

Memoires for Jacques Derrida¹

J. Hillis Miller. *For Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009

Éva Antal

Since Derrida died in 2004 a series of books has come out, commemorating the radical thinker's greatness. In their collections of essays and monographs friends, colleagues, and contemporaries trace the different concepts of the Derridean thought, following the (impossible) paths of his argumentation.² Remarkably, all of the 'homage' books are characterised by a unique feature – by a melancholically mournful tonality.

As an “impossible” closure, as a *coda*, of a forty-year friendship, Joseph Hillis Miller published ‘his’ homage-book, *For Derrida*, with its title echoing Derrida's *Memoires for Paul de Man*, which was written after the death of his ‘other’ Yale-friend, de Man. Thus, it is supposed to be a ‘friendly’ book composed in grief, together with the inevitable intimacy of such a context. The blurred photo on the cover, showing the two aged friends travelling on a train, reaffirms such a ‘closeness’, while it also hints at a possibility of a journey. Actually, Miller's ‘memoires for Derrida’ starts with mourning and ends in mourning but in-between it offers the reader – the gentle and patient reader – a highly exciting intellectual (de)tour, if he or she is interested in philosophical or literary critical issues.

On the one hand, Miller presents the ‘late’ Derrida's concepts in his rather complicated twelve essays, which were composed after Derrida's death between 2005 and 2007, with the exception of the first that was written in 2004. On the other hand, he tries to show how these concepts are applicable in literary studies and criticism; and, first of all, as he claims in “Preface”, his main aim is to encourage the readers to read, or re-read, Derrida (xvii-xviii). Here Miller, as a good guide, highlights the two most important drives in Derrida's writings (and probably the two most important keys to the understanding of his writings); namely, his death-drive and his ‘other’-drive.

¹ The title of my review alludes to Derrida's *Memoires for Paul de Man* (trans. C. Lindsay, J. Culler and E. Cadava, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

² See the recently published books: Nicholas Royle, *In Memory of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009); Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008); or the collection titled *Adieu Derrida*, ed. Costas Douzinas (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

The first and shortest chapter, “A Profession of Faith,” does not only describe the entry of Derrida and deconstruction into the States, together with the first encounters of the two friends, but it also explores the Derridean notions of “unconditionality” and “sovereignty,” while introducing such central ideas as the promise, the event and the wholly other. In *Acts of Literature* Derrida defines literature as the domain of unconditionality, being characterised by the openness towards the other and its (im)possible coming. Here Miller, the distinguished critic and professor of English literature, accepting the unconditionality of literature, declares his own ‘profession of faith’: “When I as a reader or teacher respond to the wholly other as embodied in a literary work and try to mediate it to my students or to my readers of what I write, I am, perhaps, just ‘perhaps,’ fulfilling my professional duty to put everything in question” (8).

The next essay, “Who or What Decides, for Derrida: A Catastrophic Theory of Decision” (which is also written in the Millerian ‘ethics of reading’³) focuses on the concept of decision, textually on his “Force of Law”. Apart from discussing the topic in the context of the Austinian speech act theory, Miller elaborates on the Derridean distinction between law and justice, and on the incongruity between decision and knowledge. Our actions are ruled by laws but “justice obliges us to decide;” however, making a just decision is ‘mad’ as we must decide about the future and for the future (23-5). In this chapter, the complexity of Miller’s book is revealed in the immense amount of allusions and references – besides to Derrida’s works, also to Austin, Kierkegaard, Levinas, or Proust, James, Carroll, Montaigne etc. On the other hand, going beyond the difficulty of understanding, the reader can enjoy the way Miller ironically juxtaposes philosophical, political and literary examples. Nevertheless, placing George W. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq next to Isabel Archer’s dilemma (viz. whom to marry) really makes the reviewer think about the “unconditionality” of criticism.

After the two ethical chapters, the third is about Derrida’s “destinerring” (“Derrida’s *Destinerrance*”), where the central question is what will happen to Derrida’s *oeuvre*. Derrida is/was destined to wander and he was so characteristically doing it in all of his writings and seminars – thanks to his ‘bad’ or ‘good luck’, being expressed in the same pronunciation of *mes chances* and *méchance* (36). In Derrida’s complex rhetoric, in his wandering sentences, the reader can encounter how language falls upon us by chance, where this ‘us’ is problematic as well. Moreover, deconstruction should be understood as “to allow the other to come or to announce its coming in the opening of this dehiscence” (46). Miller emphasises the importance of Derrida’s ideas on telepathy because it is “another name for the communication at a distance that Derrida came to call or demand of the wholly other” (48). It is obvious that Miller is interested in the different ways of (tele)communication and technology and his frequent mentioning of the Net, wikis, iPods, Macs, and cell phones is in

³ Joseph Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

accordance with the ‘demand’ of the 21st century.⁴ However, he also frequently refers to Derrida’s aversion of the Internet; for instance, due to his fear of data-loss, he refused to write e-mails though he was a “demon typist” (261).

In the fourth chapter, “Late Derrida,” Miller quotes from his friend’s last interview, which he gave, being aware of his dying of pancreatic cancer in the summer 2004: “I live my death in writing” (59). The crucial word, death, resonates not only throughout the entire interview but the whole *oeuvre*. In his writings – starting with *Aporias* and *The Memoirs of the Blind* through *Glas* and *Spectres of Marx* to *The Gift of Death* and *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (only to mention the most famous works) – death is thematised. After listing the compulsory references, Miller chooses to speak about the Derridean death-drive and the *revenant*, analysing a seminar of the (still) unpublished ‘late’ work, *The Beast of the Sovereign (Two)*, giving the quotations in his own translation and the French original in endnotes.⁵ It is the right time for the reviewer to praise the precision and accuracy that characterise the book. Inescapably, the essays are full of quotations – how can a book be written ‘for Derrida,’ not allowing Derrida to speak? The reviewer cannot help expressing her admiration, having found the seven-page list of Derrida’s abbreviated works at the beginning, the fascinating Index at the ending of the book and the exact references and witty endnotes throughout.

In “Late Derrida” in a really enjoyable and lucid way Miller discusses, more exactly, he is closely reading, what Derrida says about Defoe’s Robinson, who has just found the naked footprints in the sand on the island. Miller gives a quotation in full length, where Derrida imagines Robinson’s exaltation in a style that is analogous to a jazz-riff or a Bachian fugue: “Is it I? Is it my track? Is it a specter of my print, the print of my specter? Am I in the process of returning? Am I or am I not a ghost, a *revenant*? a *revenant* of myself which I cross on my path as the trace of the other, on a path which is already a path of return and of coming back, etc.?”(59) Crusoe’s fear that he is running after his death recalls Heidegger’s definition of man as “being toward death” (*Sein zum Tode*), while his fear of being haunted by himself, or of encountering himself as the wholly other, alludes to the Freudian *unheimlich*. As ‘for Derrida,’ who claimed to have thought about death everyday, writing was meant as speaking of death, while the waterfall of words were to keep death away – for a while.

In the next chapter, in “Derrida’s Remains,” again the death drive and the future of the legacy are examined by Miller – this time with a main focus on the word, *reste*, meaning bodily and textual ‘remains’ (cf. the corpse and the unpublished writings). As the reader can expect, *reste* should be discussed with the concepts of *restance*, the trace, and “archivization”. Miller calls attention to

⁴ See more about it in J. Hillis Miller. *The Medium is the Maker: Browning, Freud, Derrida and the New Telepathic Ecotechnologies* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

⁵ In 2009 only the first volume of the seminars was published. See *The Beast and the Sovereign: vol. 1*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

the most striking (very Derridean) idea of *Archive Fever*; namely that, besides the desire of preserving, some ‘destruction drive’ operates in the ‘evil’ archive (viz. the original title, *Mal d’archive*, 82). While Derrida, recalling Plato’s fear of writing itself in *Phaedrus*, says, if something is safely stored, it can safely be forgotten; Miller emphasises such dangers of new technologies as, for example, hackers, bugs and viruses. Nevertheless, the reviewer would rather highlight Derrida’s naming his own work as “a strategic wager” and his definition of deconstruction in *A Taste for the Secret*: “Deconstruction is not a method for discovering that which resists the system; ... in the reading and interpretation of texts, ... it has been a question of showing that a system does not work, and that this dysfunction not only interrupts the system but itself accounts for the desire for system” (87). In the same interview, quoted by the author, he also claims that in ‘his’ deconstruction he has made efforts to go beyond language, to think the unthinkable and utter the unsayable about “the wholly other” (89).

The sixth chapter, “Derrida’s Enisled,” addresses the Derridean (anti-)concept of community. Although the opening hypotheses suggest a clear and straightforward argumentation with a reference to Heidegger’s *Dasein* (‘being there’) as *Mitsein* (‘being together’), the definition of community as an “agglomeration of solitaries” and Derrida’s radically different views on these two ideas (101), the essay turns out to be one of the most (awkwardly) complicated ones. The author thinks, he has to tell everything about the concept of community before Derrida’s *entrée*. Consequently, with the insertion of some Derrida-quotations, he flashes Walter Benjamin’s, Raymond Williams’s, Husserl’s, Heidegger’s, Levinas’s, Lacan’s, and Nancy’s notions of community in order to reach his actual topic – after a nineteen-page introduction. The reviewer has to admit that this lengthy intro is thorough and exciting, though the reader should make an intellectual effort to get a taste and enjoy the ‘digressive’ rhetoric of the argumentation. As for Derrida’s concept of community, it radically denies the others’ ideas, especially rejects the Heideggerian *Mitsein*, since Derrida emphasises that “there is no world, there are only islands” (121). In Derrida’s (world)view each and every human being is irremediably isolated, *enisled*, without any “bridge, isthmus, communication”; everyone is infinitely the “wholly other” with ‘its’ secrecy and complete alterity (*ibid.*). In the presenting of Derrida’s concept Miller mainly relies on the already analysed last seminar, as a result, the description of the ‘marooned’ individuals is haunted by Derrida’s own lines (cf. traces) written on *Robinson Crusoe*. Also in this essay the concepts of “nonbelonging” and “autoimmunity” are introduced but investigated in chapters 8 and 10.

The seventh chapter is about “Derrida’s special theory of performativity,” as the title exactly states. Actually, it is the least convincing writing in the book. On the one hand, the chapter, similarly to the previous one, begins with the hypothesis-trick, here playing on the two senses of the word – performativity as speaking about a performance or a performative speech act. Then it gives a ‘brief’ seventeen-page overview of the different interpretations of the concept,

where Miller consults with some ‘outdated’ article on Wikipedia (sic!), then with J. L. Austin, Judith Butler, Kafka, and Lyotard, before turning to the discussion of Derrida’s ideas. To be honest, the geneology of the re-defined term Miller proposes; namely that Butler formulated her “performativity theory” in *Gender Trouble*, having “appropriated Derrida’s modification of Austin’s speech act theory” (probably with Lyotard in the background) is interesting but not convincing (145). Nevertheless, Derrida’s questioning of the stable ego (‘I’), being presupposed in the Austinian performatives, and his claiming that there is no innate selfhood and subjectivity as everyone takes roles in the “iterability” of performatives (or would rather change due to the others’ demands in every context), greatly influenced the Butlerian ‘engendered’ performativity. On the other hand, chapter 7 also shows how the study of performativity – in both meanings – can be useful in the analysis of literary works. Miller provides a long digression on George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, which turns out to be a well-written short essay within the lengthier one, though it is only forcefully and awkwardly related to Derrida’s conception, mainly reflecting on his ideas on the promise and his Jewishness.

The next chapter, “‘Don’t Count Me In’: Derrida’s Refraining”, can be read as a ‘light’ intermezzo between the two previous rather difficult and the two forthcoming ethical and socio-political essays. Here, in the opening, Miller deals with the “*tantalizing* and challenging” Derridean term of the aporetic “third” (neither/nor, both/and), that is, “the continually displaced middle” that frequently turns up in his writings (175-6). The chapter then speaks about the philosopher and teacher Derrida’s “nonbelonging,” even highlighting some biographical episodes; for instance, how he propagated the setting up of several revolutionary counter-institutions then turned against them. As Miller sees, in all of his ‘performances’ Derrida insisted on refraining, sometimes even refused to react. In accordance with his ideas of being enisled and even heterogeneous to himself (cf. ‘Derridas’), he claimed that he was “not one of the family;” consequently, he was rather suspicious of any form of collectivity (187).

Chapter 9 traces the concept of “irresponsibilization” in two sections (“Derrida’s Ethics of Irresponsibilization; or, How to Get Irresponsible, in Two Easy Lessons”), how Derrida differentiates between the responsibility of universal ethics and the responsibility of absolute ethics, where the second type is destined to be understood as “irresponsibility” by the standards of the first one. In the opening Miller deals with the “secrets” of literature (“Literature in Secret”) so as to bring his focus on a Biblical story of secrets, in which Abraham was called to sacrifice his own beloved son, Isaac. In *The Gift of Death*, following Patočka’s and Kierkegaard’s reading, Derrida makes Abraham the emblem of “irresponsibilization,” who upon the demand of the (absolute) Other acts against, ‘sacrifices,’ everyday ethical norms. Interestingly enough, this sacrifice is also performed textually because Miller feels to be condemned to comment on Derrida’s commenting on the others’ reading of the parable “by

respeaking the words of the other or the words of an interminable string of the other” (207).

Chapter 10 explores “autoimmunity” and also intends to describe the ‘political’ Derrida (“Derrida’s Politics of Autoimmunity”). This chapter is ‘mostly’ American, so to say, with lots of references to such current happenings and events as the War of Terror following 9/11, the cock-up of Bushian politics, scientific and technological innovations with their potential dangers, and the recession. It is the most repetitive writing, although an almost 380-page book on Derrida written by the same author obviously cannot avoid repetitions (and for sure, it does not). What makes the chapter still informative on Derrida is that the events described are used to exemplify autoimmunity. Derrida is said to foresee that the self-protecting defence mechanisms of a social body will turn against themselves and become self-destructive (238); similarly, how after 9/11 the fear of terror generated greater fear and more terror.⁶

The eleventh chapter titled “Touching Derrida Touching Nancy” is about Derrida’s highly complex book, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (*Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*), a commentary on Nancy’s works; more exactly, Miller tries to deal with the motif of ‘the hand’ in Derrida’s book. It is the right time for the reviewer to recommend reading, which is also frequently done by the author himself. It is the longest essay (sixty pages), where not only the ‘late’ Derrida but also the ‘late’ Miller is shown in their ‘prime’. The reader encounters the abundance of wordplay, flourishing rhetoric and insultingly convincing argumentation. The Nancy-Derrida essay is a masterpiece of rhetorical close reading and the reviewer, only with great difficulty, can do without quoting the essay in full length, and can only (poorly) highlight the main, ‘presentable’ ideas here.

Before reaching his “humanual” (cf. human and *manus*, ‘hand’ in Latin) theme, Miller offers a digression on technicity, then describes Derrida’s style (cf. *stylus* in Latin). The author, as a good critic, enumerates eight features of the “inimitable” Derridean hand: his usage of (otherwise Blanchotian) “x without x” phrases; his “unhanding” the boundaries between the literal and the figurative; usage of wordplays; putting everything in question; giving extravagant list of connected words or synonyms; his technique of “micrological” reading with numerous even repeated citations and ironically insolent commentaries; “the rhetoric of postponement”; and his manipulations (cf. *manus* hidden in the word) of aporia and paradox (267-78). All of these features characterise his Nancy-book, where his main aim is to deconstruct the Western concept of “touch” from Aristotle through Husserl to Nancy, claiming that “there is no ‘the’ touch” (Nancy) and the “immediacy and intimacy of touch never happens” (278). By the end of the essay, the reader must admit that no one can lay a hand on anyone

⁶ However gloomy a picture Miller paints of his contemporary America (and the world), he also welcomes some improvement, expressing his hope about Obama’s election in November 2008 in a passage that is probably one of the last additions in the book.

here: neither the writer, nor the critic, or the reviewer. Notwithstanding, in his “coda” Miller happily quotes from Nancy’s *Noli me tangere* (cf. Touch me not), which he wrote after Derrida’s death and in which he touches upon Derrida’s “rabbinical” *Le toucher*, analysing primarily Renaissance paintings about the risen Christ and Mary Magdalene’s encounter (301-303).

Miller proposes mourning as a leitmotif, “as a conspicuous and enigmatic thread” that runs through Derrida’s work (309). The theme is actually introduced earlier in chapter 5 “Derrida’s Remains” (90-95), but it is elaborated in the last two essays. While the Nancy-essay is a strange kind of mourning text since Nancy survived his heart-transplant (he “died and resurrected,” 292), the twelfth chapter titled “Absolute Mourning” deals with – not only Derrida’s but also Miller’s – ‘work of mourning’.⁷ In the interpretation of “absolute”, “impossible”, or “pre-originary” mourning, Miller reveals that for Derrida mourning, since it is speaking about the sorrowful “nonavailability of the other and myself” (320), is a “universal condition of human existence” (324). In his discussion of the differences between mourning and melancholy, Derrida argues against that the two could be kept separate, undoing Freud’s, Abraham and Torok’s distinctions about the introjecting mourning and the incorporating melancholy (310). Moreover, he suggests that both of them, even the Freudian ‘normal’ work of mourning with its introjection, betrays the other’s otherness, while the ‘true(ly)’ “impossible” mourning “leaving the other his alterity, ... refuses to take or is incapable of taking the other within oneself” (95) – as Miller quotes Derrida from his *Memoires for Paul de Man* (95).

Although mourning marks and frames the essay-collection, the reviewer does not intend to conclude in a doleful tone. Moreover, in his last interview Derrida himself puts emphasis on the survivor’s duty: “survival is an originary concept that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Dasein*, if you will. We are structurally survivors, marked by this structure of the trace and of the testament. But, having said that, I would not want to encourage an interpretation that situates surviving on the side of death and the past rather than life and the future. No, deconstruction is always on the side of the *yes*, on the side of the affirmation of life”.⁸ In his complex book Miller fulfils the survivor friend’s duty, since in the essays Derrida’s texts are kept alive and the reader – the frequently addressed “dear reader” (e.g. 32., 121., 281., 297) – is invited to

⁷ See the collection of his ‘eulogies,’ dedicated to his friends’ memory: Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001), and Jacques Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, Textes présentés par Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Paris: Galilée, 2003). Actually, I first came across Miller’s book when I was doing some research on Derrida’s work of mourning in winter 2010 at NIAS in the Netherlands.

⁸ Jacques Derrida. *Learning to Live Finally – The Last Interview. An Interview with Jean Birnbaum* (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 51. The interview was given to *Le Monde* in the summer of 2004, and Derrida died in October the same year.

join the journey and enjoy the Sternesque narration with its numerous digressions on philosophical and literary texts or of private anecdotes. Meanwhile, in the reading process, the Millerian-Derridean texts are ‘lively’ *destinerring* and escape their ‘deadly’ oblivion.