

Deconstruction, Literary Criticism, and American Academia: An Interview with J. Hillis Miller

Ning Yizhong & J. Hillis Miller

Abstract: This interview with J. Hillis Miller, the late renowned Yale literary critic, reflects on his intellectual journey across decades of literary scholarship. He explores the philosophical roots of deconstruction, tracing its ties to European thinkers like Heidegger, Husserl, and Rousseau, and its expansion through figures such as Derrida and Paul de Man. Miller discusses the institutional rise of deconstruction in the United States, particularly at Yale and Johns Hopkins, and its compatibility with the close-reading tradition of New Criticism. He offers personal insights into the academic and political dynamics of the MLA, the evolution of English departments, and his shift from phenomenological criticism to a language-centered, deconstructive approach. The interview touches on the “hegemony” of English literature in American universities, issues of national identity in literary studies, and Miller’s reflections on criticism as an act of imaginative empathy. Intertwining memory and theory, the conversation presents a vivid intellectual history of late 20th-century literary criticism through the lens of one of its most influential practitioners. It will be 5 years since his death in 2021. This interview serves as a tender memory of this great literary figure.

Interviewee: J. Hillis Miller (1928–2021) was a distinguished American literary critic and theorist, best known for his influential work in deconstruction and literary theory. He held professorships at Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, and the University of California, Irvine. Over the course of his career, he authored more than fifty books on English and American literature, ranging from studies of Dickens and Hardy to theoretical explorations of reading, rhetoric, and textuality. As a central figure of the so-called “Yale School” of criticism, Miller played a pivotal role in introducing and advancing deconstructive approaches in literary scholarship.

Interviewer: Ning Yizhong, Professor of English at Beijing Language and Culture University, currently professor of English at South China Business College, Guangdong University of International Studies, China. He did postdoc research under the supervision of Professor J. Hillis Miller at the University of California at Irvine, during which he interviewed Hillis Miller on a wide range of topics.

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Studies, Guangdong University of Technology. This interview is part of a research project funded by the Chinese Ministry of Education for the Humanities and Social Sciences [No.22YJC752006] and Guangdong Provincial Social Science Foundation [No.GD22YWW03].

1. On “The Deconstructive Angel” and “The Critic as Host”

Ning: M. H. Abrams published a paper titled “The Deconstructive Angel” carried in *Critical Inquiry*, to refer to the “deconstructionists. I was wondering how his naming is grounded and how is it accepted.

Miller: Well, it’s a joke. It’s a play on a much more idiomatic English, which would be “Destroying Angel.” I thought Abrams would have made up the “deconstructive angel.” It’s a subtle joke because many of those “Destroying Angels” are very ambiguous. On one hand it might refer to the divine emissary sent by God, and the “Destroying angel” is sent to do something destructive, to take revenge on somebody bad, so those are “Destroying Angels.” It would be divine, but also angels are the materially impalpable, conceptual into pretty far away from the physical world, so to speak. Being “Deconstructive Angel” would describe the work of the deconstruction as abstract and impalpable like angels. Also, it has angelic power, that is to say, the supernatural power, that is, having a power, which is ambiguously good because it is being deconstructive.

Ning: Adams named it so as to indicate the tow-sidedness of deconstruction, the good and the bad at the same time. .

Miller: Exactly. “Destroying Angel” also has to do with a kind of extremely poisonous mushroom. I remember that there is a family of a really poisonous mushrooms that are common in the United States people call “Destroying Angel.”they grow up about this high and you can tell them. They look very edible, and fairly known for their color. If you see one of those, and eat even a little piece of these mushrooms, you will die, so that’s what we call the “Destroying Angel.” It looks beautiful. So you see Adams’ way of going from the “Destroying Angel” to the “Deconstructive Angel.”

Ning: In the “Manifesto of Deconstruction,” *Deconstruction and Criticism*, you have a wonderful article titled “Critic as Host,” in which you explored the complex relationship between critical interpretation and the texts they analyze. You began by questioning the nature of citation and its impact on the host text, suggesting that

critical readings, especially deconstructive ones, can be seen as parasitic. You argued that both the “obvious” reading and the deconstructive reading were intertwined, forming a triangular relationship rather than a simple binary opposition. You used the metaphor of the “host” and “parasite” to illustrate how each reading feeds off the other, creating a dynamic of mutual dependence and conflict. You further extended this metaphor to the broader context of literary tradition, where each text is both a host and a parasite to its predecessors and successors. Through examining Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life,” you suggested that the act of criticism itself is parasitic, as it both relies on and transforms the texts it engages with, revealing the inherent complexity and instability of literary interpretation. I heard that you and Professor Adams had different views about the parasitical nature of criticism, and you two had some debates.

Miller: Yes, as I remember, there was some kind of session of Modern Language Association meeting in Chicago, in which Abrams, Wayne Booth and I were in a panel. Both Wayne Booth and Abrams are old friends of mine. Nevertheless, they had strongly negative things to say about deconstruction. Before that, I challenged Abrams by writing a negative review of a great book which is called *Natural Supernaturalism*¹. You know Abrams has published a very important book *The Mirror and Lamp*. He worked for many years on the second book called *Natural Supernaturalism*. I wrote negative reviews for that book, and I think correctly that Abrams has oversimplified the homogeneity and benignity of the western tradition. It is essentially a reading of idealism—Hegel, Plato, the German tradition, and the English tradition. Abrams was also very general, because it represents a moment for this new kind of intellectual history. Deconstruction is, among other things, a new kind of intellectual history.

What I was attracted to Abrams was a part of a panel session of MLA. Abrams defended himself by pointing out that deconstructive reading of any author, Wordsworth, Rousseau, Abrams, is parasitical on the normal reading. In other words, it presupposes the normal reading, the reading by a person with any common sense will make, namely. That’s the common sense for anybody who reads, and then deconstructions comes along. And then conversely, and willfully it destroys that reading by proposing another one. It presupposes that critics’ commonsensical reading is parasitical. And I found that is an interesting term if you start thinking of the word parasite, so I sort of start studying parasite and host². Parasite originally meant someone who are invited to your house, stays and eats the parasitical plant

1 *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, 1971.

2 For more information about parasite and host, see “The Critic as Host” by Miller in 1977.

and destroys the plants. Think about the word parasite, as one can see, the word parasite was used to describe literary criticism. Then we should track the word, right? So I had a wonderful writing and it was really fun. I'm afraid probably Abrams was unhappy when we seemed to be making fun of him. Abrams was a very nice guy but he doesn't have a big sense of humor.

2. On the Origin, Development and Influence of Deconstruction

Ning: Thank you for your explanation. Now I would like to ask a few questions about the philosophical background of deconstruction. My first question is about the philosophical basis and origins of deconstruction. The second concerns the development of deconstruction in America, as well as the peak or "summit" of its influence there. The third question is about the broader impact of deconstruction. I understand that deconstruction is applied not only in literature, but also in fields like art and archaeology. I've read some articles suggesting that there are even deconstructive styles of architecture—these reflect the ideas of deconstruction—so I believe it has had a strong influence across many disciplines. Finally, if time permits, I'd like to ask about the specific strategies used to interpret literature through a deconstructive lens.

Miller: Those are good questions. The first one has to do with the philosophical basis or origin of deconstruction. If we take Derrida and Paul de Man as the originators of deconstruction, we can compare their different approaches. Derrida's is the more widely recognized one, so you mentioned one, but it's also helpful to bring in the other. The obvious point is that both of them were European-trained, though in different ways—Derrida in France and de Man in Belgium. So, the most direct answer to your question would be to say that the origins of deconstruction lie in European philosophy, particularly as interpreted within the French and German traditions. Derrida was educated at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris. Many of the teachers there were deeply influenced by Hegel, and modern phenomenology played a central role. At that time—just before, during, and after the Second World War—Derrida and de Man were in school during what was known as the period of French existentialism, associated with figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

But the basic philosophical text that influenced generations of students was Hegel's *Phenomenology*, as interpreted in French translation by one of Derrida's teachers. In addition, Derrida's early works focused on Husserl, another major phenomenologist. You could say that de Man's education was not strictly philosophical, but he certainly would have read key philosophical texts. Among the

philosophers who influenced both Derrida and de Man was Martin Heidegger. So, deconstruction emerged from that philosophical background, but it also developed alongside contemporary linguistic theories, particularly Saussure's structural linguistics, as well as new developments in structural anthropology, especially with Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Derrida and de Man approached things quite differently. De Man's training was much more literary, while Derrida was trained in philosophy, though both were shaped by early literary critics like Georges Poulet, and perhaps Auerbach or Shaw, who were important to both in different ways. As for my own education, all of that came later—it was not what we were taught in school. I had to learn these things after I arrived at Johns Hopkins, where figures like Heidegger, Husserl, and Derrida became more central to my studies.

That kind of development couldn't have been predicted. I think what followed from these influences—what thinkers like Derrida and de Man went on to do—was not something foreseeable. If we focus on Derrida for a moment: it's not easy to explain. Though his early writing engages with Husserl, some of his major books are about Hegel and include essays on Hegel and Heidegger. Officially, one might say that Derrida read more of Heidegger than anyone else, but he was not a Heideggerian. Deconstruction, rather, was a way of taking the tools of philosophical thought and turning them against themselves—a process that could not have been predicted. It took great originality. Why did Derrida do this? I have no idea. I don't think it can be explained causally. Some might argue it has something to do with his identity—as a Jewish Algerian outsider coming into French intellectual culture—and therefore perceiving things differently. But even that doesn't explain everything. In both Derrida's and de Man's cases, one must acknowledge a certain brilliance and originality that defies easy explanation.

I think another unpredictable element is the originality or innovation—one might even call it a decisive break, interruption, or rupture—with the tradition that Derrida and de Man represent. At the same time, they continually turn against that tradition to question it. How did they do that? How did they succeed in doing it? I would say two things in response. First, there were other values and influences that were important for both of them. One major figure is Rousseau, and it's no coincidence that Derrida and de Man knew each other's work and were both deeply engaged with Rousseau and saw him as a turning point in Western intellectual history. Interestingly, they both independently focused on the same work by Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages*¹. They both found it interesting. The

1 *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, published 1781 (*Essai sur l'origine des langues*)

other two key influences—again, independently for both thinkers—are Nietzsche and Mallarmé. Both Derrida and de Man were serious readers of Nietzsche and were inspired by his philosophy. Mallarmé, a very difficult French poet, also played a crucial role in their intellectual development. These three figures—Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Mallarmé—are very different. Rousseau was an 18th-century revolutionary thinker, best known for his writings on education, politics, and the social contract. Nietzsche, writing in aphoristic style, defied philosophical norms with brilliant insights. Mallarmé, on the other hand, was a highly obscure symbolist poet. For most ordinary readers—like you or me—it would be very difficult to read Nietzsche, Mallarmé, or Rousseau and make the kind of interpretive leaps found in *Of Grammatology* or de Man’s essays on Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading*.

What do they have that other people don’t have? My answer would be that they were exceptionally gifted readers. That is to say, they had a kind of instinct as readers of canonical, familiar, and important texts—an instinct for noticing what is difficult or problematic in those works. Both de Man and Derrida had a remarkable and unusual ability to detect these inconsistencies—for example, noticing what was strange in Rousseau, or what was truly peculiar in Mallarmé. The same applies to Pynchon or Husserl, for that matter. Take Derrida’s early work *La Voix et le Phénomène (Voice and Phenomenon)*¹, for instance. In it, he observes something in Husserl’s thought—an inconsistency, a contradiction, an aporia. Therefore, it was “un-Husserlian,” so to speak, is the part of Husserl that doesn’t fit Husserl. Derrida wrote two early books on Husserl. The second was Edmund Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*², and the third—*Voice and Phenomenon* (1967)—came a few years earlier. But both books are already deconstructions of Husserl, in that they identify that aspect of Husserl’s thought which doesn’t fit the general systematic account of what Husserl said. In a way, you could say that the birth of deconstruction lies in the ability to recognize those tensions within a major thinker’s work—tensions that disrupt the otherwise coherent and rational narrative that one would expect to find in intellectual history or a history of philosophy. You would say something like: “Here’s what Husserl believed.” But Derrida and de Man noticed things that didn’t quite fit this summary. And very often, those things had to do with language. Rather than viewing these philosophers as constructing only conceptual systems, Derrida and de Man noticed the oddness the way which those concepts were expressed—

1 *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs, or Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. 1967.

2 Edmund Husserl, *Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

particularly in figures of speech that we used to express those concepts. So you could say that deconstruction begins at that point—noticing the instability of language in the most systematic thinkers.

Ning: I have several questions. The first major one is about the philosophical basis of deconstruction. I also want to know the answer to my second big question: how did deconstruction develop in America?

Miller: You know it is hysterical how it happened.

Ning: Well, I'm curious about how deconstruction developed. It seems to have spread widely—not only in America, but also in other countries. But I think the first major place was America.

Miller: That's certainly true. Deconstruction became a world power largely through the United States, especially because translations of Derrida into English were much more widely read around the world than the original French. In that sense, Derrida became a world author through English, not French—simply because more people globally read English than French. That would be especially true in places like Japan, where probably more people read Derrida in the English translation of *Of Grammatology* than in French. The same applies to other regions—for example, India, where English, though Imperial Conquest, serves as a linking language among people who speak different native languages, like Bengali and Hindi.

Historically, it's easy to say that Johns Hopkins University was very important in the diffusion of so-called deconstruction in the U.S., partly because of the famous 1966 conference, which marked Derrida's first visit to the United States. The conference, titled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," was hosted by Johns Hopkins and funded by the Ford Foundation. It brought together scholars such as Jacques Derrida, René Girard, Lucien Goldmann, and many others for several days of discussion. Derrida's talk, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," which was really an attack on Lévi-Strauss and structuralist narratology. That was a time when we had to read Derrida in French, because no English translations were available yet. In the United States, the ability to read French was probably even less common than it is now, so Derrida's work was not easily accessible to most people. Paul de Man had not yet begun publishing his major research and was not yet at Hopkins, but he arrived soon after and delivered two influential lectures titled "The Rhetoric of Temporality." These were presented at Hopkins before being published, and they marked the first exposure

many American readers had to English-language essays that strongly represented that emerging way of thinking.

A short time later, there was another conference, after de Man had moved to Yale, where he invited Derrida to participate—creating another key moment in the spread of deconstruction. What followed was that Derrida began teaching at Hopkins. Students listened eagerly to his lectures, and he soon began giving talks at various institutions across the U.S. Around this time, his books also began to be translated into English. One of the most important translations was *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and published by Johns Hopkins University Press. As Derrida’s books continued to be released, they were translated fairly quickly, and by then both Derrida and de Man had moved to Yale. Notably, Barbara Johnson, who translated *Glas*, was one of Derrida’s best translators. He was fortunate to have translators who could render his work with such clarity and precision. Thanks to these translations, so-called deconstruction—as practiced by Derrida and de Man—became more widely available in English. My own work also began moving in that direction, and we eventually established a framework for deconstruction at Yale, which led to the publication of our book on deconstruction¹—a work that received a great deal of attention.

The real question is that it’s hard to explain why this mode of reading—this way of interpreting Western culture—spread so widely. Why did it take hold particularly in the United States? That is, why was it so quickly institutionalized?

One reason is that it proved effective for teaching writing. It was even effective for people who were doing something else or reacting against deconstruction. Many scholars today who would not describe themselves as deconstructionists—feminists, queer theorists, cultural studies scholars, and so on—still rely on tools that would be impossible without deconstruction. I don’t have a full answer to that. But one could compare it with other Continental traditions that never gained the same traction. For example, structuralism in the technical sense—like structural narratology—has been of interest to some in the U.S., but if I told my colleagues I had become a structural narratologist, they might think that it is a form of criticism which was very influential on me or had strong influence on people. By contrast, phenomenology or “criticism of consciousness” was more influential for some, including people like myself, Geoffrey Hartman, or Richard Halliburton at Stanford, who sees himself as a phenomenological critic more than I ever did. But again, phenomenology never became deeply institutionalized in the U.S. So the question remains: Why did deconstruction—represented by Derrida and de Man—become so intellectually

1 *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1995.

powerful in the U.S.? I think the answer is complicated and ultimately speculative.

One explanation is that deconstruction shares a structural affinity with New Criticism. For American scholars trained in New Critical methods in the 1960s and 70s—approaches that emphasized close reading and textual analysis—deconstruction felt familiar. Although it was philosophically radical, its pedagogical method that's based on close reading was continuous with what already existed. That made it easier to adopt. A second reason, though harder to pinpoint, may lie in something about the American temperament. While it's hard to define exactly, there's a recognizable tradition of independent thinking, suspicion of authority, and critical questioning in American intellectual life—even if, paradoxically, there are also strong conservative and regressive forces. The United States is, in its foundational ideology, a Protestant Christian country— despite the presence of Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and others. This ideological background includes a deep suspicion of idolatry, rooted in the Old Testament, and by extension, a suspicion of fixed truths or absolute systems. In this sense, deconstruction's skepticism—its refusal to accept final meanings or ultimate truths—resonated with that Protestant sensibility. That may explain part of why it was so successful in the U.S. From that point of view, the radical dimension of cultural criticism today—its ideological critique and its democratic, even revolutionary energy in literary studies—is consistent with the political orientation of deconstruction.

It's not an accident that both Derrida and de Man began their work with Rousseau, the great 18th-century Enlightenment thinker who influenced both the French and American Revolutions. Rousseau helped inspire what might be called "initiatory" or foundational political events. He himself emerged from Enlightenment ideals of reason and simplicity. Derrida and de Man, in different ways, shared an early and deep common interest in Rousseau, and that was partly how they became friends. Over time, Derrida engaged more and more with 18th-century thought, which proved crucial. So while American scholars may not have fully understood Kant or Rousseau, or may have misunderstood them, the intellectual culture in the U.S. was, in a way, already prepared to receive deconstruction—more so, perhaps, than other cultures that might seem philosophically better prepared, like the French.

If there is a connection between pessimism and deconstruction, then that might also help explain it. But ultimately, the best explanation I can offer is this: Derrida's work was rapidly translated and published, and it found an audience among younger scholars. Those scholars became influential, and even if they were a minority, their work wouldn't have been impactful if it hadn't been usable and adaptable for others.

Ning: The education you each received—Derrida, de Man, and yourself—was quite different, with different philosophical and social backgrounds. You also seem to have different practical approaches and interpretations when reading literary texts. While you're all considered critics or deconstructionists, there are many differences. So, what exactly is the definition of deconstruction?

Miller: Well, remember that people like Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman were often grouped under that title. But they would never have said, "We are deconstructionists." That book you're referring to—probably *Deconstruction and Criticism*—is about deconstruction and about criticism. Hartman and Bloom were critics working in the same intellectual space, and in the introduction to that book, Hartman takes a very cautious, even distanced position from radical deconstruction. I, on the other hand, wouldn't.

When asked to define deconstruction in three sentences, my response has always been: I can't. There is something that the five of us—Derrida, de Man, Bloom, Hartman, and myself—do share, although it's a little difficult to define precisely. I certainly wouldn't call it a strict definition of deconstruction, but it could be described as a shared approach or spirit that brought our work together. It's hard to find a name for it that isn't misleading, but I would describe it as a kind of intellectual joy or pleasure in the act of interpreting texts. For me, it always felt like a great adventure—you discover the most unexpected and wonderful things in poems and novels. It's exciting to write about those things, and even more so to teach students how to see them. That's something all five of us had in common.

Even though what Bloom was doing is very different from what Derrida or I was doing, and there are also important differences between Derrida and de Man, we all shared that tremendous excitement in the process of deep reading and discovery. You read a powerful literary work and feel like you've found something no one else has ever noticed before—and then you write about it or teach it with a kind of energy that's hard to describe. Bloom's teaching, for example, much like Derrida's and de Man's, embodied what I call intellectual joy. It was infectious, and catching. Derrida could make a text sound so interesting—take for example his interpretation of the episode of the Bible, "the sacrifice of Isaac Abraham"—he made it exciting, made you want to go back and read it again with close attention to the actual language. Because for us, the power lies not in abstract ideas or traditional interpretations, but in the words themselves, in their texture and sound. That feeling—the deep, almost magical experience of language—is something we all shared: Derrida, Bloom, de Man, and myself. It's what gave our teaching and

writing its energy. But to be clear: that's not the formal definition of deconstruction. It doesn't explain the theoretical distinctions, like those between Derrida and Bloom. Still, what I can say with certainty is that de Man's teaching was like that too—thrilling and full of surprises. It wasn't just intellectually stimulating; it was joyful. And that's my best answer to your question.

Ning: That was the second moment when people tried to define deconstruction. I read a book by a Chinese scholar, Sheng Ning (盛宁). I'm not sure whether he fully grasps the key elements of deconstruction, but his understanding is that the first deconstructionist scholars are those who attempt to trace language back to its very root. That's his interpretation. I also recall a word used by Professor Murray Krieger in *The Institution of Theory*. The term he used to describe their approach might be intellectualism.

Miller: That's true in a certain way. All of these thinkers have what you might call an instinct for genealogy—that is, the sense that behind every text, or even behind every use of a single word, lies the entire history of that word's use. You can clearly see this in Derrida's teaching. Derrida's teaching is very scrupulous and he often talks about the nuances of this word. He explored how German differs from French, and how those differences impact translation—especially in the context of religious texts like the *Bible*. For example, using the King James Version in English compared to a French translation can reveal very different implications. De Man did similar work. At the same time, I would add that all of these critics were aware of the importance of philology—of a kind of archaeology of language. In their own ways, both Derrida and de Man were responding to Heidegger's idea that there's some kind of magic, aboriginal power in certain German words that goes back to the Indo-European root, and that there is an unbroken line of meaning stretching through time.

But there's also a suspicion on Derrida's part—shared by de Man—toward etymological essentialism, the idea that the original meaning of a word is somehow closer to truth or remains embedded in it. Derrida and de Man both seek to demystify this notion. Nevertheless, the history of a word is the history of those uses varied from one time to another, and nothing prevents a word from being used in a completely new context, even one that is discontinuous with its previous context. But at the same time, even in this discontinuity, you cannot completely forget the earlier meanings.

Ning: In your conversations with Derrida over lunch, did you ever disagree on

the translatability of certain philosophical concepts? Could you share an example where your views on the limits of language or translation diverged?

Miller: Languages differ in how deeply they engage with meaning—some are more rational or superficial than others. For example, the Greek word *logos* is commonly translated into Latin as “*verbum*” (word), which, according to Heidegger, is an oversimplification. In Greek, *logos* carries much richer meanings, such as gathering, fire, essence, and reason, but these are lost in the Latin translation. Heidegger believed that these deeper layers were flattened by Latin and that the German language, in contrast, retained more of the original philosophical richness. So, in Heidegger’s view, Greek could be deeply thought, but not easily written in Latin. German, he believed, allowed for similar depth of thinking. French, however, derived more directly from Latin, was seen by him as a more superficial language in terms of its philosophical potential. There’s no doubt that certain philosophical concepts are more readily expressed in German than in French. But from that observation arises a dangerous kind of Germanophilic nationalism—as seen in Heidegger’s own involvement with National Socialism, which was just one of the ideological errors that lies behind them. It’s not just that Heidegger was “temporarily a Nazi”; rather, some of the nationalistic elements in his philosophy seem embedded in his thought itself, which ties back to longer intellectual traditions in Germany, especially early 19th-century German Idealism.

I don’t believe you must be from a particular country to think philosophically. Anyone, anywhere, can do philosophy. But Heidegger sometimes implied that to do it properly, one had to do it in German—a dangerous and exclusionary idea. I don’t think that view is shared by Derrida or Paul de Man. In fact, many of us are fascinated by the difficulty of translating philosophical ideas from one language to another. For instance, just today over lunch, Derrida and I were discussing the subtle differences between the English word “stupid” or “stupidity” and the French word “stupide.” While they appear to be exact cognates, Derrida pointed out that their connotations differ slightly. To be “stupide” in French is not quite the same as “being stupid” in English—and I think he’s right. These nuances show how misleading apparent equivalence can be, and they illustrate the deep idiosyncrasy or idiomatic quality, or specificity of each language. In fact, this highlights a broader point: no two languages say exactly the same thing. This is a fundamental reason why translation is always imperfect, and why comparative literature, as a discipline, is a disappointment. It’s a rich but frustrating practice, because meaning is always shifting across linguistic boundaries, which is a real center of this problem in translation.

Ning: This brings us to the topic of deconstructive strategies. I'd like to save that question for another time, as it's quite important. But for now, I have a few smaller questions. I heard that you have dinner with Professor Derrida every Tuesday to discuss ideas?

Miller: Lunch usually. We have a habit of having lunch this year once a week usually on Tuesdays, where we used to have lunch there once a week with Paul de Man.

Ning: Was Geoffrey Hartman also in the English Department during that time?

Miller: Yes, they both were. Hartman is retired now, but during his time at Yale he was Professor of English and also held a joint appointment in Comparative Literature, which was a separate department. Like myself, he was a full member of both.

When I first came to Yale in 1972, Hartman was a member of the English Department. But by around 1976 or 1977, he got a battle with people in the English department. He negotiated a way to step outside of it—not by moving to another department per se, but by being almost a professor of humanistic study or something, not in any department. As for Paul de Man, he was a member of the French Department, not English. He also held a role in Comparative Literature before his passing. For a time, he even served as Chair of the French Department, and later became Chair of the Comparative Literature Department.

Ning: I imagine that during those years, you must have had many opportunities to talk with them. I wonder if those conversations still resonate with you today.

Miller: That's a bit of a misunderstanding. After 1977 or 1978, I was no longer in the English Department in the same sense. But Paul de Man always was.

There was a woman named Julie Ellison. She worked on Romantic poetry, which is why she was called Professor of Romanticism. And interestingly, Derrida, when he was here, was also called Professor of Romanticism, though of course that wasn't officially the case. Derrida didn't formally belong to any department. His position was appointed directly by the university president. The same was true for Harold Bloom.

Ning: I've read quite a bit of your work, and I was thinking—perhaps your literary career could be divided into three phases. I'm not sure if that's entirely accurate, but maybe: first, a **New Criticism** phase; then a consciousness or

phenomenological phase; and then a deconstruction phase—and possibly a phase beyond that. It seems your books and essays reflect those transitions.

Miller: That’s more or less correct, and it does follow the chronology of my publications. By the time I published my first book on Dickens¹, I was already moving into phenomenological criticism. Of course, there are a few very early essays, like one on D.H. Lawrence that I published in *The Harvard Advocate* back in 1952. But even my first serious academic essay, “The Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins,”² written when I was at Hopkins in 1955, was heavily influenced by George Poulet and other phenomenologists. My book on Thomas Hardy³ marks a kind of transitional phase—a bridge between phenomenology and what would soon be known as deconstruction. That Hardy book still carries traces of phenomenology, but also anticipates the methods and questions of deconstruction.

Everything I wrote after the Hardy book falls under what might broadly be called the deconstruction phase. In fact, when Yale hired me, they assumed they were getting a critic of consciousness. But what they got instead was someone who had begun doing deconstructive criticism. That’s the story. The only real exception, perhaps the only work that could be categorized under New Criticism, would be my Ph.D. dissertation. It’s still there, boxed away somewhere. Would you like to read it?

Ning: Yes, sure. Dickens’ World?

Miller: That’s right, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*. It was published in 1958. That book is based on my dissertation, though it’s important to note that the dissertation itself was strongly influenced by Kenneth Burke. If you wanted to categorize it as a kind of New Criticism, this book is quite different from later works, such as those influenced by Allen Tate. Most of my major writing at that point had been completed before I began reading George Poulet and developing what later became known as criticism of consciousness.

Ning: So this book came directly from your dissertation?

Miller: Yes. After finishing graduate school, I spent a year teaching at Williams College. During that time, I started changing quite a bit and began reading thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre. By the time I began revising the dissertation the following year, when I had moved to Johns Hopkins, I was no longer quite the same. In fact,

1 *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958.

2 “The Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins.” *ELH*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1955, pp. 293–319. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2871890>.

3 *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

I discovered, almost by accident, that I couldn't just revise the dissertation; I had to rethink it entirely. This was during the summer of 1953, I believe. So when the book was finally published, it had become something very different. While the topic was still Dickens, the approach had changed significantly. The published version bears very little resemblance to the original dissertation.

Ning: So would you say this book was a kind of transitional work?

Miller: Well, yes. It's still structured around a series of individual chapters, each focused on a specific Dickens novel, very much in line with traditional literary criticism. This is not what Poulet did. Poulet wrote more synthetic essays, where the unit of analysis was the author's entire body of work in relation to his personal consciousness. For example, my *ELH* (the journal of *English Literary History*) article, "The Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins," published in 1955 during my time at Hopkins, is much more of a Pouletian essay. It draws citations and quotations from a wide range of sources to build a portrait of authorial consciousness. By contrast, the Dickens book still focuses on individual novels, but its underlying aim is already shifting. Nevertheless, its target is the consciousness of Dickens that is manifested in those novels, so you're absolutely right, the book represents an uneasy combination of the critical commitment to the organic unity of individual works.

On the other hand, phenomenological criticism of consciousness breaks down the idea of textual unity and replaces it with something else: a personal and inward community of consciousness. This approach focuses on the distinctive interiority of the author, and Hopkins becomes a particularly powerful case for this kind of reading. That's one of the reasons I was drawn to Hopkins. I tried to say something about this in my early work, and I even conducted a seminar here partly because of a remarkable passage in Hopkins's religious writings. In that passage, he speaks about the absolute uniqueness, singularity, and definiteness of what he calls "the taste of myself." He says that this taste is unlike anything else, not like anybody else, not like everything else, nothing, nothing at all. He writes that when he tastes himself, it is more distinct than even the taste of ale or alum, ale meaning beer, and alum being a kind of sharp, bitter powder sometimes used as a medicine or fertilizer. That metaphor, this sharp, unrepeatable taste, fascinates me. It asserts the idea that each person is utterly unique, and we can't really imagine what it would be like to be somebody else.

That idea, the radical uniqueness of every individual, is a kind of basic premise of Poulet's work, and it resonates with a Proustian sense of interiority. There is an

active self-consciousness for each author, and that self-consciousness is different for each author. The goal of criticism is to reconstruct that inward uniqueness, a value that cannot be fully explained away by external frameworks like ideology, class, gender, race, or any other sociological factor. This kind of lingering commitment to individual interiority is part of the reason why I resist so-called cultural studies today. Cultural studies often seeks to explain an author's work by returning to an interest in context—by saying things like: “Well, of course he wrote that way, because he was a male, from this class, in this country, during that historical moment.” But Poulet, and I would agree, would say: you should know all those contextual facts, but they are not fully explanatory. They do not fully explain Baudelaire, Hegel, Proust, or Rousseau.

That's why I remained interested in Gerard Manley Hopkins, because he is clearly someone who asserts his own uniqueness in a way that directly illustrates Poulet's ideas. My essay “The Creation of a Self” was really about that. It's not built around new critical readings of particular poems. Instead, it draws from across Hopkins's writings, his letters, journals, and poems, in an effort to synthesize a unified portrait of his inward consciousness.

I never thought of the change that occurred after I began reading Derrida, Paul de Man and others as a complete break. Rather, it was a return to my original fascination with literary language. It is kind of my deconstruction, and a kind of New Critical deconstruction, a label others have used, and one I don't deny. In that case, that doesn't gave up the category of self-consciousness, which remains central. And it's not as the basic explanation anymore, but it still provides a general direction for my work. We should remember that I am still engaged in close readings of individual texts. For example, there's a whole series of essays, including quite recent ones on Hardy's poetry, which are readings of individual poems.

Ning: Will they be published soon?

Miller: Not yet. They haven't been published. If you look at my list of works, you'll see them. I would like them to be published soon, but the process takes time.

Ning: So they're readings of Hardy's poems?

Miller: Yes, readings of specific poems. I still do individual readings, not of collected works, but of single poems, which shows that I retain a kind of New Critical instinct for the integrity of individual works. To some extent, this goes against the idea that the consciousness of the critic should serve as the main unifying force. My book on Hardy, for example, is an uneasy attempt to do both:

it presents a dialectical trajectory across Hardy's works, while also preserving the integrity of individual readings. It brings together quotations from both the poetry and the novels, and is based on a complete reading of all of Hardy's poetry and fiction. This is also true of *The Disappearance of God*¹, which is built on extensive reading of each author's work and takes quotations.

Ning: The question of unity is not necessarily a matter of comparability.

Miller: That's right. I take that from my good friends from college, and from Derrida's so-called deconstruction, and Paul de Man. They gave many seminars, lectures, and wrote essays that were essentially close readings of individual works. Derrida would often organize an entire seminar around reading an episode from the *Bible* or poems. Paul de Man, similarly, would write about Nietzsche, or Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*², or Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise*³. The difference is particularly evident in de Man's work. That's one point where I feel some affinity. In my book *Black Holes* (1999), for instance, I follow a similar approach. De Man's essay on *Julie* doesn't trace the entire trajectory of Rousseau's novel, but focuses on a particularly striking episode. It's the same with Derrida. He doesn't write an essay on Kafka's *The Trial* as a whole. Instead, he zooms in on the parable "before the law," offering a deep reading of just that part. That's a hallmark of deconstruction: the method of concentrated reading, or procedure of reading, or strategy of reading. It is so great that we get a huge amount out of the very small piece of the text. This method involves a kind of rejection of the idea of unity. Instead of analyzing the entire work, say, all of *The Trial* or Rousseau's *Confessions*⁴, Derrida or de Man selects a fragment and shows that the implications within that one part are so rich that there's no need to reduce it to a function of the whole. If you tried to write about the whole work, you'd end up with a thousand pages.

Ning: So this kind of close, fragment-focused reading is one of the prominent features of deconstruction? These short passages seem to carry a reactive power that grabs our attention.

Miller: Exactly. It catches your attention. You feel compelled to say something about them, but they always seem to offer more. It's hard to put them into a box,

1 *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers*. Cambridge: University of Illinois Press, 1963.

2 *A la Recherche de Temps Perdu*.

3 *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, 1761.

4 *Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Les Confessions), 1770, published 1782.

because their implications keep expanding.

Ning: How would you compare the Geneva School's approach to phenomenology in literary criticism with the more directly Husserlian-influenced criticism emerging in the U.S. during the same period?

Miller: The phenomenology of that group is what is commonly referred to as the Geneva School. I should mention Jean Starobinski, as well as Jean Rousset, both of whom were based in Geneva. One could say that they did not spend a significant amount of time reading phenomenology in the strict sense of Husserl. Whereas in the United States, at about the same time or a little later, there developed a form of literary criticism, practiced, for example, by Richard at Stanford and others, which was directly influenced by Husserl. These critics were serious readers of phenomenology.

In the case of Georges Poulet, one wouldn't say that he read Husserl deeply. Poulet was slightly younger than Marcel Raymond and Albert Béguin, and he learned tremendously from them. But I believe the true source of this school of thought was a certain kind of French or Swiss tradition that we might (though the term is misleading) call "spiritual." That is to say, it had a certain religious tone, both Raymond and Béguin were profoundly religious. Their readings of Rousseau and the German Romantics reflected that interest. Poulet didn't study consciousness, he was interested in states of consciousness rooted in religious and meditative traditions. Both Raymond and Béguin, for instance, began with an introspective approach grounded in Christianity, where there was a deep concern with meditation, states of consciousness, and earnest concern of what's going on inside. Poulet was fascinated by minor 17th-century French theologians, not just Pascal, but a wide range of lesser-known thinkers from the same period and from the decades following Rousseau, who remained a key figure for them. There were people who were aphoristic writers around the time of the French Revolution. Another influence on Poulet came from German aesthetic theorists.

Poulet also belonged to a modern French tradition that began with Proust and included earlier figures who preceded the Geneva School, such as Jean de Bosschère, Ramon Fernandez, and later Maurice Blanchot. I first heard about these writers from Poulet and began reading them. So Poulet's exploration of the origins of states of consciousness looked back to figures like Proust, Bosschère, and Fernandez, rather than to Husserl, which the label "phenomenology" might lead you to think. Although I don't recall Poulet saying much about Heidegger and Husserl, I was reading Heidegger myself, not because of Poulet's influence, but because I

think Heidegger is important.

In any case, my own project became an attempt to ask: could one do something similar with English literature? Could you apply this phenomenological approach to Dickens, for example? And if so, how?

That led me to develop this line of inquiry in my own classes. *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* was the first major product of that effort. In fact, both *The Disappearance of God* and *The Poets of Reality* came out of this broader intellectual trajectory. Those two later books are much more like what Poulet did in the full sense. The Dickens book is a serious study focused on individual novels. It attempts to do both: to pay attention to language while maintaining a critical respect for the form of each individual work. That's something Poulet never did. He didn't write, for instance, a chapter specifically on *Great Expectations* or on *Our Mutual Friend*. But in my book, the chapters are organized in such a way that all the novels appear connected as part of one overarching vision.

The second and third books I wrote—*The Disappearance of God* and *The Poets of Reality* are more like Poulet's essays. Each chapter, however awkwardly, borrows from his method: taking quotations from across an author's work and building a kind of dialectical progression. That is, they construct a timeless structure, as both Rousset and Poulet tried to do. There is no real difference between the ends, because consciousness remains the same from one end to the other. Poulet was fascinated by time, temporality, and how an author's work might be read as if it were atemporal. In this view, time becomes a closure, and the writer essentially says the same thing in every work, just in different ways.

I remember once when Poulet was writing something about Hawthorne, the American writer, for the concept of time in Hawthorne. When he came back after one weekend, he said to me, "I found it, I found it." And I asked, "What did you find?" He explained that he had discovered a kind of dialectical arrangement of motifs or themes in Hawthorne, and that these had to be logically connected in order to trace a progression. There was one missing element, a gap in the pattern, which he had hypothesized must exist to complete the structure. And that weekend, he found the passage that filled the gap and proved that his intuition of this was right. That was a great chance for him, because he saw the act of criticism.

Ning: You mentioned that reading Derrida inspired a shift in your focus from consciousness to language. How did Derrida's work specifically challenge or reshape your earlier views influenced by Poulet?

Miller: As you know, for a critic, there is often a sense of identification

between the critic's mind and the author's mind. The pleasure in literary study and writing about literature comes from the sense, not imagined, but somehow real, that you might succeed, however imperfectly, in becoming another consciousness through reading. That is what happens when you read: it may be only hypothetical or imaginative, or only partial, but in some meaningful way, you become the author. You learn what it feels like to be that author. I haven't always done that.

Some said there must be a certain idea or motif to guide a reading. That idea that a reader could trace a writer's inner logic seemed like a wonderful goal to me at the time. But now, I would say no. I'm more skeptical than I used to be about whether we can ever truly identify ourselves with another person or fully enter another's consciousness. On the other hand, I believe Poulet was onto something. When you read Proust as if you were Proust for a while, you begin to think a bit like Proust, or feel the emotional atmosphere of that language. Poulet was an excellent reader of Proust. He saw Proust as a forerunner of his kind of criticism, especially in Proust's preface to the *Bible* translation. Poulet suggested that when reading a given work by an author, the reader should have a total memory of everything that author has written, so that every passage echoes with others across the whole body of work. This breaks down the form of the individual work and leads instead to essays that draw quotations from everywhere, an image of internal distance, as though everything the author ever wrote existed in one vast interior space. The essays Poulet wrote would then trace a trajectory through that space.

The transitional book, from this Poulet-inspired criticism to a different kind of criticism, was my book on Thomas Hardy. That book represented a return to writing about individual works, each with its own emotional form, and it raised questions about Poulet's notion of unified authorial consciousness. You could say that it marks a shift from using "consciousness" as the primary category of literary criticism, back to "language" as the central category. You can see that in New Criticism, in Burke and Empson, for example, but for me, it was really inspired by reading Derrida.

I would like to talk about the shift from Poulet to Derrida during my time at Hopkins. I was at Johns Hopkins with my wife, as I mentioned, from 1953 to 1972. During that period, I published the Harvard books that allowed my thinking to develop. Both of us were also involved with the Modern Language Association. It was at Hopkins where I served the Academic Council, which is elected by professors.

Reading Poulet was one of the ways I learned to do literary criticism. What I learned from him was not simply how to interpret a single work, but how to begin with the idea of a continuous community consciousness, that could serve

as a theoretical basis for considering the entire body of an author's work. I think that hypothesis is that certain elements remain the same across an author's works. Poulet's essays also offered me a way of organizing the material one gathers from reading an author's different works. His approach was quasi-dialectical. I say "quasi" because it wasn't dialectical in the strict sense of criticism and antithesis of synthesis, but rather a matter of identifying recurring features in a given author's writing. It might be thematic, formal, or figurative features.

The presumption in this approach is that when something shows up repeatedly in an author like Dickens or Hardy, it matters. Now, that's an important assumption, because you could just as well argue that something which happens only once is more important. But Poulet's method values repetition and recurrence. For example, if you're reading Hardy, you might notice that there are numerous passages where someone inside a house is speaking to someone outside through a window. That's interesting. It suggests that the imagination is working in terms of a situation in which there's somebody inside and somebody outside. So you begin to collect those instances and identify them as recurring features. The presupposition is that it has to happen more than once to be important. That is to say, all these assumptions are very problematic, just as the assumption that consciousness remains unique in a given person.

What do you do with this material? You gather it as you read, perhaps by indexing recurring situations or figurative patterns. Every time you come upon another episode involving the inside-outside window motif in Hardy's twenty volumes, you examine its special features, some of which may be dramatic, others more subtle and figurative, like an unusual frequency of personification. Once you've identified six, eight, or ten such patterns, you begin to work with them. That's what I learned to do. When you come to the actual work of writing an essay, I often begin with this material, often from notes or an index. That's how I wrote my book on fictional repetitions.

What Poulet did for me was to offer a method for handling literary material, namely, to set up what looks like a logical, inevitable, dialectical sequence, in which one element is taken as a kind of beginning or presupposition of a starting point, and the others are arranged in a structure that makes them seem to flow naturally from one to another, either by contrast, antithesis, or a sort of causal relationship: this leads to that, which leads to the next. This process forms a quasi-dialectical sequence. It often doesn't involve an opposition but instead fills in a "missing opposition" through the arrangement of ideas. This method leads automatically to a final stage, a kind of culminating stage, which you may call a kind of endpoint. The

idea is that by the time you reach that conclusion, it feels necessary and justified; you couldn't have arrived there without having passed through the earlier stages. Each earlier step becomes necessary to make the final point clear or possible. The final point is kind of leisure, exposure, climax or something. It's a dramatic way of organizing materials that doesn't necessarily follow the sequence of the literary work itself. It might begin in the middle, abstract ideas, and rearrange them into thematic or structural categories. I found this technique in Poulet's essays to be effective. My own attempt was to see if I could apply that approach to my own work.

It seemed especially appropriate in my book on Dickens, which is a series of essays on individual novels. While the chapters in that book focus on individual works, they were organized according to this dialectical model, but they still obey that new critical respect for the integrity of the work.

I still believe this is a productive approach—to trace thematic development and internal shifts in such a way that they reveal deep structural or psychological patterns. That's the method I aimed to apply in my critical work: a technique I learned largely from Poulet. I tried to adapt it to my own critical procedures and make it a consistent method of interpretation.

Ning: In 1986, you were elected as the President of the MLA (Modern Language Association). That was a very influential event in the American literary circle, and *The Los Angeles Times*, along with many other newspapers and magazines, reported it. Is there any story behind it?

Miller: Yes, many newspapers did report it, but the actual moment of the election took place three years earlier. That's because of the way the election process works in the Modern Language Association, which has roughly 25,000 to 30,000 members. The Modern Language Association of America includes anyone who teaches English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese, but not Latin or Greek. "Modern languages" here refers to the vernaculars, and anyone who teaches them in the United States can be a member. This is the standard professional organization for college and university language and literature scholars. The election process begins with a nominating committee of three people who select nominees. You are first elected as Second Vice President. Then, you serve successively as First Vice President and then President. So by the time I officially became President in 1986, I had already served two years as an officer, first as Second Vice President, then as First Vice President. Once you're elected Second Vice President, it is automatic that you'll move up through the ranks the following

two years. Every year, someone new is elected as Second Vice President, and they then proceed up the chain. So there are always three officers: the Second VP, the First VP, and the current President. There is also a group called the elected council.

It's part of what is called the Elective Council or something like that, which includes elected representatives. These positions are filled through mail-in ballots sent to anyone who wishes to vote. Of course, not all 25,000 members actually vote, many fewer people return their ballots, and not everyone takes it seriously. I had already served on the Elective Council while I was still at Hopkins, which gave me a certain degree of familiarity with how things worked. I also served on various other committees for the MLA. When I was elected, I have to be honest. I think it happened partly due to what the French might call *coup de chance*—a stroke of luck. The nominating committee put forward three men, and the other two, besides me, were much more conservative, old-fashioned scholars. They were highly respectable and distinguished. Now, I don't know what was going through the minds of the nominating committee exactly. But I do know that one of the members of the committee was a friend of mine, someone I knew, a professor at USC (University of Southern California). You could have anticipated that I was going to win once I was nominated. The nominating committee may have set things up in such a way that my election was quite likely. That was the case. You still need a majority of votes to win. If no candidate gets a majority, there's usually a runoff election through another round of mail ballots. But in my case, I received more than 51% of the vote, so no runoff was needed.

Now, I don't mean to downplay the honor of being elected. It was a great honor. But part of what made it possible was that the field of candidates wasn't particularly broad. There were no women on the ballot, so all the women members of the MLA had to choose among three men. And if you were someone who supported forward-looking ideas or literary theory/criticism, that likely tipped the balance in my favor.

Ning: Did you read any reports about that last election? I heard it had a great impact on the literary circle.

Miller: Yes, I wasn't entirely aware at the time, but I did give a speech at the MLA that they requested. I saw it as an opportunity to say what I truly thought. Typically, MLA presidents give polite, reassuring speeches filled with generalities about how great literary studies are. But I felt this was a rare chance to speak honestly about how I saw things and to point toward the future of the profession, especially for young scholars. I wanted to talk about the radical changes taking

place, such as the changes in cultural studies. What I said may have surprised some people, and I'm sure it upset others who opposed such changes.

Ning: So the presidency is a four-year term?

Miller: Not quite. The full cycle lasts three years: one year as second vice president, one year as first vice president, and one year as president. So I serve as president only for a single year.

Ning: I heard that a Chinese scholar—Zhao Yuanren, I believe once served as president of the MLA. I'm not sure exactly when, but it was seen as a source of great pride.

Miller: Yes, that may be. Serving in that position also involves a great deal of work. For those three years, I was deeply involved in the operations of the MLA, which has a large annual budget and publishes PMLA (Publications of the Modern Language Association of America). It requires your support during multi-day meetings, where major decisions are made. I had already served in similar roles before, but one of the most interesting and rewarding tasks I had was serving as one of the editors of PMLA.

Ning: How do you see the relationship between institutional prestige, like that of the Ivy League, and the development or dissemination of critical theory such as deconstruction?

Miller: "Ivy League" is the name for a group of eight private universities in the northeastern United States, especially the three most elite ones: Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Why are they called the Ivy League? I believe it's because many of the buildings, especially at Yale and Princeton, were built in a pseudo-Gothic style, modeled after the medieval architecture of Cambridge and Oxford. When you go into the campus of Yale or Princeton, it's like going back in the Middle Ages. These buildings were designed to look old and prestigious, with ivy plants growing on the walls. By a kind of metonymy, the name of the plant that grew on these Gothic buildings came to refer to the schools themselves--Ivy League. The so-called "Yale Critics," located within one of these Ivy League universities, is dispersing because two of those original five people, both Derrida and I, were living outside that league at one point.

Ning: I'm very interested in life at Yale. But first of all, I have another question: Why is Bloom called a "General Professor of the Humanities"?

Miller: The historical fact is that Bloom was originally a professor of English. However, he later quarreled with some members of the English department. The conflict arose because Bloom, although hired as a professor specializing in Romantic literature, was directing dissertations on American literature. One professor in particular, whose field was American literature, objected to this and said, “This is not right! you’re poaching on my territory.” Bloom, who is an aggressive and strong-willed person, became angry and responded, “Fine. I’ll never direct another dissertation for the English department. I’m not going to be permitted to direct dissertations whatever I want, because the principle was wrong. Because a professor at Yale, a principle, your professor of English there, you could direct dissertation than anything.” On the other hand, you can understand the concern. For example, if I had suddenly started supervising dissertations on Beowulf or Chaucer, areas taught by other colleagues, those faculty members would likely have felt annoyed or undermined.

The difficulty in Bloom’s case was that, Bloom is a superb specialist in American literature, even though he wasn’t hired for that, specially canonical figures like Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens. His work in that area was widely respected. Eventually, Bloom went to the president of Yale and said, “I want to leave the English department.” At that time, I was the chair of the English department and I said, “Well, it might be a good idea to allow it.” So Bloom was made a Professor of the Humanities and assigned to a different department, separate from English.

Ning: So the English department belongs to humanities?

Miller: Sure. For all practical purposes, it does. But there is still a distinction. Bloom continued to teach, and he gave graduate seminars and undergraduate seminars, and he taught brilliantly. He used classrooms and spaces associated with the English Department to do so. In other words, he succeeded in getting out of the hard and often tedious service work required of English Department faculty, while still doing the parts he enjoyed, mainly teaching. Actually, he directed a fair number of dissertations informally. I know this because I served as the shadow director for several of those dissertations, good ones. Bloom was the one truly guiding the work, even though his name wasn’t formally attached, including one on Emerson.

Ning: Thank you, and my last question would be your perspective on the study of national literature evolved over time, especially regarding the role of English literature in American academic culture?

Miller: If you want to study literature, and if you’re interested in poetry,

novels, and plays in the United States, at least until fairly recently, the most obvious, easiest, and almost inevitable way to do it was to study English literature, to be an English major. For example, that's what I did at Harvard because I was interested in literature. Most Americans don't know French or German or any other foreign language, so relatively few Americans choose to study French or German literature simply because they don't know the languages. What had not occurred to me as odd at the time was that what you study isn't American literature—not the literature of your own country—but the literature of a foreign country. And that never struck me as strange. But if you look over here on my shelf, you'll see a whole lot of books not about American literature, but about English literature, Dickens, Carlyle, George Eliot, several volumes on Shakespeare, Sterne, Trollope, and so on. That's been, at least initially, my profession.

At Hopkins, you could be examined in American literature, and the same was true at Yale, but it was maybe one-sixth of the total, just a small part. At Harvard it was called the Department of English Language and Literature, but it really meant British English. There was a separate department for American Studies. But that's strange, isn't it? It never occurred to me how strange it is that the United States built its cultural ethos and values, its national identity, insofar as those are embodied in literature, not on its own literature, but on the literature of a foreign country. And not just any country, but the one we defeated in the Revolutionary War over 200 years ago. We defeated them and then we went right on studying their literature.

It's only fairly recently, in departments like this one, that we've seen more emphasis on the history of criticism, theory, the development of Women's Studies and other interdisciplinary programs, and a strong growth in American Studies. I borrow a word I don't really like: the hegemony of English literature has begun to weaken, and that's probably a good sign.

On one hand, I regret the loss of an integrated, historical approach to studying English literature. I think that's largely disappeared in this country. On the other hand, I understand why it's happening. And I see the argument: Who really cares about *Beowulf* in the United States, except in an antiquarian way? *Beowulf*, Chaucer, Shakespeare, great as they are, masters of the language as they were, don't belong to us in the same way they belong to citizens of England. They're foreign to us in all kinds of ways.

That's something I hadn't thought much about before. So to be a specialist in English literature as an American is really not all that different from being a specialist in German, French, Italian, or Chinese literature, except that English literature is written in the language we speak. But even then, the deeper cultural

assumptions, about the self, about human relationships, are very different in the U.S. from, say, those in Trollope's world. I hugely admire Trollope. He helped me understand British people to some degree. I like him because he's different from Americans, not because he's like us.

Ning: Thank you very much for this interview.