cogito, is "mediated" and "indirect." "It is to be approached only by way of the interaction of the imaginary minds of the narrator and his characters as they are related within the horizon opened by time in the novel" (2). Much of his later criticism deals both thematically and rhetorically with signification, or, as he explicitly deals with in The Linguistic Moment, his criticism is a demonstration of how literary works are themselves about signification, unreadability, and the unattainable "other." In this model, the critic's job is not to talk about her own reading process, but to talk about the characters' and narrator's, which are themselves metaphysical investigations of signification. From a deconstructive standpoint, then, reading allows the only access to the "other" found only in the textual interplay, and, by extension, language is a performative rather than constative device. The deconstructive emphasis on the ontological experience of rigorous reading is reminiscent of Poulet's emphasis on reading as "prior to any act of consciousness." From a phenomenological standpoint, reading allows the only access to the authorial consciousness, and, by
extension language is constative only through its performance. The major
difference between the phenomenological and deconstructive reading paradigms is
that the former uses reading to reach an endpoint and the latter can paradoxically
and necessarily never reach any.

Indeed, as Miller travels further into the deconstructive woods, the
distinctions between literature, criticism and reading become less and less distinct.
Just as criticism seems to participate in the "specific shaping energy" of literary texts,
literary texts contain "self-interpretative elements" and thereby participate in their
own critical reception. In "The Interpretation of Lord Jim" (1970), Miller writes, "The
critic must enter into the text follow its threads as they weave in and out, appearing
and disappearing, crisscrossing with other threads" (211). To represent the "shaping
energy" of his own criticism, he uses the image from Heart of Darkness of Marlow's
"yarns," whose meaning:

was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale
which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the
likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made
visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine (212).

That image, which simultaneously exists and doesn't exist, whose materiality
continually undermines itself as light and light reflection, which can only reach
deeper into the paradoxical substance of haziness, seems to represent the difficulty
Miller finds with objectifying a text. There is no kernel of objective reality to
represent meaning. Meaning must be instantaneous and engaged with the text:

Whenever the interpreter thinks he has reached back to
something original, behind which it is impossible to go, he finds
himself face to face with something which is already an
interpretation, that is, something which refers to another sign
still further back, and so on forever (213).
If language is always already figurative, signs can refer only to other signs in an infinite signifying slide of meaning, and, perhaps more importantly, the meaning of a sign is only itself. His reliance on Conrad's metaphor is an ironic reversal of criticism and literature. Conrad recognizes, predicts, or foreruns a deconstructive paradigm for reading, thus further hopelessly intertwining literature and criticism. Miller, in fact, repeatedly claims that a critic's job is not to deconstruct a text, but rather to show how a text deconstructs itself.

If a critical piece is objective, logocentric, and epistemological, it is alienated from the text. If, on the other hand, a critical piece is subjective, uncanny, and ontological, it mystically "becomes" the text and will inevitably come under scrutiny for presuming to be "literary" in its own right. Reading is the middle ground between criticism and literature, a "performative catachresis" which imposes a meaning "that can never be encountered face-to-face" (Ariadne 210). Similarly, theory is "performative praxis," which guides the reading process but has no epistemological value in itself, is "there to help us get on with the serious business of reading" (vii). Theory exists only in the act of reading and reading is necessarily guided by theory, but the two are hopelessly antithetical. Theory is epistemological; reading is ontological—theory is constative; reading is performative.

One way Miller deals with the literature/criticism dichotomy is to use his criticism to talk directly about the reading process and, perhaps more aesthetically pleasing, to demonstrate, like a narrative, his own reading, entering it into history. The importance of narrative which Miller identifies in any fictive voice becomes catachrestically his own critical voice. In "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line," narrative catachrestically fills an important ideological void. "Narrative is the allegorizing along a temporal line of the perpetual displacement
from immediacy” (158). Allegory in this sense, however, is precisely the expression of the impossibility of expressing unequivocally, and so dominating, what is meant by experience or writing. Because a critic cannot escape the maze of figurative language, cannot articulate an “arche, telos, or ground,” she must strive to reach a “double blind” which deconstructs her own undertaking as a critic and interpreter: “Criticism of a given novel or body of novels should therefore be the following of one or another track until it reaches, in the text, one or another of these double blinds, rather than the attempt to find some presupposed unity” (162).

In the Lord Jim essay Miller describes the motion of criticism as a “weaving movement of advance and retreat [which] constitutes and sustains the ‘meaning’ of the text, that evasive center which is everywhere and nowhere in the play of its language” (227). The Derridean notion that language is “free play” (play in the sense of the play of a steering wheel) has important implications for Miller’s critical paradigm. In “The Still Heart: Poetic Form in Wordsworth” (1971), Miller captures the ontological spirit of deconstructive thought: “Meaning is generated by the interplay of elements rather than by the copying of some pre-existing sense” (298). “Play” denies the existence of origin or telos; meaning comes from the ontological rather than epistemological elements of language. Aligning linguistic free play with textual signification allows Miller to account for the uncanny “literary strangeness” without objectifying it and by experiencing it as a ontological rather than epistemological phenomenon.

Miller, then, makes some important claims about criticism. Criticism should be focused on the figurative nature of language, and deconstruction is the “playing out” of linguistic possibilities, a teasing out of meaning which, in itself, is often the meaning. In a strong sense, Miller’s criticism is parabolic, itself a figurative
representation which never quite reaches the "other" outside language but points allegorically to its existence. Miller and authors alike play with the indeterminate nature of language and its corresponding relation to a presupposed objective reality. But such a view, it has been argued, isolates a text from the "real world" and is devoid of any social or political utility.

The redrawing of the literary boundaries seems to have relegated close reading to a less than primary position. This, Miller feels, is a significant growing pain: "That the profession is nothing if it is not philology, the love of words, the teaching of reading, and the attempt in written criticism to facilitate the act of reading" (Fiction and Repetition 21). In his most recent work, Miller has been less involved in criticism per se and, ironically, more involved with preaching the importance of close, rhetorical reading. Again it is not "the free invention of new conceptual or historical schemes" but the close reading which advances literary study ("Search for Grounds" 28). For Miller, theory should be secondary to reading. Theory is generalization, and generalizations do not fit because they cover up and ground the fundamental strangeness of literature which he wants so badly to preserve. The only possible ground for literature is language, which itself is ungrounded, unmeaning, and undecidable, and figurative. Criticism, like literature, must then be the "testing of the grounding of language in this or that particular text, not in the abstract or in abstraction from any particular case" (31). This does not mean that critical and literary authors do the same thing, but it means that they are after the same unattainable "other."

Indeed, Miller treads on philosophically unstable "ground." Primarily, he negotiates between the antitheses of literature and criticism, subjectivity and objectivity, ontology and epistemology by narratizing historical accounts of his own
close, rhetorical readings. His largest challenge, then, is to make his brand of literary criticism socially and politically productive. In defense of the practicality of deconstruction, Miller’s “Ethics Project,” *The Ethics of Reading* and *Versions of Pygmalion*, examines the metaphysics of reading and unites the antithesis of pragmatics and aesthetics by exposing essential connections between them; they are always already dependent on one another. As a metaphysical investigation of reading, the “Ethics Project” defines reading as a simultaneously constative and performative state for which the reader must take responsibility. As I will explore in the final two chapters, this definition has important implications for both the socio-political and aesthetic expectations for literary studies.
THE "ETHICS PROJECT"

[T]here is a necessary ethical moment in the act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical (Ethics 1).

As is explored in Chapter 2, Miller’s criticism remains consistently focused on reading. But with his post-structuralist recognition of the always already figurative nature of language, Miller begins to grapple with the metaphysical implications of reading an endlessly referential language. Does reading understand, translate, interpret, conceive, deduce, or induce? In his two volume “ethics project,” Miller attempts to account for the material effects of reading—specifically, how is reading a performative which makes something happen in the physical world. The Ethics of Reading, (1987) queries how the metaphysical category of ethics is derived from reading, and Versions of Pygmalion (1990) grapples with the ethical dimensions of narrative. Both function as sub-categories of the larger investigation of the metaphysics of reading. By exploring the connection between reading, a narrative imperative, and the “ethical moment,” Miller diminishes the distinction between the dichotomies of language and action, constatives and performatives, metaphysics and the material world, and epistemology and ontology.

For Miller, the “ethical moment” is a response in two directions—the moral imperative ("I must") and the ethical act, the "doing;" both are responses to the slippery metaphysical category of ethics. Essentially Miller separates ethics from politics and cognition, defining it as a source rather than a subordinate (4-5). The key to understanding Miller’s theory is to think of ethics not as a reference to a preexistent moral imperative defining right or wrong, good or bad. Rather, Miller
thinks of ethics as existing only in their application, the self-imposed imperatives that continually guide our actions and reactions but cannot be confronted directly. The theoretical framework for Miller’s investigation of reading and narrative is that ethics are, like any semiotic system, ungrounded, endlessly referential, and, by extension, essentially performative. Miller’s deconstruction of ethics explores how moral imperatives are derived from reading.

Essentially, *Ethics* explores the connection between the act of reading and the ethical moment as a way of looking at the connection between a categorical imperative and a performative. The “ethical moment” in reading exists not in *reference* to any transcendent moral law but as a performative (“I promise”), a self-imposed, ungrounded, decision which is always inaugural and only self-referential. The reading, performance/writing, re-reading and subsequent re-performance/re-writing create an infinitely ungrounded chain of infinitely ungrounded ethical moments, perpetually deferred from immediacy in its retrospective narrative cloak. The moral imperative, in other words, is neither moral nor linguistic, but a categorical imperative derived from the words on the page. It is the semiotic equivalent of the signifier which refers only to other signifiers, infinitely deferred, referential, and ungrounded. As a performative, then, an ethical response is a response to a self-imposed categorical imperative—rather than a response to some transcendent moral law. Indeed the “of” in “ethics of reading” is not a constative response to the thematic content, but a performative response to the categorical imperative to respond. Miller pursues the nature of that allusive categorical imperative in both *Ethics* and *Pygmalion*, though he never quite captures it, concluding that it exists in that allusive category of “other” which always is out of the reach of human cognitive abilities.
In *Ethics* Miller looks at examples of authors reading themselves, those texts where Kant, de Man, Trollope, Eliot, James, and Benjamin confront the ethical dimensions of their texts. By choosing authors reading themselves, Miller is able to contrast ethical intention with actual ethical interaction; the authors act as guinea pigs for their own signifying intentions. That is, the authors he reads read themselves armed with the metaphysical presupposition that their texts will "transmit" an ethical imperative in a certain way. In his chapter on Kant, "Reading Telling," Miller uses a passage from Kant’s *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* to deconstruct Kant’s validation of a transcendent moral or ethical law. In the passage Miller examines, Kant uses a footnote to defend his claim for "respect" in his theory that identifies duty to a law as determined by pure respect, "the consciousness or the submission of [a] will." But as Miller demonstrates, Kant finds it impossible to isolate "respect," paradoxically defining it as "an object neither of inclination nor of fear, though it has something analogous to both." Respect, then, is paradoxically both like and not like inclination and fear, is itself a moral or ethical imperative which eludes the metaphysical grounding Kant wants to subject it to, and, by extension, exists only in the performative ethical moment. The performative moment of "respect" functions paradoxically as both response and origin; adherence to the law is paradoxically a self-imposed necessity generated by the moral imperative for respect ("I must"), the subject’s submitting "as if" the law were universal.

In his deconstruction of Kant’s footnote, then, Miller demonstrates that Kant’s description of the ethical moment is itself metaphysically ungrounded. The moral law is by Miller’s definition “forever inaccessible” and can be confronted directly only in its ultimately irreducible performative moments. And “respect” for
the moral law, Miller extrapolates, exists only in its performance and can be abstracted only in the form of a performative, which itself can neither abstract nor be abstracted. The ethical performative is metaphysically impenetrable and therefore functions as a catachresis for some unarticulable "other," the moral law itself, which exists only in its manifestation in the political, social, and/or cognitive world. Further, it must be articulated as a narrative. That is, because access to the moral law is limited to the performative, narrative is ethics' "subversive accomplice." Narrative functions like a "bridge between the law as such and any particular law applied in a specific familial, social, and historical situation" (38). And in Miller's literary investigations, narrative is the performative which attempts to "bridge the gap" between the material world of performatives and the metaphysically impenetrable "other." But narrative is a catachresis, a supplement for the metaphysical and epistemological void, so it must fail to "bridge," to "take the reader where he wants to be, face to face with the law" (25). The reader is left with a self-inflicted bridge to nowhere. Like the inevitable infinite deferment of promise, the reader is left with "unreadability," "a recognition of the fact that the text commits again and again the error it denounces" (34), namely a deferral of the promise to be "readable." Narrative is an infinite postponement of the ultimate direct confrontation with the metaphysical law itself, but, as Miller likes to point out, it's all we've got: "Narrative, like analogy, is inserted into that blank place where the presumed purely conceptual language or philosophy fails or is missing" (24). It is, then, not so much a performative bridge over the chasm between the material and metaphysical world, as it is a sort of highly biodegradable landfill, inserted catachrestically into that point where metaphysical explanation necessarily fails.
Though Miller uses Kant's paradigm to extrapolate a theory of narrative, the important aspect of Kant's work is the fact that he denies the subject direct access to the universal law and, as a result, shows that it must be "respectfully" self-imposed. For Kant, the categorical imperative is a respect for the moral imperative. In contrast, Paul de Man and his emphasis on linguistic referentiality explores the notion that the categorical imperative is, in fact, a linguistic imperative. In his chapter on de Man, "Reading Unreadability," Miller, with de Man's help, deconstructs the notion of reading itself by demonstrating the impossibility of penetrating the metaphysical content of ethics. In *Allegories of Reading* de Man claims that ethics is a necessary feature of human language, a linguistic and not metaphysical imperative, "a referential version of linguistic confusion" (45). Ethicity comes at the end a series of inevitable errors in reading as the imaginary referential of language, the metaphysical grounding which stops the infinite slide of meaning. Metaphysical grounding is paradoxically both the catalyst and the deactivator for reading and narrating, which, for de Man is always the allegorical representation of the "impossibility of reading:" it is the story of an epistemological error of metaphorical naming (47). And yet it is impossible to read reading, so into this epistemological void is thrust (catachrestically) ethics. Epistemology is continually and necessarily undermined by the linguistic imperative for metaphysical grounding. But, as Miller points out, that linguistic imperative remains largely hidden because it is always already wielding its power: "It's impossible to get outside the limits of language by means of language" (59). De Man's paradigm of "unreadability" is a deconstruction of reading itself; indeed, reading as such becomes a particular moral imperative, which itself is a metaphysically ungrounded categorical imperative. Reading is the performative imperative to confront
unreadibility. Unreadability must, then, be more than a linguistic phenomenon because if it isn't, reading in and of itself would be free from ethical responsibility and bound by a preexistent moral imperative.

If ethics are derived from neither a moral imperative ("respect") nor a linguistic imperative ("unreadability"), then the question remains as to how reading literature has an ethical dimension. In his chapter on George Eliot, "Reading Writing," Miller "reads" chapter 17 of Eliot's *Adam Bede*. Eliot's work is built around a metaphysical contradiction. On the one hand, it is consistent with Victorian realism, an obligation to reflect "exact truth" above all else, an avoidance of any degree of falsity, an obligation to mirror the world in a "one-to-one correspondence." Such an obligation, Eliot feels, is economic, ethical, and legal. On the other hand, Eliot wants to "make something happen in the pragmatic world of things and people," to alter her readers' moral perspective, and, in the case of *Adam Bede*, to "rename her ugly, stupid neighbors lovable" (81). Eliot wants to create human sympathy through a process of renaming. Such a renaming would imply that the novelist works solely with "referential, nonfigurative language, language validated by its truth of correspondence to things as they are" (70). Yet language is always already figurative and the notion of "mirroring," for Miller, is spurious. Literal representation is antithetical to Miller's notion of the ethical performative. For realism to be performative, it must depend explicitly on figurative language and specifically on catachresis (73). He writes, "This happening has no 'basis' other than the fictive, figurative, reevaluation performed by the catachrestic renaming one's ugly stupid, inconsistent neighbors as lovable" (74). There may be an ethical moment in Eliot's chapter, but it isn't, as she proposes, derived from a process of "renaming."
Eliot's literary paradox, which strives to be both constative and performative, is similar to de Man's in that both widen the fissure between metaphysics and reality in their attempt to close it. In de Man's case, the fissure is widened by grounding the ethical moment in linguistic necessity. And in Eliot's case, the fissure is widened by grounding the ethical moment in thematic content. Both present impractical notions of the ethical moment in reading because both ground the ethical moment in a "predictable and measurable" structure. A solely performative paradigm for the ethical moment, on the other hand, is paradoxically both an epistemological and ontological response. Miller writes,

All performatives are unpredictable and unmeasurable. A performative can never be controlled, defined, or have a decisive line put around its effects. The link between knowledge and power goes by way of language, and that link is both a barrier and a break, a gulf. Language used performatively makes something happen all right, but the link between knowing and doing can never be predicted exactly or understood perspicuously after the fact (76).

The link between knowing and doing becomes less evasive in Miller's chapter on Trollope's mode of literary production, "Self Reading Self." As Trollope reveals in An Autobiography, his novels are derived from two seemingly contradictory impulses. On the one hand, Trollope understands his novels as effecting moral goodness in his readers by presenting "fictional characters on whom to model ourselves" (85). His goal is "to make the characters in his novels a medium of social communication, affirming and maintaining the values of that society" (87). Like Eliot's emphasis on renaming, Trollope emphasizes the importance of models and, again like Eliot, the moral imperative is derived from a constative representation of moral goodness. Yet, as An Autobiography reveals, the "morally-calculated"
characters are not calculated at all. Trollope describes himself as a childhood social outcast who was forced "play" in a world of fantasy which he retrospectively "transcribed" into novels. Miller describes Trollope's creative process as "auto-affection" and "auto-fecundation in which Trollope impregnates himself with his own creations" (94). In a sort of "ethical fraud," his creative process is spontaneous, refractory, and lacks metaphysical grounding: "Moral decisions may therefore be an ungrounded act of self affection like Trollop's act of creating characters out of nothing but his unaided 'moral consciousness'" (97). This "unaided moral consciousness" becomes more and more unaided, more and more spontaneous, and more and more ungrounded as Trollope writes from his subjective experience; yet, there is still a moral imperative in his novels. Like Eliot's, Trollope's desire to "do good" is determined by and separated from the moral law itself. The dangerous extrapolation from this mode of ethical production is that, like the text that produces them, the ethical act refers to some preconceived notion of moral goodness; they represent and defer to the moral law, and extricate themselves and the reader from moral responsibility. From this perspective, ethics are self-imposed, linguistic performatives, and the ethical moment, any metaphysical moment, it would seem, is "free" in its decision to be "responsible" to the metaphysical law.

In his chapter on Henry James "Re-reading Re-vision," Miller explores this notion of freedom and responsibility. The evasive paradox James identifies is,

where we seem more responsible we are bound by a necessity which makes us in fact irresponsible, while where we are most free, united, we are able to be more responsible, or are in fact, whether we will or not, responsible, since it is open to us to take responsibility or not (107).
We are bound to take responsibility for freedom and free to deny responsibility for fidelity to the moral law. The grounded moral law, in other words, frees us from responsibility, but the grounded moral law is not ethical because, by definition, ethics must be derived from a freedom of choice. In *Pygmalion* Miller writes, "An ethical act must be free, free in the sense that I must be free to do it or not to do it, therefore taking responsibility" (15). This paradigm collapses Kant's idea of "respect for the law" by compounding the freedom of "respect" and the moral ground of the "law" into one ethical decision. The ethical decision is not a benign, predictable, and re-presentative act. It must be inaugural and productive; the ethical act is the result of an ethical compulsion which, in turn, drives other ethical compulsions. Miller writes, "All our doings, along with what their results cause to be done in their turn, form one indestructible web" (103). But the "doing" is always one step removed from the ethical moment and, as a result, must always be read retrospectively as a moral imperative. That is, reading "memorializes" the ethical moment into an ethical law; it is, as Miller describes a "preservative gathering or recollection" (105). Something is not "done" until it is put into words, but once it's put into words, it's no longer being done. "Memorializing," however, is different from "representation" in its acknowledgment of ethical death. The ethical moment is inaugural but constructive only in its ability to surpass itself, to always be the catalyst for more inaugural ethical moments which, in turn, will be inevitably memorialized.

Implicit in Kant's, Eliot's, and Trollope's paradigms is the notion that ethics are derived from an epistemological/ontological dichotomy. If the reader can never face the law itself, she can observe or re-present the law as a re-naming or a characterization. The notion is that ontology is able to take over when
epistemology fails. For James, the always evasive moral law is neither the objective manifestation of the text nor the subjective surrogate of the reader. The metaphysical ground can not be re-presented as a performative, a character, or a referent, but it is also not an unattainable “other.” Metaphysical ground is always transitory and instantaneous, always being re-grounded and is therefore always ungrounded. Seen from an epistemology/ontology dichotomy, metaphysics becomes the ground which stops the signifying slide of meaning. But for Miller, metaphysics too must be ungrounded, re-inagurative, and in a constant state of flux.

In James's take on narrative, each reading comprises a completely new ethical moment, similar, but not identical, to the original reading in the writing of the text. The reader, constrained by the text, is free to re-invent it; she reads not to learn nor to confirm presupposition, but to continue the inauguration process: “The value of reading, against all reason, lies in its difference and deviation from the text it purports to read” (118). As a narrative, the text functions like the memorialized ethical act, which itself is both constative and inaugural, constraining and freeing. Reading is the freedom to captivate oneself; it is “not of the text as such but of the thing that is latent and gathered within it as a force to determine in me a re-vision of what has been the latent law of the text I read” (120). Each reading is an example of the “productive force of the law,” which itself is a reading of an example of the “productive force” of another law, and so on, each an inaugural act which necessitates other inaugural acts. Metaphysics, in its true etymological sense, becomes physics about physics, an act which explains other acts, always trying to elude the stasis of epistemology and the flux of ontology.

In the last section of his James chapter, Miller identifies Walter Benjamin’s notion of translation in “Die Auggabe des Übersetzers” as a metaphor for the
reading process. The difficult task of the translator, Benjamin writes, is not to resemble the meaning of the original but to "lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification" (124). The translator re-presents not the words but the original's failure to capture the "pure language," "an ultimate element beyond all information—quite close and yet infinitely remote, concealed or distinguishable, fragmented or powerful" (125). Similarly, the reading of a text is never the imperative translation of its epistemological characteristics, but the performative deferment of its parabolically-close mode of signification. The text is ultimately unreadable because "pure language" is metaphysically allusive, always oscillating between grounding and ungrounding, memorializing and inaugurating.

In many ways, Miller diminishes the distinction between ontology and epistemology by asserting the importance of the linguistic performative and its corresponding continual inauguration of metaphysical categories. There is no transcendent or sublime moral law, only one which is inaugurated by the performative. And by making ethics performative rather than constative, Miller resituates responsibility. Under the rule of a preexisting moral imperative, the subject is freed of responsibility because she is "told" how to act. But when the moral imperative is actually a metaphysical imperative, the subject is responsible for generating the moral law. Thus ethics oscillates between imperative and performative, and, more importantly, between freedom and responsibility. Yet, paradoxically, the performative must also be constative if it is to be inaugural—it must inaugurate something. And as ethics' perpetual "subversive accomplice," narrative is itself performatively and constatively inaugural. Contrary to the structuralist notion that metaphysics is a category for understanding narrative, Miller identifies narrative as the performative/constative inaugural arena for
understanding metaphysics. This allusive connection between metaphysics and narrative is explored in Versions of Pygmalion, Miller's "ethics of narrative." Rather than reading authors reading themselves as he does in Ethics, in Pygmalion Miller reads self-examining narrators, narrators who are themselves involved in the act of reading and whose reading allegorizes the difficult reading process the reader faces.

As a preface to Pygmalion, Miller points out in Ethics that there is "a peculiar and unexpected relation between the affirmation of universal moral law and storytelling" (2). Paradigmatic of this relationship between ethics and storytelling is narration's reliance on prosopopoeia. In Pygmalion, Miller describes narration as an explicitly figurative category which depends heavily on prosopopoeia, the figurative trope which "ascribes to entities that are not really alive first of all a name, then a face, and finally a voice" (5). Author, narrator, and reader necessarily "do" prosopopoeia, the "inaugural trope of narration," as they narrate and re-narrate. Miller writes, "There is no storytelling without prosopopoeia, just as there is not access to the moral law without the intervention of some human figure" (212). This has important ethical considerations because author, narrator, and reader are always already "figuring" in their constant struggle with trying to escape figuration. Like the inaugural ethical considerations implicit in reading, narration is an ethical performative for which author, narrator, and reader must take responsibility. And as with the ethics of reading, the ethics of narration presents an important metaphysical paradox, namely the performative/constative dichotomy of inauguration.

"Memorializing" serves as an important metaphor for Miller. In its literal sense, the memorial re-presents the dead; indeed, it is a specific brand of prosopopoeia. Miller explores the connection between memorial and narrative in
his chapter on James' *What Maisie Knew*, "Reading, Doing." Miller reads James' novel as a struggle to close the gap between what the narrator knows and what Maisie knows (47). As a prosopopoeia, Maisie's face is ascribed to the moral law, so any effort to "close the gap" between the narrator and Maisie is an effort to "close the gap" between the narrator and the moral law. Yet Maisie herself is a figurative representation, a figure for remembering the moral law which could not be faced directly in the first place. The moral law must always be memorialized, remembered, figured retrospectively in a narrative. The gap between knowing and not knowing can never be closed, is figured as a narrative which is always already retrospective, and is neither epistemological nor constative in relation to the moral law it presumes to represent. Such narrative "failure" is roughly synonymous to de Man's notion of unreadability which must continually oscillate between success and failure: "Getting it right always means being forced to reenact once more the necessity of getting it wrong" (*Ethics* 53). And understanding Maisie as metaphorically symbolic of or metonymically contingent to the moral law is roughly analogous to Eliot's emphasis on renaming. Though memorializing is a renaming which reconstitutes the moral law, it also destroys it, puts the final nail in its metaphoric coffin. Miller writes,

> Just as any naming substitutes for the immediate presence of what is named and presupposes some form of unavailability, so personification kills just when it ascribes life. It presupposes the absence, inanimation, or death of what it resurrects (223).

Of Maisie's narrative "death," Miller writes,

> At just the moment we most need to know what is going on in her mind, Maisie's subjectivity becomes a nonentity that no
longer exists as something or someone whose story can be told according to the narrative presuppositions operative here (72).

A reader cannot accept not knowing what Maisie knew, so she must be figured in a story, refigured with a linguistic chisel, just as Pygmalion refigures Galatea from stone. Each layer or refiguration necessarily covers the previous, uses the previous as its grounded signified. Yet as each layer is peeled away, a forgotten layer of figuration is exposed. Figuration is a process which necessitates forgetting and refiguring. For Miller, this model has important moral implications: “The question at the heart of the ethics of narrative is the question of how we can be held responsible for something we cannot remember” (240). Beyond the ethical themes of a text, the constative ethical elements, the author, narrator, and reader are responsible for the performative act of “personifying the inanimate.” The reader must repeat in reading what the author does in writing and the narrator does in narrating: a perpetual act of figuring in order to dis-figure, always separated from the original creative act by layers of memorializing figures. As a literary trope, the memorial is a performative which, in turn, is itself a catachrestic representation of a moral imperative: “What the reader reaches by way of the text is not the text itself but that to which the text gives the reader access. This is that ‘universal’ of which all the texts figured symbols are allegorical expressions” (78). Reading is the “ineluctable necessity” to ascribe such a “universal” to a character’s actions, to know what Maisie knew.

What exactly, then, does narrative give us access to? Put another way, if ethics exist only as performatives, what ethical value could the performance of an always already memorializing figure such as narrative have? In his chapter on Kleist’s “Der Findling,” “Just Reading,” Miller exposes the “asymmetry” between the constative/epistemological aspect of reading and the performative one. He
represents reading as a constant struggle against the stagnation of epistemology which it tends to favor asymmetrically:

Only for a brief moment, in a lightning flash, can there be a glimpse of what is originating about each act of reading, before some theory or other descends to put out the light. We must therefore return again and again to perform the act of reading itself, in order to try to catch that moment before it vanishes (96).

If, as Kleist claims, ideas are formulated and articulated simultaneously, then each reading would be a re-performance of the original creative act, or, perhaps more accurately, a re-performance of what the reader formulates as the original creative act. Each reading must be perceived as a re-formulation and re-articulation of a preexistent order. As Miller points out, Kleist's work underscores the "human tendency to project personal agency and concatenation on what may be a random sequence" (137); reading is an "unjustified imposition, not a triumphant seeing of what is really there" (139). A reading strives to make a text readable, but once it is readable, reading stops; readability is the static grounding antithesis of the dynamic process of reading. A text is always "strange," "irreducible," and "unexpected," but reading fits it into a tenacious causal chain; indeed, reading, narrative, and causality are unwaveringly simultaneous epistemological events. Narrative cannot not be causality: "A causal sequence is always an implicit narrative organized around the assumption that what comes later is caused by what comes before" (130). Miller writes, "There can be no experience, no event, no perception that does not include a spontaneous assignment of cause" (130). So in order to understand a narrative, readers must commit the same error the text itself commits, namely relying on narrative.
Miller’s notion that reading is always an assertion of narrative causality places narrative firmly in the post-structuralist signifying chain of meaning. Meaning is imposed from an external point of reference, but importantly, it is imposed as a narrative. Narrative acts not like a bridge which leads to nowhere as is proposed above, but a bridge which necessitates the inauguration of other bridges, which themselves build other bridges, and which keeps the subject from falling into the abyss. In *Ariadne* Miller writes, “Narrative is the allegorizing along a temporal line the perpetual displacement from immediacy” (158). It is this “perpetual displacement from reality” which aligns narrative and ethics, or any metaphysical category, as “subversive accomplices.” Ethics could not be represented without narrative, but narrative always memorializes ethics, always moves ethics from a performative to a constative state, always points allegorically to its inevitable unreadability, and, luckily, always leads to other narratives.

In his chapter on Melville’s “Bartelby the Scrivener,” “Who is He?,” Miller uses Melville’s narrator as the paradigmatic example the “human tendency” towards narrative “closure.” He writes, “The moral or message of ‘Bartleby,’ if there is one, seems to be the following: I cannot determine what my ethical obligation to my neighbor is, and then act on that obligation, unless I can identify him by telling his story” (142). Narrative is a prosopopoeia which tenaciously animates a “Bartelby construction” in order to bring him “into the space of immediate presence where [he] can be seen and known” (144). The narrator’s disposition allegorizes the reader’s—both must simultaneously assert a Bartleby story while denying another. For Bartelby to “fit” into a narrative, in other words, narrator and reader must select which textual elements are to be asserted and which
are to be forgotten. Narratives must be mutually exclusive, exercising “sovereign control over the others” (182).

In his chapter on Blanchot’s *L’arrêt de mort*, “Death Mask,” Miller focuses on a specific type of narrator who tells a specific type of story—the critic and her criticism. Current criticism, Miller claims, accounts for literary strangeness on the basis of society, individual psychology, or language. Miller lobbies for a fourth basis, what he calls a “disruptive energy:”

This energy might be called religious, metaphysical, or ontological, but these works cannot be used here in a conventional way. [T]he disruptive energy is ‘ontology without ontology.’ Nor is it to be defined as a species of negative theology (181).

One might extend his claims to say that this mystical “disruptive energy” is narrative without narrative. Like Benjamin’s notion of “pure language,” this “disruptive energy” exists apart from our epistemological and/or causal capabilities; both are a “wandering of language in perpetual exile from a lost original language” (195). From this point of view, author, reader, and critic all participate in the same process of trying, but necessarily failing, to understand. All try to translate a narrative into other narrative terms, and “each is initiatory, the bringer of unique thoughts, but each is also no more than secondary, a translation of the others” (208).

Yet with the recognition of “disruptive energy,” the reader is able to face the allegorical representation of the impossibility of reaching narrative origin.

In his final chapter on James’ “The Last of the Valerii,” “Facing It,” Miller puns on the verb “to face.” In one sense, we can never “face” the narrative origin, the “first prosopopoeia,” or the transcendental signified because, like the categorical imperative, it is the unattainable “other.” Miller writes, “We do not comprehend
because neither that inaugural figure-nonfigure nor its material base was ever present as such to consciousness” (239). As a result, we ascribe catachrestically a “face” to it, which allows us to “face it” directly but figuratively. For Miller, this facing-defacing paradox is allegorized in “Last of the Valerii” and, it can be assumed, in all literary texts as the “undertext.” A “good reader” recognizes such an “undertext,” a allegorical text below the “manifest”/constative meaning of the text. There is always a tension between what a narrator says and what a text says, and this text/”undertext” dichotomy is an inevitable characteristic of narration which points to the inevitable failure of the narrative to face its origin directly. In an ethical framework, narrative is not the process of objectifying the ethical moment into an ethical imperative, but the allegorization of this inevitability to memorialize. The narrative “gives a glimpse, through the cracks, of the inaugural creative posing that has already happened, the imposition of an initiating catachrestic prosopopoeia, the hiding of an aboriginal ignorance” (237). The narrative, then, is always an allegory of the impossibility of reaching a point of origin; indeed, even James’ narrator who is “intelligent, perceptive, and ironic,...cannot be counted on to draw out the full implications of what he says” (217). By extension all texts are about unreadability, allowing readers to comprehend only “incomprehensibility.” As narrative “faces” one figure, it must always “deface” another.

In both Ethics and Pygmalion Miller stresses that the ethical moment is an uncomfortable, ungrounded moment when ethics must be inaugurated independent of preexisting ethical codes. Further, it is a moment which is derived from a categorical imperative for ethical responsibility. Miller roughly equates the relationship between moral imperative and performative to that of signifier and signified. If the signifier cannot be grounded in the static signified, then ethical
imperatives are actually self-imposed, linguistic performatives. Like narrative, reading is performative, a figurative translation corresponding freely and catachresitcally to an infinitely deferred meaning—just as a promise frees by binding infinitely. The categorical imperative is universal, but its ethical mode is performatively specific. As the reader performs the imperative, she defines the law which she can never have access to, can only understand its “significance.” He writes,

I am unable to know whether in the experience I am subject to a linguistic necessity or to an ontological one. Or, rather, I am unable to avoid making the linguistic mistake of responding to a necessity of language as if it had ontological force and authority (Ethics 127).

The categorical imperative becomes Miller’s “transcendental signified,” his metaphysical ground which he asserts as a linguistically and ontologically unattainable “other.”

As I indicate in chapter 2, Miller is uncomfortable with the study of social, political and historical contexts as a “cause” or “mirror” of the text. This, he claims, is merely asserting a metaphor, a “similarity between the reflection and what is reflected” and are “displacements, substitutions, and crossings” which “require a linguistic or rhetorical analysis, a mastery of the varieties of figure inhabiting this region of linguistic transaction” (Ethics 7). Further to assume that the text is a metaphor for some reality is to assume that a text is entirely historical and constative, and, more importantly, that reading itself is not at all performative. Reading must be active and inaugural—it must somehow change the reader for it to be useful: “The ethical moment is genuinely productive and inaugural in its effects on history” (9). As a paradigmatic example of the metaphysics of reading, the
ethical moment is a response to the categorical imperative to respond rather than the thematics of a text.

In his criticism beyond the "ethics project," Miller attempts to resolve the critical "double-blind" derived from an allegiance to close, rhetorical reading. Indeed the double-blind points to the "other" by way of the performative. The "other" is essentially a myth, a story which is itself a performative, a perpetually deferred promise. The "other" exists, paradoxically, only as a non-existent entity or plane, but it is vitally important to the existence of metaphysics. In a critical paradigm, the "text" can be generally understood as itself a metaphysical category which can be represented only in the guise of a performative. We must act "as if" it exists. In his close, rhetorical reading, Miller decenters the critical text from a metaphysical context to a rhetorical one in order to catch a glimpse of its metaphysical performatives. The reader must paradoxically deny the existence of metaphysics in order to see how it exists—rhetorically. As a result, the study of literature remains a pragmatic study of philology which has "practical implications for our moral, social, and political lives" (3). By ungrounding metaphysical categories, deconstruction is criticized for making literature amoral, but Miller's "Ethics Project" reasserts the political, social, and ideological importance of literature and, by extension, literary studies. Literature must be a "cause and not merely an effect" (5), must be performative rather than constative.

Miller's "ethics project" questions how we can take responsibility for what happens when we read and what happens when we narrate if both are an anesthetizing supplement for our inability to face metaphysical categories. Miller is ambiguous about what he means by responsibility. Does he mean responsibility to the text? To the author? To the reader herself? To the academy? To language? To
social order? To universal order? Further, how can one "read" responsibly? What form would that take? Here too we reach a notorious double blind. Reading and responsibility are themselves metaphysical categories which we must define in the narratives we tell as we read, destined to assert each paradigm as a sovereign law.
THE READING OF CRITICISM

To live is to read, or rather to commit again and again the failure to read which is the human lot. We are hard at work trying to fulfill the impossible task of reading from the moment we are born until the moment we die. We struggle to read from the moment we wake from the morning until the moment we fall asleep at night, and what are our dreams but more lessons in the pain of the impossibility of reading, or rather in the pain of having no way whatsoever of knowing whether or not we may have in our discursive wanderings and aberrencies stumbled by accident on the right reading? (Ethics 59).

Criticism as re-writing is truly ethical and affirmative, life-giving, productive, inaugural. It is a response to a categorical imperative, a demand which perforates new channels, more adequate channels, in my writing, for the latent and gathered force to which I respond by way of the work I read. My writing as re-writing in its turn is performative, productive. If it has value at all it opens access for my readers and students not the meaning of the text as such, the information it conveys, but to the ‘matter,’ ‘thing,’ or ‘force’ latent in the work (Ethics 120).

As I show in chapter 3, Miller’s “ethics project” is especially concerned with taking responsibility for what happens when we read and narrate because both are inevitably inaugural (though Miller avoids pinpointing “responsibility” itself by staking it as an elusive and always inaugural metaphysical category.) But how does the notion of responsibility work in a critical framework? As the above epigraphs indicate, Miller understands reading and criticism as responses to a categorical imperative. Reading is a struggle to know “whether or not we may have in our
discursive wanderings and aberrencies stumbled by accident on the right reading;” similarly, criticism is a response to a “demand which perforates new channels,... for the latent and gathered force to which I respond by way of the work I read.” Both express a responsibility to the text for a “right reading” in the former and a “latent and gathered force” in the later. But, importantly, that responsibility to the text can be reached only by way of a particular “textual moment.” That is, the text itself is a sort of metaphysical category which can never be confronted directly and is always mediated by one “reading” or another. What are the implications for criticism if all a critic can face is his or her own reading act? Is criticism merely a forum for subjective reader responses, independent of any textual constraints? And, perhaps most importantly, what good does criticism do for art? Does art depend in any way on criticism?

Undoubtedly Miller struggles with the relationship between art and criticism throughout his career. On the one hand, he has a deep respect for the uncanny, “literary strangeness” (“for the law?”). He does not want to misrepresent literature as a constative genre or discount it as a benign means for transmitting preexistent metaphysical categories. He feels a responsibility to the “literary strangeness” of each literary text. On the other hand, Miller is a critic who wants criticism to be “ethical and affirmative, life-giving, productive, inaugural,” and wants to somehow “allow access” to the “‘matter’, ‘thing,’ or ‘force’ latent in the work.” He wants, in other words, to be responsible to the critical imperative, to come closer to the always ambiguous “‘matter’, ‘thing,’ or ‘force.’” But the respect for, and responsibility to, “literary strangeness” and the critical imperative are themselves irreducible metaphysical categories. In his ethics project, Miller explores how metaphysical categories are inaugurated from reading and narrative; the “of” in
"ethics of reading" can be roughly translated to "derived from." Seen from a causal metaphor (undoubtedly inappropriately), the reading/narrative comes before the ethics. Ethics is a metaphor which supplements the "permanent displacement from [the] immediacy" of reading itself. As a paradigm for understanding how metaphysical categories (not just ethics) are derived from reading texts, Miller's "ethics project" offers post-structuralist insight into the nature of criticism itself: what it is, what it can and can't do, and how it can remain responsible and respectful to the artwork itself. Criticism, too, is a supplement for the reading process which we can never face directly. Thus my title "The Reading of Criticism" refers not only to the fact that I will be reading Miller's criticism of Hawthorne's "Minister's Black Veil" [MBV], but also to the fact that criticism itself is inaugural and derived from reading, which is itself a reading that can never be faced directly, ad infinitum.

Perhaps the most interesting move Miller makes in his "ethics project" is to deconstruct reading, representing it as a category which is neither exclusively metaphysically constative nor performative, neither epistemological nor ontological. He diminishes the distinction between traditional opposing paradigms of reading to make it a metaphysical category in and of itself. Reading is never the same, is always inaugural, and, by extension, is constantly oscillating between constative and performative impulses. In the above epigraph, Miller points to a "failure" and a "struggle" to read; he portrays reading as the "impossible task," the fruitless confrontation with unreadability. Yet, understood as a metaphysical category, the struggle to read is no different from the struggle to act ethically. Both are overtly performative before they can be constative, always inaugurating and re-inaugurating themselves. Further, like ethics, the categorical imperative to read cannot be a response to a preexistent notion of reading. For reading to be freely
responsible to the text, each reading act must re-inaugurate reading itself. Reading, in other words, should embrace its own epistemological/constative futility: "The act of reading is intrinsically interminable. It can therefore be terminated only arbitrarily. It can be stopped only by stopping, or by working out to its limit the implications of one line of interpretation" ("Ellipses of Interpretation" 92). Criticism, I propose, is a particular kind of reading: a reading of reading which faces two directions. It must be responsible to the critic’s reading of the text, and it must also be a text to be read in and of itself; it is a simultaneously constative and performative enterprise which strives to come closer to and re-inagurate the process by which we come closer to the "‘matter’, ‘thing’, or ‘force’" latent in reading.

As a reading of reading, a paradigmatic example of good criticism is necessarily elusive. It must represent what is latent in the act of reading while simultaneously being an act of reading; it pulls the reader in two antithetical directions. To pursue latency is to pursue the “productive illumination produced as one moves through various stages of reading," a process which he identifies as an oscillation between “elucidation and exposure of error ad infinitum” (Ethics 43). Latency cannot be articulated because, at the point of elucidation, it ceases to be latent. For criticism to be truly inaugural and performative, it must also be, paradoxically memorializing and constative. It must somehow diminish the distinctions between traditional binarily opposed critical paradigms: constative and performative, epistemological and ontological, explicit and latent. It’s important to recognize that post-structuralism is not the opposite of structuralism because it is necessarily structural in addition to its unnamable opposite. In “A Guest in the House,” Miller acknowledges his structuralist impulses: “My own discourse is necessarily an example of the failure I was trying to identify. Had I succeeded I
would have failed” (189). A deconstructive critic is constantly oscillating between asserting and denying opposing paradigms by consistently asserting and denying the power of the critical text: “If structuralism is an enterprise of mastery, deconstruction sees all analytical discourse as being invaded, contaminated, finally mastered by the illogic it would master” (“Guest” 190). What, then, is the form which can walk this paradoxical tightrope between hopelessly opposed polarities? What, in other words, does “illogic” look like?

Undoubtedly, the categorical imperative to interpret resists illogic all the way down to the linguistic level. In his review of M. H. Abrahms’ book *Natural Supernaturalism*, Miller writes:

There would appear to be no escape from the prison of language except by way of a radical theory of fictions and of the interpretation of fictions, a theory which would recognize that there are no “facts-in-themselves,” for a sense must always be projected into them before there can be “facts”’’ (11).

The “prison of language” fosters the illusion that signifiers can be grounded in signifieds and fictions can be grounded in interpretations. The “radical theory of fictions” which Miller calls for in this 1972 article is not radical at all. As Miller demonstrates in *Pygmalion*, narrative is the “subversive accomplice” of metaphysics which, I argue, includes the metaphysical category of reading. As a reading of reading itself, criticism must be figured as a narrative which, like Ariadne’s thread, is necessarily interactive with, but not grounding to, the text by becoming a text in and of itself. The critic’s narrative is parabolically related to the text, “following its threads as they weave in and out, appearing and disappearing, crisscrossing with other threads” (“The Interpretation of *Lord Jim*” 211). That is, just as Kant’s story points parabolically to the elusive metaphysical category of respect, criticism is a
story which points parabolically to the metaphysical category of reading. If the best readings are those which "repeat the text's failure to satisfy the mind's desire for logical order with a demonstrable base" ("Ellipses of Interpretation" 92), literary criticism is another kind of catachresis, a parable which hovers infinitely close to the "thing" latent in reading it, which cannot be itself faced. As a critical paradigm, narrative embraces unreadability as it struggles to read, always inaugurating another reading, which is itself another narrative line, repeating interminably the act of constative failure to avoid "premature closure."

In *Ethics*, Miller points to the importance of storytelling as he looks at Kant's use of narrative in his parable about "respect." Indeed, philosophical texts are often excluded from the literary analysis Miller to which subjects Kant's. H. P. Rickman, in his highly critical essay "Making a Mess of Kant," lambastes Miller's presupposition that "philosophy is a kind of literature and can be adequately analyzed from a purely literary point of view" (278) Rickman feels that Miller gets "sidetracked" and "misrepresents" Kant's conclusions (281). In defense of his deconstructive, rhetorical reading of Kant, Miller writes, "Since he [Kant] uses it [a parable] as a basic proof of one of his propositions about morals, the proposition cannot be detached from the example that is essential to making us understand it and persuading us to accept it" ("Rhetoric, Cultural Studies" 338). In another example, "*Gleichnis* in Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra,*" Miller pinpoints Nietzsche's reliance on parable to express the "most abysmal thought." Nietzsche must figure the story as a parable because it expresses that which cannot be directly named, a catachresis: "A fictional protagonist, modeled on no real historical original, and the literary form of parable, which gives in figure what could in no way be given literally, are both extended modes of the figure-no-figure called catachresis" (14).
The use of figurative language has important applications for texts across the humanities spectrum because it relies so heavily on it: "Figures of speech, choice of examples, and so on are just as important in a philosophical speech, as in a literary text" ("Rhetoric, Cultural Studies" 338). Yet, like the stories which he interprets, there is no clear telos to his work, no governing theme, like his title "Adriane's Thread," for example, which refers not so much to any constative central theme but rather to the performative, labyrinthine motion of the text.

In "Ariachne's Broken Woof," Miller concludes that narrative repetition fills the void of the impossibility of a single monological narrative line and asserts the permeation of bifold surfaces which are impossible to resolve. In reversing implicit hierarchies of the fully permeated dialogic, deconstructive narratives attempt "to define the monological, the logocentric, as a derived effect of the dialogical rather than as the noble affirmation of which the dialogical is a disturbance, a secondary shadow in the originating light" (59). Criticism is itself a narrative repetition, a "secondary shadow" of the literary text's "originating light." As a "secondary shadow" of Hawthorne's "originating light," Miller's "Defacing it: Hawthorne and History" is the story of Miller's difficulty in reading "The Minister's Black Veil" [MBV] as a parabolic example of the impossibility of unveiling. He writes, "In saying, 'Let me read for you "The Minister's Black Veil,"' I make a promise, or I enter into a contract, an alliance, a vow of faithfulness to report to you whatever happens when I open my Hawthorne and begin to read the words on the page" (65). In his assessment of Miller's essay, Martin Schweizer points out that the position Miller assigns to art is as (with emphasis on simile) a bridge for the gap between "essence" and "appearance" which "both opens the chasm, creates it or reveals it, and at the same time fills it up, covers it over by naming it, gives the
groundless a ground, the bottomless a bottom” (29). Miller’s criticism, then, is riddled with paradoxes which continually and instantaneously reveal the “chasm” between history and literature, realism and allegory, veiling and unveiling, text and theory, and most importantly, metaphysics and the material world. It’s the story which points parabolically to the “deconstructive moment” which disappears as soon as the human mind necessarily bridges the chasm.

The essay itself is an example of how close, rhetorical reading is aligned with deconstruction by revealing how a text deconstructs itself. Central to Miller’s project in his essay on MBV is his attempt to collapse the distinction between realism and allegory, and, by extension, literature and history. By exploring MBV’s “attendant documents,” he reveals just such a conflict to be central in Hawthorne’s aesthetics at the time of MBV’s production. Hawthorne saw his fundamental problem as a writer as “the irreconcilability of spiritual meaning and material embodiment” (56). Similarly, this conflict is central to the deconstructive critic’s aesthetic. Namely, how does one relate texts to history, reveal intertextuality rather than mere textual implications?

One of the claims which Miller continually makes is that authors are the best deconstructors. Miller’s reading of MBV concludes that it is a sort of parabolic representation of post-structuralism: “It is the indirect, veiled expression of the impossibility of expressing anything verifiable at all in the parable except the impossibility of expressing anything verifiable” (97). If deconstruction exposes the ways texts simultaneously assert and deny themselves, then MBV and Miller’s reading both assert and deny through a parabolic representation of unreadability. Like latency, readability is impossible to represent, so while both assert the “impossibility of expressing anything verifiable,” they do just that by asserting a
narrative representation of it. In both, the constative/performative opposition is an opposition between parable/allegory on the one hand, and history/realism on the other; the former implies "figure" while the latter implies "mimetic representation." By subtitling his story as "a parable," Hawthorne invites the reader to consider it as one; yet, Hawthorne undermines this figural intention by using the footnoted, memorial reference to a pseudo-historical event, "Reverend Moody," to highlight that MBV turns history into parable (108). (Hawthorne’s text reads, "In early life he [Reverend Moody] had accidentally killed a beloved friend; and from that day till the hour of his own death, he hid his face from men.") Hawthorne makes this opposition explicit and the reader is torn between reading the story as a parable in which she abstracts figurative meaning or a history to which she attaches a literal meaning. Miller’s job as a critic is not to choose between parable or history. Rather, he must somehow give access to the paradoxical “matter, thing, or force” latent in their juxtaposition by oscillating between parable and history himself.

In his essay, Miller investigates and collapses Hawthorne’s seemingly binary opposition of realism/history and allegory/parable by showing that the distinction is grounded in the assumed existence of metaphysical grounding. According to Miller, the structuralist model separates historical from literary texts as the former transcends semiotic indeterminacy and the latter is subject to its figurative nature. Yet, as Miller reveals, both rely heavily on narrative; like literature, history is always already figurative, is always a re-reading, and is equally subject to the indeterminacy of language. Similarly, the division between realism and allegory is erased as “both are enigmatic and ultimately indecipherable narrative expressions of a strange kind of outside that can by no procedures of language be given an other than the enigmatic expression” (51). Because MBV deconstructs the opposition of history and
literature, it becomes a deconstructive parable, an "exemplification of an obscure conceptual meaning" (118). Similarly, because Miller's critical essay is a narrated historical event, his reading of it which points parabolically to the impossibility of reading it.

As a deconstructive parable, MBV reveals the uncanny relationship between semiotics and subjectivity in which arbitrary signs, for example a face, become grounding signifiers for the unreadable subject. Reverend Hooper's veil deconstructs the literal version of this act of reading subjectivity, makes explicit the ways in which prosopopoeia veils subjectivity. He writes, "the wearing of the veil...suspends two basic assumptions that make society possible: the assumption that a person's face is the sign of his selfhood and the accompanying presumption that his sign can in one way or another be read" (92). Miller explores the notion that by veiling the "literal" prosopopoeia of Reverend Hooper's face, Hawthorne calls into question the metaphorical prosopopoeia through which we presume access to all that is outside human. We give nature, God, or death a human face in order to give ourselves the illusion that we can have access to them, understand them, and appropriate them as the grounds of our social intercourse (95). These universal tropes which cease to be recognized as tropes become visible only when they are suspended by the presence of Reverend Hooper's mask. The minister's veil works to call prosopopoeia into question because it is explicitly a sign that signifies nothing "since its referent and its signification remain forever unverifiable" (96).

As mentioned above, the critic must not veil that which is "strange" about a text. Miller identifies the absence of justification for the veil and the ambiguity of its meaning as the "major clue[s] for the right reading of the story" (67). He proceeds by identifying strange elements of the story and supposing how they were
intended. He asks questions like, "The black veil is double-folded. That seems as if it ought to be significant, but what does it signify?" (67). And concludes from this and other questions that "There is no way to tell for sure, though much depends on getting it right, just as there may be a severe penalty for getting it wrong" (68).

Clearly, Miller employs an element of structuralism as he supposes that texts are intended to be read in a certain way, that there is a "right reading" of unreadability. His close, rhetorical reading often conflicts with his post-structuralist intentions; to conclude that there is no determinant meaning is, in fact, a structured, post-structuralist conclusion. Yet there is a sense that the constative element of rhetorical interpretation is a necessary characteristic towards a deconstructive reading. Like James' notion of freedom and responsibility, the critic must employ some grounding framework to acknowledge the freoplay of the text. In "Hawthorne and History," Miller aligns the deferral of meaning with the apocalyptic undertones in the story, that the story acts as the veil itself, as an apocalyptic parable whose meaning is found only in the deferral of meaning. He describes this particular parable as "like apocalypse in promising such a revelation or illumination, while at the same time deferring it" (72). To free one's self entirely from structuralism, to embrace completely unreadability, and to confront the "other" which the narrative points to parabolically would be to experience apocalypse of metaphysical categories: "To cross over into parable would be to be in that unthinkable and unsayable realm where there is no longer any distinction between literal and parabolic language" (72). The infinitely-deferred promise must remain infinitely deferred.

As mentioned in chapter 2, Miller is disappointed with the state of literary criticism and its emphasis on critical theories rather than close, rhetorical reading. In
“Hawthorne and History,” he responds to D.A. Miller whose interpretation of MBV identifies the veil as a metaphoric representation of 19th century sexual repression and secrecy. According to Hillis Miller, D.A. Miller asserts too much power over the text by “knowing more than the text knows” (80). Hillis Miller’s reading is constative and performative in that he reveals how the text functions in, rather than how it is subject to, a historical context. He asserts that his reading of MBV calls attention to “the incommensurability of cause and effect in the social world, and to the relation of this to the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling.” By asserting authority over the text, D.A. Miller ascribes meaning to it which the text is capable of neither asserting nor denying. D.A. Miller brings a “historical Truth” to the text, which, not only does the text refuse to support, but is in its own right a narrative and subject to the same unreadability. Hillis Miller writes, “To say the meaning of MBV is determined by its reference to the repression of sexuality in the American culture of Hawthorne’s day is to be mystified by the ideology that Hawthorne unmasks” (88). Like Reverend Hooper’s parishioners, D. A. Miller subjects the veil to constative and historical expectation. Sexual repression, or any repressed symbolic value, can never be unpressed because it is always already figurative; the apocalyptic promise of the symbolic order must remain apocalyptic and definite meaning must remain suspended. By juxtaposing the material and ideological values of the veil, Hawthorne deconstructs the semiotic essence of it. It unmasks the way ideology masks itself. Rather than remaining in a state of constructive bafflement, in view of the “chasm” to which Heusseur refers, D.A. Miller and the citizens of Milford mask the veil with another veil, bridge the “chasm” by privileging context over text.
As Miller writes in *Pygmalion*, "The relation of literature to history is a problem, not a solution" (33). To understand a text as a "reflection of its historical conditions" subverts reading by privileging context over text. With its emphasis on direct causality, D. A. Miller's critical paradigm is antithetical to reading. Again in *Pygmalion* Miller writes,

A literary text does not merely reflect its historical conditions, in however complex or obscure a way. It also transforms those conditions, does something to them. A work of literature intervenes in history whenever it is read. Literature is productive, performative. It makes something happen (34).

Even in his first work of criticism, Miller points to the performative nature of literature, understanding Dickens' work as not merely symptomatic of the consciousness of the age and the author, but rather as "the very means by which a writer apprehends and, in some measure, creates himself" (viii). D. A. Miller's historical narrative veils the text with historical context and, by extension, defines reading as an application of historical factors. As D.A. Miller and the citizens of Milford show, it is the categorical imperative for hermeneutics which arbitrarily assigns some meaning to the veil, which assigns "something more verifiable behind the veil, make[s] the veil type and symbol of something definite one can confront directly, face to face, through the veil, by means of the veil" (98). A reading, on the other hand, must be a parabolic demonstration of a text's unreadability, of its conviction to say "neither yes nor no to whatever hypotheses about it the reader proposes" (106). Reading must be an apocalyptic struggle, the deferral of the process to understand it. Hawthorne and Miller suspend this process by not allowing signification to take place, by continually undermining any hypothesized meaning. Like the veil itself, the story is a sign that is not a sign, it is a tale which
hermeneutically signifies nothing, which is an "allegory in the reader's own situation in reading it" (105). Reading must acknowledge its status as "a perpetual wandering or displacement that can never be checked against anything except another sign" (97). And any reading of MBV must acknowledge that "There is no way, in this life, once you have accepted the complex ideology of the veil, to get behind the veil to find out what is really going on back there, though this is what the ideology wants us to do" (99). To understand the veil as an allegory for the sexual repression of the 19th century is to represent reading as understanding. D. A. Miller's interpretation arbitrarily stops reading by trying to make the latent "matter, thing, or force" explicit.

Central to Miller's deconstructive reading of MBV is the sense that language is conceived of as semiotically self-referential, within a closed system of signs, and therefore that meaning is clearly different from, and opposed to, experience. By describing MBV as a parable, Miller's definition seems to be a definite statement of meaning, a literary grounding not unlike D. A. Miller's historical grounding. Specifically, Hillis Miller uses prosopopoeia as a "tool" for understanding the text. He personifies the text and, in the process, shows that "prosopopoeia is a fundamental feature of historical events as happenings" (124). As Hillis Miller admits, "I have already committed the crime I am led by the story to condemn. I have made the mystified victim, once more, the piece of ideology I would 'unmask'" (123). But by making his reading itself a historical event, a self-conscious, figurative, narrative representation of a reading act, he keeps reading going, seeking a "gradual clarification," which briefly exposes the "chasm" which must always disappear. It's valuable in that it makes possible
new insights into what is going on in particular works, even where that has been insight into the necessary blindness of the work to its own incoherence or heterogeneity and insight into the consequent inability of the critic to ‘read’ the work in any determinate or monological way (“Theory and Practice” 610).

His representation of MBV as a parable of the impossibility of reading is convincing and, to a large degree, discourages opposing readings of it. But by acknowledging his reading as a failure to reach the “‘matter,’ ‘thing,’ or ‘force’ latent in the work,” his essay brings the reader closer to it and re-inaugurates the process by which we strive to come closer to it.

If literature and criticism are both parabolic representations of the impossibility of confronting the unattainable “matter, thing or force,” what is the difference between them? In his 1965 article “The Geneva Critics,” Miller writes, consider literary criticism to be itself a form of literature. It is a form which takes as its theme not that experience of natural objects, other people, or supernatural realities about which the poet and novelist write, but those entities after they have been assimilated into the work of some author. Literary criticism is literature at a second degree. (“Geneva School” 305-6).

Criticism and literature should be both performative and constative, should be both inaugural and productive, and should be an ultimately unreadable narrative. Yet as “literature at a second degree,” criticism is a response to a categorical constative impulse, a fundamental hermeneutic motive to respond to a physical object, the text, in addition to metaphysical indeterminacy. Criticism is built around paradox—an objectified heterogeneity, an extra-linguistic text, not logocentric but coherent, containing the uncontainable. Literature, on the other hand, is a response solely to metaphysical indeterminacy which tries to free itself from any “materiality of
history." Literature is a perlocutionary speech act, a signifying chain which always "means" something other than what it constitutes. The "linguistic turn" which semiology and post-structuralism have initiated in humanities allows deconstructive literary critics to champion rhetorical rather than grammatical reading, allows them to affirm "the relay of figurative language in the 'construction of meaning' and the way it grants a performative as well as constative or cognitive dimension to language" (108). He proclaims that "the most important methodological problem in humanistic studies now is to refine our understanding of the particular form of sign to sign connection involved in the relation of text to context" (108). Literary theories, in other words, are only as helpful as their ability to walk the semiotic tightrope between constatives and performatives, and to assist, but not arbitrarily stop, reading, to be "literature at the second degree."

The "theory" which people in the field of literary studies refer to is a slippery term. Does it formulate to a mode of production? Of criticism? Of reception? Or, on the other hand, is it meta-theoretical? Granted, readers must approach a text with a theoretical presupposition. "Theory" necessarily dictates the way we read, just as ethics dictate the way we act. It is by definition constative, but, for it to be truly useful, it must also be performative. Of the constative/performative dichotomy Miller writes,

Insofar as theory is constative, its function is epistemological: to promote clear-seeing knowledge, as the etymology of the word 'theory' suggests. Insofar as theory has the performative face I have been recognizing in it, its function is to cooperate with reading or facilitate reading or in fact to be an act of reading that is a productive event in the real world of material history. The two aspects of theory cannot be reconciled, harmonized or
synthesized. They are not logically or dialectically opposed, but asymmetrical (Pygmalion 84-5).

Theory, criticism, reading, or any metaphysical category is always a parable of metaphysical indeterminacy. Theory is necessarily metaphoric, the covering of strangeness with a dominating figure. Thus the proliferation of theory is at once constructive and destructive: "The opposition between theory and practice is not that between metaphorical and literal language, but it is that between language, which is always figurative through and through, and no language—silent doing" (110). They are narratives of their own failure to read, but they must asymmetrically assert a particular reading, a temporary constative distraction from the task at hand: reading.

In his "Presidential Address," he has much more to say about the misguided proliferation of literary theory, or the shift from the search for meaning to a determined metaphysics of meaning. Theory must not resist the reading upon which it depends, but "the triumph of theory is the resistance to reading, a resistance so successful as to be an erasure or forgetting of the material base in question" (288). Critics must resist the temptation to champion the metaphysical ground they inevitably seek, but instead must recognize it as the ground from which other readings can originate. Of the relationship between reading and theory Miller writes,

There is no reading that is not theoretical, but the actual act of reading is always to some degree the disconformation of theory. The interaction between theory and reading might be defined as a constant infinitesimal calculus in which reading informs and alters theory, along with the other vital and inaugural effects it has (Pygmalion 94).
He advocates a paradoxical sort of open-mindedness where fruitless paradigm shift always keeps reading in a constant state of fluctuation between ground and unground, theory and practice, each presupposing the other as its “enabling ground.” In uniting the two important impulses of literary studies, theory must be dynamic, continually made new, and necessarily derived from a reading. Theory should be “inaugural performative praxis,” not an application of an established theory, but as a link in a chain to further understanding. The notion of “deconstructions” (as opposed to the singular) allows Miller to avoid stagnation. The real danger for deconstruction is that it would become a method, a verb, a kind of recipe where you’d sit down and say I’m going to deconstruct the “Prelude” (82). “Deconstruction” is not a verb; critics don’t “deconstruct” what has not already been deconstructed by the unreadability of the text itself: “the great works of literature are likely to be ahead of their critics. They have anticipated explicitly any deconstruction the critic can achieve” (31). The critic’s job is to identify the “act of deconstruction” which the text performs on itself. But such an act can only be approached indirectly through a narrative of unreadability. Miller’s theory is, paradoxically, the denial of theory’s ability to tell us anything useful: “Deconstruction does not promise liberation from that famous prison house of language, only a different way of living within it” (“Theory and Practice” 613). Thus, theory as such should be the antithesis of the reading act, yet, like the reading act, constantly fluctuating between construction and destruction. Reading points to the parabolic nature of any theoretical presupposition, necessarily always not quite reaching theoretical clarification, continually disallowing the structural impulses of theory, always a catachresis. Miller writes, “Research in the humanities always ends in a moment of postponement or deferral. It ends not with the sense of a goal or
research triumphantly research, but with the sense of a need for further talk and further research later on” ("Face to Face" 294).

In the discomfort of metaphysical indeterminacy, theory has asserted literature as mimetic and referential to some extra-textual context. Readers and critics have declined to take responsibility for the “literary strangeness” and the “chasm” derived from the experience of unreadability. The primary responsibility, then, of the reader, teacher, or critic is to the text, a “response to the demand made by the words on the page, an ability...to respond to what the words on the page say rather than to what we wish they said or came to the book expecting them to say” ("Ethics of Reading" 190). The words “demand” to be read, misread, and rewritten. As a response to that “demand,” criticism should try not to understand the text, but the “matter, force, or thing” which the text tries to understand.
CONCLUSION

My contention is that the study of literature has a great deal to do with history, society, the self, but that relation is not a matter of thematic reflection within literature of these extralinguistic forces and facts; rather it is a matter of the way that the study of literature offers perhaps the best opportunity to identify the nature of language as it may affect what de Man calls 'the materiality of history' (Reading Narrative 81).

The relationship between art and criticism is difficult to understand, but the shift from structuralism to post-structuralism has "redrawn" the "boundaries" of it. The notions that texts are infinitely heterogeneous, that literary and critical language is always already referential, and that art, criticism, and reading are metaphysical categories which exist performatively and inauguratively places this relationship in a dynamic context. As representative of this shift, J. Hillis Miller's movement from phenomenology to "deconstructions" typifies the inaugurative force and intellectual vigor of this movement. But the study of literature must be more than an exercise in aesthetics; it must somehow be socially and/or politically useful.

The danger of post-structuralism is that it becomes a useless floundering in the epistemological void. And Miller's movement from focusing on the thematic elements to the rhetorical elements of a text can be interpreted as a New Critical aesthetic which looks at the text in contextual isolation. But if the study of literature is the study of language/rhetorics, it can help to reveal "just what the role of literature [and language] might be in society, in history, and in individual human life" (Ethics 125). Further, if we are constantly struggling to read, and if criticism is a forum for inaugurating the reading process, then it is an immensely practical and
ethical pursuit, one that each critic must take responsibility for. In reading, author
and critic pursue the same unattainable, extra-linguistic "matter, thing, or force,"
both parabolic representations, signifiers referring only to other signifiers, and
politically, socially, and aesthetically useful in their ability to continually renew the
reading process.
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