

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Éamonn Dunne, *Reading Theory Now: An ABC of Good Reading with J. Hillis Miller* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013)**

When the subject of a study himself declares, as J. Hillis Miller does of Éamonn Dunne's book (in the Preface), that it is 'the best introduction I know to my work', it gets our attention. Dunne's book is indeed a useful, clearly written and thoroughly informed entry point into the astonishing range and acuity of Miller's many publications, from 1958's *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels* to 2012's *Reading for Our Time: Adam Bede and Middlemarch Revisited*. I know this because Dunne provides an excellent annotated bibliography of Miller's 'major works' at the end of this book. Before this, as his title suggests, Dunne has, in the manner of a classic primer, used the alphabet as a practical way of structuring his 'provisional, even speculative foray into' Miller's works. Dunne cleverly uses Miller's own thread metaphor to characterize this working-through of both Miller's meditations on reading and the maze of narrative itself.

Dunne tells us at the outset that 'what has most interested me about Miller's work ... is [his] attention to the *event* and *act* of reading', specifically the ways in which narratives 'have an uncanny way of escaping cognition and will, given half a chance, always exceed a reader's expectations' (xviii). Miller's (post)structuralist readings attest to his keen interest in the uncanny ways in which texts are spatial and temporal – on the page, in the moment of reading – and yet, at the same time, exist in a kind of Platonic, ever-changing, 'virtual' world of words and stories. Dunne bears this out nicely in his A to Z entries. This does not mean that Dunne assumes Miller's work is programmatic, only that this approach is a good as any other possible one.

The first entry, 'A before B – of course ...', exemplifies this. Quoting from Miller's 1999 book *Reading Narrative* (whose abbreviation Dunne has listed, along with 21 other Miller titles, at the outset), Dunne writes: "'Anacoluthon doubles the story line and so makes the story probably a lie" (RN, 149).' In what proves to be characteristic, Dunne goes on to unpack the quotation in brisk and well-illustrated fashion. The line tells us, writes Dunne, 'that storylines are assembled and dismembered by the implicit demand made on each reader to remember the way at all times, to follow the line back and forth from the clue . . . to the center of the labyrinth' (1). But doing so is bound to include some 'wandering' from what the text is asking of us. The word anacoluthon – literally, an ungrammatical, nonsensical sequence – here means 'an abrupt breach in the line', such as Proust's habit of switching pronouns mid-sentence to call our attention to the fictionality of all narratives, including ones we think are based on true memory. By drawing on a wealth of literary examples, Miller shows us how storytelling, which after all constitutes memory, rests at the juncture of 'lying and remembrance' (3). Since storytelling is both a retrospective act and, as Dunne emphasizes in his book title, the 'now' of active reading, we miss the point if we ask that a text be factual (such as the controversies over so-called lies in certain autobiographies). The trick is, instead, to detect the degree of trust we can (or are willing to) place in our authorial host. This first entry displays Dunne's own (acknowledged) editorialized prerogatives, for he sets out here some of Miller's most significant concerns.

Dunne's primer goes on in similar fashion to discuss Beginnings, Character and Decision, as well as Uncanny, Virtual and Writing, unravelling a sophisticated but cleanly threaded path through Millerian interpretation. A term that recurs frequently enough to warrant its own entry, in my view, is 'strange'. In discussing Miller's understanding of the uncanny, for instance, Dunne describes how the reading of a comic passage in David Copperfield reveals its 'strange and uneasy mix of the horrid

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and the ridiculous' (69), a mix that resembles Freud's use of uncanniness. As Dunne observes in his introduction, Miller is famously drawn to such 'bizarre and esoteric moments' in literature (xvi) because they are microcosms of all narrative and all reading, which is itself a staging of the strange and, as we read, an experience of linguistic strangeness. It is, therefore, says Miller (quoted by Dunne) the business of critics to 'translate' this realization of 'how very strange the works of literature are' (xvii). The result is an equally strange commentary, says Dunne, further illustrating the mainspring of Millerian reading, namely, that each text (indeed, each phrase) is weird and unfamiliar in some way until placed within a more familiar cultural pattern. But this uncanny sensation is never fixed since, 'Each act of reading is a performative action, a *finding* of what was there already' (xvi).

The performative nature of reading explains part of Dunne's choice of title, 'reading *now*'. Reading is inescapably temporal, yet always somehow situated, a bit like Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. But is Dunne right to emphasize *theory*, given his observation that 'theory is not the end of reading, but its beginning' (xxv), and that Miller isn't a theorist in the sense that he advocates particular interpretive rules? Judging by Dunne's masterful summary of Miller's oeuvre, it seems so. Miller is less a traditional theorist than one whose works offer a lit-crit version of Snapchat, the software that lets you send emails that disappear after a set time. Apply these insights to your favourite literary works, Dunne seems to be saying, and they can make them more meaningful.

Meaning is thus pragmatic and processual, not fixed. Miller's ideas help us appreciate that reading is at once naively pleasurable and consciously critical, and that all texts are fluid, shifting with time, circumstance and person. When Dunne says, therefore, that 'there is no escaping theory' (xxv), he does not mean we all must use critical jargon, simply that we – especially we teachers and students of literature – must acknowledge that language is a serious, profoundly ethical matter. 'To read well,' Dunne declares, reflecting Miller's view, 'is to struggle with theory's grip, to write from the heart as well as the head' (xxix). Miller has clearly been doing this for over a half-century, and Dunne's excellent introduction shows that he, too, has clearly taken this to heart, as should we all.

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