

J. HILLIS MILLER
*Fiction and Repetition: Seven
English Novels*
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard
University Press, 1982. Pp. 250.
\$15.00.

In *Fiction and Repetition* J. Hillis Miller, well known as a critic of Victorian literature and, in recent years, as a literary theorist, presents an introduction entitled "Two Forms of Repetition," followed by individual chapters on *Lord Jim*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Henry Esmond*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *The Well-Beloved*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Between the Acts*. He explains that his book, though "not a work of theory as such," is a series of readings focusing "on the 'how' of meaning rather than on its 'what.'" While much of his genuinely intelligent and subtle commentary on the seven novels (the more or less New Critical readings) cannot be condensed and fitted into a review, it should be possible to clarify some of his basic assumptions and repeated conclusions—matters which may be distressing or at least controversial.

Miller's distinction between two kinds of "intertwining" repetition—first, "Platonic," which is "grounded in a solid archetypal model" and will seem normative to most readers; second, the "Nietzschean mode," which is "the subversive ghost of the first," ungrounded, riddling, arising "out of the interplay of . . . opaquely similar things"—may be valid and important; but, after all, in the essays which comprise the body of the book (except those on Hardy) repetition seems to be a more or less peripheral subject. It is possible that Miller's title, introduction, and intermittent interest in repetition are a result of the scholarly community's demand for a governing "thesis." Certainly a book which ignores Continental writers, such as Mann and Robbe-Grillet, cannot pretend to be a comprehensive study of repetition in fiction. Moreover, in one notable instance Miller ignores the fact that scholarship demands continuity: that is to say, he does not even allude to E.K. Brown's *Rhythm in the Novel*, perhaps dated (1950), but clear, persuasive, gentlemanly lectures, in which, incidentally, Brown consistently employs a phrase, borrowed from E.M. Forster, which should have been handy for Miller, "repetition with variation." Of Miller's seven chapters on individual novels, that on *Mrs. Dalloway* is clearly the best; uniformly the result of sensitive and careful

reading, the chapter comments on the "narrating presence," the image of "a great enshadowing tree," tenses, the song of the old woman, and so on. The chapters on Hardy rank second. The longest is on *Esmond*, a "family romance" and definitely an ironic book for Miller. The chapter on *Between the Acts* seems as nervous or disjointed as the novel itself, and the opening chapters on *Jim* and the *Heights* are the most emphatic pieces of deconstruction.

Yes, although *Fiction and Repetition* is "not a work of theory as such," it is a work which frequently discovers "heterogeneity," a deconstructionist's goal. (I say "frequently" because, as far as I can see, Miller's preoccupation with deconstruction fades in the last three chapters.) Miller's analyses are preceded by an important declaration: "one characteristic" of his own criticism, he asserts, is "a desire to account for the *totality* of a given work The readings in this book assume that the demand for a *total* accounting is implicit in the effort of interpretation, even when it is evaded or minimized" (emphasis added). How many professional students of literature "assume" the same thing? Not all by any means, as David Lodge suggests: "Criticism, then, cannot avoid being partial and selective" (*The Novelist at the Crossroads*, p. 63).

Miller's deconstructionist conclusions are stated clearly and boldly. *Lord Jim*, for instance, is said to raise questions but not answer them; "the indeterminacy lies in the multiplicity of possible incompatible explanations given by the novel and in the lack of evidence justifying a choice of one over the others." As for *Wuthering Heights*, which has generated nearly countless essays written by critics who hope to be "the Daniel who can at last decipher the writing on the wall," it resists "a single definitive reading," not because it is "incoherent, confused, or flawed," but because the "center," "the head referent," the "innermost core" is missing (for similar comments on other novels, see pp. 109, 128, 140, 142). Those who distrust such conclusions may be pleased to find that only in limited ways is Miller able to illustrate or to prove "the unresolvable heterogeneity" of the various novels. He likes to pick out passages which are "emblems" of the whole, possibly because an exhaustive deconstructionist essay would be excessively long. (He also likes the language of weaving, possibly because he wishes to weave and then unweave, to construct and then deconstruct.)

If all novels contain “unresolvable heterogeneity,” why write criticism at all? Listen to Miller speak of *Tess* and *The Well-Beloved*: “The power of readings to go on multiplying means that Tess’s wish to be ‘forgotten quite’ cannot be fulfilled. The chain of interpretation will continue to add new links.” “In the case of such a text, any new reading, like each of the *Avices*, is no more than an additional link midway in an endless chain stretching before and behind.” Perhaps we can no longer delude ourselves and think of criticism as cumulative, as gradually creating a consensus about some “truth”; but if criticism is nothing more than an endless repetition of various competing possibilities, if it is nothing “more than an additional link midway in an endless chain”—*cui bono?* Kafka and Dante come to mind, particularly the Infernoites who engage in ceaseless and meaningless activity.

There is much in Miller’s book—standard literary criticism, at times brilliant; brief excursions into theory (for instance, see comments on Iser and Kermode, pp. 214-16); and perhaps glimpses of a dark abyss some readers will wish to deny.

Daniel P. Deneau

HEINRICH BÖLL
Fürsorgliche Belagerung
 Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch,
 1979, Pp. 415.

In contrast with his compatriot, Günter Grass, Heinrich Böll reveals himself in his novels as overtly softhearted, even sentimental at times. Grass reminds one rather of a sinister magician with a glittering bag of narrative tricks: he rarely ceases to astound and confound with his weird fantasies and his grotesque smoke screens. Heinrich Böll’s fiction, on the other hand, does not show enough sleight of hand to deceive a sideshow audience for five seconds. In fact, Böll’s artistic forte is not narrative techniques at all, but rather straightforward sincerity and fatherly concern. His recent novel, *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*, seems to have been written by an eccentric but very humane old priest who has lost his dogma and is unsure about his faith but who is filled with a troubled love

for all human beings. Now nostalgically and now indignantly Böll mourns in this novel for the irretrievably lost spirit of a loving Christian community. It is not for nothing that his protagonist, Fritz Tolm, is a sad, old man who shows himself to be well meaning and kind, but quite impotent against the evil monster that is tearing Western society apart. Heinrich Böll is convinced that this monster is the juggernaut capitalism. It is the capitalist mode of production in an anonymous mass society, he feels, which is encouraging the perverted and unstable few to pursue their lust for power over the plodding many. Not, as Böll makes clear in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*, that the worst exploited are the young leftist socialists of West Germany who lost their professional employment owing to the *Radikalerlaß* (Radicals’ Ordinance) and the neo-McCarthy witch hunt for communist spies and sputniks in the 70’s. No, the worst exploited are the refugee-employees in Third-World countries who labor for a starving pittance to produce the fripperies and gadgeteries of our department stores.

Böll longs to replace his disillusioned dream of Christian brotherhood with a liberal, humanitarian socialism. His heroes of the future are the young middle-class intellectuals whose economic studies at Western universities have given them a moral epiphany and a socialist mission. They are convinced that capitalist society is in the death throes of suffocating in the futility of affluence and sexual self-indulgence, the pollution of their living environment, and the guilty anxiety of the haves that they may soon be guillotined by the have-nots. *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* reveals a ruling elite which is rotten throughout with fear or perversity and is constantly engaged in compulsive manipulations to increase its power and prestige. The leaders of this group have devised an intricate machine of secret security policemen to protect themselves from ultra left-wing terrorists. But they do not die at the hands of idealistic assassins. Trapped in the publicity glare of the media providing ersatz titillation for the unadventurous masses, these men of the elite jerk like marionettes on center stage through their scandals, their miseries, their emotional self-mutilations, and often ultimately their suicides. Böll seems sure that a socialist government would lift mankind from this sump of futility.

Fürsorgliche Belagerung is the novel of an unabashed moralist whose aim is to persuade the reader that at least a provisional refuge from the perversions of affluence