

Miller's Perspectives on Deconstructive Angel

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Abstract: The deconstructive angel has been with us for a while, long enough for us to want to start evaluating its impact on us. M.H. Abrams first used the phrase “deconstructive angel”, He has analysed it with bad metaphysics, but it has not been successful. More than two decades have passed with American critics wrestling mightily with deconstructive angel, and many have succumbed to its charm. This paper analyses the deconstructive angel from Miller's point of view. Miller applied deconstructive angel analysis to various metaphysical things such as pronouncement, mise en abyme, ideological material, reading and misreading.

Keywords: Deconstructive, Metaphysics, Reading, Pronouncement.

INTRODUCTION

Abrams refers to Miller's analysis as ‘difficult’ from the outset since it raises some issues that cannot be contested and others that require in-depth discussion. He voices his agreement with Wayne Booth that a pluralistic vision is essential for better understanding literature and history. There is no denying the fact that a depth of vision can truly be achieved by pursuing the method where there is convergence of diverse points of view. But Miller, in his view, goes beyond the limits of pluralism when he presents the radical statements in the deconstructionist interpretations. Miller claims in his review of Abram's book that the latter belongs to the class in which he places C.S.Lewis, Lovejoy, Auerbach and Curtius, and pronounces that the premises of the whole critical tradition of human science are questionable.

According to Abrams, certain general presumptions held by “conventional historians of western culture” include:

- History is recorded in written texts by authors who wished to say something determinate. They exploited the possibilities of language to enable their readers whom they considered competent to understand what they write. It is as simple as that.
- The historian as an interpreter of the author's statements tries to approximate the meanings intended by the author and aims to reach them to the readers.
- By doing so the historian is sure that the competent reader's interpretation will come closer to his own interpretation. This would confirm the ‘objectivity’ of his interpretation. The historian leaves some margin for the errors that might creep in his interpretation.

Not Mimetic Theory

M.H. Abrams expresses severe disagreement with Miller's assertion that a literary book has a single, obvious meaning that mimics reality. This suggests that Abrams views language as “implicitly mimetic,” or as passively carrying out its reflecting or imitation function. The argument, of course, has a lot of weight since it suggests that critics like Abrams, who identify with the modern school of criticism, have a strong propensity to stick with archaic linguistic ideas. So it makes sense that he would express his amazement. In the same sentence in which he expressed his surprise, he also expressed his sarcastic retort that Derridean deconstructionist critics appear to hold the belief that all those who do not adhere to its tenets hold mimetic views of language, thus exposing the shortcomings of the deconstructionist theory.

His view of language is pragmatic and functional: he says that language in whatever form performs a great variety of functions aimed at ‘a great diversity of human purpose’. One of them happens to be a state of affairs, and language, rather than mirroring it, seeks to direct our attention to it. Such a vision of the pragmatic language may appear rooted in a traditionalist framework, but its validity and strength cannot be devised. What Abrams is doing is to suggest that the purpose of language is more solidly denied than assumed by deconstructionists.

Miller's Point of Disagreement

By pointing out that Hillis and critics of his school have a deep mistrust of conventional historians because they cannot get rid of the notion that such historians can never be correct by virtue of what they are, M.H. Abrams powerfully exposes the obstinacy of Hillis's position. They reject the possibility that anyone who disagrees with their

techniques might be right in their broad anti-traditionalist conclusions. This comment has both a subtle assault and a deep sarcasm.

Nietzschean Stand

Abrams chooses the central principle of Hillis Miller and his fellow critics to point out the tenuous quality of their stand. This stand which affirms that since in a text there are multiple meanings and no single meaning can be important than the others, it would be futile to interpret it in one way only, is derived from Nietzsche's view which challenges the concept of rightness in interpretation. Nietzsche stated that "the same text authorizes innumerable interpretations, there is no 'correct' interpretation" (Abrams, 1977). Miller and his deconstructionist friends the German philosopher in high regard, no doubt as Miller's opinions quoted sporadically confirm, what fascinates them most is that reading is not an attempt to objectively identify sense, not aimed at discovering meaning. It is an importation of meaning by the readers, that is, the readers bring meaning into the text. This is the crucial factor on which the enormous deconstructionist business is run. In comical vein Abrams quotes a small dialogue from Alice in Wonderland between Alice and Humpty Dumpty where he finds a faint echo of Miller's views in Humpty Dumpty's assertion. Therefore, he proceeds to suggest that the radically skeptical premises of the deconstructionists are not wrong, they are right beyond question, 'infallibly right', as he calls them and that is precisely their trouble.

Derridean Weakness

Jacques Derrida reverses the traditional position in which speech is given priority over written form. At this stage it would be relevant to remind ourselves that it was Ferdinand de Saussure among several other linguists who established that language is primarily speech and the basic raw material of linguistics science is speech sound and not marks on the surface which is what writing is. Linguists are unanimous about this basic position. Therefore, by prioritizing written language Derrida has already put himself in a position that is limited and constrained: Abrams portrayed that "his ultimate recourse is to these black marks on white paper as the sole things that are actually present in reading". It is from this level that he launches theories in broad sweeping arcs.

Thus in the Derridean model, the text is free of any sort of meaning, and does not seem in the least to be concerned with the process of language

acquisition through identifying mistakes and correcting. Even the authors "one more mark among other marks". A graphocentric page reveals nothing but a disorganized mass of marks, because seen from the angle of Derrida, even syntactic order and organization are denied their existence or role. What Derrida was obviously doing was to subvert the traditional modes of analysis, whether thematic, for, all, psychological, historical, sociological or biographical. His model emphasizes the 'necessity of questioning and examining, receiving notions about meaning, text, author, self, truth, presence and so on'. This is what Derrida calls free play of signification as the only alternative to the traditional ways of getting at any sort of meaning. Abrams hits out at Derrida for offering us the purest nuggets of 'signs' sans meanings, sans organization, sans any control the floating specks of gold and invites us to gaze at it with joyous feelings, which he calls 'a Nietzschean affirmation'. This is the pristine state of being, an innocence of becoming generated in turn, to use Derrida's own words, "... genetic indeterminacy, the seminal chanciness of the trace".

Abrams expresses his horror at this 'monstrosity' and ends the first actions by quoting Derrida's own words.

The second section begins with reference to J. Hillis Miller who classifies the current structuralist critics into, i) the canny critic and ii) the uncanny critic. The former, 'canny critics', are those who still stand on the firm and determinate ground of 'rational and rationalisable activity', and work on given facts and look for measurable free play of indeterminable meanings". Miller acts like a disciple of Derrida, in setting up black marks on page, carrying traces of meanings. His criticism is an amusing game, as with all Derridean critics, of enhancing to the utmost limits the possible number and diversity of meanings. He sees that any factors that might limit this free-play are removed effectively.

Miller's Strategies

Miller's use of the terms 'interpretation' and 'meaning' prevents an utterance or writing to the outer physical world, or 'metaphysical thing' or of 'fact'. "These diverse realms are treated equivalently as 'texts' which are 'read' or 'interpreted'. There is no room in this kind of Derridean exercise for reconsidering signs as in any way related to outer experience. This is contrary to the perception of signs developed by Bakhtin, another Stalwart of modern times who

tried to discover and establish relations between the inner or non-material universe and the outer world. Here is what Bakhtin says, that “the chain of ideological creativity and understanding... nowhere is there a break in the chain, nowhere does a chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and underbodies in signs”.

So, while for Bakhtin “each ideological product is meaningful not in the soul but in the objectivity accessible ideological material”. The second strategy adopted by Miller also follows Derrida’s practice of excluding any reference of signification to the uses of a word or phrase. Words exclude meanings like a diamond irradiating rays of light. Words are picked up from the text and contemplated in all the possibilities of meaning that it exhibits. It is claimed to signify ‘and all the diverse things it has signified’ in the entire course of its evolution in recorded history. Thus English words can accumulate meanings in the journey it has made since its birth or derivation; and not content with this alone Hillis Miller even goes to the source language, Greek, Latin, French whatever, to add further signification. Thus whatever the textual context, the periodic or historic socio-cultural environment or the author-related circumstances, a word means everything that the interpreter can find in historical and etymological dictionaries, unsupplemented by any further information that the interpreter’s own erudition can provide. There is no norm that tells one how which of the several meanings to select in a particular interpretation, for such a process goes against the grain of Derridean deconstructionism. Such a word is termed by Abrams, using Mallarmé’s phrase *sus-pens vibratoire* “a vibratory suspension of equality meanings” (Abrams, 1977), which show the capacity to develop all the irreconcilable, incompatible and contradictory meanings.

Millers conclude that any reading is misreading, silence a text is the playground or anomalous meanings. A text is ‘undecidable’, ‘undecipherable’ and ‘unreadable’. Any reading can be shown to be a misreading of the evidence drawn from the text itself. So, what is the role of the interpreter? He merely repeats what the text says, for “any literary text ... reads or misreads itself”.

Mise en abyme

This is the bottomless abyss that the uncanny moment in interpretation reveals, the persistent following of the ‘interpretive time’ leads to the

place where the bottom suddenly drops out, uncovering a ‘vertigo of the underlying nothingness’. The famous Gardner (1982) demonstrated that if texts are only black marks on whitepaper, emitting an endless play of significances, any text is as good as another for the purpose of picking up these signals, and they all exist in a timeless state awaiting our attention. And then she writes, the indeterminacy of literary texts is part of the indeterminacy of the world; which is, to use Frank Kermode’s term, an ‘unfollowable word. Abrams, (1977) appears to agree with Ms.Gardner’s opinions in stating that critics like Miller have created a game for themselves which ensures that they can’t fail. It is a quest declaring; “Seek, and ye shall find”. “The deconstructive method works because it can’t help the working: it can’t fail enterprise”. The interpretive conclusions appear to foregone all texts reducible to one interpretation; it is the same impasse’, the same dead end. Abrahams, (1977) described that Miller’s words are “the reading comes back again and again, with different texts, to the same impasse”.

Feeling a sense of numbness at Miller’s pronouncements, Abrams says that such critics have nothing to do with the rich variety and human concerns in works of literature. It is a game devised with exceptional intelligence, offering insights into and incongruities that would have gone unnoticed, but the final word is a sense of ‘vertigo’ ‘at teetering at the brink of the abyss’. The repeated sameness of conclusion would soon of course numb even that. Gardner, (1982) portrayed that “it marks, I think, a real loss of belief in the value of literature and of literary study. By some, this is dignified and partly justified by being linked with a universal skepticism about the possibility of any real knowledge of the universe we live in or any true understanding of the world of our daily experience”.

In this third section of the essay M.H.Abrams calls Miller’s position as ‘abyssal vision of the textual world of literature, philosophy and all the other achievements of man-kind in the medium of language. Derrida’s overarching objective, according to Cleanth Brooks, was to dismantle metaphysics itself in order to show that none of our intellectual systems are based on a solid foundation of reality. I’ve occasionally questioned whether the new critics truly comprehend this theory and how it relates to literature.

Analysis of Blake's Angel

He calls it a de-humanizing philosophy. Abrams selects an apt image from William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven Hell* where the Angel reveals to the poet having descended the winding staircase, "a ghastly vision of hell as an 'infinite abyss', where the shining sun is totally black around which were 'firry tracks on which revolved vast spiders'. But as soon as the Angel departs, Blake finds himself sitting on a pleasant slope beside a moonlight-bathed river listening to sweet music. How did he escape? The Angel wished to know, and the poet replied, "All that we saw was owing to your metaphysics."

If one can view Hillis Miller as an Angel, then it is some consolation that he is not entirely committed seriously enough to the consequences of his premises. Abrams remarks that Miller, happily, is in a double role, one being deconstructive critics, the other will commence as soon as she steps out of the podium, "out of his graphocentric premises" and "begins to talk to us". Then he will begin all kinds of definite and determinate things and "will masterfully exploit the resources of language to express the things clearly and forcefully. He will apparently have recourse to forms of thinking, his words will have references to the outer world, and he will be displaying normative behavior. He will be a feeling and thinking subject, showing all the ordinary degrees of responses and emotional-rational logical reactions. The overriding and what Brooks calls over weaning authority of linguistic model has reduced literature, the great works of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Goethe, Wordsworth, Dante and Homer, to yawning blanks, works that inspired

and motivated generations of human beings, It is this dehumanizing method latrous, obsessive enterprise that is being sought to be promoted by the new theorists which M.H. Abrams warns us against.

CONCLUSION

M.H.Abrams essays the long debate going on at the moment between the humanist critics and the post- structuralists. He, as an ardent advocate of the humanistic tradition, points out the serious drawbacks of the latte school and the great disservice they are going to literary criticism. The whole doctrine of man's imprisonment in language should be doubted; we must assume that language itself is in an ontological relation reality, as all older philosophers of language and even Heidegger assert. There is, after all, a perceptual life of man; personality and self. It cannot be reduced to language relations. Even deaf-mutes find their way around the world.

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Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:

Vairavan, C. "Miller's Perspectives on Deconstructive Angel." *Sarcouncil Journal of Arts and Literature* 2.1 (2023): pp 14-17.