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Book Reviews

J. Hillis Miller. *Communities in Fiction.* Fordham: Fordham UP, 2015. Pp xi, 333. US$30.

J. Hillis Miller's *Communities in Fiction* explores the concept of community, elaborated sometimes contradictorily by critics like Raymond Williams, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Derrida in relation to six fictional works. His analysis extends from the Victorian community of Anthony Trollope *(The Last Chronicle of Barset*) to the postmodern community of Thomas Pynchon ("The Secret Integration"), circling back to Miguel de Cervantes' "The Dogs' Colloquy" in order to examine "the ways community or its lack is presented in each work" (Miller 308). Among the strengths of Miller's book are his familiarity with narrative theory, his detailed rhetorical readings, and his warm conversational prose, which make the text eminently lucid and accessible, particularly in its early theoretical chapters. His exploration of Derridean "communities of self-destructive autoimmunity" forms the cornerstone of the book (17). "Real communities," or "true communit[ies]," Miller argues, are governed by the "self-destructive" (17) and "autoimmunitary (il)logic" that Derrida describes (308), which is visible in our contemporary world, particularly in the United States (17). Throughout the book, Miller returns to this claim about communities in order to argue that "what is happening in the United States and worldwide today . . . indicates that this self-destructive community behavior is not just a fiction" (308). These novels of community, or lack thereof, Miller contends, speak to the "relevance" of the humanities "to our globalized political and economic situation today" (152): by reading these novels and exploring their representations of communities, readers may "see their own [communities] differently, and . . . behave differently as a result" (153).

Miller's general claims about the relevance of the humanities and literature occasionally detract from his specific claims about the nature of the particular communities in the stories that he examines, largely because he does not spend much time expanding on these claims. Miller draws analogies from the novels he examines to our contemporary twenty-first-century world, but with limited space for this secondary purpose, his analogies fall short on actual evidence and end up as sweepingly broad statements with some inaccuracies. This is especially evident in his chapter about Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, which runs just shy of a hundred pages (in a three-hundred page

book). In addition to explicating the depiction of community within the novel—which he does in detail—Miller simultaneously draws on contemporary world events as evidence for his claims about *Nostromo*'s (non)community. This leads him to argue against the global capitalism of an imperialist US, and particularly the "American neo-conservative arguments for bringing democracy to Iraq in order to secure the smooth working of the oil industry there" (186), which distracts from his compelling argument about Conrad's text. Miller acknowledges that "it would be too long a tale to tell the whole story here of United States military and economic intervention . . . in South America" but attempts to do so anyway through *Nostromo*'s "emblematic fictional example" (190). Although he ties his argument about the contemporary US to the "material interests" advanced in Conrad's novel (186), the length and bifurcation of the chapter limits his ability to sustain an analysis of the community in Conrad's text. The chapter would be much improved as either a shorter piece more focused on the nature of community or an in-depth explanation of "Conrad's prescience" (189) about twenty-first-century American interventions in South America.

The book also launches attacks on unspecified "humanities professors" who have apparently felt compelled in recent years to "disguise their love of literature . . . in the masquerade of hard-headed, empirical, politically progressive cultural studies, or feminist studies; or studies in gender, class, and race; or investigations into the material bases of culture; or studies based on the recent vogue in the humanities of cognitive science" (150). By collapsing several distinct strands of literary criticism into a straw-man argument about the current state of the humanities, Miller fails to recognize that scholars of feminism or cultural studies frequently question empiricism. The book often mobilizes straw-man arguments like this one because it fails to properly acknowledge or quote at any length recent critical literary studies other than Miller's own work. In his introductory chapter, "Theories of Community: Williams, Heidegger, and Others," Miller acknowledges only one recent study (published in the last ten years): Julián Jiménez Heffernan "Togetherness and Its Discontents," published in *Into Separate Worlds* (Palgrave, 2013). His second and third chapters, "Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset* as a Model of Victorian Community" and "Individual and Community in *The Return of the Native*," mention no literary criticism published on these books from the last ten years except his own. The chapter on Conrad offers two examples of contemporary literary studies: Peter Lancelot Mallios' "Untimely Nostromo," published in *Conradiana* 40.3 (2008): 213–32, and Stephen Ross' *Conrad and Empire* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2004). In his final two chapters, "*Waves* Theory: An Anachronistic Reading" and "Postmodern Communities

in Pynchon and Cervantes," Miller again mentions no recent criticism on these novels. In terms of *The Waves,* for instance, he claims that "much [critical] emphasis is placed . . . on the characters' sense of solitude and isolation" (247) without saying *who* places this emphasis and how they do so. Another representative example occurs in the Trollope chapter, where Miller states that "it is widely assumed, in innumerable essays and books on Trollope, that his novels are more or less scrupulously accurate representations of the . . . high Victorian period" (22) but fails to identify who these essay/book writers are and, more importantly, what they actually say about Trollope. Tellingly, the book has no works cited section.

Miller is at his best when he maintains focus on the precise type of community depicted within the texts he examines. The Trollope chapter is particularly compelling, with its analysis of the "imaginary" community of Barset (23). According to Miller, the novel models "ethically admirable persons whom we should imitate" in an "ideal community" with its own unique sets of laws and conventions (23). Trollope, Miller contends, grants his characters the ability to "penetrate into the minds and feelings of any other member of the community," who in turn become "almost completely transparent to me if . . . he or she belongs to my community" (42). This is particularly evident through the "narrative voice," which "transmits without distortion the judgments and vision of the collective community" (47). The Barset community stands in stark contrast to the novel's depiction of the "non-community" of London (81), a "counter-example" to the ideal morals held by the individuals in Barsetshire (91). Yet the community of London, Miller persuasively argues, is not as absolutely different from Barset as it initially appears. Even in Barset, there are "lapse[s]" and "black holes" of unknowability, where members of the community utterly fail to understand each other, even while they stand together in solidarity (91). The novel thus works to represent "the community of those who, at the deepest levels of their singularity, have nothing in common," which closely resembles Nancy's explanation of the "unavowable" or "unworked" community (91).

Miller's final chapter is likewise compelling, particularly his discussion of Pynchon's "The Secret Integration." In it Miller argues that the community in Pynchon's text represents Derrida's "self-destructive auto-immunitary (il) logic" (284). While the boys in the story work to "form a utopian community set against the autoimmunitary community of the adults" (280), this is shown to be impossible when Carl Barrington is revealed to be an "ideal construct" of the boys' imagination rather than a real person (282). However, the boys' creation of Carl nevertheless represents the "latent possibilities" of the "democracy to come, beyond race segregation and race prejudice" (282).

Miller's treatment of Pynchon alongside Cervantes, and his argument for the similarities between the two, effectively argues against the trajectory of historical periodicity, whereby communities in fiction become more precarious and fractured over time. In so doing, Miller demonstrates the problem of fixed, inflexible definitions of period names and styles that inhibit fluidity and nuance. This is perhaps the strongest claim that Miller makes in his book. Drawing on texts from the seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Miller convincingly argues that communities in fiction have been consistently represented as complex and fractured.

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