

Book Reviews

J. Hillis Miller. *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2011. 329 pp. \$29.00 USD.

According to J. Hillis Miller, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz* “constructs a Benjaminian constellation” (xii) which juxtaposes five topics. They include Jean-Luc Nancy’s “reflections on community after Auschwitz” (from which the book’s title derives); three novels by Franz Kafka that Miller believes “foreshadow Auschwitz”; four novels about the Holocaust “written by authors at varying degrees of distance from it”; and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (chosen because it examines “the feature of American history that most resonates with Auschwitz”) (xii-xiii). Miller’s final topic differs from the others in that it is neither philosophical nor literary. It is an analogy based on “the chilling resemblance between what happened in Germany and adjacent countries in the years leading up to the Nazi takeover and what has happened recently in the United States and abroad as a result of its actions” (xiii). This topic also differs from the others in that it is not highlighted in any of the headings of the book’s four parts. Nevertheless, Miller’s outrage at contemporary American actions is so intense that the resemblance he finds between what led to the Holocaust in Germany and what has happened recently in the United States resonates throughout to such an extent that it often appears to be the book’s primary topic, disrupting discussion of all others. A representative example is a paragraph that begins by addressing why Kafka resisted finishing his novels but quickly moves to analogies Miller sees between Kafka’s protagonists and Iraqis “indefinitely incarcerated, interrogated, and tortured at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay, or in some secret prison abroad” (50).

Knowing that readers may object to his analogies, Miller provides a cautionary note: “Analogies . . . are not identities, but juxtaposition of ‘somewhat analogous events’ may help to understand both sides of the analogy” (xii). This defence of his project is persuasive, but there are other ways of providing understanding that Miller avoids. Although he reads Kafka’s work for its premonitions of Auschwitz while simultaneously acknowledging that this reading “might seem perverse” given that Kafka died in 1924 (39), Miller chooses a book title that does not foreground the analogy that so preoccupies him. He insists that Kafka’s writings are proleptic in that they “anticipate the Shoah” (271), but what *The Conflagration of Community* may actually

demonstrate is how much readers post-Holocaust bring to their readings. As Miller admits, when he first wrote about Kafka nearly fifty years ago, his tone was very different. But having lost his “cool, amused insouciance” because he genuinely believes that Americans today live in a “nightmarish Kafka-like world,” he reads Kafka very differently now (112). The epigraph to his preface is Theodor Adorno’s famous prohibition on poetry after Auschwitz; *The Conflagration of Community* responds to Adorno by demonstrating not just that reading fiction matters even more after Auschwitz, but also how reading fiction after Auschwitz, we cannot avoid bringing our post-Holocaust knowledge to our reading of earlier works.

At one point, Miller invokes a juggling metaphor for his approach: “I have in my comments on [Ian McEwan’s] *Black Dogs* juggled three of the four balls I am trying to keep in the air in this book: the question of whether a novel can testify to the Shoah; the question of narrative form in relation to whether fiction can be testimony; the question of our relation today to the Shoah” (166). He then adds that the subject of community—presumably the fourth ball—will be addressed in the next chapter. Unfortunately, sometimes *The Conflagration of Community* reads as though Miller is juggling too many balls. What else accounts for his need to keep reminding his readers what his subject is? According to one chapter, “The center of this book is the question of whether or not the Holocaust can be testified to by way of fictional works” (67). However, the density of his argument leads him to shift directions in the next chapter as he turns to the subject of narratology and links its rise to a post-Holocaust world that longs for clarity. Assessing the values of narratological modes of analysis in testing his theories of community, Miller asks numerous questions and provides fascinating asides prompted by his wide reading to such an extent that he must remind himself that he may be getting off track: “After all, the ‘conflagration of community’ is supposed to be my main topic in this book” (140). By this point, readers may well feel that they are themselves at risk of becoming like one of Kafka’s protagonists, embarked on a journey whose destination is not at all clear. On the surface, the “center of this book”—the question of Holocaust testimony—and the “main topic”—the conflagration of community—do not appear identical, but Miller brings them together in his reading of Imre Kertész’s *Fatelessness* when he proposes what he calls “Miller’s law”: “If Holocaust novels get more complex . . . narratologically and rhetorically, the closer the author was to direct experience of the camps, at the same time the rendering of the conflagration of community becomes more pronounced” (223). The problem with this “law” as he admits a few pages later is that it is based on a very small sample.

Despite the acknowledgement that “Miller’s law” is only a hypothesis, it is one of three primary assumptions underlying the book’s argument. The other two, also named in the brief coda, are “That a work of fiction or a work of criticism can be a valid testimony to such events as Auschwitz, or as slavery in the United States, or as our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and other United States catastrophes[,] . . . [and] [t]hat a work of fiction can, after the fact, be seen as proleptic” (271). However, the coda also reveals Miller’s belief that ultimately *The Conflagration of Community* provides “readings of eight novels that will work as adequate testimony to what happened to [him] when [he] read them” (271). The readings become a model that Miller hopes will “function as speech acts to instigate others to read these novels for themselves” (271). It is a surprisingly modest conclusion to a very complex argument.

The main strength of this book is Miller’s nuanced interrogation of how and why we read fiction, not just after Auschwitz, but also in an age when so many predict the “disappearance [of such reading] into cyberspace” (269). In “Community in Fiction after Auschwitz,” the prologue to his two chapters on Holocaust fiction—yet one more example of how the title does not really capture the chapter’s primary focus—he analyzes the many reasons for his resistance to writing about the Holocaust. In a typical pattern where he begins by identifying four reasons for his anxiety, but then actually provides an additional reason that returns him to his overriding concern with “the extremely disquieting similarity between the run-up to the Nazi period in Germany and what has happened in the United States in the last decade and is still happening to some extent today” (153), Miller finds the most persuasive reason for writing about the Holocaust: “Certainly this analogy is a big reason to try to face up to the Shoah. . . . Reading and thinking about Auschwitz fiction *may* help with that” (154; emphasis added).

The tentativeness of that final sentence is significant, for Miller’s defence of reading is not naïve. He never pretends that a community of readers can substitute for a community that has been destroyed, and he knows that reading and thinking about Auschwitz fiction may help us recognize and object to the American government’s current behavior, but they may not. Throughout his book, Miller asks what readers should do after they read a novel of witness. He asks this about the Holocaust novels; and about *Beloved* when he observes, “It is not *prima facie* evident that reading *Beloved* is any help whatsoever to bring us in 2010 to face up to our current frightening situation and to do something about it” (239). The “big challenge” of his book is proving that “[p]aying close attention to a literary work” can make a difference (243). Insisting that in the texture of *Beloved* he finds “a universal structure of all communities” (257) and calling on Jacques Derrida’s theory of community

as “*auto-co-community*” (262) to make his case, he concludes his chapter on *Beloved* by claiming, “I . . . have shown that reading *Beloved* is, somewhat surprisingly, useful or even indispensable as an indirect way to understand the mechanisms that govern our present-day world, the world of ‘terrorists,’ the War on Terror, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, cyberspace, and global tele-techno-military capitalism” (268). That’s a big claim, but it is one of the book’s more persuasive ones.

Where Miller’s argument proves less persuasive is in his generalizations about Holocaust fiction. He bases these generalizations and his judgment of what characterizes the best Holocaust fiction on his immense admiration of Kafka. But this produces a chicken and egg scenario in which he sees Kafka’s writing as anticipating Kertész’s writing yet has little interest in considering the reverse, that is, that Kertész’s style might be affected by Kertész’s reading of Kafka. As a result, Miller makes numerous pronouncements on what defines the best Holocaust fiction: for example, “This not making sense is also represented in the best Auschwitz novels” (49); and “irony is the most appropriate mode of narrative language for writing about Auschwitz” (202). Such comments derive from his admiration for Kertész’s fiction, but that fiction is not analogous to all Holocaust fiction. (See Kertész’s dismissal of a writer who sounds very much like Elie Wiesel in *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*.) Miller admits that the “law” he constructs regarding the relationship between narrative complexity and the author’s closeness to the concentration camp experience is based on a very small sample—four “novels,” one of which is Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus*. With the exception of Kertész’s *Fatelessness*, Miller does not examine any other novels written by survivors.

Even more puzzling is Miller’s determination to read Kafka’s fiction as “obscurely foreshadow[ing] the catastrophe of the Shoah” (40). He points to the “distressingly contradictory ways of reading Kafka” (105), but this does not make his reading more persuasive. He even proposes that Kafka did not complete his novels because he feared “that they might be prophetic or might have the force to bring about on a large scale the individual sufferings and catastrophes they dramatize” (40). This attribution to Kafka of magical thinking not only weakens the political force of Miller’s defence of reading, it also verges on the backshadowing that Michael André Bernstein warns against in *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*. Nearly half the seven chapters of *The Conflagration of Community* read Kafka’s work in terms of what Miller admits is an “obscure” foreshadowing and of Kafka’s determined resistance to his foreboding through the self-censorship of not completing his work. That Miller sees Holocaust analogies does not prove that Kafka wrote in fear of his power to provoke the Holocaust. Although

Miller qualifies his assertions by writing that he actually “do[es] not believe in telepathic foreshadowings,” he is unable to abandon this thesis: “it almost seems as though Kafka must have had some occult telepathic premonition of what the genocide would be like, though he got the details sometimes a little garbled” (65). The “almost” invokes the precarious language of analogy; there is a resemblance that Miller as a post-Holocaust reader finds, but an analogy is not an identity. As Bernstein argues, history is not predetermined; the Holocaust did not have to happen. Had it not happened, would we still insist that Kafka’s work obscurely foreshadowed what nearly happened?

Adrienne Kertzer

Works Cited

- Bernstein, Michael André. *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994. Print.
- Kertész, Imre. *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*. Trans. Christopher C. Wilson and Katharina M. Wilson. 1990. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1997. Print.

Rumina Sethi. *The Politics of Postcolonialism: Empire, Nation and Resistance*. London: Pluto, 2011. 190 pp. £16.00.

World War II was a watershed. Before, European colonial states in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean; after, anti-colonial struggles culminating in decolonization. During the conflicts, subaltern intellectuals gave voice to the colonized’s yearning for collective self-determination, a yearning eventually satiated, the story goes, with decolonization. Newly independent, postcolonial states started fulfilling the promises of decolonization with modernization projects and policies designed to conserve the cultural heritage. To do so, they borrowed, often at usurious rates of interest. To finance these loans, they submitted to ruinous debt repayment regimes. Local production virtually asphyxiated by the imposed lifting of import restrictions, national economies collapsed. Those who could (skilled professionals and the educated) fled, most to Europe and North America, where a few entered the Academy. But access to the Academy, like emigration, exacted a price. At the level of the Postcolonial Studies curriculum, coming to terms with structuralist and post-structuralist theories entailed substituting hybridity and multiculturalism for foundational concepts of anti-colonial discourse such as the nation. At the level of ethics, it meant disengaging one’s pedagogical practices and schol-