

## PUBLISHED VERSION

Peter Poiana

**Ethics and Literary Criticism: Hillis Miller, Sartre and Jauss**

Literature and Aesthetics, 1995; 5:46-60

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

### PERMISSIONS

<http://openjournals.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/LA/about/editorialPolicies#openAccessPolicy>

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

*Permission obtained for full text via email 25May16*

25 May 2016

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/99030>

# Ethics and Literary Criticism: Hillis Miller, Sartre and Jauss

*Peter Poiana*

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how forms of ethical questioning can be applied to the field of literary studies. The question as to whether it is legitimate to develop a literary theory which is properly ethical, that is, one that is founded on ethical rather than historical, epistemological or linguistic considerations, remains problematical at this stage, and it would certainly be premature to claim an independent status for a comprehensive 'ethical' model of literature. Rather I intend to proceed obliquely by exploring the question of ethics with respect to the works of three well-known literary theorists, namely J. Hillis Miller, Jean-Paul Sartre and Hans-Robert Jauss, all of whom command a strong position within the field of literary studies.<sup>1</sup> Although these names are associated with contrasting and even opposing theories of literature, with differing views on the relative status of the writer, the reader and the literary work, I maintain that it is possible to establish a common ground between them to the extent that each, in his own way, poses the problem of ethics.

Of the three, Hillis Miller's model is the most directly and indeed radically ethical, as he tries to guide the Deconstructive method of which he is a founder away from the realm of gratuitous play and towards the more edifying notion of social responsibility. I will try to show in detail how he goes about the task of what one may term the moral correction of Deconstruction. The second theory I will discuss is that of Jean-Paul Sartre, who extends the concept of *engagement* drawn from his Existentialist philosophy to the activity of writing and reading texts. Thus, for Sartre, literary activity becomes significant only when writers and readers make an unconditional commitment to projects of social change. Finally, Hans-Robert Jauss's hermeneutic approach to literature will be examined in order to gauge its underlying ethical concerns. My comments will deal principally with the third and culminating stage of hermeneutic thinking, that of *application*, where one confronts the question of the practical implications of literary understanding.

To begin with, it is necessary to distinguish the two key ideas which will direct my discussion. The first is that the ethical import

of literary criticism is to be situated within the confines of *reading*, reading being the process whereby literary texts come to have a real influence on contemporary affairs, either by bringing about a change in the attitudes of individuals, or by creating new modes of behaving or thinking across sections of the population. So it is that I shall refer henceforth to the ethics of reading. The second point is that reading is not a purely cognitive or speculative activity concerned with the building up of theoretical knowledge, but is to be conceived as an instance of practical reason—or *praxis*—in which thought is necessarily directed towards action. In other words, reading as a process of meaning construction is inherently ends-driven or *purposive*. Drawing these two points together, I shall argue that the first step in the direction of an ethical approach to literary criticism, is to effect a shift in focus so that one's interest lies no longer in sources or determining causes—which include authorial practices—nor in the forms or structures which characterize literature as a genre, but in the question of the ends of literature as they are realized in the process of reading. I shall now discuss Hillis Miller's Deconstruction, Sartre's Existentialism and Jauss's Hermeneutics in light of the conceptual framework just outlined.

### Hillis Miller

Turning to Hillis Miller's essay *The Ethics of Reading*, consider the very loaded statement with which he opens his discussion. 'I shall argue', he writes, 'that there is a peculiar and unexpected relation between the affirmation of universal moral law and storytelling'.<sup>2</sup> The two sides of the equation are clearly established: on the one hand we find the forms of narrative composition, with its own generic processes and structures, and on the other hand the notion of the moral law which establishes a set of principles seen to be valid universally, and thus carrying the force of an obligation. Having distinguished the two domains, Hillis Miller brings them together by stating that narrative functions by placing the reader before an obligation, an 'I must' which is to be conceived less in terms of a constraint or a prohibition, than in terms of a willing adherence to a law which binds the reader in a sort of a contract passed with the text. More specifically, the contract enjoins the reader to submit to the linguistic and rhetorical injunctions of the text, and in return the latter will introduce the reader into a universal historical narrative carrying the promise of a satisfying end. This is because, says Hillis Miller,

narrative 'has an implicit teleology. It creates history. It is the prolepsis of a story not only with a beginning but with a middle and an end. Like all founding legislation or drawing up of a social contract it makes a promise'.<sup>3</sup> Narrative then possesses a *telos* in the strong sense of producing necessary outcomes. It is driven by ethical imperatives which become the 'source of [the individual's] cognitive and political acts',<sup>4</sup> to the extent that they may be considered to be, in a more general sense, 'productive and inaugural in [their] effects on history'.<sup>5</sup> Narrative possesses the force of a moral law, then, because of the inner necessity in evidence in its formal organisation. It is this formal necessity which, in calling for the reader's unconditional acceptance, eventually produces its effects in the extra-literary realms of politics and history.

It is certainly surprising to see Deconstruction calling for such a heavily loaded moral philosophy, given that it has in the past refused to acknowledge moral distinctions of any kind. It is not difficult, however, to understand the motives behind this move. Reading the introduction to Hillis Miller's book, one senses that he is troubled by criticisms made of the deconstructive method, which has become the object of such unsavoury epithets as 'elitist', 'arbitrary', 'obscure', 'irrelevant' and 'nihilist'. The ethics of reading seems designed to curtail such attacks, for through it one is in a position to investigate, to quote Hillis Miller, 'the relations of literature to history, to moral choice, and to public decision making'.<sup>6</sup> He extends his ethical reformulation of Deconstruction to the situation of the humanities in general, saying that '[it] is these new forms of rhetoric and poetics that will lead the way toward that taking of responsibility for language, for literature, and for the role of these in society and history which is called for today'.<sup>7</sup> It appears that Deconstruction is taking, through Hillis Miller's efforts, what Americans like to call the moral high ground, hoping to silence its critics by taking a stronger position than they would perhaps ever take themselves.

This may well leave literary scholars perplexed. Given the now well-known deconstructionist formula which states that readings of texts are necessarily unstable, that meaning is constantly short-circuited in the series of displacements created by figural language, that the reader constantly loses footing in the shifting sands of the text, how are we to fathom its unexpected ethical turn? The answer is that Deconstruction's subversive power can no longer be thought of as being anarchic with respect to the reader's involvement with the text. Rather, it appears to be invested with a rule-giving function which

determines not only the mode of reading which ensues, but also the making of history itself.

How is this possible in deconstructionist terms? One has to recognize that Hillis Miller's ethics of reading is an extension of the performative model of literature he previously embraced. Literature is performative when we consider it as an act of story-telling. This places it on the same plane as other inter-subjective acts such as making promises, expressing intentions or telling lies. But these performative situations, that is the telling, the doing and promising, have the peculiar characteristic of denying their efficacy as acts, so that we are left with the uncomfortable feeling that the promises remain unkept, the intentions unrealized, the truths and the lies unconvincing. It is at this point that Deconstruction takes its now well-known stand: it says that literature is to be understood fundamentally as performance subverting itself, so that in the performative situation in which the reader is placed, all efforts to derive meaning from the work are presented in both their necessity and their impossibility. What results is a peculiar type of performativity, in which antagonistic forces are maintained in a state of suspensive free play, so that possible forms of activity are posited without any attempt being made to establish their real outcomes. It is this purely formal conception of performativity which enables Deconstruction to enter into its ethical phase.

In his *Ethics of Reading*, Hillis Miller makes the ingenious leap from the domain of performativity to that of morality. Instead of the text telling readers what to do, and then denying them the possibility of doing it, it places itself on a higher level of abstraction where it confronts the problem of the very possibility of issuing commands. Instead of the text telling readers to perform certain acts, it now considers whether it has the right tell the reader to do anything at all. Hillis Miller's ethical move is, by his own admission, a Kantian one. Now the text is conceived according to its legislative moment, whose claim to truth is such that it cannot but be obeyed, for the reader cannot but firmly adhere to its principles. Following the Kantian conception of the individual as a free rational agent, Hillis Miller places the individual reader at the very centre of literature's ethical function. It is the individual reader who provides the fundamental drive for the attribution of meanings to texts, by virtue of the approbation with which he greets the law emanating from them.

The ethics of reading is only concerned to examine the text's law-giving potential as it impinges on individual acts of reading. Consider

## *The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*

the following testimony by Hillis Miller: 'I still stand before the law of the ethics of reading, subject to it, compelled by it, persuaded of its existence and sovereignty by what happens to me when I read. What happens is an "I must" that is always the same but always different, unique, idiomatic.'<sup>8</sup> Standing before the law, the only possible reaction of the reader is to acquiesce to its commands, viewing these not as specific acts to be accomplished, but as the mark of the necessity of forming a project directed towards history. True to Deconstruction's fundamental premise, Hillis Miller states that narrative remains the essential vehicle of the moral law, which constantly appears in its various linguistic and rhetorical guises. The law thus acquires each time a presence which is 'different', 'unique' and 'idiomatic'. This is because one never eradicates the fundamental 'epistemological error' which continues to pervade texts through their various rhetorical transcriptions, these being contained in such figures as *prolepsis*, *repetition* and *allegory*, to quote the three traditionally favoured by Deconstruction. But here, the ethics of reading is concerned with the final, motivating cause of the 'epistemological error', as it is realized by the reader who does not merely collaborate in its projected rhetorical designs, but who brings it to fruition by virtue of it having attained the force and the amplitude of a moral law.

When Hillis Miller writes that '... each act of reading like ethical acts in general, is a performative new start',<sup>9</sup> one is struck by the essentially teleological perspective in which he places himself. More than this, it appears that the common ground between reading as an act and ethics as a discipline, is precisely the recognition of a *telos* as a founding principle. This *telos* is contained in the fact that reading, as *praxis*, is a rule-governed activity eminently directed towards an end. That Deconstruction continues to define this end as nothing other than the production of more text, of more story commanding the relentlessly fitful restarts of human destiny, does not undermine its ethical basis. For although it is the text which commands the *telos* of reading, it is the presence of the reader as a free and conscious agent, necessary to the fulfilment of that end, which makes reading ethical.

## Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre develops an equally strong teleological view of literature in his essay *What is Literature?* published in 1950. The end of literature, he asserts, 'is to appeal to the freedom of men so that

they may realize and maintain the reign of human freedom'.<sup>10</sup> It is true that Sartre stresses in these essays the responsibility of the writer to become involved in the social issues of the day, through the act of writing which is seen as an effective form of social and political action. However, a substantial part of the book is devoted specifically to the activity of reading, which is considered as important for human freedom as the act of writing. I quote here from Sartre: 'Since creation can find its fulfilment only in reading, since the artist must entrust to another the task of carrying out what he has begun, since it is only through the consciousness of the reader that he can regard himself as essential to his work, all literary work is an appeal'.<sup>11</sup> The task of the reader, then, is to answer the 'appeal' originating in the text. In this formulation, Sartre, like Hillis Miller, is effectively dealing with the problem of the ends of literature from the point of view of the reader's relation to the text. This relation is conceived according to the main tenets of existentialism as Sartre had defined them: that is, the individual exists through his capacity to exercise 'pure freedom', in undertaking 'unconditioned activity'<sup>12</sup> with a view to changing in some way his social, political or cultural environment. Sartre's literary criticism reflects this existential position, by positing a pure form of freedom which results in intervention in social and political affairs by the individual reader who assumes full responsibility for his actions.

The path that Sartre charts from the bounds of the text to the world of action, via the activity of reading, is first and foremost an ethical one because it is governed by the notion of ends. In reading a work, Sartre asserts, 'I transform the [textual] given into an imperative, and the [textual] fact into a value'.<sup>13</sup> Borrowing from Kant's Ethical Philosophy, he goes on to explain that the literary work 'from the very beginning places itself on the level of the Categorical Imperative',<sup>14</sup> which is a specific instance of reason determining the way in which the moral law makes itself known to free rational agents. One cannot escape here the rationalist and idealist underpinnings of Sartre's model, which brings rational truth to bear on moral choice. Reading is thus an example of the workings of Kant's Practical Reason, for through it one is called upon to devise rules of social behaviour which have the force of duty, and to which one chooses to adhere because they are formulated according to the dictates of Reason.

But what part is played by the text in this forceful affirmation of the ends of literature? And what specific literary methodology is required for this end to be fully revealed? Two points need to be

made in this connection. The first is Sartre's belief that the text must be interpreted in light of the historical circumstances which surrounded not only the writing of the work but also its initial reception by the reading public. Thus, the possible repercussions of the work can only be considered in terms of the concrete and finite conditions of the reader's life experience, and of the situational constraints which weigh upon him as he devises his project of social action. In his analysis of Vercors' novel *The Silence of the Sea*, published during the Second World War, Sartre makes the radical assertion that the effectiveness of the work is limited to the period of the German occupation of France, because it is only during this period that readers can devise forms of action, envisage political projects, in keeping with the message of the novel.<sup>15</sup> This is because, says Sartre, '*being situated* is an essential and necessary characteristic of freedom'.<sup>16</sup> Sartre defends here a peculiarly virulent type of historicist method, with the historical boundaries drawn exclusively around the historical events portrayed, inasmuch as they anticipate the forms of social and political intervention in which a reading public could conceivably engage in response to the work. Here, Sartre's idea of the work's *telos* is acutely, and perhaps abusively, historicist.

But we are no closer here to an understanding of how the literary text functions with respect to the imperative to engage in social action. What are the characteristics of the literary text which convey its appeal to the reader? We come to the second point which must be made in connection with Sartre's theory, namely that his ethics of reading is much more inclined towards aesthetical notions than textual givens. In fact, textual considerations are ruled out rather abruptly, in his curious statement that literary language should be simple and direct, without any hint at all of stylistic or rhetorical devices. To quote Sartre, '[s]ince words are transparent and since the gaze looks through them, it would be absurd to slip in among them ... panes of rough glass'.<sup>17</sup> Language then does not interest Sartre. What does interest him are the sequences of actions portrayed in the work, and the choices made by the characters in dealing with the near impossible situations in which they find themselves. The reader develops with respect to the fictional world what Sartre calls a 'positional consciousness',<sup>18</sup> which is a form of involvement in the exemplary struggles played out in the work. Furthermore, it is this 'positional' aspect of reading which provides the essential structure of 'aesthetic pleasure', in other words the feeling of exhilaration which, beyond the realm of disinterested contemplation,



brings about the desire to act ethically.

These sometimes curious methodological choices can be explained by the fact that Sartre is first and foremost a philosopher, and only secondarily a literary critic. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to be impressed by the strong teleological slant of his literary method. Through his elucidation of the phenomenology of meaning production, Sartre aims to highlight the way in which literature gives rise to a socially responsible readership, via an ethical imperative which orientates readers directly to the society they belong to. However, it is this direct access to reality which poses a problem in Sartre's criticism. One can justly claim that literature is composed of mediate forms of reality, and that reading must consequently determine itself with respect to the instances and strategies of mediation proper to texts. These questions may be usefully dealt with by turning now to the field of literary hermeneutics.

## Jauss

One could conceivably object that it is forcing the issue to draw Jauss's hermeneutics into the sphere of ethics, for hermeneutics as a discipline has traditionally been concerned to develop ways of reconciling logical oppositions, of balancing points of view, of recognizing the right to exist of the Other in its own terms and for its own sake. Hermeneutics as the art of understanding does not as a rule sit easily with the more aggressively voluntarist stance of the ethical thinker. Neither does it readily admit of the ethical imperative which, in seeking universal validity, tends to override the claims made by the Other. I maintain, however, that it is useful to consider Jauss's literary hermeneutics as pointing in the direction of an ethics of reading, for it retains the strong teleological principles in evidence in Hillis Miller's and Sartre's models, all the while attenuating the latter's dogmatism and bringing to light methodological questions which they have tended to overlook.

The starting point of hermeneutics is the recognition of the inherent strangeness of the literary work, which can be attributed to the fact that it almost always comes to us from a different age, and from a different place. Hermeneutics is the process by which the reader comes to terms with this strangeness, so that the message conveyed by the work ultimately attains a ring of truth for the reader who sees it in the context of his own life experience. According to Jauss in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, the concept around which this

process revolves is that of the 'horizon of expectations'.<sup>19</sup> In reading a literary work, the horizon of possible meanings projected by the text is confronted with the set of expectations of the reader, with the result that there occurs a 'fusion of horizons'<sup>20</sup> within which the process of understanding develops. It is the notion of 'fusion of horizons' which provides the essential structure of literary understanding. Jauss then extends this concept, using it to establish a basis for the historical understanding of texts, where meanings elaborated in the present are connected with meanings which come to us from a recent or a distant past. Through the concept of 'fusion of horizons', Jauss explains the process of reading as a form of dialogical understanding between past and present, present and past being the temporal equivalents of the instances of the Self and the Other. In this coupling of inter-subjectivity and historicity, the crucial moment of hermeneutic understanding remains always, as Jauss stresses, 'the methodical reconciliation of the horizons of the text and of the interpreter'.<sup>21</sup>

Now in what way does Jauss's hermeneutics contribute to an ethics of reading? It can be said that the process of the merging of horizons is invested with a *telos*, in the sense that the understanding gained in reading texts possesses a particular orientation, or end. To appreciate this point, it is instructive to see how the foremost Hermeneutic philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, attempts to associate the hermeneutic method with key elements of Aristotelian Ethics.<sup>22</sup> In the same way, says Gadamer, that Aristotle's practical philosophy aims at the concretization of knowledge in specific situations, hermeneutics is directed towards the appropriation of signs to meaning systems established in the context of the individual's life experience. To this end, the three moments which traditionally constitute the hermeneutic method, namely *understanding*, *interpretation* and *application*, are to be seen as progressive, each stage building on the previous one so that we move progressively from the strange to the familiar, from the general to the particular, from the passive to the active. The hermeneutic process culminates in this way in *application*, this being the final stage of understanding in which meaning is appropriated to real-life situations, by virtue of the change that is brought about in one's horizon of expectations with respect to that situation. The point Gadamer is making, is that hermeneutics as a discipline is fundamentally ethical in an Aristotelian sense. That is to say, the form of knowledge it implies is one in which the knower himself is fully implicated, so that it

appears to him essentially as a task to be performed. Hermeneutics aims toward that practical form of knowledge in which, as Gadamer puts it, 'the person acting must see the concrete situation in the light of what is asked of him in general'.<sup>23</sup>

Following the general observations made by Gadamer, we can turn again to Jauss's literary hermeneutics in order to see how he translates them into a literary methodology. The final hermeneutic moment of *application* is realized, in Jauss's methodology, by a review of the meanings which have been attributed to canonical texts in the different historical periods which have followed their first publication. Thus, of a poem by Baudelaire written in the nineteenth century, Jauss selects a number of commentaries which appeared from the time of its first publication to the present day, with the intention of, as he puts it, introducing a 'temporal dimension' into his analysis of the poem. In Jauss's method, past and present horizons of understanding are clearly distinguished, so as to show '... how the meaning of the poem has unfolded itself historically in the interaction between effect and reception—up to those very questions that guide our interpretation and to which the text in its own time did not have to be the answer'.<sup>24</sup> Now, the specifically ethical character of this process lies in the confrontation which occurs between past and present interpretations, between one's own and previous readers' interpretations of the text, the confrontation being a means, says Jauss, 'to measure and to broaden the horizon of one's own experience vis-a-vis the experience of the other'.<sup>25</sup> We have no better method, Jauss seems to say, to apprehend a text's relevance for present day readers. The key term here is *relevance*, to be understood as the end which informs all interpretation.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I return to my original proposition that an ethics of reading is characterized by the fact that it directly confronts the question of purposiveness in literary studies. If ethics as a discipline posits as the first principle of all activity the existence of an end, it follows that any attempt to develop an ethics of reading must incorporate the concept of purposiveness into its approach to literary understanding. The three models I have chosen to discuss here strike me as being particularly suggestive of such an enterprise. The fact that they achieve this from very different vantage points, enhances the claims made in favour of an ethical approach to literary studies.

## *The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*

For Sartre, this purpose finds its expression in the individual's commitment to effective political action. For Jauss, it involves the creation of an awareness of one's relationship with the Other, and for Hillis Miller, when he is not occupied with the corporatist defence of Deconstruction, it signifies the responsibility of literary scholars towards their profession and towards their students.<sup>26</sup> Taking the three models together, one could say that their defining moment lies precisely with an overarching preoccupation with the question 'Why read?', to be understood not in the sense of the pursuit of one's personal tastes or interests, but in the sense that reading itself is nothing if not oriented toward a project engaging the reader in the domain of *praxis*.<sup>27</sup>

By making the notion of purposiveness central to an ethics of reading, we are in effect positing a fundamental and necessary relationship between text and context. This relationship manifests itself as a distinct directedness, or orientation, which starts out from the text's discursive structures as they are perceived by the reader, and ends with the making of an existential choice as the final moment of interpretation. Context is here defined as the universal destination given to the process of reading as it is informed by reading's inherent purposiveness. It is thus not to be equated with the empirical conditions in which reading takes place. By saying that reading is purposive, we are saying that literary understanding is possible in all historical contexts. Seventeenth-century texts can be understood by twentieth century readers, European texts by non-European readers, and even ancient Asian texts can provide an enriching reading experience to people who have no knowledge of the cultures from which they originate. In all these cases, the rule of relevance is universally admitted, insofar as it is conceived as a universal potential for practical meanings to be extracted from texts, and insofar as texts retain their value as an instance of reappraisal of the self seen in the context of its life-situation. Such are the principles which would seem to underlie the very idea of an ethics of reading.

### Notes

- 1 The principal texts chosen for discussion are: J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, New York, 1987; J.-P. Sartre, *What is Literature?* London, 1950 (trans. B. Frechtman); and H.-R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis, 1982 (trans. T. Bahti).
- 2 Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p.2.
- 3 Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p.29.

- 4 Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p.5.
- 5 Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p.9.
- 6 J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Then and Now*, Durham, p.334.
- 7 Hillis Miller, *Theory Then and Now*, pp.336.
- 8 Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, p.127.
- 9 J. Hillis Miller, 'Response to Jonathan Loesberg', in *Victorian Studies* 37, 1 (1993): 127.
- 10 Sartre, p.119.
- 11 Sartre, p.32.
- 12 Sartre, p.34.
- 13 Sartre, p.43.
- 14 Sartre, p.34.
- 15 Sartre, see p.116.
- 16 Sartre, p.112.
- 17 Sartre, p.15.
- 18 Sartre, p.42.
- 19 For a concise definition of the term, see H.-R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p.79: '... for each work a preconstituted horizon of expectations must be ready at hand (this can also be understood as a relationship of the rules of the game) to orient the reader's (public's) understanding and to enable a qualifying reception'.
- 20 Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p.30.
- 21 H.-R. Jauss, *Pour une herméneutique littéraire*, Paris, 1982, p.434. The English translation is mine.
- 22 H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London, 1975 (trans. W. Glen-Doepel). See 'The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle', pp.278–288.
- 23 Gadamer, p.279.
- 24 Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p.170.
- 25 Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, p.147.
- 26 'But I want to stress here that those on these committees and editorial boards have a tremendous moral obligation. It is the obligation to decide, ultimately, what gets published, who teaches, and what gets taught.' Hillis Miller, *Theory Then and Now*, p.331.
- 27 Jauss strongly puts the view that literary interpretation, as well as literary creation, is 'subordinate to practical action'. *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, Minneapolis, 1982, p.46.