J. Hillis Miller 2005: *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*. New York: Fordham UP. xii + 343 pp.

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J. Hillis Miller's nuanced, precise, and detailed elaboration of speech acts in literature has encompassed, in addition to a volume of the same title (2001), at least *The Ethics of Literature* (1987), *Versions of Pygmalion* (1990), and *Topographies* (1995). The long-awaited appearance of *Literature as Conduct* is notable as a current update and consummation of certain theoretical issues into which he has delved over a significant stretch of his remarkably generative career, questions relating to the conceptual, rhetorical, representational, and ethical conditions under which literature is at once possible, felicitous, and impossible.

The volume at the same time orchestrates a meticulous and multi-tiered encounter with Henry James's mature fiction in all the exasperations, rewards, ethical quandaries, communications blackouts, confirmations of existential predicaments, and literary and theoretical educations encrypted in its astute reading. Each reading with which Miller emerges is authoritative. Major novelists, of which James is a particularly daunting and compelling, but by no means exclusive, example, will never again be readable in obliviousness to the play of speech-acts and performatives on which the credibility of their simulated worlds depends. In the wake of *Literature as Conduct*, the literature on Henry James gains a framework and focus of which it was largely unaware.

Miller explains the persistence of his interest in speech acts and performatives in some of the following introductory phrases:

> The author's act of writing is a doing that takes the form of putting things in this way or that. . . . The narrators and characters in a work of fiction may utter speech acts that are a way of doing things with words—promises, declarations, excuses, denials, acts of bearing witness, lies, decisions publicly attested, and the like. Such speech acts make up crucial moments in the narrator's or in the characters' conduct of life. . . . The reader, in his or her turn, in acts of reading, criticism, or informal comment, may do things by putting a reading into words. Doing that may have an effect on students, readers, or acquaintances. . . . My title, "Literature as Conduct," can refer to the way writing literature is a form of conduct, or to the representation of conduct within literary fictions, or, using *conduct* as a verb, to the way literature may conduct readers to believe or behave in new ways (2).

Acts of readership, criticism, commentary, and rhetoric, in and around literary works, are not without their repercussions. These preoccupations are anything but hopelessly derivative teapot tempests at an outrageous remove from the scenes of deliberation and action. They are the very paradigms of the tangible, often cataclysmic aftershocks, in the full socio-political sense, ensuing from the collaborative speech acts in which actual people as well as literary characters regularly engage. As Miller puts it, with respect to one of the major Jamesian novels in his sights:

> Society in *The Wings of the Dove* is a reciprocal system of working and being worked. . . . The whole system of relative valuations is based on nothing of substantial worth as foundation, at least not on any insight into that, nor on an objectively valid method of measuring value. Another more hyperbolic way to put this is to say that this social system is based on a set of lies that everyone knows are lies and yet agrees to pretend to believe. The whole airy fabric of giving and taking, of exchange, substitution, and appropriation, has no substance and is suspended over nothing (216-17).

In comparison to earlier studies, Miller demonstrates even greater confidence and fluidity in linking interrelated phenomena of narration, characterology, rhetoric, and ethics while at the same time bringing certain persistent theoretical inquiries—into the nature of speech acts and their decisiveness to social relations in and out of literary works—to some resolution, however provisional. His commentary achieves new authenticity not by dint of any relaxation of discipline or by giving in to broad generalizations.

With regard to the nature of speech acts, their role in and out of literary texts, their theoretical implications, and their compelling interest as a site where literary (and by implication, all cultural) invention impacts tangibly on the domain of action in its multiple theaters, Miller's phrasings and attestations attain even more than their usual high level of lucidity and directness, as should be evident in the initial citation above (from the Introduction). Yet each chapter in *Literature as Conduct* is a complex performance in its own right. Each encounter with a major James novel or novella somehow manages to choreograph patient elucidation of related theoretical inquiries by the likes of John Austin, John Searle, Martin Heidegger, Paul de Man, and Jacques Derrida; precise definitions and examples, in and outside of James's writing, of specific speech acts such as lies, paths, promises, and the rhetorical tropes (for instance, catachresis, diegesis, prosopopoeia) that they mobilize; and, a remarkably germane and coherent elucidation of a James work certain to have aroused more than its share of 'the commentator's despair'. In the fluidity with which each extended encounter with a major Jamesian fictive work segues toward the broader theoretical considerations specific to it, Miller attains a new level of playfulness in his criticism. In keeping with his unabashed respect and appreciation for Jacques Derrida, the man and his project, and, in his dedication, his celebration of "almost forty years of unclouded friendship" between the two, each detailed exegesis arises from and embellishes the local difference, endowing that text with its irreducible singularity, its private idiom, and its distinct virtual reality.

It is within the framework of such a multifaceted performance, whose core bearings and insights have matured over steady retrospection as well as time, that Miller can offer us his bravura readings of kisses in *The Portrait of A Lady* (32-44) and of the ejaculations "There you are" and "Oh!" as they transition from character to character in *The Wings of the Dove* (195-202). The kiss, for Miller, figures as a modality of expression operating on oral, tactile, non-verbal, demonstrative, and performative levels. Miller's reading of the kiss that Caspar Goodwood gives Isabel Archer near the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* focuses on how the avatar and literal vehicle of the more untrammeled sexuality emerging during the timeframe of the novel (the kiss) is precisely the cue triggering her return to an awful marriage—but in a state of knowledge, autonomy, and liberation emerging from her performative experience in

the novel. The motif of the kiss in James's fiction attains its local singularity over and against its role in works by Proust, Freud, Joyce, Novalis and Derrida, in a surprising, spontaneous literary history of the kiss that Miller deftly grafts into his own narrative.

Speech acts are an abiding concern for Miller, among other reasons, because they serve as the interface at which the formal features and dynamics of language receive their 'translation' into social relationships and societal phenomena. Deconstruction's eventual turning, after its initial inquiry into the philosophical pretexts to and conflicts surrounding the figural constitution of texts and discourse—its taking up such issues as hospitality, pardon, mercy, and political sovereignty—no less than 'decided' the social relevance and indispensability of its critique. *Literature as Conduct*, in the extreme effectiveness of its summation of deconstruction's turn to the theories of performance and speech-acts, is a major work of critical theory at the same time that it is a decisive contribution to the criticism of Henry James and of fiction in general. Not only does it take James's novels as the pretext for a clearer, more patient exposition of the possibilities and varieties of speech acts than is available, say, in the works of Derrida or Jean-Luc Nancy. It discloses the novelistic dimension surrounding all our conventional interpersonal interactions, opening up a crucial new panorama for ethical oversight and introspection.

Severe moral quandaries, both exacerbated and resolved by the speech acts in which they engage, are an everyday fact for the characters housed in the virtual space of James's novels, according to Miller. The reader of his novels encounters "a torn fabric full of gaps, hiatuses, voids, places where what should have been represented is not represented, or represented inadequately, though it remains there, waiting to be justly said" (163). Miller in no way evades the historico-sociological constraints upon the particular moral quicksand upon which the Jamesian characters tread. Nanda Brookenham's marriage prospects, in *The Awkward Age*, are severely restricted by the sexual knowledge to which she has been prematurely exposed according the Victorian mores of sexuality operative within the novel's fictive cadre. "On the continent young girls are scrupulously protected, sequestered, until the moment of marriage. . . . That decade was an awkward age of transition from Victorian approximate silence about sexual misdoings in literature to a new century" (131). "Only a girl who is not only physically a virgin but whose mind is a virgin sheet of paper is qualified to say 'I do'" (135). Morally attenuated situations in literature more often than not have their roots in speech acts, such as the lies and lying promises proliferating in *The Wings of the Dove*, but the quandaries to which they give rise empower the artifacts, in this case novels, to issue overall moral declarations of their own:

> The lesson of *The Wings of the Dove* might be expressed as the command: don't tell lies. They have a way of coming true, of their own accord, through the power of words, that is, in their secret relation to death, against all your wishes and intentions (225).

Two striking Millerian beliefs (themselves inevitably, in his parlance, bearings toward words) in the background of the above formulation concern the *virtuality* of a memorable writer's fictive spaces, their objective and autonomous existence with regard to their characters, readers, and even their authors; and, speech acts' proleptic and self-

confirming *effectivity* (what they pronounce eventually comes true). In respect to *The Wings of the Dove's* virtual existence, Miller writes:

> The novel, it follows, refers to an entire world to which James alone has access, but which he has not invented, except in the sense of discovering it. The evidence for this is the way he says he fails to bring all of it to light (162).

With unerring accuracy and concision, Miller demonstrates throughout James's fiction the actualization of realities first arising as circumlocutions in speech acts, a construct we might rephrase, for purposes of our discussion, 'the customized fictions of everyday life'. The uncanny fluctuation, in and outside of literature, that Miller stages between the play of its figures and fanciful conceits and its virtual repercussions, is a vertiginous object-lesson in the earnest responsibility inhering in the critic's (and reader's) task.

Speech acts, for Miller, are the disturbing interface where the contractual conventions of literature spill over into the human conspiracies both definitively establishing the banality of evil and rendering the exchanges of communal life possible. It is a tribute to Miller's personal and interpretative ethics, his approach to linguistic and human predicaments always on the highest intellectual plane, and his avoidance of personal and intellectual triviality that the "almost forty years of unclouded friendship" he claims to have shared with Jacques Derrida is indeed a true attestation. Very few of Derrida's colleagues and associates, past and ongoing, can press this claim with anything near Miller's authority and authenticity. Yet Miller's ongoing investigation into the performative moves the construct of the community away from the impasse it reached in Derrida's own writings and closer to the notion of the inoperative community defined by intangibles: death, narrative, contingent encounters and affiliations—explored by Jean-Luc Nancy. Speech acts, for Miller, at once imbue literature with a good measure of its drama and excitement, facilitate the enactment of ploys and plans whose initial expression is understandings between people in and about words, and underwrite all mechanisms of the social contract— for example, laws, civil and administrative procedures—'making something happen'.

Yet the only possible arena for Miller in which such deliberations and postulations can take place is a meticulous reading of cultural artifacts, one informed by the most dynamic and thought-initiating conceptual paradigms available. At a moment when the corporatization of information and the commodification of intellectual work pull critics away from exegesis and into postures of self-presentation and self-representation (for instance a memoir); increasingly, as well, into wide-bore global pronouncement, Miller restricts himself to scoring all his points in a head to head encounter with Henry James, in the above-cited phrasings a most exasperating intellectual 'property'. Miller simply will not let his fellow critics off the hook of the complexity of the artifacts they address and the imponderables attending their own rhetorical positions, the fated obscurity of astute and responsible commentary in an age of sound-bytes, and the moral imperative, within ethical limits, to make complexity plain. Nothing could be timelier than Miller's exhortation, in his 'performance' of James, for the colleagues, students, and readers all over the world he has served with dedication, integrity, and intellectual and personal generosity: to keep on task, to brave the resistance and

obscurity prompted by criticism, and to sustain that close commentary, on our age and the forces and phenomena it brings into play.

If we were to permit ourselves a moral pronouncement, yet another form of speech act, one arising from the invariably inventive critical ploys of *Literature as Conduct*, one of its (several possible) virtual articulations might be as follows: "Readers will make things happen only if they persist in the task of the critic, only if they assume the devotion, discipline, and rigors entailed in close reading and minute attention to the transitions between words and deeds".

Works Cited

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