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THE TEXT AS A LABYRINTH OF MEANINGS: EXPLORING JOSEPH HILLIS MILLER'S THE CRITIC AS HOST

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Abstract: The deconstructionist school of literary analysis has been a controversial method of literary critique. Many critics find it to be a wasteful genre of analysis – too hung up over the details to notice the bigger picture. The most passionate defense of the deconstruction school comes from the critic Joseph Hillis Miller. In his essay *The Critic as Host*, Miller goes down a rabbit-hole of antithetical meanings of words and sentences to arrive at an intricately detailed definition of deconstruction. He shows us how, to make meanings with sentences, we must respect the meanings of words. The deconstructive reading of a text truly begins whirlpool of previously hidden meanings.

Index Terms: Deconstruction, literary criticism, equivocal reading, interpretations of text

Joseph Hillis Miller is a literary critic from the deconstruction school. He specializes in literature from the Victorian and Modernist eras. During his tenure at Yale University in the 1970s, he worked along with critics Paul De Man and Geoffrey Hartman. Together, they formed the Yale school of deconstruction. Among the many distinctive positions he has worked in, he was also the president of the MLA (Modern Language Association) in 1986.

Miller's idea of deconstruction was challenged by many critics, most prominently by M.H. Abrams. Miller answers to these challenges in his essay "The Critic as Host".

Miller begins the essay by quoting from M.H. Abrams's essay "Rationality and Imagination in Cultural History", who in turn quotes from Wayne Booth's essay "M. H. Abrams: Historian as Critic, Critic as Pluralist". Abrams asserts that the deconstructionist reading of a text is "plainly and simply parasitical" (Booth) on "the obvious or univocal reading" (Abrams).

Miller says his citation of a citation is deliberate and asks, "Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host?" Miller wonders what is the relationship of the citation vis-à-vis the text in which it is quoted? On the one hand, the citation is being used to give life to the essay – to expand on its meaning and derive new knowledge from it. On the other hand, the citation is but a tiny fragment of a larger whole and thus occupies an awkward, incomplete position. Is it possible for the host (the essay) and the parasite (the citation in the essay) to co-exist happily without any threats to meaning?

Abrams is of the opinion that deconstructionist principles make textual history impossible. Miller's response to this is simply, "So be it." Miller says even if certain textual histories are made indeterminate due to a deconstructionist reading, it does not take away from the meaning of the text. He says just like multiplicity of histories in a text does not affect its interpretation, similarly the lack of one won't influence it either. Textual history may not be one continuous narrative; there may be multiple, there may be none. According to Miller, the only challenge truly worth addressing is if the text becomes impossible to read because that would affect our cultural ethos deeply.

Miller rejects Abram's ideas of "univocal reading". The word 'univocal' is used in Logic to mean a term that can have one possible meaning in any given context for example, *The Prime Minister of India*. The person holding office may change but the term *The Prime Minister of India* can only refer to the Prime Minister of India in any context.

In logic, terms can also be equivocal – which express different concepts that are similar such as the word *ring* that can refer to jewellery and also to the sound that a phone makes.

Terms can also be analogous – which express different meanings that are related such as *chair* refers to furniture and also to a person who "chairs" a department.

Thus, terms can be categorized using these three categories – which tell us the signification of that term.

Keeping this in mind, Abram's idea of a univocal reading means that a text should be read in one way by all readers and they should all arrive at the same conclusion. This is against the tenants of deconstruction and Miller rejects the idea of univocal reading of texts.

Miller comes back to elaborate on the term that he began with – 'parasitic'. He says that the concept of univocal reading is considered to be "...as the mighty, masculine oak or ash, rooted in the solid ground..." and deconstructive thought is "...the insidious twining around it of ivy, English or maybe poison, somehow feminine, secondary, defective, or dependent, a clinging vine, able to live in no other way but by drawing the life sap of its host, cutting off its light and air."

This example is telling of Miller's ideas. The tree is described in phallic terms and it is 'rooted' in the ground. The parasite (ivy in this example) is inferior, co-dependent and slowly killing the mighty oak. This image has been resonated in literature too. Miller quotes two examples:

This line from *Vanity Fair*, "God bless you, honest William!--Farewell, dear Amelia-Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling!"

And in these lines from Thomas Hardy's "The Ivy-Wife":

In new affection next I strove

To coll an ash I saw,

And he in trust received my love;

Till with my soft green claw

I cramped and bound him as I wove ...

Such was my love: ha-ha!

By this I gained his strength and height

Without his rivalry.

But in my triumph I lost sight

Of afterhaps. Soon he,

Being bark-bound, flagged, snapped, fell outright,

And in his fall felled me!

Miller says these lines from literature are about commonplace domestic happenings. In the quote from *Vanity Fair*, Emmy Sedley and Col. William Dobbin are married after years of Emmy rejecting him and pining after her dead husband. Becky Sharp reveals to her that her dead husband – George Osborne didn't love her and wanted to be with Sharp instead. Emmy then finally admits she loves William and they marry. The narrator's description of Emmy as a "tender little parasite" is at odds with the scene of holy and joyous matrimony.

Similarly, the poem "The Ivy Wife" by Thomas Hardy shows the Ivy plant as a personified female plant. The ivy is a climbing plant and she desires to be as tall as the mighty trees. Her attempts however are futile and end in disaster both for her and the (masculine) tree. This is Hardy's warning, in typical Victorian fashion, that women who seek equal status as men will bring the men's and their own downfall.

Despite projecting commonplace domestic happenings, the image of the parasite – of the uncanny, the *Unheimlich* are present. This feeling of eerie decay demonstrates perfectly how deconstruction is being perceived in literary circles. The parasite is deconstruction and it is destroying the host.

Miller begins to question – is the conventional way of reading really univocal? Rather than deconstruction, is it not the univocal way of reading that is uncanny – that it so familiar that it doesn't seem strange?

The word 'parasite' doesn't mean anything by itself. A parasite can only be a parasite if it attaches itself to a host.

Miller says that words are not the absolute units we take them to be. Words and counterwords are deeply fragmented and become "a double antithetical word." For example, *Unheimlich* and *unheimlich* are doubly antithetical to each other.

He elaborates – take for instance, the prefix –para. This prefix may mean alongside, near or beside, beyond etc. Miller says, "The words in "para" form one branch of the tangled labyrinth of words using some form of the Indo-European root *per*." However, the "branch" is by itself a labyrinth. "Para is an uncanny double antithetical prefix," says Miller. This is because its significations are a multiplicity of possibilities. It may signify closeness or distance, similarity or difference, something that is at the threshold or at the margin, it may also signify the boundary itself, something equal or subsidiary etc.

The final form a word takes with the prefix –para will refer to one of the aforementioned possibilities but the other meanings will still be a part of the word "...like a slightly alien guest within the syntactical closure where all the words are family friends together." There can be many words with the prefix –para such as *parachute*, *paradox*, *paragraph*, *paranoia*, *parallel*, *parable* etc. *Parasite* is also one of those words.

'Parasite' comes from the Greek word *parasitos*. 'Para' in this case, means beside and 'sitos' means food. Sitology is the science of nutrition and diet.

Hence, 'parasite' originally meant a guest – someone sharing food with you. The meaning evolved to refer to people who accept dinner invitations but never host dinners in return. Today, the word 'parasite' has two meanings (as defined in the Oxford Dictionary) – "an organism that lives in or on an organism of another species (its host) and benefits by deriving nutrients at the other's expense." It also means "a person who habitually relies on or exploits others and gives nothing in return." Since Deconstruction has been given the status of a parasite, by explaining its meaning in detail, Miller jokes that this is a harsh description meted out for a literary theory!

The host is simultaneously someone who eats next to the parasite (echoing the traditional sense of the word) and also the one being eaten and exploited. The word "host" has its etymological roots in Christian lore wherein it refers to the consecrated bread or wafer of the Eucharist. In Latin, *hostia* means sacrifice or victim.

Since the host is simultaneously the eater and the eaten then it becomes a double antithetical word where it is both a host and a guest (a parasitical guest). In fact, the word guest has similar etymological roots – it comes from *ghos-ti* which means someone with whom one has corresponding relations of hospitality. Hence, Miller shows how the words *host* and *guest* are etymologically similar. The word "host" contains multiple meanings within its structure. The

uncanny antithetical structure that Miller spoke of previously exists not only in seemingly oppositional words such as *host* and *parasite*. It exists within the structure of each word by itself. The etymology of word *host* proves that it is an uncanny antithetical version of itself! Just like the prefix –para has the capability of conveying a multiplicity of contrary meanings; each word contains within itself a multitude of different connotations. Miller points out that after looking at the etymology of words, their ambiguous nature no longer seems ‘uncanny’.

Miller says that examining the etymology of words is an example of a deconstructive critical analysis. He innocuously began with the question of what a citation means within a critical essay and in analyzing that showed us the evolution and contradictory nature of words – in doing so, he evoked a plethora of citations from various Indo-European languages. He did this to show us how absolutely nothing – not even individual words are without a context. The story of the text is not a ‘univocal’ story; the history of the text is not a singular version of events. Every text within itself contains a multitude of meanings and meaning within meanings. The story is located not just in sentences but even down to individual words.

This is the beauty of deconstructive thought and it is not to be feared or hated, but to be celebrated for making the text reveal its many meanings to us. He says, “...my discussion of "parasite" implies, resides in part in the fact that there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concept and figure without an implied story, narrative, or myth, in this case the story of the alien guest in the home. Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence of figure, concept, and narrative in one another.”

A deconstructive analysis stretches the language of the text to its very extreme. He quotes poet Wallace Stevens:

“Natives of poverty, children of malheur,
The gaiety of language is our seigneur.”

Miller says the “prison-house of language” – a term borrowed from the Russian Formalists – is a place of joy. To consider the deconstructive reading of a text as ‘parasitical’ is to ignore the many meanings that its language has to offer. He quotes Martin Heidegger, “It is language that tells us about the nature of a thing, provided that we respect language's own nature.”

Miller says that proponents of univocal reading of texts do not realize that a univocal reading of a poem may not be identical to the poem itself. The poem, its univocal reading and its deconstructive reading have a triangular relation. Deconstructive reading and univocal reading are not polar opposites of each other. In fact, any univocal reading of a text will contain within itself – the ‘parasite’ of deconstructive analysis. Both deconstructive and univocal analyses are somehow bound together by “reciprocal obligation”.

The text itself echoes other texts – “From the Old to the New Testament, from Ezekiel to Revelation, to Dante, to Ariosto and Spenser, to Milton, to Rousseau, to Wordsworth and Coleridge...” Every work of art leans on its predecessors.

Miller says that demonizing deconstructive thought is to ignore what it has to offer. No reading of a text can be truly – univocal. Unfortunately for Abrams, the ‘parasite’ of a deconstructive reading is already within univocal reading. Univocal readings are both host and parasite.

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