

## J. Hillis Miller: Reading as Inaugural Event

Ludmila Bîrsan  
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Éamonn Dunne, *J. Hillis Miller and the Possibilities of Reading. Literature After Deconstruction*, New York: Continuum, 2010, 160 p.

**Keywords:** good reading, deconstruction, misreading, religion as doing, speech acts, irony, impossible possibility.

Reading can be interpreted as an event. Similarly to the event which transforms its location into a sacred realm, reading turns space into a place where something unique and remarkable happened. Events occur; they come unpredictably, break the regular flow of history, and are characterized by singularity. Éamonn Dunne admits being sceptic about those books which promote a certain type of knowledge of reading art and practice, as their aim is establishing definitions and creating patterns. This is one of the reasons for him dealing with the reading possibilities, for assessing that good reading appears as an inaugural event “that changes one’s views about what that ‘how to’ in reading actually means”. His choice for the title itself was suggested by Derrida’s “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event”, where the author underlines that the experience of the event blurs the distinction between what is possible and what is not. Possibility refers to something that can suddenly occur and break the certainties of the present moment, which throws into confusion the way we relate to the world, to time and to ourselves. In Miller’s opinion, literature can be read only if it contains an inaugural meaning, only if the act of reading allows the reader to

discover something inaccessible in other ways. The impossible is not necessarily the opposite of what is possible, but something which can determine or affect it. Derrida believes that, precisely because reading is an inaugural event, it can be dangerous and anguishing, since we do not know just where it is headed. Reading is the performative use of language, due to the uniqueness of its occurrence and to its hidden, untold side. It is always something inaugural, a surprise; this is why one can never pretend being fully familiarized with a text. The subtitle hints to post-deconstruction literature. The author considers that there is no “before” and “after”, as deconstruction is present while reading from the very beginning of literature. He identifies deconstruction with good reading, bringing to discussion the existence of a certain moment in the deconstruction process, of openness to the event and of hospitality to the other and to what comes.

Éamonn Dunne’s reading effort is an important one, because it requested, first of all, him familiarizing with those authors mentioned by Hillis Miller (Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Thomas de Quincey, Friedrich Schlegel, W.B. Yeats, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Heinrich von Kleist, Charles Dickens etc.), followed by those with whom Miller permanently communicated through his writing (Paul de Man, Harold Bloom, Derrida, Poulet, Blanchot, Burke etc.). Dunne’s endeavour is a considerable one, as he tried to compress and synthesize Miller’s life works. We believe of great importance reminding here the three-stage classification of Miller’s writings as identified by Williams Jeffrey. The first one refers to Poulet and includes: Charles Dickens: *The World of His Novels* (Harvard, 1958); *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth - Century Writers* (1963); *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth - Century Writers* (1965); *The Form of Victorian Fiction: Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy* (1968); *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (1970). The following deal with Paul de Man and Derrida: *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (1982); *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (1985); *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (1987); *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990); and *Hawthorne and History* (1990). The last period comprises those writings which borrow the speculative style of later Derrida: *Illustration* (1992); *Topographies* (1995);

*Reading Narrative* (1998); *Black Holes* (1999), *Others* (2001); *Speech Acts in Literature* (2001); *On Literature* (2002) and *Literature ad Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (2005); *The J. Hillis Miller Reader* (2005); *For Derrida* (2009). The risk Éamonn Dunne himself undertakes is that of experiencing, in his turn, acts of reading, both when dealing with Miller's texts and with his own. At times, he follows Miller's footsteps, trying to have the same pace, other times he distances himself from his master: "I not only change it, I also change my own idiom. But in doing this I change the ideal itself, the presupposition of an origin. This is what happens to Miller when he reads De Quincey through Poulet and to me when I read Miller through De Quincey, and to you, dear reader, whatever else happens, when you read me through all of the above. The result is always a kind of fogle" (42).

The first chapter of the volume discusses reading as conduct, speech acts, crypthonymy, distant voices, literature's secret etc. Reading is viewed as an ethical act, a performance that belongs to what is called "life conduct", which consists in the things one does and which, in their turn, do other things. There is an irresistible, imminent but at the same time free reaction to the text, which also implies the responsibility for further effects. The failure of reading is always contained within the text, that is why the right understanding of the text means undertaking the risk of getting things in the wrong way. From this point of view, all readings are ethical, while their occurrences, no matter how unpredictable and surprising, are acts of conduit of life. The stress falls upon the act of doing, not upon knowing, as what is done cannot be undone, life occurrences do not stop, disappear, but continue to give birth to other things. "Doing" necessarily requires respect towards the laws beyond human comprehension, which unites us all. A "religion of doing" is reverence towards those laws, towards the secret present in all literature, the connection with the written word. This bond makes us think about Austin's statement "my word is my bond", which presents itself as the religious expression that unites us and determines our responsibility towards an unknowable law. Performative speech acts, as Dunne put it, can create unpredictable events: "The 'religion of doing', 'putting' things as a 'doing' things with words, is therefore a dangerous enterprise" (25). "*The Aspern Touch*" is

among James's writings that contain issues and themes also discussed by Miller, such as: the acts of reading and writing, the acts of responsibility and irresponsibility, the religion of doing, institutions, hospitality, history, biography, topography, spectrality etc. Éamonn Dunne believes that reading "*The Aspern Touch*" is like violating a tomb "in the sense that our own curiosities are analogous to the curiosities of our narrator" (11). Reading is doing, and one cannot precisely delineate when it is going to be an act of conduit, since reading is each time unique, unrepeatable. The tomb refers to an open secret, since we know about its existence, but at the same time it remains closed, and does not directly reveal its "entrails". The same secret defines text reading, as it is open and at hand for everyone looking for it, an unknown territory waiting to be explored, but, at the same time, reading can be regarded as lack of respect, like violating a tomb.

In the second chapter, Éamonn Dunne concentrates upon De Quincey and the problem of translation. Dunne sees Quincey's works as difficult: "His world is a shadowy and spectral universe, where life bleeds into death and death is always returning and bleeding back into life" (33). *The English Mail - Coach*, with its last section "Dream – Fugue", is one of the most interesting De Quincey writings, where the use of the notion *Tumultuosissimamente* [most tumultuously] raised numberless discussions, and illustrated the way in which incoherent images can distract the reader's attention and contradict each other. In Dunn's opinion, what happens during Miller's journey from one moment to another is a disastrous series of failures to describe the main reasons behind De Quincey's work; it imitates, in a very realistic way, the style and the tone of his subject, which compels the translation to move at high speed from one image to the next. Inspired by James and Miller, Dunne states that all readers are fuglemen. During the entire chapter, he tries to answer the everlasting question: What happens when I translate someone else's idiom into my own? Each translation takes further an already existing one, *ad infinitum*, thus the translator's task becomes ceasing to redefine what has been told before.

The third chapter deals with De Quincey's humour. Irony is not comic, but rather a form of madness, discontinuity, disillusion. At the same time, irony can be considered lack of

meaning and rationality, as it eludes knowledge. It is impossible to strictly define the limits of irony, to identify this trope-no-trope or to try to stop its development. One cannot speak about irony without being ironic. Each one of us lives this doubling as a paralyzing parabasis which stops our movement. In the end of the chapter, Dunne returns to the same questions, frantically looking for answers: Is Miller's work unique and idiomatic? Can each work be read in terms of a singular event? He insists upon the idea that theory and reading are asymmetrical. The very moment reading really starts, there is a shift in theory.

In the next chapter Dunne discusses the meaning of good reading in the academic circles. He brings up again the rigorous perversity and seductiveness of literary language, as Barbara Johnson explains it: "Rigorous perversity is a wonderful oxymoron. The first term denotes firmness, rigidity, harshness, inflexibility, austerity, stringency, toughness; while the second term indicates a contradictory dynamism, rebelliousness, deviancy, or aberrancy" (66). This word explains why literature fascinates us, surprises us, and the way in which language is meant to be mistaken, to lose itself and be discontinued. Dunne searches the answers to a new set of questions: What does it mean to read rightly? Can there be such a thing as the correct reading? What might that be? How would we know it? How could we show or teach it to others? The teacher is confronted with the possibility of choosing the wrong texts and thus of negatively influencing the life of his students.

In the fifth chapter, Dunne discusses the notion of prosopopoeia, inherent to all literature, no matter if the text is poetic or narrative. It happens while we read and it is indispensable: "A manipulation of this trope is the key to all good, responsible, responsive reading. It is the one thing we can say is indispensable. All readers are necromancers. Reading is the art and practice of a dark magic called necromancy, and, dare I say it, Miller is an arch-virtual-necrophiliac" (83). Dunne considers that there is no direct answer to questions such as: Where does this responsibility in acts of reading come from? Who lays it upon me? Who calls me to be responsible? And to whom, for whom, before whom am I responsible? If the reading responsibility is my own, than no one can ask for the responsibility of the texts I have not

read, as no one can be responsible for the results of my act of reading. On the other hand, the acts of speech are occurrences which imply a sense of responsibility for the speaker. One can only account for the things that happened; this is why Miller deems this to be the inevitability of misreading. As Dunne puts it in the sixth chapter, reading an activity and an event which offers the liberty of reading texts the way we want it, only if we take full responsibility for all consequences.

In conclusion, Dunne goes back to his idea that reading cannot be taught. Learning to read means experiencing the text by yourself, being surprised each time by what you encounter, like it were for the first time: “One learns reading by oneself, for oneself, all alone” (121). In Miller’s writings one cannot find the recipe or the right method for reading, since this is something one can only learn by oneself; one cannot live and die for someone else, and similarly one cannot read but for oneself. Teaching reading is unnecessary, but is good to keep in mind that sensitivity for irony is an essential prerequisite for good reading. Slow reading is recommendable, and not a dancing allegro. Such readers prefer to carefully look for details, to participate to the brand new world open by/in the text, to this event inaccessible from the outside. Dunne’s conclusion is that he never learned to read, since reading has no end-result and cannot be taught. Literature is so peculiar precisely because there cannot be a final reading. Good reading is always unpredictable, and the only option at hand for us is reading ourselves, closely, attentively, responsibly.

Address:  
Ludmila BÎRSAN  
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi  
Department of Philosophy  
Bd. Carol I, 11  
700506 Iasi, Romania  
E-mail: ludmila.barsan@gmail.com