



**Print Culture, Digital Culture, Poetics and Hermeneutics: Discussion with J. Hillis Miller**

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**Recommended Citation**

Zhu, Liyuan. "Print Culture, Digital Culture, Poetics and Hermeneutics: Discussion with J. Hillis Miller." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.5 (2020): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3823>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3823)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 22 Issue 5 (December 2020) Article 13**

**Liyuan Zhu,**

**"Print Culture, Digital Culture, Poetics and Hermeneutics: Discussion with J. Hillis Miller"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss5/13>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.5 (2020)**  
Special Issue ***The China Question in Western Theory***. Ed. Liu Kang  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss5/>>

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**Abstract:** This paper is a response to Hillis Miller's query on the author's essay "Hillis Miller on the End of Literature." The author basically agrees with Miller's view on the shift from print culture to digital culture, explaining the special cultural context under which Chinese scholars emphasize the visual turn. Based on the rapid development of Chinese online literature, the author points out that print culture does not rival but coexists with digital culture. On the other hand, drawing on Aristotle's Poetics and insights of several leading figures of contemporary hermeneutics, the author contends that Miller's dichotomy of poetics (form) and hermeneutics (content) is one-sided, since the two are compatible and integral, with concern for both content and form.

**Liyuan ZHU**

### **Print Culture, Digital Culture, Poetics and Hermeneutics: Discussion with J. Hillis Miller**

In 2018, Marshall Brown, editor of the important American journal of literature and theory, *Modern Language Quarterly*, and Wang Ning co-edited a special issue "Chinese Encounters with Western Theories," including the essays of three Chinese scholars, Wang Ning, Zhang Jiang, and myself. Meanwhile, they invited J. Hillis Miller, American literary theorist from the University of California, Irvine, Theo D'Haen, professor of comparative literature at the University of Leuven and editor of *European Review of Academia Europaea*, and Professor Liu Kang from Duke University, to comment on the three Chinese scholars' essays and conduct a dialogue with them. The special issue centers on the relationship between Western literary theory and China. As a participant, I have benefited from the discussion, especially from Miller's comments on my "Hillis Miller on the End of Literature." The bulk of Miller's essay consists of his criticism and a follow-up discussion with me. This paper is a response to Miller's query. In this paper, I hope to discuss with Miller two aspects of the "China question of critical theory": First, Miller's theoretical proposition of "the wholesale shift from a print culture to a digital culture" includes his view on China, that is, the "China question" of western theory that this special issue of *CLCWeb* addresses. Second, Miller assumes that poetics and hermeneutics have different functions, with hermeneutics dealing with content (what is said), and poetics, with form (how it is said). But in my opinion, this distinction is untenable, either by Aristotle's classical views, or by contemporary European hermeneutics or contemporary Chinese hermeneutics. I hold, rather, that although poetics and hermeneutics have different focuses, both of them are concerned with form (how something is said) and content (what is said) in a complementary way.

#### **Some Advice for the Understanding of Derrida's Post Card**

I would like to first respond to Miller's reading of Derrida's Post Card. In his MLQ essay, referring to Derrida's text, Miller asserts that "they (Derrida's remarks) are the essential context for my own essay" ("Western Literary Theory" 347). In this sense, Derrida's Post Card, Miller's interpretation, and my response constitute the primary issue of the China question of critical theory that we need to address: the shift from print culture to digital culture. Derrida claims in his June 23, 1979 letter on the telecommunications age that the meaning of print text cannot be determined by the author's will, and its interpretation is diverse (as the American woman's psychoanalysis in dream suggests, diverse presentations). Truth is always "distorted." Derrida regards the openness of text as "insupportable support," meaning text no longer needs support from the author (death of the author). By the same token, he uses the example of bounty hunters to indicate print media can be manipulated to conceal the truth ("let them desire to have his skin but without being able to do anything about it"). But in the technological regime of telecommunications, the openness of text is further amplified and interpretations multiply. Consequently, the author's subjectivity further dissipates. In this regard, literature becomes "literature without literature" and soon comes to an end. Hence, in the end of the letter, Derrida bemoans he can no longer read love letters because people will not write them anymore (196-98). In another letter written on July 8, 1979, Derrida denounces news and the mass's distortion and fabrication of fact (202-04).

However, Derrida does not seem to believe that the thriving telecommunications technology and the declining literature are absolutely irreconcilable. Instead, he implies the possibility of literature existing in the telecommunications age ("Curious to know what she understood by this") (204). Perhaps the end of literature in the telecommunications age means the end of writing for print media only, and literature in a broad sense will survive. This is probably what "literature (in a narrow sense) without literature (in a broad sense)" means.

These two letters indicate Derrida's conviction that modern telecommunications technology is the root-cause for the end of literature. Of course, for him there is still a glimmer of hope deep down for the survival of literature. It should be added that Derrida's "régime techno-logique des télécommunications" was translated as "technological regime of telecommunications" by Alan Bass. This is not incorrect, but the concept "techno-logique" was weakened. I suspect Miller cites Derrida's French expression to underscore the evolution of logic in "techno-logique" during the course from print to digital media. Actually, this echoes with Derrida's main concerns, namely the influence of media technology on literature, but this is not obvious in the English-Chinese translation. Miller agrees with Derrida's basic thesis but also points out its deficiency: "Asserting, as Derrida does, that the political

'regime' of a given country that undergoes the digital revolution does not matter, because 'going digital' will put literature and the like to an end in every country, is also problematic" ("Western Literary Theory" 350). Here, I concur with Miller.

Nevertheless, I'm more concerned with Miller's criticism of my and other Chinese scholars' views on the shift from print media to visual media. Miller says, "My concern, however, was not with the shift to visual culture but with the wholesale shift from a print culture to a digital culture. That shift is still in progress." And "Chinese scholars, like Western ones, were right to be concerned about the replacement of printed books by the 'aestheticizations' of cinema and television, but my concern was with the comprehensive shift from a print culture to a digital culture" (350). Here, Miller uses the adjectives like "wholesale" and "comprehensive" to describe the fundamental change of global culture, differentiating print media and digital media at considerable length. China becomes a major point of reference in Miller's theoretical formulation. As he engages me on this issue in a serious way, I would like to offer my following response.

### **The China Question of Print Culture and Digital Culture**

We should consider the specific context under which the debate over Miller's "end of literature" was raised in Chinese academe and I summarized it (from 2000 to 2013). Now in hindsight, China at the time did witness a wholesale shift from print culture to digital culture. But it was probably at its first stage of transition, that is, printed works were seriously squeezed by the rapid rise of visual culture, including image, cinema and television under the banner of modernity. Such a prominent phenomenon naturally attracted scholars' attention. Ouyang Youquan assumes:

In the new media-dominated visual age, undoubtedly digital-based visual representation gained momentum and verbal aesthetics declined. In Hillis Miller's view, the printed book apparently passed its heyday, being increasingly supplanted by new media, even though the printed books will hold onto its power for an extended period of time. Meanwhile, Miller also said that 'it's not the end of the world but the beginning of a new world ruled by new media.' We then have good reason to name the cultural trend today as the "visual turn," 'the pictorial turn' or 'the society of spectacle'... An inevitable consequence of the digital techno-media's infiltration into socio-cultural formations is the visual reading's oppression over verbal reading, or the words vis-à-vis images rivalry. In today's world of arts, gnostic poetics exclusively based on verbal reading is being replaced, or truncated, by the pleasure from watching electronic images... Today's dominant mode of cultural production has become visualized, as a result of the formidable new media venues of the Internet, mobile phones, various digital entertainment gambits, electronic billboards, etc. ("Literary Border" 244).

Ouyang Youquan accurately describes China's rapidly changing society and culture. It was precisely this kind of ambience Chinese intellectuals (including myself) experienced, in which we academics felt quite anxious about the prospect of the encroachment of the visual over verbal, images over words. (Miller has obviously sensed that). Although Ouyang Youquan cites Miller's remarks and notices the pivotal function of "digital techno-media's infiltration into society," he has a different interpretation, namely regarding the focus on visual culture. His point of view basically represents most Chinese scholars' opinion, including mine, which is also the Chinese context that I emphasize in my essay. Of course, now in hindsight, Miller's view of the shift from print culture to digital culture is obviously far-sighted, seeing the meaning of digital culture as much broader than visual culture. Therefore, I am happy to accept Miller's view and partially revise my own, as I was once inclined to view such historic changes by understanding digital culture through the prism of the visual culture, rather than differentiating the two. It should be noted that in 2012, Shan Xiaoxi predicted that digital literature was no longer restricted to visual culture but embraced "the high-tech literary narrative and representation featured by hypertext, multimedia, and cross-media, which are initiated by digital media" (131). Ouyang Youquan also assumes digital and online media are the most direct and comprehensive media penetrating into every aspect of literary creation, which change not only the form of literature and arts but also the shape of their development in China ("Digital Research" 22).

Another issue worth discussing with Miller is the regime of telecommunications and digital media. Miller writes, "rather, the change, I claim, in agreement with Derrida, is not from verbal to visual but to a radically different medium, the new 'regime of telecommunications'" ("Western Literary Theory" 348). Here, Miller not only agrees with Derrida's view about the shift from print media to new media, but also shares his view that the "new 'regime of telecommunications'" equates to new digital media. However, I think these two are different from each other. So-called "digitization" is a mode of binarizing information like sound and image, while digital technology is a technique collecting, producing, coding, and storing this binary information. The development of such a technique

generates present digital literature, digital culture, and the like. "Telecommunications," in contrast, is much narrower than "digital" in terms of either media or technology. Digital refers to general modes of information such as sound, image, word, and motion pictures, which can all be "digitized." Telecommunication refers to the transmission of information through an electromagnetic system, such as a telephone transmitting sound and a telegram transmitting words, while high-volume information (moving images) in early periods were not transmittable. In the era of the Internet, although the scope of "telecommunications" has expanded to include the Internet as a digital form of transmission, ordinarily telecommunication is somewhat restricted to mean the pre-digital media. For that reason I think digital technology and digital culture cannot be equated with telecommunications technology and the regime of telecommunications.

I also want to emphasize that the comprehensive shift from print media to digital media does not indicate a complete cutoff of the two, which is quite obvious especially in the contemporary Chinese cultural context. Here I cite two sets of data. The first is drawn from a 2018 report:

In 2018, the number of various types of online literary works totaled 24.42 million, an increase of 7.95 million from 2017, and a year-on-year growth of 48.3%. Among them, there are 240,000 new contracted works, the current number of which has reached 1.291 million...In 2018, there are 430 million Chinese online literature users, a year-on-year increase of 14.4% ("Report").

The other is provided by Ouyang Youquan:

Since the 1990s, when online literature characterized by mass production advanced into the Chinese literary arena, it has become an unavoidable historic existence in literary studies due to its numerous creators, voluminous works, and hundreds of millions of readers. Statistically, the number of Chinese netizens amounted to 772 million up to June, 2017, among which the number of online literature users reached 378 million, accounting for 48.9% of all netizens. Over the years, there have been 6,962 published paper books downloading from original online novels, together with 1,195 movie adaptations, 1,232 TV series adaptations, 605 game adaptations, and 712 anime adaptations from the same source. Such a significant literary existence has provided new objects and put forward new question for traditional literary studies, making online literary studies an important part and mission of Chinese literary studies ("Online Literature's Influence" 35).

These statistics suggest, first, nowadays Chinese online literature has gone from its early inception to a stage of "wild growth." Hence, the number of works, authors, readers (users), and other elements have become monopolizing mega entities, rarely seen across the world. Second, although the production and transmission of online literature totally depend on computers and the Internet, written language is still a basic mode of expression for its works, and it is therefore inseparable from printed literary works. Given that a great many published paper books (print culture) downloaded from original online works (mainly novels) account for a fairly high proportion of published paper books, we can conclude that print culture is not only promising but also irreplaceable in the era of the Internet. It is not declining, let alone disappearing. Rather, it can (and should) complement and interact with digital culture in this tremendous shift. Third, the relationship between online literary creators and readers, writing and acceptance, has stepped into a new stage where readers participate, restrict, and promote writing, as well as provide endless force for the massive dissemination of works in no small measure. Four, there is plenty of room for the advancement and expansion of online literature, proven by online literary works that are adapted in abundance into new media forms, such as movies, TV series, animes, and games. All these lead to thriving online literature in cross-media and hypermedia under the circumstance of digital new media technology. As Huang Mingfen puts it, in the digital era, producers of literature include not only professional writers, but also non-professional, amateurish internet users active in cyberspace. According to Huang, literary media will no longer be hard "text" once embedded in wooden tablets, bamboo slips, clothes, and paper sheets, separable from each other in the past. Instead, they have become the "bit" hypertext or hypermedia that circulates and evolves rapidly on the Internet. The combination of randomness and planning will perhaps supersede target-oriented imagination to be the primary method of literary production. Literature no longer serves passive readers or audiences but autonomous online users. Moreover, literary content springs from not only the "objective reality" that is independent of or prior to literary activities, but also the "digital existence" which is integrated with the content proper (Huang 3).

In sum, the dynamic Chinese online literature today amply testifies that print culture still maintains its vitality even under the development of digital new media technology, and that written language literary works still remain the primary source that both new and old readers rely on (either on computer and mobile phone or paperback and newspaper). What drives the advancement of online literature should and must be the marriage between print culture and digital culture. In this respect,

my estimate might be different from Miller's. Miller underscores the wholesale shift from print culture to digital culture has not only already happened but also cannot be reversed, while I hold that although this shift is happening, it is a long process which will not finish in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the development of digital new media culture does not indicate the disappearance of print culture; instead, it will gain momentum in various unpredictable ways. In other words, relatively speaking, my prediction is probably more optimistic.

### **Chinese Interpretation on the Connection and Distinction between "Hermeneutics" and "Poetics"**

Citing my remark "literature also uses rhetorical language and tropes to create associations among different things and to lend characters vivid profiles," Miller contends that, even though tropes may appear to function as aids to richness of meaning, one must distinguish what is said ("hermeneutics") from how it is said ("poetics"), and that "poetic" practice in literature, notably the use of tropes, may not be consonant with what is said "hermeneutically" (Miller, "Western Literary Theory" 350). The reason for the distinction is that, in the practice of literary criticism, "the two may interfere with one another and thereby create great difficulties for hermeneutic meaning, that is, for determining just what is said. That interference might forbid a successful paraphrase of hermeneutic meaning" (350). This view comes from Paul de Man, who draws on Walter Benjamin's "Hermeneutik and Poetik." Miller agrees with it on many occasions. For instance, referring to De Man's rhetorical reading of literary works, Miller maintains that "'rhetorical' means the teaching of literature by way of the distinction between hermeneutics and poetics, between what is meant and the way that meaning is expressed." He further clarifies: "De Man claims, correctly, that hermeneutics and poetics are incompatible" (*An Innocent Abroad* 266). Of course, I also note that Miller sometimes is suspicious of, or even rejects this distinction. He states that De Man's essays are "demonstrations of the incompatibility of hermeneutics and poetics." However, "De Man's assertion that hermeneutics and poetics are "not complementary" is truly scandalous...we think (or I think) poetic procedure works seamlessly to create, support, and enhance meaning! That is what such a procedure is intended to do. Metaphors and other figures of speech in a poem, for example, have as their function adorning, expanding, and making more "vivid" the paraphrasable meaning" ("Poetics Today" 107). Here Miller's view is in complete agreement with mine. Furthermore, he added in the footnote of the article: "I, however, am, of course, happily reconciling hermeneutics and poetics in my own discourse in this article" (107). Such a view is clearly at odds with De Man's "dichotomy of hermeneutics and poetics."

Nevertheless, in my opinion, Miller more or less endorses De Man's "dichotomy of hermeneutics and poetics" on most occasions, and they share some experience of literary criticism to a certain degree. For example, Miller repeatedly cites De Man's "The Task of the Translator": "when you do hermeneutics, you are concerned with the meaning of the work; when you do poetics, you are concerned with the stylistics or with the description of the way in which a work means" ("The Task" 88), and in general affirms his "dichotomy of hermeneutics and poetics." But De Man's experience of literary criticism is always self-contradictory. Sometimes, when he does hermeneutics, "the poetics always drops out," and "forget about the poetics." When he does poetics, in contrast, the hermeneutics will be forgotten. He thus concludes "the two are not complementary, the two may be mutually exclusive in a certain way." (88) However, the distinction is blurred occasionally. For example, when Miller tries to use this distinction to analyze "The Motive for Metaphor," he contends that "what happens to me is the reverse of what de Man says happens to him. He tries to do stylistics and ends up deplorably (according to his ironical judgement of it) doing hermeneutics. I try to do hermeneutics, that is, to account straightforwardly for the meaning of 'The Motive for Metaphor,' but I almost instantly end up getting snarled in stylistics" (Zhang and Miller 590). Clearly, both Miller and De Man are trapped in the entanglement of hermeneutics and poetics in critical practice. Actually, De Man vacillates in this dichotomy, which in Miller's words, is characterized by "the irony of self-referentiality," and "if he irresistibly does hermeneutics, it must be pretty hard to resist" (Miller, "Poetics Today" 107). In a similar vein, Miller's own critical practice also suggests, "I discover I cannot easily distinguish hermeneutics from stylistics in what I must say about the poem. Are those scenes that arises so powerfully in my mind's eye hermeneutical meanings or stylistic devices? I think any decision about what would be difficult to make and justify," and even that "they are theoretical formulations to be tossed out when the actual work of reading 'The Motive for Metaphor' begins" (Zhang and Miller 589). In this regard, Miller is skeptical of this dichotomy.

However, Miller underscores, "teaching how to read in light of the distinction between poetics and hermeneutics is a way literature can still be brought to matter" (*An Innocent Abroad* 266), which at least confirms the "dichotomy" in theory. Perhaps Miller's view can be summarized as the following:

the criticism of criticism between theory and practice on the one hand cannot be equivalent to hermeneutics or the search for meaning of intention, and, on the other hand, nor can it be equal to poetics or theory of how text generates meaning, despite that it closely relates to the latter" (Miller "The Search for Grounds").

In any case, Miller in effect concedes the study of hermeneutics is significantly different from that of poetics in literary criticism, which is demonstrated in his comment on my essay, "one must distinguish what is said, 'hermeneutics,' from how it is said, 'poetics'" ("Western Literary Theory" 350), while I hold it is concerned with the understanding and acknowledgement of the nature and purpose of these two disciplines. Miller claims, "'Poetic' practice in literature, notably the use of tropes, may not be consonant with what is said, 'hermeneutically.'" The two may interfere with one another and thereby create great difficulties for hermeneutics" (350). Here he assumes the two are radically different in disciplinary nature and function, with hermeneutics mainly focusing on and delving into the meaning or intention of text (what is said), while poetics emphasizes and probes into the way in which this meaning is manifested (how it is said). If we define this dichotomy in Hegel and Marx's words, can we say hermeneutics focuses more on content while poetics on form? This probably accords with Miller's idea. Miller mentions the two may interfere with one another and thereby create great difficulties for interpretation, "that is, for determining just what is said" (350). Here Miller in effect concedes every literary text has its relatively fixed connotation and claims hermeneutics criticism "determining just what is said" can be counted as "a successful paraphrase of hermeneutic meaning," otherwise it is unsuccessful. This can be seen as a fairly lucid summary of the disciplinary nature of hermeneutics. Miller also illuminates that calling *The Post Card* "a collection of love letters may not jibe with the way it is 'actually' a powerful and strange philosophical treatise" (350). In other words, *The Post Card* is "actually" a strange philosophical treatise, thereby regarding it as a collection of letter does not conform to its original meaning, which is not "a successful paraphrase of hermeneutic meaning" but a misunderstanding (347).

This clearly demonstrates Miller's view on the nature, purpose, and function of hermeneutics (discipline), that is to "successfully" reveal and interpret the meaning of content (what is said) in literary works. Conversely, in his view, poetics is more about the form in which literary works generate and express meaning (how it is said) in virtue of rhetorical reading. As a Chinese scholar influenced by Hegel and Marx, I would like to offer my view as a Chinese interpretation of the "dichotomy" of hermeneutics and poetics advocated by Miller.

Generally speaking, as far as I am concerned, both hermeneutics and poetics as modes of criticism deal with both content and form, though the two have different emphases. However, we cannot imagine that poetic analysis of literary works can forget content (what is said) by merely analyzing form (how it is said) and vice versa. When interpreting or criticizing literary works, poetics and hermeneutics can have different emphasis on form or content, but both are necessary. Instead of being what De Man called "incompatible," the two are certainly compatible and integral, and can reinforce each other, which has been vindicated by Miller's own experience of reading and criticism. Let me start with poetics. Miller holds poetics mainly concerns form, but I think it also concerns content. Here I would like to cite two statements from Aristotle's *Poetics* to support my view.

First, Aristotle defines tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (1449b). The imitation of a "serious" action obviously involves the meaning of content, and the "arousing" and "catharsis" of the specific emotions of "pity and fear" are directly concerned with the meaning of content as well. If the medium and form of imitation mainly indicate form, then form here is for the sake of achieving tragic effect (content), that is, form, though indispensable, serves content. If we use the famous "four causes" proposed by Aristotle in *Physics* to interpret the definition of tragedy, we might have a different understanding of the special unity of content and form: the material of tragedy (material cause) is made of language with "pleasurable accessories"; the formal cause is people's action which endows the material with form; the efficient cause is the imitation of action, which means the action performed by the actor rather than narrated by words; as for the final cause, it arouses pity and fear to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions. Here Aristotle defines tragedy with serious action as formal cause, declaring action the soul of tragedy. Compared to the heterogeneous material, "form" here is not form beyond content but "form" endows material with rule, namely form with content. Only with this "form" can the purpose of tragedy to arouse and accomplish catharsis of pity and fear be achieved.

Second, without doubt, Aristotle also attaches great importance to the aesthetics of form in tragedy, and emphasizes that the construction of plot should be a whole. The so-called "whole" means a plot must have its beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is not itself necessarily after anything else, but has naturally something else after it; on the contrary, an end is itself naturally after something, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; a middle is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. In this regard, a well-constructed plot must comply with the above-mentioned rules (forms), and cannot either begin or end at any point one likes. In addition, the "whole" is closely related to a certain magnitude and length since beauty is a matter of size and order. Therefore, beauty is impossible either in a very minute creature, since our perception becomes indistinct as it approaches instantaneity, or in a creature of vast size because the unity and wholeness of it is lost to the beholder (1451a). As for drama, the limit of its length has external and internal factors, with external factor bearing on spectators' patience. Aristotle illustrates how if they had to perform a hundred tragedies, they would be timed by water-clocks. On the other hand, the internal factor lies in the longer the story, with its being consistently comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is. However, spectators are unlikely to accept an infinite story. In this sense, Aristotle concludes a length that allows the hero to pass through a series of probable or necessary stages from bad fortune to good, or from good to bad, may suffice as a limit for the magnitude of the story (1451a). Here the "whole" is mainly embodied in form, but that it emphasizes "probability or necessity," and the shift from the good to bad stage is relevant to content. Tragedy should present those who are better than us but not impeccable. From good to bad belongs to the scope of content.

Actually, either the shift from bad to good or that from good to bad pertains to two elements that Aristotle emphasizes most about plot: reversal and discovery, which are the rule of form epitomized in numerous Greek tragedies. But underlying the rule of plot's form is the content as the determinant. First of all, referring to "reversal," Aristotle takes Sophocles' Oedipus the King as an example. The appearance of the Messenger reminds Oedipus that he himself is the person who kills his father Laius, and however he struggles, he has never escaped the doom of killing his father and marrying his mother. Such a reversal is undoubtedly thrilling. As for "discovery," it indicates the discovery of whether someone has done or not done something, and the discovery of the character's identity is most directly connected with the plot. Aristotle claims, "This, with a reversal, will arouse either pity or fear--actions of that nature being what tragedy is assumed to represent; and it will also serve to bring about the happy or unhappy ending" (1452a-b). Clearly, Aristotle assumes if reversal appears in conjunction with discovery, the strongest dramatic effect will be achieved. Therefore, it is not only concerned with rule of form but also the content of plot.

In this sense, poetics is not what Miller claims, mainly concerned with form, but also the content represented by form, otherwise, the form—how it is said—of literary works will become an isolated, unattached, and meaningless shell, and the content that arouses people's emotion—what is said—is eclipsed. This surely is not a good criticism. Actually, almost all of Miller's works of literary criticism insist on the approach of form, and simultaneously disclose in a special way the profound meaning of content, which suggests the integration and complementation of the two. Therefore, in my view, to say poetic criticism mainly concerns content is obviously unfair.

More on hermeneutics: Miller regards hermeneutics as being mainly concerned with content rather than form. But I think hermeneutics also concerns form. Indeed, it is in general not incorrect to say hermeneutics is mainly concerned with content, because, after all, what hermeneutics does is explicate the nature and purpose of understanding and interpretation, as well as the ways by which the meaning of the text is produced. Hence hermeneutics cannot but deal with the content and meaning of text (literary works). Meanwhile, it cares no less about form. For any understanding and interpretation, one must delve into the content of the work through its form or symbols. Being a Chinese scholar who has dedicated considerable attention to hermeneutics, I would maintain that insofar as hermeneutics deals with the form through which understanding and interpretation is made possible, and, as history of hermeneutics indicates, the question of form is immanent in the logic of hermeneutics itself. Let me explain.

To begin with, form has been a major question in the history of Western hermeneutics; however, the theoretical approaches have varied. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher, a forerunner of modern hermeneutics, proffers a holistic solution to the hermeneutic circle that he first expounded, that is, the determination of the whole in the relationship of the whole and the part. Schleiermacher claims, "The canon now takes on this form: In order to understand the first thing precisely one must have already taken up the whole. Not, of course, to the extent that it is the same as the totality of particulars, but as a skeleton, an outline of how one can grasp it while ignoring the particular" (Hermeneutics and Criticism 28). Here the holistic solution is the rule of form by which the



hermeneutic circle is to be resolved. Wilhelm Dilthey considers the combination of linguistics and psychology to be a principal method for Schleiermacher: "the common beginning for both the technical and the grammatical interpretation is the general overview which grasps the unity of the work and the main features of the composition. The unity of the work, the theme, will be viewed here as the writer's motivating principle, and the foundation of the composition as his peculiar nature as it is manifested in each motif" (Schleiermacher, "The Hermeneutics" 96). The specific method is, "before beginning the technical exposition, we must know the manner in which the subject occurred to the originator, and how he acquired his language, and anything else one can learn about his mannerisms" (97). But "two moments belong to psychological interpretation. It becomes more easy and more certain the more analogy there is between the manner of combination of the author and of the explicator, and the more precise the knowledge of the material of the thoughts of the author is" (Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism* 104). For either linguistic or psychological method, the key is to learn the author's "mannerisms," as well as the "manner of combination" of the author and the explicator, the extent to which these combinations are analogous. All these are formal features that interpretation has to manage. Moreover, Dilthey thinks Schleiermacher reformulated classical hermeneutics in terms of specific norms and procedures. However, in Dilthey's view, these norms and procedures deriving from years of hermeneutical exercises still remained rather superficial. Dilthey then concedes that "Schleiermacher now sought for an analysis of the understanding that lay behind these rules, or in other words for a formulation of the goal of the activity as a whole, and from such a formulation he derived the possibility of valid interpretation in general, along with its conceptual instruments, limits and rules" (110). Schleiermacher's understanding of the rule of interpretation was greatly expanded to the normative plane where viable "instruments, limits and rules" of ordinary interpretation were set.

Dilthey himself made more eminent contributions to contemporary hermeneutics. He was the first to define understanding (*Verstehen*) semiotically from the perspective of epistemology. He contends that "understanding [*Verstehen*] is what we call this process by which an inside is conferred on a complex of external sensory signs. Such is ordinary usage; and that precise psychological terminology which we so desperately need can come into being only if such carefully defined, clear and usefully delimited expressions are respected by all writers to the same degree." And "we must therefore call Understanding that process by which we intuit, behind the sign given to our senses, that psychic reality of which it is the expression" (102). Here Dilthey on the one hand regards understanding as a recognition of the internal psychic reality by way of external sensory form (sign), thus defining it semiotically and cognitively. On the other hand, he regards the work as the fixing of the author's inner world through sensory form (the expression), whereas understanding is taken as a reverse process through which to interpret the psychic reality, the inner lived world of the author expressed in the work by sensory signs. Therefore, "such orderly and systematic understanding of fixed and relatively permanent expressions of life (*Lebensäußerungen*) is what we call exegesis (*Auslegung*) or interpretation" (103). In this sense, Dilthey regards understanding and interpretation as the activity and process of entering and understanding the author's inside through the sensory form (sign), or the expressions of life fixed in the work. Henceforth form (sign) has become an unprecedented center of gravity of hermeneutics.

Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer as two precursors of modern hermeneutics also pay high attention to form, which I will not elaborate due to the limited space of this paper. Here I would like to draw our attention to Emilio Betti (1890-1968), the Italian theorist of hermeneutics, whose contribution to the field is comparable to that of Gadamer, but regrettably often undervalued. The core concept of Betti's methodological hermeneutics is "Objectivations of Mind," which means the object of hermeneutics comes from the author, and is the product of the objectivation (objectification) of the author's creative thoughts. He further names all these "objectivations of mind" "Meaning-full Forms" ("*sinnhaltige Formen*"), claiming "through which an other mind addresses us," and our understanding and interpretation are to discover and demonstrate "the meaning contained within these forms of others" (Betti, "Hermeneutics" 160), which is the fundamental task of hermeneutics. It should be noted that Betti anchors the possibility of understanding and interpretation in such "meaning-full forms," contending "we insist that an interpretation is possible only in view of meaningful forms" (160). Why? I suppose his "form" can be understood in a broad sense as a homologous structure between us (those who understand and interpret) and the other, or author. Such a structure is good to preserve the mindset of (the other or author) who creates the form, or is embedded in the form. Thanks to the meaningful form, we (those who understand) then are capable of "striking of the same chord on their mental instrument to bring forth thoughts that correspond to those of the speaker (others and the author)" (161) through the homologous nexus of cognition which allows our recurring

movement within their conceptual universe. Despite the divergence between Gadamer and Betti, or the latter's specific views on form, it must be noted that the gist of Betti's hermeneutical method is the study of form and Meaningful forms is the core concept of his hermeneutics.

I spend considerable effort here to enumerate the views of form by several leading figures of Western hermeneutics in order to dispute what Miller insists, that hermeneutics is mainly concerned with content. Moreover, I believe formal logic is an important aspect of hermeneutics. In recent years, Zhang Jiang has proposed a series of notions, "imposed interpretation," "public interpretation," and "public reason" in order to construct a Chinese version of hermeneutics. He also advocates to "conduct research on and formulate the general logic and normative system of hermeneutics and human sciences" (Zhang 2). In my view, "the logic and normative system" is exactly the formal norm of hermeneutics. In this regard, Zhang Jiang contends that:

Interpretation is public in its nature. The nature of interpretation is the communication and dialogue between subjects. Basic intersubjectivity, such as "I," "you," and "he" constitute the logical relationship in an existential sense. Without certain logical relationships, intersubjectivity and public space no longer exist... Interpretation must be developed according to a scientific and coherent logical norm, otherwise there is no understanding, no expression, no interpretation. Logic is the basic form of the generation and evolution of rationality. Regardless of the specific content of rationality, the form of its generation and development must be logic. Rationality is generated and developed within a certain logical framework. In this sense, interpretation must have a logical basis consistent with its own generation and development (2).

I concur with Zhang that any interpretation, regardless of its "logical content," must be, and can only be executed in a logical form. Such an interpretative logic and system is the formal norm of hermeneutics, the indispensable disciplinary framework without which the field would cease to exist. This was also what Gadamer had in mind when he established philosophical hermeneutics. In 1985, twenty-five years after the publication of his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer reflected on his theoretical propositions, especially the logic of interpretation (form), stating that "twenty-five years ago, I integrated research from various perspectives into a unified philosophical system, and now it is time to review the logical consistency of this formulation, especially to check whether its logical inference is coherent" (2). Obviously, he acknowledges there is a consistent logical form inherent in his hermeneutics. But what is it? Gadamer sees it in terms of the relationship between a language game and an art game: "clearly, language in these two situations is adapted to the hermeneutic orientation. I think it has been convincingly explained what you have said must ground the dialogue, that is, ultimately, we should regard the 'dialectic of question and answer' as a point of departure, only then can people reach consensus and express a common world in language" (6).

Apparently, Gadamer here views the inner logical form of his philosophical hermeneutics as the "dialectic of question and answer." He even contends "I have gone further than the logic of question and answer proposed by R. G. Collingwood, because I argue the world-orientation is not only embodied in the question and answer among speakers, but also generated from the side of the things themselves. It is the subject matter 'yields question.' Therefore, question and answer also play a role between the text and its explicator" (6). In other words, he expands Collingwood's logic of question and answer among the interlocutors to that of the world (text) and its interpreter, thus ontologizing hermeneutics which hitherto served as an epistemological method.

However, it is undeniable that Gadamer's "dialectic of question and answer" or interpretive logic of form is the foundation of his hermeneutics. Since the logical form is inherent in hermeneutics, the logical form matters as much as the content. Here lies another reason that I disagree with Miller's dichotomous views. In summary, I contend that both poetics and hermeneutics are concerned with content and form. Miller's strict distinction of poetics favoring form and hermeneutics favoring content is somewhat misleading. I look forward to further exchange with him.

In the end, I want to acknowledge the platforms for this conversation: First, the 2018 special issue of *MLQ*, and second, *CLCWeb* in this special issue that Liu Kang guest-edits. I would like to thank Marshall Brown, editor of *MLQ* who also co-edited the 2018 special issue, and my colleagues Wang Ning and Liu Kang, who all have done an admirable job to make these exchanges possible. In reading my *MLQ* essay, Miller apparently knows more about the Chinese response to and debates on his notion of "the end of literature." Likewise, his comments on my essay also help me better grasp the major shift from print culture to digital culture. This essay is meant to continue the conversation with Miller, for it not only benefits the two of us personally on issues of mutual interests, but also points to an effective manner for scholarly exchanges between scholars in China, the U.S. and, generally speaking, scholarly communities across the world. I am hopeful that many more scholars will join us in such conversations, which undoubtedly boost the modern transformation of classical Chinese literary theory

and criticism, as an integral part of world literary theories and criticisms in diverse, heterogenous, and multiple configurations.

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