

Book Reviews

J. Hillis Miller. *Versions of Pygmalion*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990. pp. ix, 263. \$25.00.

This book is part of a series of connected works designed to demonstrate the ways in which deconstruction, in so far as it is a way of reading, is also a form of action with ethical, social, and political consequences. Deconstruction has often been branded escapist, irresponsible, or worse, for what it appears to do to language and to the possibility of determinate meaning. Hillis Miller, now at Irvine but formerly one of the Yale School who did so much to promote deconstruction in North America, clarifies and contests such charges in a series of readings which are remarkable for their patience, intelligibility, and quiet determination to set the record straight. As befits an accomplished theorist and comparativist, Miller moves easily between disciplines, language, cultural traditions, in the name of narration, reading, and teaching, activities which he regards as interrelated, inescapably and infinitely complex, and enormously important. In the course of six long and demanding chapters, Miller demonstrates time and again how and why we should continue to read Ovid, James, Kleist, Melville, and Blanchot. The result is a book worth the effort and worth the price; it is also, I suggest, a book deeply flawed and unduly suffused with pathos.

In *The Ethics of Reading*, Miller was at great pains to re-appropriate the ethical in the name of deconstructive reading. In the forthcoming *Hawthorne and History*, he will, presumably, offer a sustained defence of deconstruction against the charge that it attempts to be ahistorical, if not anti-historical. In *Versions of Pygmalion*, he tries to establish that "The coming alive of a statue that one has made and then fallen in love with expresses in a fable the act of personification essential to all storytelling and all storyreading" (vii). Here, in a manner reminiscent of the New Critics, he privileges a particular rhetorical figure in order to facilitate his own reading of texts produced in widely differing historical and cultural contexts. Personifica-

tion or prosopopoeia is hailed as *sine qua non*, the master trope that makes possible in the first instance narration and the activities it supports. Such rhetorical essentialism is grounded in a reading of Ovid designed to establish a cautionary double truth: "in the cruel justice of the gods we see the terrible performative power that figures of speech may have. Tropes tend to materialize in the real world in ways that are ethical, social, and political. The *Metamorphoses* shows what aberrant figurative language can do. The power of the gods to intervene in human history is the allegorization of this linguistic power" (1). Miller will use the example of Pygmalion in Book Ten to substantiate a rhetorical economy that takes its cues from Austin and de Man. Agency, value, accountability, indeed material instantiation as such, each alike betrays the militant "tendency" of *figurae ex machina* to keep the human story going. Prosopopoeia has an unpredictable, residually mysterious plot which human beings replicate, and the originary enactment of that plot, a "prosopopoeia of prosopopoeia," can be found not in the behaviour of entities already personified (and represented elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*), but in the story of Galatea, "an ivory statue that becomes a girl" (6).

Miller moves from the unpredictable distribution and deferral of "guilt and punishment" (11) in Ovid to a shrewdly chosen range of later analogues, beginning with a reading of *What Maisie Knew* which attempts to establish how later creation can constitute a "repetition of Pygmalion's carving of Galatea" (49), and how James, the narrator, the reader, and "Maisie herself" (49) all act prosopopetically. Miller reveals himself to be James's ideal reader, not only in his receptivity to the labyrinthine interplay of ethical, psychological, and economic possibility, but also in his own deeply recessed, partially ironized aesthetic idealism. Where his treatment of Ovid left one wondering about a number of matters, including the undervalued obduracy of the physical, and the claims of simile and metaphor to prosopopoeia's title of master trope, so also Miller's treatment of James remains in several important respects inadvertently problematic. He can claim, for example, that in *What Maisie Knew* James's preference for a female rather than a male child shared by divorced parents ("Boy or girl would do, but I see a girl") proves that in such cases "the act of invention freely exceeds its sources" (49). But what kind of excess is being alluded to here? What kind of freedom does "freely" denote? A feminist reader would surely suspect this appeal to imaginative autonomy as grounded in patriarchal assumption, and proceed to demonstrate how the Jamesian gaze that apprehends a girl as the subject of knowledge and as prematurely knowing subject is determined by the author's host culture in ways that even (or especially) an omniscient male narrator will fail to "see." Where Miller follows

James in recognizing only the constraints of “verisimilitude . . . [and] the intrinsic implications of the ‘subject,’ its ‘full ironic truth’” (48-49), other readers may bridle at the persistence of an all too familiar aesthetic ideology behind the operations of “visionary creativity.”

Selective sensitivity is all that any of us can plausibly lay claim to, and I do not wish to overemphasize what I take to be the deficiencies of Miller’s latest book. However, as well as being somewhat uneven in his discussion of gender, he seems significantly more severe with historicist and Marxist theory and criticism than with their rhetorical equivalents. Indeed, Miller seems driven by a need to “rehabilitate” de Man by making his own work an extended and uncritical gloss on de Man’s writings. He chooses to discuss authors like Kleist who are prominent in the de Manian canon, reaffirms a de Manian version of “forgetting” (112ff.) as well as disfiguring and defacement, and has regular recourse to praise such as this:

Paul de Man is right in his shrewd adaptation of Hölderlin’s “Es ereignet aber das Wahre” into a formula for what happens in reading. Hölderlin’s phrase, says de Man, “can be *freely* translated, ‘What is true is what is bound to take place.’ And, in the case of the reading of a text, what takes place is a necessary understanding.” (21; emphasis added)

Miller used this passage against deconstruction’s enemies in “An Open Letter to Professor Jon Wiener” in order to show how de Man gave “full authority to the text to determine what happens in any act of reading” (*Responses: On Paul de Man’s Wartime Journalism* 340). Here, while remembering his friend’s empowerment of the text at the expense of author and reader (a problematic version of agency), Miller makes of Hölderlin’s reflexive version of the truth of what happens (“Es ereignet sich aber das Wahre”) something mysteriously transitive (another problematic version of agency). I cannot with any certainty attribute to Miller himself the dropping of the “sich” from Hölderlin’s line, and I read it therefore not as a Freudian slip but rather as the turn of contingency during material production of the text, a turning in effect against an overtextualizing of agency and necessity which Miller unequivocally endorses in a note (251). The move from poetic formulation to theoretical “formula” is made possible by de Man’s translating “freely,” but once again we may ask what is the nature of the freedom in question, in what does the shrewdness of this “adaptation” consist? Miller follows de Man in wishing to claim both necessity and indeterminacy as effects of language, but in so doing he composes a series of readings which can themselves be read as (though not reduced to) an allegory of amity which rather dangerously reduces dialectic to the asymmetry of tropes (95) and causality to a “fundamentally *linguistic* event” (130).

WORK CITED

Miller, J. Hillis. "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Wiener." *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*. Ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989.

LEN FINDLAY

Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. *Slavery and the Literary Imagination: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1987*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. pp. xiii, 172. \$22.95; \$9.95 pb.

Had this collection, the thirteenth in the new series from the English Institute, been published, say, fifteen years ago, it would probably have contained four essays on various features of Harriet Beecher Stowe's work, maybe one on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a modernist quasi-slave narrative, maybe another on Faulkner and the revisioning of the discourses of the slave trade, and perhaps, if the editors had been daring, an essay on a slave narrative itself (and, more than likely, that would have been the very unrepresentative Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*). It is almost fortunate that such a collection would not have been imaginable fifteen years ago, because the collection Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad have brought together now, preparing the way for the scholarship in African-American studies in the 1990s, represents the best of a new attitude towards what is helpfully called "Slavery and the Literary Imagination."

Instead of the assortment of essays I imagined in the scenario above, this collection contains seven essays, all but one of which deal with African-American writers. Moreover, the one exception, Carolyn Karcher's study of Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), is in fact an examination of the imaginative limitations suffered by even so thoroughly engaged an abolitionist as was Child. It is an essay that is not a counterpoint to the rest of the series, but very much participates in the general trajectory of the collection. And that general trajectory is primarily aimed at tracing potential origins and describing moments of revisionist energies.

Two of the essays are interested in establishing the beginnings of the African-American literary tradition in the discourses surrounding the institution of slavery and the experiences of ex-slaves. The volume starts off with James Olney's essay which examines Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) and Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) as the constitutional texts of the "founding fathers" of another American discourse, that of the "Afro-American nation" (8). In the