

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor. The authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

Presidential Address

To the Editor:

I was fascinated by J. Hillis Miller's "Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base" (102 [1987]: 281-91). Miller suggests that "the resistance to theory" is one factor in the "almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such" (283). I want to suggest another factor, one rooted in the very nature of the process by which ideas spread from their originators to others.

Let us consider deconstruction. Much of its rhetorical force comes from its immediate intellectual tension with the Western metaphysics it criticizes. First-generation deconstructionists, such as Miller, reached intellectual maturity fully within Western metaphysics. For Miller and his peers, deconstruction is thus something they arrived at after other philosophical commitments, such as phenomenology, fell apart. For these critics deconstruction has a strength and necessity that comes from the struggle they endured to create it.

The situation is quite different for those of us who first encountered deconstruction in graduate, or undergraduate, school. For us, deconstruction has been just one intellectual option among others. When we learned deconstruction we of course learned of the crisis in Western metaphysics. But it is one thing to learn of such a crisis, much as one learns, for example, about the Renaissance, and quite another thing to run into that crisis while trying to advance within Western metaphysics. For *them*, the crisis has been and is an immediate fact of their intellectual experience. For *us*, our knowledge of the crisis is, in Platonic fashion, but a copy of the original crisis.

Thus deconstruction can never be as compelling to us as it is to its originators. Our intellectual world is, by virtue of their effort, significantly different from theirs. Within this difference, many of us see deconstruction primarily as a great leveler. The distinction between the world and its representations retreats behind an infinite regression of signs. All texts become vessels for containing contradictions in Western metaphysics. Just as all cats appear gray in the dark, so all texts appear the same under deconstruction.

In short, to those young enough to be removed from the immediate crisis, the boring sameness of deconstruc-

tion's results can easily become more compelling than its logical rigor or its sense of intellectual urgency. The social process of creating and disseminating knowledge moves inevitably toward routinization. Ideas that taxed the full powers of the best thinkers of one generation become the routine intellectual property of ordinary thinkers in succeeding generations. Deconstruction is so tied to the passing moment of its initial necessity that its force weakens as its accomplishments become routine. That, as much as resistance to theory, is why younger critics have turned from language-centered theory, such as deconstruction.

I am not entirely happy with this situation. I think that we really are in trouble, that we need to establish new intellectual frameworks. But I am not at all sure that deconstruction has succeeded in doing much more than turning our deep intellectual problems into a rhetorical device called "the crisis in Western metaphysics." The move "toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context" may well be theoretically naive; it may even spring, in part, from "the resistance to theory." But I don't think that deconstruction's repeated encapsulation of intellectual crisis is rich enough to overcome that resistance.

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To the Editor:

In his Presidential Address, J. Hillis Miller makes a forceful and convincing case for theory and deconstruction. I admire the artful way in which Miller has woven together the various strands of his two central themes (the thinness of North American culture and the triumph of theory) to make his point. If the goals and practices of the critics of deconstruction are as he says they are, then I am all for them. I cannot imagine that any thoughtful literary critic would want to quarrel with the sort of intelligent, open, responsible, self-questioning, and ultimately humbling reading of texts that he proposes.

There are two areas in the paper that trouble me, however. First, I am somewhat confused about what constitutes the "material base" and the relations of the parts of that base to one another. At the beginning of the paper, we are presented with the idea of the material base as something similar to the land or the soil: out of this nurturing substance some cultures (e.g., European cul-

tures and indigenous American cultures) grow “naturally,” as if “in magical correspondence with the matter of which . . . [they are] constructed” (282). In America, we are told, no such organic correspondence exists between the material base—presumably, the natural environment—and the predominantly European culture that has been superimposed on it. This puts us Americans in the position of being able to detect more readily than our European counterparts the “arbitrariness of the decree that makes things into the bearers of significance, matter into signs” (287). In other words, because the gap between the material base and the sign system is conspicuous in our culture, we are both blessed and cursed with being able to recognize a discrepancy that is always there but usually forgotten or avoided. Furthermore, our “privileged” position is reflected in the phenomenon of the triumph of theory in literary studies, where this “incommensurability between the sign system and its material base” (288) is also to be found.

It is here that I begin to have trouble with what Miller means by “material base.” For, in order to talk about the material base of the literary theorist, he finds it necessary to widen his term to include (1) the particular texts that are to be accounted for by the theory; (2) the cultural circumstances of the critic; (3) the physical existence of the critic (“the somatic symptoms, the body that may become the locus of a sign” [288]); (4) “each unique act of reading” (288); and finally (5) the written material itself (books, articles) and all the paraphernalia (typewriters, computers) used to transmit the theories to the reading public. Now, my question is this: how do these different areas of the material base relate to one another? Is there an orderly move from soil to word processor? Is one more “material” than the other? And I wonder: are the relationships between Americans and the different aspects of their social environment as superficial as the one that holds between them and their natural habitat?

My second point has to do with Miller’s use of the term *America*. It seems to me that it is a good example of a practice that he is urging us to avoid: namely, the unexamined adoption of a term whose standard usage, at least in the United States, masks the sort of arrogant, narrow-minded attitude that he, following the lead of William Carlos Williams (*In the American Grain*), ascribes to the New England Puritans. Had Miller inserted “North” or “English-speaking” before America, or had he pointed out in passing that there are important differences between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Americas, his readers would be reassured that he at least was aware of the difference. Instead, however, he conflates the two by mentioning Cortés’s destruction of Tenochtitlán (again, following Williams) almost in the same breath that he speaks of the Puritans’ decimation of the Indians in New England. These two examples of an apparent lack of sensitivity on the part of the European conqueror toward the indigenous American cultures are offered in contrast to the “receptive response” given

the latter by one Père Sebastien Rasles (also cited in Williams), a Jesuit missionary who was eventually killed by the Puritans. Surely Miller knows that there were countless Spanish-speaking missionaries in America who were not killed off by the Spanish settlers and who took the time to learn the Indian languages and familiarize themselves with the native cultures in order better to educate and proselytize their members. As they learned about Indian ways, these missionaries became convinced of the need to help the Indians preserve written records of the Indian languages, customs, and oral literature. They also realized the usefulness of incorporating Indian rituals and symbols into Christian ceremonies. This openness to native American culture on the part of both missionaries and settlers, who were not averse to miscegenation, was at least partly responsible for the fact that the Indian deities, the Indian way of life, did not entirely die out, certainly not in the large population centers. The “radiant gist” remained above ground, though partially submerged.

I wish there were room to say more about the *mestizo* culture of Spanish America and the *cronistas* and their attitude toward the New World. But I have made my point: that in many areas of America the indigenous culture was not stamped out but rather has come to form a curious, sometimes uneasy blend with the superimposed European culture. What this means with respect to the relation between the material base and the ideological superstructure I am not certain, though I suspect that there would be a closer and more natural connection than the one described by Professor Miller. In any case, I do hope that these last traces of the *leyenda negra* visible in Miller’s address will be carefully examined and worked out by him.

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To the Editor:

Residents of California’s Bay Area are accustomed to seeing Gertrude Stein’s words in their newspapers from time to time. Stein was born in San Francisco, and she once made a San Franciscan’s joke about Oakland. “There is no there there,” she said. At least, this is the context the newspapers give us. I don’t know where the quotation comes from, myself. If I did, I would tell where.

As a San Franciscan’s joke about Oakland, the line at once suggests irony, wonder, and delight in the power of words to refer to things. The first “there” refers to something intangible, the second to something tangible. One infers, also, that there is a there in San Francisco—but you wouldn’t *call* it a there unless you were *there*, in Oakland or someplace else—which proves, of course, that there is a there there.

Well, it was a joke, I thought.

J. Hillis Miller proclaims in his Presidential Address