

b2 Interview

**Isn't It a Beautiful Day?
An Interview with J. Hillis Miller**

Bradley J. Fest

BJF: *Much has already been made of your "turn" from phenomenological criticism toward deconstruction in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I have been quite interested, however, to note how this turn took place in certain ways around the poetry of William Carlos Williams. In 1966, Williams largely functioned as the hero of your third book, Poets of Reality, a book I find to*

Interview conducted via Skype, July 17, 2013. Transcript revised and augmented for print publication July–August 2013.

Bradley J. Fest: Considerable thanks must go to J. Hillis Miller for agreeing to be interviewed and for his incredible generosity. It has been a profound joy to work with him. I would like to thank Jonathan Arac for suggesting this interview in the first place and for putting me in touch with Professor Miller. And I thank the editors of *boundary 2* for their helpful comments and their enthusiasm for the project.

J. Hillis Miller: I thank Bradley Fest for inviting me to do this Skype interview, at the suggestion of his dissertation advisor, Jonathan Arac. The interview has instigated me to think through issues that are important for me. I thank Dr. Fest also for inventing such sharp and provocative questions and for doing so accurately the hard work of transcription. The footnotes are Fest's work. They show how indefatigably learned he is. It has been a pleasure to work with him on this project.

boundary 2 41:3 (2014) DOI 10.1215/01903659-2812489 © 2014 by Duke University Press

be quite powerful still. The book of critical essays you edited concerning him the same year remains a remarkable volume, not least for being the first place that made readily available the fascinating prose sections of Spring and All (1923). (I have found the passages in Spring and All where Williams has the imagination annihilate all human life to be continually striking, particularly considering the various ways disaster has been represented since Williams was writing.) By 1970, however, you were writing about Williams quite differently in "Williams's Spring and All and the Progress of Poetry." You use that essay to address broader concerns about "progress" and "decline" in the humanities. The end of that essay also shows you citing the work of, among others, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. You returned to this essay and your earlier introduction to the book of essays on Williams with significant revisions quite a few years later in The Linguistic Moment (1985), and then returned to Williams again to begin your 1986 presidential address to the Modern Language Association.¹ Over this twenty-year period, what role do you think Williams played in your thinking? Has he continued to be a presence in your thought?

JHM: Well, yes. It's true that he was important at the moment when I started writing about him in *Poets of Reality*, but I would like to stress two features of that. One of them answers two questions: Why did I write about Williams? Why did I include him in that book? Because I immensely admired his poetry, not particularly the prose. I found Williams's poetry extraordinarily beautiful, both rhythmically and in all kinds of other ways, thematically and so on. I thought "By the Road to the Contagious Hospital" (1923) was a terrific poem. I delighted, and still delight, in Williams's poetry of small insignificant things. There are lots and lots of such poems that are superb, right on down to the end. "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (1955) is a wonderful poem. But Williams was a challenge to the methodology of reading that at that point I thought I was using. He just doesn't give much of a handle to so-called phenomenological criticism, or criticism of consciousness. I found that very interesting. Here was a poet that I immensely

1. See the following by J. Hillis Miller: *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966); "Williams' *Spring and All* and the Progress of Poetry," in "Theory in Humanistic Studies," special issue, *Dædalus* 99, no. 2 (Spring 1970): 405–34; "Williams," in *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 349–89; "Presidential Address 1986: The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base," *PMLA* 102, no. 3 (1987): 281–91; and J. Hillis Miller, ed., *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

admired who didn't give me a handle to talk about the *cogito*. What's the *cogito* of William Carlos Williams? And he didn't seem to allow much for dialectical procedures such as Poulet uses in his essays, or for Pouletian abstractions about consciousness. So I was really trying to figure out how to say something sensible about Williams when I started working on him and reading him. In those days, I was very much a Pouletian, a critic reading everything Williams had written in the attempt to make a total coherent interpretation of his work. Now I would feel less compelled to do that. This, as you know, in Williams's case, means a lot of prose: *The Autobiography* (1951), the *Selected Letters* (1957), and so on. So, yes, Williams has played a special role in my development, but it's also true that I've returned to him partly because I was more than once asked to write something new about him. There were not all that many people who had taken Williams seriously enough to write in detail about him. So when somebody wanted to do a book or a journal issue about Williams, they would sometimes turn to me. But I also continued to find him worth thinking about and writing about.

In some ways, Wallace Stevens has been more important for me over the years than Williams. Stevens is an earlier interest, going back to graduate school. And he's a different kind of challenge. What do you do with a poet who is conspicuously philosophical, who knew continental philosophy? I don't see Williams sitting down in the evening to read Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger.

The theme that is so important for you, of the annihilation of all human life, in my opinion has a specific origin: Rimbaud. I am sure Williams had read Rimbaud, whose work would have been available at that time, either in translation or in the original. Williams, of course, read French. And as you know, he was Hispanic, or partly Hispanic. So he's a minority poet. He was more aware of that than many of his readers have been. After all, his middle name was Carlos. *Kora in Hell* (1920) and the prose in *Spring and All*, I think, are directly indebted to Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* (1873) and to Rimbaud's poetry, where that theme appears—the theme of a total annihilation, followed by an instantaneous re-creation, everything exactly as it was. . . . This is also a theme in Mallarmé in a famous pronouncement, I paraphrase from memory and truncate: "I say: a flower! And musically there arises the absence of all bouquets."² The word *flower* annihilates

2. "Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée riieuse ou altièrre, l'absente de tous bouquets" (Stéphane Mallarmé, "Avant-dire au René Ghil «Traité du verbe»,", in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. Bertrand Marchal [Paris: Gallimard, 2003], 678).

flowers and replaces them with another existence, a poetic existence. So Williams's notion of annihilation has a history. It's pretty powerfully repeated in Williams in a way that I've always found slightly paradoxical because he was a very nice man, which I would not say about Wallace Stevens, or about Rimbaud, either. Stevens was apparently cordially disliked by all his colleagues in the insurance company where he was a vice president, the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Apparently, as a businessman, he was not a likable person. But Williams comes through to me as a likable person.

By the way, I heard both of these people read their poems when I was a graduate student at Harvard. This experience confirmed my feelings about Williams and also about Stevens. At Stevens's reading, he was very austere. He was "tall and of a port in air,"³ like his jar in Tennessee in "Anecdote of the Jar" (1923). He stood up there as if alone. He read poems like the late poem "Large Red Man Reading" (1950), and the wonderful poem "Credences of Summer" (1947): "Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered."⁴ It was a pretty big room, and I happened to be near the front. As time went on, he began to read more and more softly, you might say inwardly, for himself. I could hear him, but the people in the back of the room couldn't hear him any longer and started getting up and leaving. He paid no attention whatsoever. He went right on as if the audience was not there. And in a way, it was a kind of defiant thing to do. He could have raised his voice.

The reading of Williams I remember as being a joyful occasion. There was a series of poetry readings at Harvard with people like Robert Lowell, E. E. Cummings, and other poets who were famous at the time, and the Williams reading was one of them. The poem that I especially remember hearing him read, which he read with great gusto, was "The Sea-Elephant" (1930). I remember the wonderful way he read the B-L-O-U-A-U-G-H in the poem, and the wonderful way in which he said that. This is the sound of the sea-elephant, this "Blouaugh!"⁵ It was great. And then I remember

3. Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," in *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 61, line 7.

4. Stevens, "Credences of Summer," in *Wallace Stevens*, p. 322, line 1.

5. William Carlos Williams, "The Sea-Elephant," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: 1909–1939*, vol. 1, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991), pp. 341–43, lines 24, 56, 65.

after the reading, happening to be out on one of the streets adjacent to the Harvard Yard and seeing this great poet getting into a very shabby car, all alone, nobody there with him. I have no idea whether they were going to give him a meal or not, but it looked to me like he was getting in his car to drive back to Rutherford, New Jersey. There was a sort of poignant isolation in this. Whereas Stevens was a Harvard man and felt at home there, Williams was in a strange place.

So, yeah, Williams—he's a presence in my thought, as has been Thomas Hardy. Williams is somebody that I come back to repeatedly and from different angles. He came to my mind when I was asked by the *Daedalus* people—the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences—to participate in a conference at Bellagio in Italy that was followed by a publication in *Daedalus* on the question of progress in the humanities. They didn't impose Williams on me; I chose to go back to Williams. This is evidence that, yes, he has been important to me. He is still important. So that's my answer to that. Do you have any questions about him I haven't answered? I think often of that image of this somewhat shabby, tall, angular man getting into this quite old, worn-out car to drive all the way back from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Rutherford, New Jersey, which is a pretty good distance, in the late afternoon. . . . I may have this all wrong. He may have been going back to get his coat and tie to go out to dinner.

BJF: *As so often in your work, I appreciate your answer's emphasis on the text, that it was something specific about Williams, about Spring and All, about Kora in Hell. In your MLA address, you talk about In the American Grain (1925), that it was about the specific moments in the text rather than some larger project that you were trying to impose upon the text.*

JHM: Everybody knew the red wheelbarrow poem,⁶ and I greatly admired it. Since my métier is teaching and writing about works of literature, I asked myself, why would I teach this? What would I expect from the class? How could it go beyond simply reading the poem and saying, isn't that beautiful? That's about five minutes. What do I do with the other forty-five minutes of the fifty-minute class? Those were real questions for me.

I do have a story about *Spring and All*. The stories I am telling, by the way, are meant to be emblematic or parabolic, a way of saying much in little, though perhaps enigmatically. When I started working on Williams, the

6. See Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow," in *Collected Poems*, 1:224.

prose in *Spring and All* had never been republished. It didn't exist for most readers. I had at Hopkins, and still have as a friend, a professor named Richard Macksey. Dick Macksey is one of the great book buyers and collectors in the world. When he needed some money for something, he just sold his row of Yeats first editions to make a hundred thousand dollars or so. He bought a big house in Baltimore, complete with a ping-pong table. In two weeks, the ping-pong table was covered with books. He has a great collection of little magazines up on the third floor of this house. He eventually had to build an addition for his books, and it has a projector and some other equipment. So whenever a book was not in the Hopkins library, I would go to Macksey and see if he had it.

Here is my story about Macksey and books. I used to read the French phenomenological critic Jean-Pierre Richard. One of his later books is a big book on Mallarmé, after the ones on French fiction and then poetry that were so important for me. I ordered the Mallarmé book from a French bookseller. It came one day and was on my desk, just opened. Macksey happened to come in my office. "Oh," he said, "you have the Richard book on Mallarmé?" I said, "Yeah. I'm not going to have time to read it over the weekend, would you like to borrow it?" So away he went with the book. He'd been so generous with me, in a way I'll tell you about in a minute, that I didn't think it would be polite or courteous later on to say, "Dick, by the way, where's my copy of Richard's *Mallarmé*?" Some months went by, and I was in his house—living room full of books, there were bookshelves everywhere, in this big Roland Park house in Baltimore—and there on a shelf was my book. So I took it down. There were a lot of people there, so Macksey wasn't watching me. I opened it up, and it said "Richard A. Macksey" and a date, in his handwriting. He had apparently forgotten it was not a book he had ordered for himself. I just put it back on the shelf and ordered myself another copy.

Here's an example of his generosity. He owned the first edition—Dijon, 1923—of *Spring and All* at a time when none of the prose was available in any other way. And I, at some point, said, "Dick, you don't happen to have the first edition of *Spring and All*?" He said, "I've got that." It's a very valuable book. It's got a little blue cover. And it has the poems interspersed with the prose. It's important, by the way, always to remember that the prose and the poetry in the original book are interspersed. You're reading the prose, and then suddenly there's one of these great poems, which were later abstracted and put in *The Collected Early Poetry* (1951), but not in the way they were originally published, mixed with the prose. Wil-

liams said, “I had a lot of fun doing it; it had no circulation.”⁷ How could it? Dijon? I remember I learned once from James Loughlin, when I was quoting from the complete version in the New Directions volume *Imaginations*, that there’s no copyright, he couldn’t copyright it, I guess maybe because he was not a French citizen. So if you happen to have now the New Directions book that has the prose, you don’t have to get permission to cite it, though it would still be a courtesy to do so. Williams didn’t own a copyright.

So Macksey loaned me this precious little paperbound book. Our youngest daughter, Sarah, was, at that point, about four years old, just learning to walk, just at that stage where you can reach up on a bookshelf and pull yourself up. I made the mistake of putting this book on a lower shelf in my study in our house in Baltimore. I came in and there was Sally sitting on the floor with the book. She had torn the cover. So I went to Macksey, and said, “Dick, I’m very sorry to report that your copy of *Spring and All* is not so pristinely beautiful any longer.” And he said, “It doesn’t matter.” He was very nice about that. That was my way of being able to read the prose with the poems. *Kora in Hell* was available, the whole thing. But the prose in *Spring and All* is, I think, a wonderful clue to what Williams thought he was doing, at least at that stage. So that’s another parabolic anecdote. It’s emblematic both of Richard Macksey’s extraordinary generosity and of the fortuitous way scholarship gets done, at least mine, not to speak of the role of our three children in my life. Sally was already proleptically a book-reading intellectual at four, as she has certainly become for real, as have our other two older children.

BJF: *It has been highly educational to read the various conversations and debates surrounding deconstruction that stemmed from review essays you wrote during the early and mid-1970s. One of these reviews addressed Joseph N. Riddel’s deconstructive reading of Williams, to which Riddel wrote a response.⁸ Your review essays of M. H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) and Edward Said’s *Beginnings* (1975) also occasioned*

7. “Nobody ever saw it—it had no circulation at all—but I had a lot of fun with it” (William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal [Boston: Beacon Press, 1967], 38).

8. See J. Hillis Miller, “Deconstructing the Deconstructors,” *Diacritics* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1975): 24–31. This is a review of Joseph N. Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974). Riddel responded in “Response: A Miller’s Tale,” *Diacritics* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 56–65.

considerable further discussion. Your exchange with Abrams and Wayne C. Booth has been particularly enlightening for me to read, and it appears to have continued far past “The Critic as Host” (1977). Abrams, who will turn 101 this month, continued to comment upon deconstruction during the 1980s. And a young Donald E. Pease largely used this exchange to write a commentary on your work in 1983, which he has since significantly reconsidered.⁹ How important do you think the conversation with Abrams was? Do you feel like that conversation continues to resonate to this day?

JHM: There would be two things to say about that. One, concerning my quarrel with Joe Riddel, who was a friend of mine: I offended him by my criticism. He said to me in a letter in response, “Well, it’s clear that I should go spend all my time playing golf.” Well, this was somebody that I considered to be a friend of mine. That he was hurt was painful to me. My quarrel with him was that he wasn’t deconstructive enough, that there was too much undigested Heidegger taken without interrogation. I was really saying, “Joe, you’re not really reading. What you’re saying—the theoretical, philosophical stuff—doesn’t quite fit the text that you’re talking about.” And that offended him. I think I was right, but I think probably humanly I was wrong, because he was a sensitive person. He taught in California, and I saw him occasionally out there after I moved to Irvine. I was deeply saddened by his early death.

Abrams, on the other hand, is important enough, big enough, and generous enough to take care of himself. I’ve only written about three or four negative reviews in my life. There’s one of Paul Ricoeur, the big book on narrative.¹⁰ I’ve always been surprised by the responses.

BJF: *Time and Narrative (1983–85), the three-volume one?*

JHM: Yeah, the big three-volume one. I read it in French, then in English. And now I’ve discovered, to my amazement, that people I criticize feel hurt.

9. See M. H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), esp. 113–34 and 237–363; and Donald E. Pease, “J. Hillis Miller: The Other Victorian at Yale,” in *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America*, ed. Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, and Wallace Martin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 90–108, and “American Literary Studies and American Cultural Studies in the Times of the National Emergency: J’s Paradoxes,” in *Provocations to Reading: J. Hillis Miller and the Democracy to Come*, ed. Barbara Cohen and Dragan Kujundžić (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 159–96.

10. See J. Hillis Miller, “But Are Things as We Think They Are?,” *TLS* 4410, October 9, 1987, 1104–5.

I don't quite understand it, because other people do this, and the recipients take it for granted. I think it's because I'm assumed to be "Mr. Nice Guy." It happened to me when I was hired at Yale. It took them quite a while to figure out that I'm not really, on the intellectual side, all that much of a nice guy. That really distressed them because they discovered that they had misunderstood me as a person. They didn't like this. When I decided to move from Hopkins to Yale, I grew a beard here in Maine. So I showed up at Yale in the fall with a beard. The beard was supposed to signify my incapacity for ever being an administrator of any kind. Two things happened. One, all my colleagues, three or four of them at least—Geoffrey Hartman, Bart Giamatti, and such—grew beards themselves. To me, that seemed my effect on these people. And within two years, I was chair of the English department. So it didn't work in any kind of way, either to distinguish me from my colleagues or to get me out of administrative work.

In the case of the review of Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*, he too was offended. I wrote this review in the most honest kind of way, trying to express my disagreement not so much with the historical assumptions of his book as with the readings that he had made of romantic philosophers—Kant, Hegel—the sort of basic presuppositions he makes. And that really bothered him. There was an MLA encounter where he sort of turned away and refused to talk to me. We made peace later on, but I learned a lesson. Which is, if you're considered to be Mr. Nice Guy, don't write negative reviews, just write reviews that say how wonderful the book is. *Natural Supernaturalism* really is a wonderful book, but I took issue with some of its premises.

There's quite a lot at stake in the issues between me and Abrams, not only in ways of reading Kant, Hegel, Wordsworth, the German romantics, and the whole intellectual sequence that Abrams is trying to recover. Abrams was right to be upset, and he has his own sharp polemical side. "The Critic as Host" was a response on my part to something he said which struck me as pretty sharp. I paraphrase and extrapolate: "Deconstructive reading is parasitical on the ordinary reading, the commonsensical reading, the reading everybody would make, the correct reading, the reading that I, Meyer Abrams, would make."¹¹ That's just the issue. It's possible that the

11. Abrams's use of the word *parasitical* was actually a quotation of Wayne C. Booth, which Miller notes at the beginning of "The Critic as Host": "At one point in 'Rationality and Imagination in Cultural History' M. H. Abrams cites Wayne Booth's assertion that the 'deconstructionist' reading of a given work 'is plainly and simply parasitical' on 'the obvious or univocal reading'" (J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," *Critical Inquiry* 3, no. 3 [Spring 1977]: 439). See Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts*, 126; and Wayne C. Booth, "M. H. Abrams:

commonsense, received reading is wrong. Abrams was unwilling to entertain the possibility that this might be the case. I found his reaction surprising. I guess it makes sense, since I put his whole enterprise in question.

My presentation of “The Critic as Host” was an occasion, a panel in which I appeared with these people on the stage at the MLA. I presented a paper and encountered Wayne Booth again there—there would be a lot to say about my relationship to Wayne Booth over the years. Again, that was less of a quarrel, just disagreements between us, and a very touching effort on Wayne Booth’s part to convert me to the commonsense, Wayne Boothian way of reading. (After all, he wasn’t a Mormon for nothing.) I remember, at one point, Wayne Booth saying to me, “You’re not like those other people,” meaning, Derrida, de Man, Hartman, and Bloom. He meant that I was traveling in bad company, that the real me would be a very different sort of person. But that was rather different from my relation to Abrams, which became cordial again later on. I sent a message to him on his hundredth birthday and would have gone to Cornell if I could have done so—I was invited to go to Cornell. Who could be unhappy that such a learned and nice man has lived so long and remained active and mentally vigorous? But Mike Abrams is a little too cheerful for me.

And again, I have a story. These are parables or allegories. They have a point. This is Mike Abrams in essence for me: when Harold Bloom was visiting Cornell. Harold was an undergraduate at Cornell, and, so I gather, actually was in undergraduate courses taught by Mike Abrams. Imagine, even if you’re Mike Abrams, having Harold Bloom in your freshman/sophomore course! (Bloom apparently corrected Abrams now and then: “Professor that was 1801, not 1802.”) At any rate, it’s a typical day in Ithaca in the winter. Bloom is there as a visitor for a year. This is after Bloom is well established as a professor at Yale. It’s snowing. This is in the sixties, the late sixties. The African American students have occupied the administration building. For Bloom, this was the end of the world. He’s very conservative politically, in spite of always voting for Democratic candidates. He was full of anxiety about the future, not only of Cornell but also of everything else. So they meet. Bloom meets Abrams. Snow, catastrophe on the campus, riots, and so on. Abrams turns to Bloom and says, “Harold, isn’t it a beautiful day?” That’s Abrams. That’s Abrams in a nutshell, and I immensely admire that.

Historian as Critic, Critic as Pluralist,” *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 441. Miller’s “Critic as Host” was later considerably revised, expanded, and collected in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 177–207.

Pease is a little different. We've made peace long since. I've lectured at Dartmouth at his invitation, and he was, as you know, invited to participate in that conference about my work and did a very good paper on it. He had the feeling, mistakenly, that I had been brooding over his early essay about me, which I hadn't. It's okay. It's a free country. But he did change, as you said, and I think what's at stake there is rather different. Pease is a very distinguished Americanist. He is one of the founders of the new kind of American studies that's going on now, somebody that has done wonderfully good work over the years in changing American studies from a relatively conservative "America is best" kind of attitude to the sort of thing it is now. Pease has been really important in doing that. So my relation to Pease is really quite different from my relation to Booth or Abrams. I have had nothing but admiration for Pease and his work all along. I can also see why he would have found what he understood as deconstruction to be troubling the agenda that he had.

I've been surprised that "The Critic as Host" took hold the way it did, genuinely surprised. Because I didn't think of it when I wrote it as a kind of position piece that would be anthologized and read all over the world. Often that's what people have read of my work and really little else. That's fine with me, but it was a genuine surprise. It shows the domination of theoretical discourse over readings during the last twenty or thirty years. If somebody asked me, "Which of your essays do you think everybody ought to read?" my answer would likely be some essay that was actually a reading of a work of literature. The fact that that has not happened—what everybody reads by me is a polemical, theoretical piece that belongs to a specific moment in American academic history—has surprised me, but I've learned something from that. I'm happy to have people read "The Critic as Host." I don't disown it, but it does need to be put back in context, which was a very overdetermined moment.

BJF: *It's interesting, because, reading through even just a small body of your work, "The Critic as Host" stands out as unlike a lot of the rest of your writing. Most of your work reads specific works of literature, specific texts. "The Critic as Host" has been important for me, but I've been much more captivated by your other work, to be honest.*

JHM: Good. And remember, "The Critic as Host" is not about a particular literary text, but it *is* about the word *parasite*, it's about the word *host*—a multiplicity—it's really about language. And it does have a literary background, which is Wallace Stevens. I think—I haven't read this essay for a

long time—I think I refer to Stevens, to the last set of poems by Stevens. My essay is literary through and through, or linguistic through and through. What I did was to pick up on that word *parasite*, and worry the word *parasite*, and that's the basis. But I think also it may be partly why the essay is read. It's sort of interesting to know that the word *host* has these multiple meanings, and that the word *parasite* also does. I got the parasite stuff from Derrida, as I've got so much, because there's a text that I had read prior to my essay where he talks about the word *parasite*.¹² And so I looked it up in my *American Heritage Dictionary* and the *OED*. It means somebody who, at the table, is put beside the bread, *para sitos* (παράσιτος), down the table, because he's a hanger-on in the court. It has a very specific source, an interesting etymology. A parasite is somebody who is fed when he doesn't really deserve to be fed, and I read all that into what Abrams was saying about me and about deconstruction as being parasitical. There's a great poem by Thomas Hardy about the parasitical ivy that kills the great oak tree.¹³ It may have been in Abrams's mind.

BJF: *I ask about Abrams not only because of the historical importance of the exchange between the two of you but also to address your take on romanticism. In the collection on Williams, you included brief essays by Yvor Winters and Wallace Stevens that call Williams "romantic" fairly bluntly. Winters wrote that Williams "is an uncompromising romantic."¹⁴ Stevens said that "there are so many things to say about him. The first is that he is a romantic poet."¹⁵ You were clear then, and became clearer in the subsequent things you wrote, that you did not feel Williams was romantic at all (with the exception of his very earliest poetry). This was largely before the appearance of Natural Supernaturalism. Was Williams an important foil to Abrams for you? Did your thinking about the lack of romanticism in Williams resonate with your criticism of Abrams at the time?*

JHM: I don't remember that it did, but it may well have, there may well have been a connection. What I would say now would be slightly different about

12. See Jacques Derrida, "Signature événement, contexte," in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 365–93. This has been translated as "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307–30. See also *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), esp. 90–91.

13. See Thomas Hardy, "The Ivy-Wife," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 75.

14. Yvor Winters, "Poetry of Feeling," in *William Carlos Williams*, 66.

15. Wallace Stevens, "William Carlos Williams," in *William Carlos Williams*, 62.

Williams and romanticism. On the one hand, both Winters and Stevens wanted to put Williams down. They were competitive, particularly Winters.

BJF: *Yeah, that little essay is very strange.*

JHM: I actually had a chance to speak to Winters about that essay. I had to get his permission to republish it in the collection I made. He must have been pretty much in his old age. He came to Hopkins to give a talk. I had to drive him to the faculty club or something, so we had a slight chance to talk. I mentioned his take on Williams, and he was absolutely intransigent. In effect, in order to defend his particular kind of moral poetry, Winters's kind, he had to say bad things about Williams. Stevens's case is a little different, since they were more or less friends, collaborators. On the one hand, these fellows play hardball, they're very competitive, and it was a nasty thing to say on Stevens's part: that he's a romantic poet, that he's like Wordsworth or Shelley or something like that. So, there's a context for these remarks. On the other hand, my old *Dædalus* essay, in effect, is arguing that there is a sort of perennial group of theories of poetry—the imitative one, that is, the *mimesis* one; the revelation one; and an independent-creation one. Those are, indeed, present everywhere in romanticism, as well as everywhere else in Western poetry. So yeah, it's true that you can plausibly make Williams a romantic poet. I think maybe what Stevens meant, and even Winters, was that it's a little too cheerful, Williams's poetry. It's romantic in the sense of hiding the anxious kind of sensibility. Williams is not so threatened as both Stevens and Winters were, in their different ways, in their poetry. Stevens had to build up a big philosophical apparatus in order to defend himself. He talks about that: the line as a defense against the world. Williams, on the other hand, cheerfully said, "The world is me, I am the world," and so on. It was always a beautiful day for Williams. What I really love about Williams—because I'm that way myself—are the poems about little insignificant things, as I have already said, his celebration of that little piece of green bottle glass, or the bit of parsley by the sink, or the great poem about the plums in the refrigerator that he had eaten, and the poems about wildflowers, not about beautiful flowers in the garden, but about chicory and daisies, Queen Ann's Lace.¹⁶ "No ideas but in things,"¹⁷ but what common,

16. See Williams, "Between Walls," "Good Night," "This Is Just to Say," and "Daisy," in *Collected Poems*, 1:453, 85–86, 372, and 160–61; and "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," in *Collected Poems: 1939–1962*, vol. 2, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 2001), 310–37.

17. See Williams, "Paterson," in *Collected Poems*, 1:263; "A Sort of Song," *Collected*

disregarded things! That's wonderful. There's no other poet I know that quite does that: celebrates insignificant things in that way. There are poems by Stevens about things, little things, but they're always surrounded by a huge apparatus, whereas Williams just says, "A bit of green bottle glass," and that's wonderful, I think. All of my work on Williams was a celebration of that feature of his poetry.

BJF: *Thank you very much for indulging me and talking about Williams specifically and those early review essays. The rest of my questions are a bit broader and are more about your work in general and your thinking about the current state of things.*

Though I read a few of your essays when I was an undergraduate, I arrived at a serious reading of your work more recently through the slightly circuitous path of your early writing on Williams. I imagine others have found many diverse entrances into your criticism as well, especially considering the breadth and volume of your writing, and that these entrances have changed the further we get away from the height of deconstruction. In the last decade, there has been considerable attention paid to your long career, with at least three issues of journals devoted to your work, two collections of essays, a monograph by Éamonn Dunne, a reader, and even a film.¹⁸ I know many writers forswear reading or engaging with their reviews or commentary, but it appears that you have been closely and generously involved in most of these projects, either participating in conferences and colloquia, contributing essays yourself, or agreeing to be interviewed frequently. I know this is probably a difficult question, but what sense do you have about how people approach your work? Are there aspects of your work that you feel have been overlooked? Engagements you are surprised by or things you did not foresee?

Poems, 2:55; and *Paterson*, rev. ed., ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1992), 9.

18. See *Journal for Cultural Research* 8, no. 2 (April 2004): 99–215; *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 684–736; *Comparative Literature Studies* 50, no. 2 (2013): 342–63; Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman, eds., *Acts of Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Cohen and Kujundžić, eds., *Provocations to Reading*, which also collects some of the essays from the special issues of *Journal for Cultural Research* and *Critical Inquiry*; Éamonn Dunne, *J. Hillis Miller and the Possibilities of Reading: Literature after Deconstruction* (New York: Continuum, 2010); J. Hillis Miller, *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); and *The First Sail: J. Hillis Miller*, dir. Dragan Kujundžić (Deer Isle, ME: Deer Isle Productions, 2011), DVD.

JHM: You didn't mention the book by my Spanish colleague, Manuel Asensi.¹⁹ And you didn't mention, because there's no reason why you should know, that two or three books have been published in China, not only collections of my essays translated into Chinese, with introductions, but at least two or three Chinese PhD dissertations on my work. I'm very proud of those even though I can't read them.²⁰ I corresponded with the author of one of them in particular, a grad student who had lots of questions and would send me e-mails—"What did you mean on page so-and-so of such and such a book? Could you explain this further?" and so on—and I cooperated. So I have been very well treated around the world. I'm especially honored when I have an e-mail out of the blue, by somebody either in this country or somewhere, anywhere around the world, saying, "I read such and such an essay"—not always "The Critic as Host," often something else—"when I was a sophomore in college, and it's always been very important for me." It's often an essay about somebody they were reading, somebody was teaching Tennyson or some other author about whom I've written. That is very moving for me because it is unpredictable which of these essays of mine they have read, and it is a delight to know they have had influence.

19. See Manuel Asensi, *J. Hillis Miller; or, Boustrophedonic Reading*, trans. Mabel Richart (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999). This volume also contains J. Hillis Miller's *Black Holes*.

20. For a selection of some of the work being done on Miller in China, see Fengzhen Wang, "One of the Yale Four," *Foreign Literature* 11 (1987): 80–84; a special issue on J. Hillis Miller of the *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 20, no. 4 (1991), which includes a Chinese translation of the "J. Hillis Miller" entry from *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Modern American Critics since 1955* (vol. 67, ed. Gregory S. Jay [Detroit: Gale Research, 1988], 221–31), trans. Yang Ming-Chen, 11–16, a Chinese translation of "J. Hillis Miller: Another Kind of Victorian," trans. Chang Chin-Chang and Yu Hui-Chin, 53–74, and articles by Ying-Hui Cheng, "Miller on Hardy," 76–85, Yu-Cheng Lee, "The Politics of the Ethics of Reading," 86–94, and Te-hsing Shan, "A Form of Parabasis: An Interview with J. Hillis Miller," 95–115; Shen Dan, "On Certain Limitations of Stylistics as Seen in Contrast with the Analytical Models of David Lodge and J. Hillis Miller," *Journal of Peking University* (1992): 91–97; Te-hsing Shan, "On J. Hillis Miller's Concept of Cultural Criticism," *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* 22, no. 3 (1993): 5–26, "Illustrating *Illustration*: An Interview with J. Hillis Miller," *Con-Temporary* (1993): 49–71, and *Dialogues and Interchanges: Interviews with Contemporary Writers and Critics*, ed. David D. W. Wang (Taipei: Rye Field Publications, a division of Cité Publishing Ltd., 2001), 267–89, 291–310; Ning Yizhong, "Miller's Theory on Literary Theory Translation," *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* 5 (1999): 37–39; Lian Duan, *A Cross-Cultural Approach to Art Criticism* (Xinan Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2004), 12–14, 17; and Yuan Gao, PhD diss. in Chinese about J. Hillis Miller (Beijing Language and Cultural University, 2009). I thank J. Hillis Miller for providing me with this bibliographic information.

Oh, by the way, that film by Dragan Kujundžić will be followed now by a book that transcribes the text of the film and includes other essays as well. I have the manuscript of this. It is an example where I collaborated because it was an interview. The interview records what I actually said when asked the kinds of questions that you're asking me now. So that will be coming out. And there are lots of interviews that go on all the time, some of which are published, some of them are podcasts, which I never quite get around to looking at or listening to.

My sense is that my work has been approached with generosity and, on the whole, accuracy. I have no complaint. I can't say I've been consistently misunderstood. I don't think that's the case. Éamonn Dunne's book—that was a dissertation written for the University College Dublin—that's a very interesting book. So is the long essay by Manuel Asensi in *Black Holes* (1999), a book of which I did half. And I intended in that book to make my part so different from my earlier work that Manuel Asensi's part on my writings would be all wrong. It didn't work. He found something that I hadn't reflected upon as a kind of unifying procedure that goes through all my work. He calls this "Boustrophedonic Reading," the back-and-forth movement of an ox plowing a field. Not all that flattering an image! But Asensi's essay is a splendidly specific reading of my work, one of the best. So I've learned from what people have said about my work. I certainly have been surprised by the diversity of people who have been engaged in my work and for whom it's been important in multiple ways. But what I really care most about is when it helps them do their own work.

The only aspect of my work that I feel has been overlooked . . . I have been trying to think of one and have come up with the following: my work has been, perhaps, taken a little too solemnly. That is, I consider irony important in my own work, including "The Critic as Host." There's a kind of irony in saying, "Abrams, you use this word *parasite*, were you at all aware what lies behind that word? I don't think so. . . ." So the essay is an ironic attack on Abrams. He casually used this everyday idiom, borrowed from Booth, but it has more implications than he thought. And that's irony. It goes along with something that I have talked about often: the immense joy I have had doing literary study. I wouldn't do this if it weren't fun. But the fun part leads to a certain degree of irony in my style. Sometimes I say things which were intended to be an ironic miming of a mistake. I thought the context would make that clear. People will nevertheless quote that as if it was me solemnly, without irony, saying, "I believe so-and-so."

What I've discovered about this is several things about irony. One

is that a sense of irony, an ability to understand irony, is crucial to literary studies because literature is full of ironies of one sort or another. And second, a sense for irony, a gift for recognizing irony, is unevenly distributed in the population, including the population of students of literature. A sense for irony is not the same thing as high intelligence. There are some who don't have that sense and therefore miss ironies. Irony is dangerous because it's very annoying if you discover somebody has meant to be ironic and you've missed it. Because it shows that you're an idiot, and you don't really like that.

One of my disagreements with Wayne Booth—though I don't know that I ever explicitly quarreled with him about that—was about his theory that ironies are easy to understand and are controllable. He wrote a whole book about irony. Give Wayne Booth credit. He was smart enough to see that irony was a challenge to his own way of reading literature, and to take up irony, to try to reduce it, in the sense of saying, "Come on, there's no problem about irony. If it's pouring rain outside or snowing, and I say, 'Isn't it a beautiful day?' You know that this is meant ironically, that I am saying one thing and meaning another." I don't think, by the way, that Abrams meant what he said to Bloom ironically. For him, well, snow is beautiful. It was a beautiful day. But you see the difference. It's interesting that Wayne Booth has two or three sentences in which he more or less dismisses the German romantics, especially Friedrich Schlegel. As a result of hearing Paul de Man give a whole seminar on Friedrich Schlegel and irony, Friedrich Schlegel is, for me, the great theorist of irony. It's not something Mike Abrams makes a whole lot of, either. So it's not just that my own ironies are missed, but I think the role of irony in literature is to some degree missed more than it ought to be.

For some reason, I've been going back to read and write about Paul de Man recently, something I have resisted doing. He was my colleague, so why should I write about de Man? People can read him for themselves. But I've been rereading some of his work. I think the essay called "The Concept of Irony" (1996) is a wonderful essay because it encapsulates what was a whole semester's admirable graduate seminar at Yale on irony.²¹ De Man, much more than I am, was consistently ironical in his teaching. People talk about the solemn, dark deconstructionists, et cetera. De Man was not like

21. See Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 163–84. This essay was transcribed and edited from a lecture originally given at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, April 4, 1977.

that. His seminars were very funny much of the time, and the irony one particularly. He was such a wonderful teacher that the room was full of students on the first day, many of whom were just there as auditors. Also, there were lots of faculty members there, as was usual when he gave a graduate seminar. So he was beginning his course on irony and Friedrich Schlegel. The room was full of people. De Man, with his big Belgian nose, sort of looked up under his eyebrows, and said, "I should perhaps begin by saying that this course will not help you at all to pass your graduate oral examinations. In fact," he said, "it might actively inhibit the passing of those examinations. So I suggest that any of you who were planning to use this course for that purpose should perhaps leave right now." And of course nobody left. If I said this, people would leave. They would take me seriously. Everybody sat right there. It was a marvelous ironic beginning to a seminar on irony. Another emblem there!

"The Concept of Irony" essay is an amazing distillation of a thirteen-week, two-hours-a-week graduate seminar into a one-hour lecture, including even a little section on Fichte. There was a marvelous presentation on Fichte that took him two hours to do as part of the Yale seminar. It was really, however, a seminar on Friedrich Schlegel and Schlegel's theory of irony. One of the things Schlegel says about irony is: if you don't have it, you won't get it. De Man quotes this at the beginning of the lecture, "The Concept of Irony," to which he adds, "so we can stop right here, and all go home."²² Schlegel also says irony is unevenly divided in the populace, but then he goes on to say something much more troubling. That is, it's just the people who think they understand irony, and therefore think they can use it as a way of fooling other people, who are going to be most its victims. In other words, it's not something you can master, according to Friedrich Schlegel. Irony is the unmasterable, *par excellence*.

BJF: *I'm glad to hear that your answer is irony. That's an important part of your work. I really enjoyed the end of Reading Narrative (1998), where you trace this long genealogy from the Poetics and Oedipus the King, and end by discussing irony. And I have to mention one of my favorite moments in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" (1969), de Man's other essay on irony: what "may start out as a casual bit of play . . . soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute."²³ Even the smallest irony can explode to the greatest limits.*

22. De Man, "The Concept of Irony," 164.

23. Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the*

JHM: Schlegel says, “One little irony produces a million other little ironies. What Gods are going to save us from all these ironies?”²⁴ So there was a big influence of Friedrich Schlegel on de Man. If you go to the normal scholarship on Friedrich Schlegel, of which there’s a lot, from Wellek on down to Ernst Behler, there’s a big critical *Ausgabe*, a huge edition of Friedrich Schlegel’s writings, and so on—I think people tend to assimilate him to his brother August Wilhelm Schlegel and say they are all part of a theory of romanticism, et cetera. He’s very different from August Wilhelm. Friedrich changed over the years. He converted to Catholicism, so his later work is much more conventional and conservative than the early work. The work around 1798–1800 in the critical fragments—these are, like fragments generally, not all that easy to understand. I think there’s been a resistance to understanding them, so that de Man had some work to do in that seminar. Wayne Booth thought he could just write two sentences about Schlegel and irony, whereas for de Man, Friedrich Schlegel is the great theorist of irony.

His theory was seen as threatening, in his lifetime and thereafter, by many important thinkers. It had to be put down, both by Hegel, in what he says about irony, and, more importantly, by Kierkegaard, in *The Concept of Irony* (1841), his dissertation. De Man observes that the title of his lecture, “The Concept of Irony,” is ironical in the sense that it is a reference to Kierkegaard’s book. If de Man had lived a little longer, he would have written in more detail about Kierkegaard, and then about Adorno and the Frankfurt School. But he did talk a bit about Kierkegaard’s *Concept of Irony* in that seminar. Kierkegaard’s view is that in order to see irony as a stage in a spiritual development that will lead to a happy, religious conclusion, one must oppose Friedrich Schlegel’s assertion that once you are trapped by irony you can’t get out. Kierkegaard resists Schlegel by attacking Schlegel’s novel, *Lucinde* (1799), as had already been done by Hegel.

If you want to put Friedrich Schlegel down, you talk about his

Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, rev. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 215.

24. “Welche Götter werden uns von allen diesen Ironien erretten können? . . . Ich fürchte, wenn ich anders, was das Schicksal in Winken zu sagen scheint, richtig verstehe, es würde bald eine neue Generation von kleinen Ironien entstehn: denn wahrlich die Gestirne deuten auf fantastisch” (Friedrich von Schlegel, “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe: Charakteristiken und Kritiken I [1796–1801]*, vol. 2, ed. Ernst Behler, Jean-Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner [Munich: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967], 369–70).

obscene novel, *Lucinde*. How could somebody who wrote this dirty book be taken seriously? There's a big polemic in Kierkegaard's *Concept of Irony* against *Lucinde*. That polemic is a little bit hard for us today to contextualize. The United States is still to a considerable degree puritanical, and many of its citizens take for granted that an obscene book should be censored. Nevertheless, we are exposed by the media to obscene words and acts all the time. Think of *American Psycho* (1991). Think of Lady Gaga. One of the great erotic books of German romanticism is Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), *Elective Affinities*. It is not obscene in the way *Lucinde* is, which has all sorts of references to private parts and so on—but *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* might be banned by many today. It would be considered an obscene book—for example, the scene in which two married people make love while each is secretly thinking of the person they *really* love. The *Elective Affinities* has a powerful aura of eroticism about it, but it is, at the same time, an absolutely wonderful book. I didn't read it in college or graduate school because it was not part of the curriculum. Why was it not part of the curriculum? Because it was considered, as opposed to *Wilhelm Meister* (1795–96) and *Faust* (1832), to be slightly suspect. George Eliot and her partner, George Henry Lewes, read *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* in German to one another at night. They were, if I remember correctly, living in Germany at the time. It had a big influence on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). So it has had a kind of underground history within literature in English. There is an appreciative essay by Auden about *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, and there was a translation into English in the mid-nineteenth century. Though I studied German in college and had every reason to have encountered this book, I had never read it until de Man and I taught it in Lit Z, a lower-level undergraduate course in Yale's Literature Major. There were three Lit Major beginning courses at Yale. One year, I taught Lit Z with de Man, who usually taught it with Hartman or with Andrzej Warminski—they were team-taught courses—but one year, de Man and I taught it together. Lit Z was essentially a course in tropological reading or rhetorical reading. The texts changed every year. De Man chose to have *Elective Affinities* as one of the texts that year. So that's when I read it for the first time, when I was full professor at Yale. It is a wonderful book that everybody should read.

BJF: *In your 1986 presidential address to the MLA, you responded to the fear that “there is a crisis in English studies or in the humanities generally, that theory is destroying literary studies and that something urgently needs*

to be done to eliminate the theorists." You stated, quite emphatically, that "there is no crisis in the humanities." You went on to say that the situation is "quite the opposite. There is, rather, a tremendous vitality, a multiform intellectual energy and healthy diversity in all the fields and modes of our discipline."²⁵

The perception of the situation seems quite a bit different today. In the past month, David Brooks's op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, "The Humanist Vocation," has sparked a flurry of rather familiar debates. In the article, he declares that the humanities are in decline, and that this decline is largely the fault of humanists themselves. Brooks appears to be revisiting similar ground to what you were responding to in 1986. As someone who has been educated well after the wake of theory, and even after the heyday of cultural studies, Brooks's points seem relatively anachronistic to me. I find it difficult to believe that someone in Brooks's position in this day and age can still believe, after all the vital, multiform, and diverse work in the humanities over the past decades, that at one point "the job of the humanities was to cultivate the human core, the part of a person we might call the spirit, the soul, or, in D. H. Lawrence's phrase, 'the dark vast forest,'" but now the humanities are "less about the old notions of truth, beauty and goodness and more about political and social categories like race, class and gender."²⁶ How does one even respond to such a statement except by advising Brooks to enroll in a few humanities courses? Was not one of the goals of your 1970 essay on Williams to combat just this kind of hyperbole and oversimplification?

One of the most notable respondents to Brooks has been the past-president of the MLA, Michael Bérubé. In his recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The Humanities Declining? Not According to the Numbers," he points out that Brooks's argument about declining undergraduate enrollment is just flat-out wrong. Despite this, Bérubé and most others would grant that "there is indeed a crisis in the humanities. . . . It is a crisis in graduate education, in prestige, in funds, and most broadly, in legitimation."²⁷ This current crisis is something you seem deeply aware of

25. Miller, "Presidential Address 1986," 290.

26. David Brooks, "The Humanist Vocation," *New York Times*, June 20, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/opinion/brooks-the-humanist-vocation.html?hpand_r=2and.

27. Michael Bérubé, "The Humanities Declining? Not According to the Numbers," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2013, chronicle.com/article/The-Humanities-Declining-Not/140093/. For Bérubé's own presidential address, see "How We Got Here," *PMLA* 128, no. 3 (2013): 530–41.

in the piece you sent me, "Cold Heaven, Cold Comfort: Should We Read or Teach Literature Now?"²⁸ It is also a crisis any newly minted PhD on the job market feels acutely. How do you compare the sense of crisis today with that attending the reaction to theory from both the Left and the Right during the 1980s? Do you think it is possible that the humanities (or indeed, anything) can ever escape a sense of perpetual crisis? It seems very difficult to say that "there is no crisis in the humanities" today, but for very different reasons. What are your thoughts on this?

JHM: That is a question it would take me quite a while to talk about in detail, but I'll be brief. First, maybe I should begin from the Brooks/Bérubé issue. I agree with you that Brooks doesn't exactly know what he's talking about, but he does express a very widespread conviction that if the humanities would just cultivate the human core—meaning teach "American values," the part of the person we might call the "spirit" or the "soul"—then money would be forthcoming and all would be well. It's because humanists do other things that the humanities are supposedly in decline. A while ago, the villain was theory. Deconstructive theory was a special target of this hostility. Now it's teaching about categories like race, class, and gender. That's why the humanities are in such bad shape.

So what's wrong with Brooks's idea about what humanists should do, which a lot of people would buy, and which is, to some degree, inscribed into the new and widely accepted idea of the "Common Core"? The Common Core is a complicated project, but the concept is accepted by many state legislatures and state governors, as something they are prepared to institutionalize in education in their states. It goes from K-12, on through college, with things to be learned at each grade level. The idea for the humanities part—it sounds perfectly plausible—is that everybody ought to learn how to read and write, and that they ought to have some introduction to reading literature. The document allows for considerable flexibility in the choice of texts. And how could anybody say they are against the idea that there ought to be some kind of standards all across the country? What's wrong with it is obvious, and that is that an enormous diversity exists in the country of the sorts of people that you find in a given grade school, high school, or undergraduate classroom. And it's not only race, class, and gender that cause this diversity but all sorts of other economic factors, et cetera.

28. This has been published as J. Hillis Miller, "Should We Read or Teach Literature Now?," in "Literature and/as Ethics," ed. Martin Middeke et al., special issue, *Anglia* 129, nos. 1–2 (2011): 1–11.

BJF: *And increasingly international students as well.*

JHM: Yeah. For example, over half of the undergraduate students at Irvine have English as a second language. And I often find myself on the campus there surrounded by people, young people, students, none of whom are speaking English. They are speaking Cambodian, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, you name it, mostly East Asian languages. There are twenty-two different languages, they discovered, spoken at home by kindergarten students in Orange County. Orange County is a very affluent part of the world, generally speaking. That was surprising. You would have to be down to things like Ukrainian and various African languages to get twenty-two different languages when they ask these kids what language is spoken at home. I'm not saying everybody shouldn't read Shakespeare, but it's going to be read differently depending upon what sort of people are doing the reading and teaching.

The other thing that I find troubling about the Common Core—which, in a way, is echoed in Brooks's "cultivate the human core" in that word *core*—is the assumption that we're all really alike, and that emphasis on race, class, and gender obscures this idea. Probably Brooks would be in favor of the Common Core. And I wouldn't try to stop it, as some right-wingers are doing, presumably because it stresses critical thinking, talking, and writing—having factual support for your positions. I'm just worried about it. I think the best teaching is done—anywhere, at any time—by people who are relatively free, both to teach to the students who happen to be in their classes, starting from where the students are, and also to teach things that they are themselves interested in. So to be told "This is your curriculum for today"—I would find this very inhibiting, if not paralyzing.

I'll give you another anecdote about this, another emblem. I taught the first year after I got out of graduate school at Williams College. I had the illusion—it was a mistake—that I really wanted to teach at an undergraduate college like Oberlin, where I went as an undergraduate. During the course of that year, I discovered that my real vocation was for teaching at a graduate university. Happily, in the middle of that year I got the job at Hopkins, which was the turning point of my career. I undoubtedly would have been fired at Williams, since almost all nontenured faculty were "rotated out," as they were at Yale in my time there. Everybody taught at Williams—it was a small English faculty—in the obligatory freshman/sophomore literature courses. Maybe they were all freshman, I can't remember. The course was divided into sections. Some sections were taught by the senior people in this small department of eight or so, as well as by the two or three junior

people. I was not an assistant professor, just a lecturer. Every week there was a meeting, in which, essentially, the senior people told us, the younger people, how to teach Swift's *Tale of a Tub* (1704), or whatever the book was for that week. Then we were supposed to go off and do that. I found that obnoxious. Who were they to tell me how to teach or how to read *A Tale of a Tub*? If I'm going to be any good at this (teaching) at all, I need to read it for myself and decide what is important about it for me. Most of all, I have to take account of who happens to be in my class. (Williams was all men still at that point.) So I spent my time figuring out ways to undermine the party line. The only difficulty was that the students all knew what the party line was and that this was going to be the basis of the final examination. So it was a hard way to start my teaching career, particularly because, of course, they gave junior people most of the eight o'clock a.m. classes. I would meet students in a dark classroom at eight o'clock in the morning in January, students who had just come back from a house-party weekend at Smith College or wherever, and were still sometimes intoxicated, wearing their formal clothes—they'd been at a formal dance. They had to be there, because cutting class was forbidden. This is a parable of how dangerous it is to prescribe the curriculum and how to teach it. The Common Core, by the way, makes a point of not prescribing *how* a given topic should be taught, just the topics that must be covered in a given year. So that's a big plus for the Common Core. And who could reasonably be against one main goal of the Common Core, which is to improve what students actually know about language and literature and can do responsibly with language (for example, make a persuasive argument based on facts) by the time they graduate from high school or college?

In one of your prepared questions, you ask me to comment on my supposed pessimism concerning the current situation for humanities teachers: I don't think the whole situation for humanities teachers is terrible these days, though big problems exist. Much of humanities teaching is done by part-timers or adjuncts. We talked earlier yesterday a little bit about their plight: underpaid, little job security, few or no benefits. Nevertheless, an enormous amount of the really good, heroic teaching is done by people at the bottom end of the hierarchy all over the country. They're my unsung heroes. I know some of them. They are good teachers in part because they are often in a situation in which there is relatively little constraint. There's probably more of a constraint in courses on composition (you have to teach the comma splice). But in the area of literature, there's still quite a lot of freedom. I know that from evidence I have from students

of mine at Irvine, and at Yale, too, who are still teaching in these underdog situations at places all around the country. Most of them are wonderfully devoted and creative teachers. I'm full of admiration for the good work they are doing in difficult situations. I also much admire the many tenure-track faculty and tenured faculty who are faithfully doing their best to teach literature in difficult situations. It should always be remembered, however, that over 70 percent of the teaching in all fields in higher education in the United States is now done by those ill-paid underdog adjuncts. That is where most of the teaching action is. One more important factor: an immense amount of really impressive, diverse, and innovative work in the humanities is being published all over the world, in books, essays, journal issues, more and more as e-texts, or available as e-texts. Conferences abound. That ebullient activity hardly indicates a "crisis in the humanities," rather the reverse.

Now, the question about numbers and the actual situation, the Bérubé article: since I am a past-president of the Modern Language Association, I am part of a valuable (to me, at least) little listserv group that consists of all the people still extant who were president of the Modern Language Association. The group is run by Rosemary Feal, the current executive director of the MLA. Various issues come up for this listserv, and statements are circulated online. For example, we've exchanged some strong opinions about the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' recent report about the humanities and social sciences.²⁹ It is a noble and high-minded report. We should be grateful for the support of these distinguished people. The AAAS commission consists of fifty people, many of whom are university presidents, or public figures, like David Brooks, who is on that commission, a few distinguished professors from elite institutions. Not one single adjunct teacher is on the commission. Not one. Little input from community colleges, which play an increasingly essential role in higher education, as most people know. Only one out of the twelve college and university presidents or chancellors of systems on the commission (presidents of Duke, Harvard, Penn, Stanford, Notre Dame, George Washington, NYU, University of Miami, Cornell; chancellors of the University of Texas, the University of California) is from a community college (Miami Dade College). There is little evidence given from the people who are actually doing the work of teaching and scholarship about the state of the humanities or sug-

29. See American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Heart of the Matter: The Humanities and Social Sciences for a Vibrant, Competitive, and Secure Nation* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013), www.humanitiescommission.org/_pdf/HSS_Report.pdf.

gestions for what ought to be done. Most of the commission members probably have little idea what it's like to be an adjunct teacher in a less than elite place or in a community college and face a class in such a place. I read recently in a blog about somebody who teaches literature at a university that is not far from Walden Pond in Massachusetts. When he met his first-year students in the beginning class, he found that not one of them had ever heard of Thoreau. Not one. Here they were, fourteen miles away from Walden Pond, and nobody had ever heard of Thoreau.

On the other hand, these students are probably terrific users of iPhones and iPads, of Twitter and Facebook. They have a tremendous verbal ability. It may be a slightly different kind of language. I know this from our grandson, a computer science expert. What he wants to say in an e-mail he can say very succinctly, very correctly, very forcefully. He's a good writer.

I think Bérubé's evidence is somewhat misleading. He's got statistics that show that there's no decline in humanities enrollments. On the other hand, there's contrary evidence; for example, the great reduction in numbers of English majors at Yale. Discussing this discrepancy has been part of the give-and-take on this past-president's listserv. Yale is a great place to do humanities, partly because if your papa is the CEO of a large company, and you're going to go into his company when you get out of Yale, you can major in anything, it doesn't matter all that much. Or the English major is a perfectly good preparation for going to law school, if that's what your goal is, as is true for many Yale undergraduates. Moreover, the humanities at Yale are extremely strong—brilliant teachers like Dick Brodhead, now president of Duke and the head of that AAAS commission. He was a teacher in the English Department or American Studies program at Yale when I taught there. I evaluated his dissertation when I first went to teach at Yale. He was a terrific undergraduate lecturer at Yale, one of the best, and Yale has wonderful teaching. The number of English majors there, however, has gone down in a very short time—I forget whether it was '91, '96, something like that—from 160 to 69. In other words, it's roughly a third as many. And this is a big, very distinguished department, but many fewer are majoring in English. More and more English majors at Stanford are concentrating in creative writing. I think Bérubé, by focusing on the total numbers, makes the situation look better than it is. Many of the courses in his statistics are probably required beginning courses that people have to take for "distribution." And relatively fewer of such courses are in literature than used to be the case. More of them would be in film studies, popular culture, et cetera. I'm not against that. It's simply that it's not the same thing as talking about

the fate of the teaching of literature and identifying how many people take that seriously. So I think there is at least that kind of crisis. The evidence is that English majors across the country—this is the statistical evidence—have gone down from 8 percent to 4 percent. The high number was not all that long ago—ten, twenty years ago. The foreign-language majors have gone down from 4 percent to 1 percent. Nevertheless, David Brooks's judgment much oversimplifies a complex situation. All those teachers who are still earnestly teaching old-fashioned print literature as a way to learn how to live should not be forgotten.

BJF: *And, of course, programs in foreign languages are getting cut all over the place. Classics departments are getting cut.*

JHM: The Department of German at Irvine is housed in the same office as the Department of Women's Studies. It is still a distinguished department but does not have its own home in the Humanities Office Building. The Irvine French Department, when I first went there in 1986, was ranked about seventh in the country among French departments, which is pretty high. Gradually people retired and weren't replaced, enrollments went down, and so on. Now Irvine has no French Department. It doesn't exist. The one remaining person, a brilliant student of Paul de Man's named Ellen Burt, was left alone. She reported to the authorities that she couldn't really mount either an undergraduate program or a graduate program with only one professor, namely herself. So she is now in the English Department. And similar stories could be told everywhere in the United States. That, among other things, is sad evidence of the hegemony of English. Why do we need to know French or German or any language other than English, except maybe Chinese, these days? "Everything important," people say, "is translated into English anyhow."

BJF: *There has been considerable fuss in recent years over the so-called digital humanities, to the point that I believe my institution is now even offering an introductory undergraduate course with that title. You have commented on the changes that technology has wrought in your own scholarship in a number of places, most recently in *The Medium Is the Maker* (2009). About that book, you write that its composition "is possible only because it is being written on a computer connected to the Internet. This is so because I am exploiting all the prestidigitizing powers of the word processor—ease of virtually limitless revision and interpolation, spell and grammar checks, possibility of multiple backups, ability to send the file any-*

where in the world as an attachment to an e-mail, ability to ‘google’ and ‘wiki’ almost anything, and so on.”³⁰ I would add to this list the conversation that we are currently having. There are many who would celebrate this prestidigitization, but I often feel that this celebration is concomitant with certain strains of neoliberalism and the corporatization of the university. And clearly there are people who are critical or skeptical of the digital humanities. What do you think the impact on humanistic study these “bio-techno-prosthetic apparatus[es]”³¹ have had and will have? How do you think all those myriad devices will impact reading and literature? Contrary to my students’ perception of themselves as people who do not “read” all that much, I like to point out to them that they are reading all the time, perhaps more than ever—text messages, e-mails, tweets, status updates, et cetera—but they tend not to think of this as “reading” in the same way. And surely you mean something quite different by “reading” in your work than the distracted reading produced by texts and tweets. Why do you think there is a perceived gap between digital reading and good old analog book reading? What is at stake for the humanities and the digital humanities? Where do you think we are being led by the digital? Is it in any way toward what you call, in *The Ethics of Reading* (1991), a “millennium of readers”?

JHM: Did I speak of such a “millennium”? Hmm. I’ve looked it up and find that my sentence is from the de Man chapter and was meant to be distinctly ironic: “I would even dare to promise that the millennium [defined just before as “universal justice and peace among men”] would come if all men and women became good readers in de Man’s sense, though that promise is exceedingly unlikely to have a chance to be tested in practice.”³² In other words, I add today, “fat chance!”

I have various things to say about the questions you have just raised. I think the change from printed books to digital technologies is a millennial change, a total change in the way we live now. I think it is irresistible. It is not anything that is going to stop or that can be stopped. That doesn’t mean that there won’t be lots of printed books, old and new, for a long time yet. But it means that their role in people’s lives is going to be diminished and is already being diminished. It’s not the end of the world. There can be a shift to other forms of what we thought of as literature. The print epoch replaced

30. J. Hillis Miller, *The Medium Is the Maker: Browning, Freud, Derrida and the New Telepathic Ecotechnologies* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 10.

31. Miller, *The Medium Is the Maker*, 12.

32. J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 58.

the manuscript one, as we know, and it's had a good run. The period of the novel has gone from the late seventeenth century to today. Thousands and thousands of printed novels are still being published all over the world. That's not going to stop overnight. But I think, just looking at it candidly, that novels have less effect on most people's lives than they used to. In the nineteenth century, young people learned about courtship and marriage, how to behave in the world, how to get ahead, and so on, from reading novels. Now I think they more and more learn that sort of thing from television, from the Internet, from video games, from Netflix, and from the interchanges with their friends on Facebook and Twitter.

Though I would have some things to say about the difference between reading a printed book and reading the same text online in an e-text, nevertheless it's still a form of reading literature. The difference is pretty obvious. It's a difference of context. The printed book belongs to the print epoch. So you think of libraries, holding the book in your hands, and so on. A printed book belongs to a whole different technology and way of living from using the Internet. Reading an e-text of the same book is different, even though it's the same book, the same words. An e-text has certain advantages. It's searchable. It's likely to cost nothing or practically nothing. Project Gutenberg, for example, has free downloadable e-texts of seventy books by Joseph Conrad, some different versions of the same text. You can get an immense number of books in the traditional literary canon online for free. You can carry a given e-text around and read it with an iPad—I use a MacBook Air—or read it in bed. So it's not the case that you can't use the new technologies in the same way you do a printed book. Nevertheless, the context is different. Now the book belongs to the expanse of the enormous, disorderly cyberspace. The Internet gives access to a huge collection of texts, graphics, and music, of which printed canonical literature in e-form is only a tiny, tiny part. I've just written a new piece about "why read literature?" I've recently revised this for an issue of *Dædalus* (again, *Dædalus*!) about what humanists do, and what I say they should do. I could send you that, by the way.

BJF: *I would love to see it.*

JHM: What I say in that essay would answer some of these questions you've asked toward the end of your last set of questions. I agree with you that people are reading all the time—they're very adept readers. I've mentioned my grandson, who has an ability not just to read but to do all sorts of things with a computer I can't do—play video games, which he's very

good at, which involve good eye-hand coordination, download and listen to music, text message, and so on. So I agree with you that a huge amount of reading is happening that is simply different from reading a printed book.

My parabolic anecdote about this is: I was on an airplane, coming back from California after my last mini-seminar this past May. I walked down the aisle of the airplane. There were ten people with iPads or e-readers or some such gadget, reading. They all looked to me as if they were reading works of fiction, not playing a video game or solving crossword puzzles. They were definitely reading texts of some sort. It wouldn't have been polite to stop and ask them just what they were reading. But they weren't playing computer games. They were reading some text or other. Eight of them were doing it on an e-reader, and only two on a printed book. Now it's more likely people would carry an iPad on the airplane than a bunch of books, so it may not be a fair evaluation, but I think my airplane experience nevertheless tells you something about the rapid replacement of printed books by digital books.

Another story: I was, the other day, in my doctor's office waiting for some routine test or other. There were five other people—a mother and daughter, an older man, a younger woman, I forget the fifth. Every single one of them was using an iPhone. Not just some of them but all of them—every one of them. That's a big change.

You'll see in my paper for *Dædalus* that I believe the rapid development of MOOCs—Massive Open Online Courses—shows that the new technology is irresistible, even in the area of teaching. It isn't that people don't think about whether MOOCs are a good idea or not, but it seems impossible to stop it, whatever you think. Once you can do it, you do it. Once somebody discovered that you could develop, with the new technology, courses that could be taken by a million people all over the world at once, it began to be done. Now many elite universities, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and many distinguished teachers at such places, have got on that bandwagon. They are now predictably trying to figure out how to make money from MOOCs. MOOCs are transforming higher education in the same radical way as digitization is transforming the culture of the printed book. As MOOCs come to prevail, a lot of college teachers, perhaps especially adjuncts, will be put out of work, just as e-mail has caused big financial problems for the snail mail postal system. Why should I pay way over a hundred thousand dollars to get an education in situ at a less well-known university when I can get a Harvard or Stanford education almost for free online? The answer, of course, is that the "in situ" gives you a lot more

than just information, however “interactive” MOOCs are: meeting other students, including sorts of people you have never met before, learning how to socialize, learning about courtship, et cetera. MOOCs are, without a doubt, a force for democracy by giving students all over the world access to elite lecture courses. Nevertheless, any course, in any field, but especially in the humanities and social sciences, will have ideological biases, often subtle ones. I worry about a million people worldwide being subject to the same, often covert ideological bias in the way a given topic is taught, even though I might agree with that bias. Part of the glory of the present college and university system is the great variety of attitudes and approaches in teaching. The AAAS commission, by the way, gives MOOCs and other online teaching resources a thumbs-up.

Who would have predicted that the iPad or the iPhone or similar devices would so rapidly become almost universally “necessary”? Not at all that easy to foresee. I have and use an iPhone, though without command over many of its wonderful “features.” It keeps doing things I am not aware of having asked it to do. “Siri” keeps popping up unpredictably, asking me what I want to do.

BJF: *In your recent work, you have increasingly commented upon contemporary events: the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the dire ecological condition the species face in the present and future, the various other catastrophes and disasters that seem to be happening with increased frequency, the national security state, et cetera. Do you have any thoughts about PRISM? About the inhuman or nonhuman forces of contemporaneity that, though they emerge from the human, appear to not be assimilable to older humanistic modes of thought? How these new technologies of control are “reading” the world in ways that are increasingly unrecognizable?*

JHM: A long history of concern in the West for surveillance and privacy exists, in literature and philosophy—for example, in Bentham and Foucault. A brilliant forthcoming book, by David Rosen and Aaron Santesso, *The Watchman in Pieces: Surveillance, Literature, and Liberal Personhood*, traces this complex history. Nevertheless, the new technological forms of surveillance have put us in a new world for universal spying, by corporations as well as by the government. I think PRISM is an example of technological irresistibility. They find you can do it with the new gadgets, so they cannot resist doing it. The National Security Agency has a job to do. Our government and military have persuaded themselves ideologically that there is a

terrible threat from terrorists, et cetera, and they're hired to protect us from terrorist attack. I think PRISM is a bit of overkill, to say the least. There are two enormous buildings in the United States full of servers and storage facilities, one in the West, one in the East. Billions and billions of our tax dollars go into this. Then they discovered—that's the billions and billions of dollars—that you could use this new technology to surveil everything. And they found that irresistible. Though there is—I've read carefully a lot about this—a court appointed by the president (by the way, appointed originally by George W. Bush, so this court is, or was until recently, all six Republicans, not surprisingly). In theory, the NSA has to go to them and say, "Can we look at so-and-so's e-mails?" The court has never turned a request down yet, so we are told. It's apparently pretty much a rubber stamp. The authorities evidently haven't been telling the truth about much of this. They say, "Well, we just have a list, we're not looking at actual e-mails or listening to recorded phone calls." Apparently that's not true, as we learned from Edward Snowden's revelations. Apparently there's much actual reading of e-mails, listening to phone calls, and watching things like Skype, which they have access to by way of Microsoft. Much more than we have been told. So we have to take for granted, as I have for a long time, that our e-mails and all the rest of our digital texts are totally public. Actually, my e-mails belong to Irvine. I use their server and their e-mail address. That means it's in their server. Not only is it in their server, but if you look at the fine print, if they happen to want to read it, they can—good luck to them on that. It's not all that interesting. This potentially total surveillance is a recent transformation of the human situation that goes along with being plugged in as you and I are now. We wouldn't be able to do this Skype interview without this new technology. It gives us this marvelous opportunity to talk to one another face-to-face at a distance. But the NSA can call it up and watch it and listen to it. That is a big change in the way we live now. And I guess you could define it by saying, "No more privacy."

I learned the other day—it's an interesting bit of information—that the Russians are considering having no more highly secret documents that are digitized. They are going to have them all on pieces of paper.

BJF: *If you want to keep something secret, you write it down on a real piece of paper?*

JHM: That would be a lot of bother, but what the Russians recognize is that cyberespionage is almost impossible to stop. (The French have differ-

ent ideas about how to stop us from reading all of their stuff.) But it's very, very difficult, apparently, to keep this from happening. It's a piece of cake to break in. The NSA employs many, many computer nerds and hackers, as do other countries around the world.

BJF: *I haven't looked at the entirety of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences report yet, but immediately after the title page, one of the things that they say the humanities is good for is to help national security experts plan for the complex global conflicts of the future.³³ This is rather chilling to me and is one of the reasons I asked about the digital humanities. Your sense about how technology is changing potentially changes how we define the human, what we mean by human, and thus what we mean by the humanities—what we study and what we do. You seem to be concerned with our contemporary situation quite a bit in your recent work, but as I said, your “Cold Heaven, Cold Comfort” essay says that, well, maybe all we have left is the ability to debunk aesthetic ideology, to debunk lies, to see through the veils that are put in front of us. I'm skeptical that that's the “use” for the humanities. I would like to think that maybe if the challenge to the human itself is so palpable and obvious to all of us, that maybe remembering all those good things that the humanities—and print culture—did do for so many years should be reemphasized.*

JHM: I agree. I would say that there are three reasons now why we should read or teach literature. Perhaps the primary one is pleasure, the pleasure of the text and the pleasure of dwelling in an imaginary world. I've said in recent essays a lot about what that means, and what there is about human nature that makes us able to read a novel and think of its characters almost as real people.³⁴ That's clearly the major reason for reading or teaching literature. That's why I read, teach, and write about novels and poems.

The second reason is that you do learn something about the real world and about cultural history from literature. Even from a lyric poem like Yeats's “The Cold Heaven” (1914): you learn something about William Butler Yeats, you learn something about what rooks are like, what the weather

33. The actual language is as follows: “Who will lead America into a bright future? . . . Experts in national security, equipped with the cultural understanding, knowledge of social dynamics, and language proficiency to lead our foreign service and military through complex global conflicts” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Heart of the Matter*, i).

34. See, for instance, J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

is like in Ireland, and so on. From a big novel like *Middlemarch* (1874), you learn a lot about social relations in Victorian England. From a David Foster Wallace novel, you learn a lot about things now in the United States. That learning is valuable. So literature is a way of learning about social relations and social rules, about landscapes, cityscapes, house interiors, food at different times and places, and so on. It is also a way of learning about the history of the various concepts and ideas that are important at a given time. An example is the brilliant account, in the book I've mentioned by Rosen and Santesso, of the tangled development in the West since the Renaissance of ideas about privacy, surveillance, and personhood. These ideas are once again at the forefront as we respond to revelations about massive surveillance by our National Security Agency. It is extremely useful to know that these ideas have a history.

The third reason to read and teach literature is also of great importance. An instinctive anxiety about this third reason probably lies behind Brooks's resistance to what the humanities are doing today. This third reason could be given the shorthand name of "training in critical thinking." In Texas, forbidding the teaching of critical thinking was a plank in the Republican platform of 2012. I find that interesting. The Texas GOP sees critical thinking as enough of a threat to propose a law prohibiting students in Texas from learning how to do it. How does reading and teaching literature train people in critical thinking? A long answer would be necessary, but a short answer would be that many famous novels—*Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Madame Bovary*, *Middlemarch*, *Lord Jim*, and many others—show protagonists making disastrous choices based on false thinking governed by mistaken figurative displacements.

If we had more time, I would say more about that, but we are running out of time. Maybe I'll send you one of my recent essays about Paul de Man and "The Resistance to Theory" (1982). For him, the resistance to theory is a resistance to what you learn by way of theory about ideology. And learning this strikes me as a social good. How can we understand the mechanism whereby huge numbers of people in the United States think Barack Obama is a Muslim and not a citizen of the United States? Or who think climate change predictions are a hoax perpetrated by power-mad scientists? Or who think Obamacare is doomed to fail and will cost billions? How did that happen? Learning about literature and literary theory can be a big help in teaching students how these and other politicians' lies come to be believed. There is a big resistance to letting that be taught. The resistance to Paul de Man capitalized on the revelation of his wartime writings,

writings which I condemn, to dismiss all his work.³⁵ De Man's later work is written against the ideology that the young Paul de Man had: the belief in certain ideas about nationalism, race, et cetera, that underlie those early writings—for example, the notorious anti-Semitic one. Racism and nationalism are things he was vehemently opposed to later on—for example, in his antipathy to Heidegger. I remember the first time I met him (yet another anecdote): I said I was reading later Heidegger with much interest, and he said, with great urgency, "That's very dangerous. If you must read Heidegger, read *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)*" (1927). It was only later on that I realized the source of the urgency in his warning. He saw, much more than I did then in my naïveté, what is dangerous about later Heidegger. This danger lies not just in Heidegger's sympathy with Nazism but in the German nationalist ideas that permeate his work. I think there is no excuse for not reading (critically) de Man's mature writing and his teaching about how to read critically. If you want to reduce it to a sentence: critical thinking means learning how to understand the effects, both cognitive and performative, of tropological displacements. De Man says just this in "The Resistance to Theory": "What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence."³⁶ The context shows that by "the linguistics of literariness," de Man means false figurative displacements, such as Dorothea Brooke's decision to marry Casaubon because he reminds her of Milton and Pascal.

Literature is a good place to learn how ideology is based on similar false tropological equivalents. Such displacements are the basis of politicians' lies. Clearheaded experts like Paul Krugman, in his *New York Times* op-ed pieces, use critical thinking to make you realize, for example, that the equation by conservative politicians of family finances—you should balance the family budget—and national finances is a mistake. It's a false tropological analogy. The United States is not like a family, partly because the government prints the money. They control the money supply, et cetera. A nation is on an entirely different scale and operates with a different mecha-

35. For Miller's reflection on the de Man affair, see "Paul de Man's Wartime Writings" and "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Wiener," in *Theory Now and Then* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 359–68 and 369–84, respectively.

36. Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11.

nism and context from a family. It is a false analogy but a very powerful one. It is used by conservative politicians to say, "We should go for austerity. We should cut Medicare, cut Social Security, because we don't have enough money for these, just as a family should not spend more than it makes." That argument is based on a false comparison. I think teaching literature or teaching literary theory would help students learn the critical thinking that would allow them to expose such lies and mistakes. Though learning critical thinking is only the third reason to read and teach literature, it is an important third. If the Texas Republican Party wants to keep Texas citizens bamboozled by false beliefs about Obamacare, climate change, the need for deregulation, reduced taxes on the rich, et cetera, they are certainly right to want to forbid the teaching of critical thinking.

The astute reader will have noted that in transferring critical thinking from literature to life, I am using an analogy. The difference, however, is between taking a figurative transference literally and using that mode of critical thinking called the linguistics of literariness, or knowledge of tropes, to account, with appropriate modifications, for ideological aberrations in two different realms: in literary works, on the one hand, and in the real world, on the other.