

‘You see you ask an innocent question and you’ve got a long answer’

An Interview with J. Hillis Miller

Introduction

J. HILLIS MILLER’S PROFESSIONAL CAREER AS A TEACHER AND SCHOLAR OF LITERATURE, philosophy and critical theory has spanned well over fifty years now. He is, according to Edinburgh University Press, ‘the single most significant North American literary critic of the twentieth century’. He has published twenty-seven books and countless articles, edited collections and book chapters. Hillis holds honorary degrees as Doctor of Letters from the University of Florida, Doctor of Humane Letters at Bucknell University, and Doctor Honoris Causa at the University of Zaragoza. He is also Honorary Professor of Peking University and past president of the Modern Language Association. He has taught at The Johns Hopkins University, Yale University and University of California, Irvine. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the American Philosophical Society and currently Distinguished Research Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine.

On 2 June 2012, Éamonn Dunne and Michael O’Rourke organized a day-long event at the Humanities Institute, University College Dublin, entitled ‘Signing, Sealing, Sailing: The Life and Work of J. Hillis Miller’.¹ The day began with a

¹ Michael O’Rourke’s introduction on the day, ‘The Sea Legs of J. Hillis Miller’, can be accessed at: <https://www.academia.edu/1630551/The_Sea_Legs_of_J._Hillis_Miller>. The authors are very grateful for the assistance of John Schad and Arthur Bradley from the University of Lancaster and for the generous and enthusiastic support of Gerardine

screening of Dragan Kujundžić's film *The First Sail*² and the other speakers at the event were Martin McQuillan, Graham Allen and Nicholas Royle. To close the day we conducted a lengthy interview with Hillis with each participant posing two or three questions in advance.³ The questions were divided into three categories: *Reading*; *New Media and Telepathic Technologies*; *Influences* (those Miller has influenced and has been influenced by). We begin here with *Reading*.

Reading

HILLIS MILLER: You want me to read the questions? [laughter]

ÉAMONN DUNNE: What are you reading now?

HILLIS MILLER: I have a truthful answer to that question. I am reading one of the volumes of Henry James's New York Edition. The one that collects the stories that he says are on the international theme written essentially in the 1880s, so they are all quite early. The volume begins with a quite extraordinary preface about the international theme. Why am I reading that? Because I promised to go to what I consider to be a very strange, conference at Oxford in about three weeks (the end of June 2012) on 'Henry James at Oxford'. Henry James received an honorary degree from Oxford but that isn't even mentioned in Kaplan's biography so it's not a big deal and Henry James's connection with Oxford is pretty marginal.⁴ He went there for the first time rather early in his life. My

Meaney, Valerie Norton and the Humanities Institute of Ireland at University College Dublin for making this event happen.

² *The First Sail: J. Hillis Miller* (2012) is the first feature length film to catalogue the life and work of J. Hillis Miller. Through archive footage and interviews at the President's House at the University of Florida, Miller's homes at Deer Isle and Sedgwick, Maine, Dragan Kujundžić (Director) documents the life and work of a man whom Gregory Ulmer has referred to as 'our own Living National Treasure'. Here Hillis reminisces about his childhood and the great contribution of his family to the University of Florida, where his father was president, as well as about his own career at Yale University, Johns Hopkins, and the University of California. Edited from over thirty hours of interviews, the film contains exclusive footage of Jacques Derrida, as well as Miller's reflections on some of the most urgent political issues of our time: climate change, higher education, and the global financial crisis. *The First Sail* is an exclusive and rare insight into one of the most distinguished critical intelligences of our time. See the trailer of *The First Sail* on YouTube at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUX68PMAbpk>>.

³ This is a revised version of the oral interview. The podcast is available on the Humanities Institute of Ireland website: <<http://www.ucd.ie/humanities/events/podcasts/2012/hillis-miller-interview/>>. It can also be listened to on iTunes: <<https://itunes.apple.com/ie/podcast/ucd-humanities-institute-ireland/id417437263>>. We would like to thank Michael Liffey for podcasting and Hillis Miller for so carefully reading through and correcting the transcript.

⁴ Fred Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of a Genius, A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

Oxford inviters admit this: it's just an excuse to have a party at Oxford. I go all the way there and then I go to Munich and Augsburg. I go all the way to Oxford to talk for twenty minutes. But I chose these stories partly because one of them was commissioned by an Oxford graduate from Merton College who lived in Paris and ran a transatlantic magazine; but I was also searching for something to talk about and those stories involve international encounters, as you know if you've read them: 'Lady Barbarina', which is the most famous one; but there's also one called 'A Bundle of Letters'. These stories tend to be epistolary, which is interesting. I was especially attracted by one of them, the one which involves Americans going to Europe and the question of intermarriage between Americans and Europeans. I was interested in that one because the woman is from Bangor, Maine, which is just sixty miles from where I live. James imitates her accent. You see you ask an innocent question and you've got a long answer [laughter].



J. Hillis Miller

But my Oxford friends asked me to bring in certain things. They prescribe, people are always telling me what I should write. They wanted me somehow to bring [J.L.] Austin in. He was certainly from Oxford. I'm happy to do that. James of course had no way of knowing *How to Do Things with Words*, but I've written a book on speech acts in Henry James [*Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James*] which uses speech act theory and that was the connection that interests my Oxford inviters. So I have asked myself 'are there any performatives in this volume of James stories?' Of course there are lots of performatives in the stories, but the one that really interests me is in the preface. It is quite extraordinary. The preface makes a sociological hypothesis: in 1908 during that period when he's writing the prefaces, says James, the international theme no longer exists because there's been, according to him, a fusion, whereas in the 1880s there was a real difference between Americans and English, or sometimes French, people. The question of intermarriage between them could in the 1880s be a legitimate subject for writing. James even excludes *Portrait of a Lady* from that. The fact that the characters are Americans or French or English is not, he says, important in *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* or even in *Portrait of a Lady*. That's interesting as a sociological hypothesis and very problematic. In that short quarter of a century or a little more national distinctions had disappeared, says James. No more international theme. So maybe claiming that is a performative. How do you prove his claim? Is it not valid just on his sayso? There's also an extraordinarily condescending passage in the preface where he says, in effect, 'now [1908] when I go to a great hotel or when I look in the bank at the people who sign their names on checks or when I see the people on a transatlantic boat, I haven't the slightest idea who they are. They have these long names that are not Anglo-Saxon names. I have no idea what they are thinking and feeling, whereas I used to believe I knew that about people in hotels, etc. They were my sort'. That is a very condescending and racist passage. Its innocent blatantness surprised me a little bit. But there is one genuine performative and this will be my subject in my Oxford talk—I only have twenty minutes, six pages [laughter]—and I've already talked six pages here. I'm talking fast so I won't have to answer the very hard questions at the end [laughter].

Here's the performative: he's talking about 'Lady Barbarina'. It's the longest and the first in this volume of stories. It's about an American doctor who courts and marries an English noblewoman and brings her to New York. She finds it horrible! But then she has a chance finally to go back home. He promises to take her back in the summer to visit her home and visit England and he knows after a while that if he takes her she'll never come back to New York because she finds Americans uncultured, even in New York among the rich. He's a rich doctor and there are parties and so on. The performative is in the preface where James says that generally speaking, both historically and in the other stories in his volume, it's the young American woman who goes to Europe and marries

there. 'Lady Barbarina' reverses that because it's an Englishwoman who marries an American. By the way James doesn't comment on a fact which strikes me as crucial. Not a single one of these stories leads to a happy marriage. It never does in James. He was incapable of imagining a happy heterosexual marriage [laughter]. Well there is one. The sister of Lady Barbarina marries a cowboy from the west. She's a bad girl. She goes out to parties at night. Lady Barbarina brings her sister with her to New York and she elopes. So the doctor (his name is Doctor Lemon) goes all the way to the horrible (to James) west coast, to California, to try to rescue the sister-in-law, but he discovers it's too late. They really are legitimately married. The performative is the statement he makes in the preface in which he admits that this is not historical, that he didn't have historical experience of a marriage of an English noblewoman and an American doctor. So he says *I forged* the documents. And that would be a speech act. So it's based on a forged historical non-truth, but he says he was so satisfied with these forged documents that he was able to write this story. It is a wonderful story. Now I've given my little talk so I don't have to go to Oxford [laughter].

NICHOLAS ROYLE: If you were sailing to a desert island and could only take six poems with you, what would they be? If you were sailing to a desert island and could only take six novels with you, what would they be? Is there any single author whose work you have not yet read and would like to take along on the same trip?

HILLIS MILLER: I have thought a bit about this. As usual, Nick's questions are sly and difficult. I can tell you which books of poetry I would bring... but not quite 'it would maybe a poem by...' Well I can say I'd take *The Prelude*. I'm going to be stuck for a long time on that desert island! Not *The Excursion* but *The Prelude*. That's a single poem. I don't think I'd take Tennyson's *The Princess*, although I might. One thing we haven't talked about at all (and there would be a lot to say about this) and that is the placement of 'Tears Idle Tears' in *The Princess*.⁵ The lyric has a context. It's sung by a man pretending to be a woman who's invaded this women's collective, so he's dressed in drag, something you don't really expect to find in Tennyson. And I've never really quite worked out the function of the context, so I might bring *The Princess*. I would want to bring poems that I haven't satisfied myself by writing about. You can always go back to great poems. I think since I haven't already written on 'The Owl and the Sarcophagus', I would certainly take a [Wallace] Stevens poem. And I would like to have some Hardy to read but Nick has said one poem and it wouldn't be *The Dynasts*. I would have to

⁵ 'Tears Idle Tears' is a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson which Miller has written about—'Tennyson's Tears' in *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995)—and also discusses in the film *The First Sail*. Dunne and O'Rourke's presentation 'Miller's Idle Tears' (you can read it at: <https://www.academia.edu/2007623/Millers_Idle_Tears>) and Nicholas Royle's talk 'Up' both meditated on this poem and Miller's readings of it.

take something like the poems 1912-1913. You see I don't really come up much beyond modernists. I stop with Stevens in the poems that come to my mind. I don't know if that is six but you get the general idea.

The novels: again I would want to take very long ones that I haven't satisfied myself that I know. One of them answers the next question— I stand here to confess, it's a speech act: I confess— I have never read Richardson, ever. I have had no particular occasion to. I would take Richardson's *Clarissa* along. On this desert island I would probably take a Jane Austen novel because I haven't really worked on Jane Austen. I've read them. I don't know quite which one, *Emma* maybe, maybe *Mansfield Park*. I mean they are all wonderful. I've been talking recently in lectures about the gothic side of *Atonement*. The epigraph from [Ian] McEwan's *Atonement* is from *Northanger Abbey*, so there's a literal reference. I might re-read *Northanger Abbey*, which I haven't done for a while. But I certainly would take a George Eliot novel that I don't know as well as I know *Middlemarch*, so it wouldn't be *Middlemarch*. It might be *Daniel Deronda*, which I have taught but I don't feel that I have mastered. It's a wonderful novel that I find more interesting than other George Eliot novels that I have taken seriously. I would certainly take Proust because though I've written on Proust, I have never really read all those 3000 pages. When I started teaching Proust I said to myself if I start with *Swann's Way* I'll never get out of *Swann's Way* [laughter]. What people normally teach is *Swann's Way* and then *Le Temps Retrouvé* at the end. So I decided I won't do that. I'll read the parts about Marcel's long affair with Albertine. In English one part is called *The Sweet Cheat Gone*, or *Albertine Disparue* in French. I'd take the French because that would slow me down [laughter]. I remember I was reading it in French. I came upon a sentence which was syntactically odd. I could read it, I knew what all the words meant, but syntactically it didn't make sense. Proust's syntax is sometimes very complicated. So I said I'll look at the translation. I looked at the standard translation and found that the translator had just left the sentence out! He obviously didn't know what it meant either [laughter]. So you have to read the French. My earlier work on Proust has been published now.

I am reading for the first time some so-called Postmodern Fiction. I don't really feel I would know what to say about *Gravity's Rainbow*, to some degree it troubles me, bothers me. I tried to read it but I think it might be good for me to read the whole of *Gravity's Rainbow*, hence my answer about another author I haven't read that I'd like to read. It's not something you would do overnight, reading Richardson or Pynchon either, which is maybe why I haven't done it.

MARTIN MCQUILLAN: Have you ever thought about writing a novel?

HILLIS MILLER: The answer is: sure, who hasn't? But I know I couldn't do it. This reminds me of a story I told at Lancaster.⁶ There's a question about my mother later on here. My mother at some point called me Hillis Junior because I'm a junior. She was a Southerner and I hated that. 'Hillis Junior! Come here Hillis Junior!' She said at some point when I was in graduate school or maybe already teaching: 'Hillis Junior, why don't you write a romance?' 'Housewives in Wisconsin write romances', said my mother. She figured I was wasting my talents writing literary criticism. My answer was quite truthful. I said 'mother if I could I would', but I knew that I couldn't. Also I've resisted a version of that question: 'have you written your memoirs?' I've told stories all the time about De Man or Derrida, about my mother, but I have a resistance to doing a memoir or autobiography partly because though I'm not all that modest a person, I still ask myself: 'Are people really going to interest themselves in my life?' I'd rather write some more criticism, so I doubt if I will do an autobiography. It's now very popular. Lots of academic people write their memoirs sooner or later, partly justifying it, as I might mine, by the fact that it has lots of true stories about people whose work is known. Edward Said was a close friend of mine. I would have stories to tell about him. But my memoirs are not going to be a bestseller.

New Media and Telepathic Technologies

DRAGAN KUJUNDŽIĆ: How can understanding contemporary media help us re-read literary tradition? I am specifically thinking about reading the mediatic in the literary. Was it always there, and if so how?

HILLIS MILLER: We have talked quite a bit about this, you and I, at one time or another. This is obviously a big topic that almost anybody these days is interested in. Nick Royle talked about it. Two answers: one would be that I have a theory that I call 'anachronistic reading'. Which means that I think reading these old works (say Richardson, or Jane Austen, or whoever) trying to make yourself as though you were an eighteenth-century person, which is what I was taught to do, you learn all about the culture etc. etc. I'm very dubious about that. I want to know what *Clarissa* would mean for me today, what use it would be today. And I think that's a rather different question from asking what its role was in its original historical context. There's a part of me that says 'so I'm supposed to read the *Elizabethan World Picture* by Tillyard in order to think like an Elizabethan'. I

⁶ Just before the event in Dublin, Miller participated in another event at Lancaster University entitled 'J. Hillis Miller: The Theory to Come—An International Symposium'. At the airport in Manchester, security asked Hillis where he was coming from. He replied 'a conference'. 'What was the conference about?' the guard asked. Hillis responded 'It was about me'. The next question was 'what are you going to Dublin for?' 'A conference' was the same response. Again they asked 'what is the conference about?' Hillis replied 'At the risk of sounding immodest, it is also about me'.

don't want to think like an Elizabethan. I don't really think I can. I don't think you can suspend your present-day picture. You read those old works today with an awareness of the change in media. That means I am quite different from readers of *Middlemarch* when it first came out. They had no way of imagining the changes in media to come. Knowing the new media gives us a special perspective on *Middlemarch* because it's easier for us to see ways in which the fact that it's a printed novel published in parts and so on limits its possibilities of meaning. So that would be one answer.

The other answer would be to say that the transformation of these old printed books into Kindle editions and other e-texts gives us a new perspective on literature. I'm not at all against e-books. Having them gives us an opportunity to reflect on the effects of new media. What's the difference between reading *Middlemarch* in a printed book and reading it on Kindle? There are a lot of differences. I think it's a useful way of thinking about new media to have works that exist in both. That's what I mean by 'the medium is the maker': that the medium has a decisive effect on what you can say in the medium.⁷ And nineteenth century novelists exploited the medium of the printed book in different ways. Trollope uses the medium of the published, printed book in a way different from the way George Eliot does. That's a challenging topic for research and reflection.

MARTIN MCQUILLAN: What does a deconstructive film look like?

HILLIS MILLER: We've just seen that! [a deconstructive film]. We've heard that question before today. It's a trap. Martin has already put down all these brilliant people that he was interrogating and has given his own answer, which is meant to be decisive. I accept his answer.⁸ The only thing that I can add to it and this seems wilfully, trivially paradoxical but I think it does mean something: there is no such thing as a non-deconstructive film. That is to say even the most banal Hollywood film that follows the conventions (for example of film noir) nevertheless has some element of one feature of deconstruction, namely: self-reflection about the medium itself and in that sense a kind of undoing of the medium. Given time I could show that every Victorian novel, even the most subservient to the conventions of the Victorian novel, has some place or other in it where there is a reflection on the medium. So I think that's a general thing. You can call that self-deconstruction if you like. It certainly is one feature of deconstruction. Then you would have to say (the reason I say it is kind of trivial) it might not be very interesting to observe that with some films or novels. There

⁷ J. Hillis Miller, *The Medium is The Maker: Browning, Freud, Derrida and the New Telepathic Ecotechnologies* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

⁸ Miller is referring to Martin McQuillan's paper 'Celluloid Philosophy' which interrogated the question of what is and is not a deconstructive film.

are obviously some that are more interesting than others. Nevertheless, I think it is a kind of non-question because there is no absolute distinction between the so-called deconstructive film and the completely conventional one. I noticed, by the way, in some of the examples that Martin showed, I was having trouble trying to watch the film. You [Martin] intended this. Listening to you [Martin] talking about me and [Walter] Benjamin at the same time as showing film clips distracted me. I missed some parts of that but the examples you gave were all I guess deconstructive.

But I did notice something quite often in the cinematic examples: that is—I talked about this at Lancaster—the question of stage play. What do actors and actresses in films do with their hands? There's been a kind of transformation. It used to be in the great days of Humphrey Bogart and in some of these film clips that Martin showed that what you do is light a cigarette, as the very beautiful actress in the film about the philosopher you showed did. She is shown lighting a cigarette. It has no obvious symbolic meaning. It is hard to say that it does anything other than to give her something to do with her hands and mouth. It's vaguely erotic, perhaps. So if you look at old films you find that a huge amount of time is spent lighting cigarettes and smoking. This is true of the film of *Atonement*, as a period touch. In the novel of *Atonement* there is a lot of smoking, but there's even more smoking in the film. Cecilia is going swimming and lights a cigarette, which is very improbable. So to get up on the diving board she has to throw the cigarette away.

Nowadays with things I watch on television it's the cell phone. You have to fill in space with something and the actor's or actress's cell phone rings and the character takes the phone out. It's a substitute for smoking partly because we know about smoking now. It's not always a good thing. And part of my reaction to the *Atonement* film when everybody is smoking is to say 'Stop it at once! You're killing yourselves!' Humphrey Bogart died of lung cancer. He smoked not only in his films but in real life. So one can imagine a cinematic performance of *Hamlet* in which Hamlet would light up and say 'to be or not to be—PUFF—that is the question—PUFF PUFF!!!' [Laughter] And that Shakespeare might have written that in. You can see how conventional it is and really weird. Most people don't smoke *that* much.

MARTIN MCQUILLAN: Literature is an invention of the eighteenth century, film is an invention of the twentieth century, how can we think that difference beyond the epochal?

HILLIS MILLER: Well, I'm thinking, I'm not quite sure about my answer to the question, but novels and films are powerful media that each has its own mediatic effects. No doubt they belong to their centuries. But I think it is important always

to remember that each is a technological means of reproduction. The print epoch, what you can do with printed texts, is to some degree subservient to historical changes in technology. Books used to be typeset by hand; then came the linotype. Now more recently it's the computer that sets books. So when you say literature is an invention of the eighteenth century, that means Derrida was right when he said that literature belongs to the age of the rise of the middle class and of bourgeois finance capitalism. It would have been impossible earlier according to him, during the middle ages or in the Renaissance. Literature also depends, says Derrida, on freedom of speech which of course people don't have in the same way under different regimes, however democratic they in principle are. In a democracy there is at least pro forma permission to say anything and to not be put in prison for it, but that freedom is always limited nevertheless. There are limits to free speech, as we all know from our teaching. Teaching in Britain and in the United States is wonderfully free. There's nobody in the classroom reporting what I say, deciding whether it's politically acceptable or not. I can choose to a considerable degree what texts I teach, and so on. It's a marvellous kind of freedom. Nevertheless, there is a limit. There is a point beyond which some of the students would complain about what Professor Miller is teaching and how he's teaching it. Things might happen to me as a result. Nevertheless, I think Derrida is right to connect literature and free speech. Why is that? Because you can always say of the narrator, the telepathic narrator, and of all of the characters: 'that's not me or any real person; that's a fiction!' In *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky could always say 'I'm not an axe murderer, I'm just writing a novel about somebody who is an axe murderer; don't blame me'. Dostoevsky did suffer exile for speaking out, but in general I think Derrida is right to connect literature and free speech.

One other question I've been asked has to do with the visual and literary. I think I can say two things about that, so I'm coming on now to Graham Allen's question. Let's hear it and I'll try to speak to both Martin's and Graham's questions.

GRAHAM ALLEN: You have written frequently about the new digital media that is shaping our society. Do you think, as many have asserted, that our culture has become an essentially visual rather than literary one? And if the answer is yes what are the consequences for us?

HILLIS MILLER: So we think of those together: film as an invention of the Twentieth Century. That is certainly true; but I think we need to define carefully the difference between novel and film—which I've said is a technological one. The technological goes beyond the epochal. Again I think Derrida is right when he says that the new regime of telecommunications, which he only in part foresaw, but he means things like the Internet and email and so on, will put an end to so-called literature, psychoanalysis, philosophy and love letters. That is in *The*

Postcard. He says that from this perspective the political regime is secondary, meaning that the technological media that are dominant in a given period have the same power let's say in Russia or China that they do in the United States or Ireland or England. That's an interesting claim: that media are more powerful than political forms. And he uses the word *regime*, which implies national sovereignty. I think he is probably right in that counter-intuitive claim. Look at the Arab Spring and how much that has depended on the cell phone. It's as though the possession of the cell phone by these young people in these North African countries was necessary to the almost inevitable result: the toppling of these regimes. The political regime was secondary to a particular kind of post-democratic democracy that's built into the cell phone. (What has happened since this interview in Egypt is not all that reassuring. The ubiquity of the mobile phone by no means guarantees democracy. Terrorists make strategic use of the cell phone. All cell phone conversations more or less world-wide, but including those of United States citizens, are nowadays being recorded by the National Security Agency in the United States. That is not exactly a big advance in democracy with its guaranteed right to privacy.)

That leads me to the opposition between the visual and literature. I'm asked 'do you think as many have asserted that our culture has become an essentially visual rather than a literary one?' And I think my answer would be to say that in general that's true, but I think the distinction between the visual and literary can be exaggerated. I would also agree with what Paul de Man says in 'The Resistance to Theory'. Rather than developing an entirely new interpretative technique for strongly visual media like film, television, or video games, we must, de Man said, learn how to 'read pictures' rather than 'to imagine meaning'. He meant, I think, that visual media use versions of tropological identifications and displacements—metaphors, metonymies, and the like—as in the metonymic juxtapositions of montage, going back to the comparison, in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, of the rioting crowd to swarming maggots, and leading up to those present-day television ads that try to persuade you that buying a certain automobile will give you possession of the beautiful actress or the handsome actor who presents the car. Moreover, a film is full of language. It's not purely visual. A lot of people have been studying this recently in a serious way, for example Tom Cohen's brilliant work on Hitchcock's films. Moreover, there's an important visual aspect to works in the print epoch, for example printed novels: the format, the binding, the advertising that's put inside, the size of the typeface, all sorts of things that make a printed novel a visual artefact. They were also all illustrated (or tended to be illustrated). It's only recently, partly because of the impact of this shift in interest to the visual and to the techniques that are needed to read the visual (these are not quite the same as those necessary for reading texts), that people have noticed that Eliot's, or Trollope's, or Dickens' novels, originally had illustrations. The versions of those novels I first read, modern

paperback editions, had no pictures at all. The original illustrations were not assumed to be important to their meaning. I was talking to somebody today about the great Blake archive at the University of Virginia, which reproduces what Blake's pages really looked like. The earlier authoritative [David V] Erdman and [Harold] Bloom edition of Blake doesn't have any pictures at all.⁹ It simply, very scrupulously, with all the powers of textual scholarship, gives you the words that were on those pages. And now we would look upon that as a falsification of Blake's mixed media productions. So I think I would say that all these media, printed novels, films, etc., are both visual and textual in different proportions, though I wouldn't deny the importance of the difference in proportion.

I know this best from the comparison of films to novels. There are things you can do in a novel, for example the way the original printed version of *Atonement* uses free indirect discourse. In that form of language the narrator speaks for the character in the third person past tense, for something that was, for the character, in the first person present tense. This creates a double language that makes that kind of discourse always ironic. It's like the student who simply repeats what the teacher has said but in the repetition is very cheeky, ironic and defiant. The thing I have learned from Nick Royle is to substitute the term 'telepathic narrator' [for 'omniscient narrator']. That's a marvellous insight. The narrators of Victorian novels and novels generally are usually called omniscient. That brings in a whole host of perhaps inadvertent theological implications. Such narrators are better described as telepathic in the sense that they are granted insight into what the characters are thinking and feeling. Reporting that insight is a powerful convention in the novel, even though I myself do not believe we can ever know for sure what another person is thinking or feeling.

I think all of these media (novels, films, television, video games) are already mixed. A film is never purely visual, despite the fact, to go back to *Atonement* for a moment, that you can't do free indirect discourse in the film version, or at any rate it is quite awkward. You must have a voiceover, and so on. So what's the substitute for that in film? Film conventions make much use of something that you can't easily do in the novel. That is the prolonged shots of the characters' faces. If you just watch carefully a film instead of taking it for granted, you will notice that a huge amount of cinematic time whether in a film or in a television programme is just shots of one or another character's face. A face that is not necessarily saying anything. For example, in *Atonement* there is a prolonged shot of Robbie Turner's face just before he makes love to Cecilia in the library. We just see his face. It doesn't look particularly sexually aroused; it's just his face. And that's supposed to give you insight. Faces—I don't think they actually do this—

⁹ See *William Blake: The Complete Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Erdman with a commentary by Harold Bloom, Newly Revised Edition (New York: Anchor Books, 1988).

are supposed to tell you what the characters are like and what they are thinking and feeling. This is a substitute for free indirect discourse. You can't easily do this in a novel; you can't easily do this with words. [Imre Kertész's] *Fatelessness* would be another example. Most of that novel is first person. He's talking about his memories of himself. The film spends a large amount of time just looking at the actor's face.

I would add one final thing to my answer to your question: I think from my experience, let's say with my grandchildren, that film as such, in the sense of movies that you go to in a theater, is actually playing a lesser role in young people's lives. They don't go to the movies so much. There is sociological evidence for this. Movie theatres are closing all over the place. A huge number of people see movies; they make a lot of money. But there are many people who don't watch them or watch them only on a computer screen. My grandson Jeremy would be an example of this. His life is visual all right; he plays a lot of video games. It's also auditory; he listens to mp3 music. It's not that he doesn't use the new media. But he doesn't go to the movies much and he doesn't watch Internet movies very much. He is a creature, you might say, of a slightly later generation for whom film is much less central than it has been. So I think just to say that there is an opposition between visual film and printed book is an oversimplification of what the new media are actually doing to people's experience of imaginary narratives.

My bottom line is that all media are in various combinations mixed media.

ÉAMONN DUNNE: You've been speaking recently about the New Humanities.¹⁰ Could you elaborate a little on what you think they might be and if they can be achieved in what you call 'these bad days'?

HILLIS MILLER: 'These bad days' is a citation from a Matthew Arnold poem. Well that's both an easy question and an impossible question. How do I know what the new humanities are going to be? It's up to the young people to fight it out with the deans and try to save the humanities in whatever way they like. But I think it would behove people who are in the humanities, especially those in literary studies and languages, to think about this and not simply to assume that they can go on with the current department structure and all the other present-day aspects. I think they are in jeopardy. The English Departments feel that they are invulnerable. The French Departments and the German Departments used to think, 'they won't touch us'. Now many of them are gone. Will there always be an English department? I'm not so sure of that. The number of English majors in the

¹⁰ See, for instance, J. Hillis Miller's 'Sovereignty Death Literature Unconditionality Democracy University', in *Deconstructing Derrida: Tasks for the New Humanities*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas and Michael A. Peters (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

United States has gone down from 8% of all undergraduates to 4%. Only half as many people, as a percentage, now major in English. The number of people who major in languages has gone from 2% to 1%, so you can see why it comes to the mind of a dean ‘Gee, do we really need the French Department? They don’t have any majors. We’ve got eight professors over there. Why not just abolish that department?’ A spectacular example of this sort of thing is the State University at Albany where an administrator closed Jewish studies, French, German, and Russian studies. He just closed them arbitrarily because he had the power to do that and wanted to use the money otherwise. My advice to Albany—not to any of you, it’s your own business what you do—would have been to tell the English Department at Albany to take this as an opportunity to sit around together and concoct a new programme which would not be called the English Department but something like ‘Teaching How to Read Media’ or ‘Understanding Media’. This new department would include Film Studies and also include all those other language programs, so students could read literature and theory in the original. You’ve got to know German to read Heidegger or Adorno properly, French to read Derrida or Baudrillard. So rescue the languages as part of this programme! I don’t know whether it would work. You could at least try. You could say, ‘We’re teaching students essential skills in how to live in this world of new media. We’re teaching them how to read television ads and political ads and not to be so bamboozled so easily by the lies they tell’. Television ads have a complex rhetoric, which I have begun to study. At Lancaster I gave one example. In the United States NBC Television News shows every night over and over again from night to night an ad sponsored by the American Petroleum Institute. The speaker on the screen is not an oil tycoon, the people who are making billions. It’s a very charming young woman. She comes out on the screen, accompanied by brilliant graphics, and says ‘I have good news for you. We have enough oil and gas, especially if we accelerate fracking (which is the extraction of gas from shale), to last for another 100 years. We’ll produce millions of jobs. This is the solution’. What she doesn’t say of course is that fracking will accelerate climate change and pollute the ground water where fracking is done. There soon won’t be any New York City left, not to speak of my house in Deer Isle Maine, or most of Florida. So, it’s a lie, the ad is a lie, a gross lie. But it’s very persuasive. The speaker is a woman, an attractive woman, persuasive, a very good actress. The argument is not made by the actual people who are doing this fracking. Sometimes such ads show bearded intellectual-looking engineers doing some of the talking. They too are part of our ideology of the good guys.

I think it would be a good thing to incorporate in the teaching of *Middlemarch* the teaching of how to read these ads. You could defend the teaching of *Middlemarch* by saying that the topic of misreading, of misinterpretation is a central feature of literature. You want to find out how to interpret lies or mistakes? Read *Middlemarch*, in which Dorothea is a spectacular misreader of Casaubon, or read

Jane Austen, read *Pride and Prejudice* and learn from Elizabeth Bennett's misinterpretations how not to do it. Misreading is a constant theme in novels, not only women misreading but also men. Think of Conrad's *Lord Jim*. It's not just courtship and marriage either. It's often gross errors in reading other people in other situations, so reading novels would be a lesson in the rhetoric of bad reading generally. I can imagine a whole programme which wouldn't be called the Department of English but called 'The Department of Rhetoric' or something like that. The University of California at Berkeley has such a Department. I don't know what you would call it in a given university that you could get away with but you see what I mean. That might be a way of saving not only the English Department but also the study of languages. Part of the reason the latter disappear is that people ask 'why do I need to learn French? What possible use is it? English is the dominant language all over the world. Anything important will almost immediately be translated without loss into English'. Such a department might persuade people that you need to read important texts in the original languages.

Influences

MICHAEL O'ROURKE: As you are introduced in the film [*The First Sail*] Pamela Gilbert lists Queer Theory among your many interests. Even in your most recent book on George Eliot we can find a concerted critique of phallogocentrism but there is a sense that this turn to queer modes of thinking only happens in your 'later' work.¹¹ Are you ambivalent about your commitments to this field? Maybe you could say a little about the belated (if it is) interest in a domain of inquiry which your own writing actually helped to foster (I'm thinking particularly here of the work of Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler)?

HILLIS MILLER: Eve Sedgwick was my student. I directed her dissertation which was on gothic novels. It wasn't yet the topic she became famous for. I didn't anticipate that in anything she said to me or in papers that she had written. 'Direct' is a strong word for any help I gave her. She would bring me a chapter and I would say 'Thank you Eve, I look forward to seeing the next one'. But we had a cordial relation. I saw her the last time near the end of her life, and we had a constructive talk. Butler was a graduate student at Yale. I also have known her a long time, but not quite in the same way. Queer theory as such didn't exist in those days. I've always been interested in some writers (without worrying very much about it) who in fact were pretty certainly gay, like Walter Pater, Wilde (I greatly admire Wilde, no doubt about his queerness), Proust, and Henry James. That hasn't kept me from reading work by these people, far from it, but I've been led by recent queer theory writing on James, for example, the outing of Henry

¹¹ J. Hillis Miller, *Reading for Our Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

James, to ask myself what difference it makes if you know that about James to your reading of the novels? So for me Queer Theory is really useful as a way of asking that kind of question. I think in James's case I've already mentioned in passing the interesting fact that no happy heterosexual marriages are presented in these stories he wrote at the end of the 1880s. There's also an amazing passage that Kaplan quotes from James's first visit to Oxford as a quite young man in 1879. He writes a letter to his brother William about that visit. He does talk about the beautiful college buildings and so on, but what he really emphasizes is those strong and healthy and muscular and fair-haired undergraduates rowing their boats and so on. I think it is probably a totally unconscious passage, in the sense that at that stage of his life he perhaps didn't really know why he found these young men so attractive. It is helpful to have that information as a way of reading James's fiction. Kaplan's biography tries in a very balanced way to talk about James's unfulfilled homosexuality. So it's because other people have done this that I began to think about this topic.

My recent essay in the area of queer theory which Pamela Gilbert may be referring to—I don't remember whether I'd written this essay then—is an article on Derrida's *Le Droit de Regard*.¹² Derrida gave me a copy of this at some point and I always remember what he said as he handed it to me—he gave me copies of all of his books, it wasn't particularly that one—he said 'Don't just look at the pictures, read my essay'. And I didn't in fact at that time follow his advice. I looked at the pictures [laughter]. Quite extraordinary photographs done by a friend of his, Marie-Françoise Plissart. They are certainly an invitation to queer theorizing. Eventually I read the Derrida essay, which is amazing. Every new essay by Derrida I read, I say this is his masterpiece because they are all so good. But I did feel that once again with the *Droit de Regard* essay when I finally got around to not just looking at the pictures. If you don't know this book, the photos show very beautiful women in lesbian intercourse. They're quite explicit. Benoît Peeters, who is a Belgian, was one of the collaborators in the making of this book. He tells the complex story of how Derrida was persuaded to write an essay for this book. Peeters has now published a huge book on Derrida, a very good book.¹³ So I chose, on Michael O'Rourke's invitation, to write an essay for a collection of writings about that aspect of Derrida without thinking too much about what that commitment might mean. I asked myself what do I really make of Derrida's essay? It is a serious investigation of narrative connection and how you can tell a story without any captions in just a series of pictures. Show me some pictures and I'll make a story out of them. It is also about a kind of

¹² Miller had not yet written this essay at the time Gilbert was introducing him in the film. It is the 'Preposterous Preface' to *Derrida and Queer Theory*, ed. Michael O'Rourke (forthcoming).

¹³ Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

circularity in story-telling, at least in the series of photographs in *Droit de Regard*. The last photo ties back to the first.

I want to say a word about Graham Allen's wonderful paper which may or may not be helpful, about the structure of repetition and *déjà vu*.¹⁴ I thought of those topics in relation to the fact that [*The Triumph of Life*] is unfinished. Scholars have said, well had he not drowned he would have finished it. And there are two ways of taking that. My esteemed Shelleyan colleague at Hopkins never wrote about the *Triumph of Life* because he was an organic unity person. He said 'it's not finished, I don't know how it would have come out, so I can't write about it'.¹⁵ Mike Abrams, on the other hand, finishes it for you and claims it would have had a happy ending. This strikes me on the whole as unlikely. It shows how cheerful Mike Abrams is. For him everything has a happy ending. My question would be 'Could he have ever finished it?' However, for better or worse what we have is a text that is not finished. I think it is a little too easy to assume that it would have had an unequivocal ending, happy or unhappy. That is for me somehow related to its structure. That would be a different way of talking about the structure of *déjà vu*, or the structure of repetition, or of the uncanny. This would be, to invoke a Derridean word, a structure of invagination. That word names an organ that is put inside another organ. It's a medical term. Derrida uses it in the 'Law of Genre' to talk about Blanchot.¹⁶ It would also work to interpret *Atonement*, which also has that structure of invagination. You're reading something which is inside but also at the same time outside. Things in *Triumph of Life* have happened more than once, always as *déjà vu*, so which is the original and which is the copy? There's a kind of oscillation. Derrida's example of invagination is a glove. You take a glove and you put the finger of the glove inside so the outside of the glove has now become the inside and the inside has become the outside in a disquieting oscillation. Blanchot's *La Folie du Jour* [*The Madness of the Day*] is an example. That's the example that Derrida uses. He uses the term rather casually, but I find it very valuable as a way of dealing with such textual structures.

In the case of *Atonement* you read something that you think is controlled by a telepathic male narrator. It must be McEwan imagining himself telling a story. So you read it all the way through that way and then come to the last part, which is in present tense first person by the aging Briony.¹⁷ At that point you discover that what you have been reading is not the primary text. It's a text inside the frame narrative written by Briony, so it's invaginated. It's both inside and outside

¹⁴ Miller is referring to the paper presented by Graham Allen 'The Triumph of Life and the Reversibility of Art'.

¹⁵ Miller is referring here to Earl Wasserman.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 55-81.

¹⁷ Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (New York: Anchor: 2003).

at the same time. And it is helpful as a notion that probably would help us think about the *Triumph of Life*. That structural feature would have something to do with its unfinishable quality. It is a feature of invagination that it sets up an endless oscillation as Derrida says. I could go on and on and on and you could go on and on and on saying it first this way and then that way and then this way again and that way. It's uncomfortable making, as the *Triumph of Life* is. It's not just that it's gloomy. It's the way that the language is put together that's unsettling, uncanny, as Graham says.

GRAHAM ALLEN: Have you any words on the legacy of the work of Barbara Johnson, who passed away a few years ago?

HILLIS MILLER: I haven't been able to bring myself to read Barbara Johnson's latest work, to my shame. I read little bits of it when it came out. I think she's terrific. It's a great sadness that she died so young. She died of Central Nervous System Lymphoma. What was so good about her? Well for one thing she was a terrific translator. The translation of Derrida's *Dissemination*. Derrida was very lucky in his translations: Kamuf is a superb translator; Alan Bass is a superb translator. But maybe Barbara Johnson is the best of all. Her command of both French and English is such that she can think of puns in English which correspond to untranslatable puns in French. There is no way you can translate the play on words in Derrida's French, but Johnson is clever enough to think of something which carries the pun over with a quite different play on words. I remember meeting her at the end of this [the translation of *Dissemination*¹⁸—she did it in one summer—in New Haven, meeting her outside the college where my office was. She said 'I've worked all summer on this translation, and it was horribly difficult work. It took a whole summer'. She was the first person – at a conference somewhere in Tennessee I think, where we both were and she gave a paper— to make me reflect a little bit about the possible or perhaps inevitable sexism built into the terminology of deconstruction and of the Yale School. She had first-hand experience of Yale and she made me worry about that issue. It was a polite paper but a very intransigent one. She accused all those men (we were all men in the 'Yale Mafia') of being sexist. Her brand of deconstruction strikes me as having a salutary feminist slant to it. I was talking about not writing memoirs but if I were to do so, I'd have some stories about Barbara Johnson. We both went to Oberlin College. Oberlin puts a mark on you. It makes you earnest, moral, responsible. But also politically and socially progressive. Both Barbara and I were products of Oberlin. It was originally a Congregationalist-affiliated school. Oberlin has a Protestant earnestness that remains in some church schools even when they have become quite secular. We all still had to go to 'chapel' once a week, but the

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

talks there were not religious, no hymn-singing. Oberlin was the first co-educational undergraduate college in the United States. It was a station on the Underground Railway, used during the Civil War to help slaves escape to Canada. Several of the Chicago Seven in the anti-Vietnam War protest demonstrations at a Chicago Democratic National Convention in 1968 were from Oberlin.

I was sitting innocently in my office one day at Yale and there came a knock at the door. This tall, awkward young woman came in and said ‘you are to examine me in Wallace Stevens’, and I said ‘what?!’ It turns out the French Department at that time at Yale had the requirement that graduate students had to pass an examination in something outside of French. So she had decided—I had never taught her or met her up to that point—that she wanted to do Wallace Stevens. I said ‘okay’, and we agreed that she would read the poems. She came in a couple of months later and what happened was sort of spooky, not the usual exam situation—there was no witness for this, it was entirely solitary, for one thing. We had a little chat about Wallace Stevens, and I said ‘you pass, I pass you’. Another performative! I declare that you pass [laughter]. And much later on, as you know, she left Yale for Harvard—after she had made tenure at Yale, which was unusual for an assistant professor in those days. She did not leave for Harvard because she didn’t have a permanent job at Yale. She was appreciated there. And when she went I remember Paul de Man saying ‘that is very bad news for Yale’. He saw Barbara Johnson as the future of the Yale French Department. We taught together in the lit major. She was a brilliant teacher in that famous Yale undergraduate programme. When she got to Harvard she shifted, with Marj[orie] Garber’s help, to the English Department from the French Department. The reason she gave is kind of ironic. She said, ‘I got tired teaching Harvard undergraduates how to say ‘please pass me the butter [passez-moi la bierre, s’il vous plaît]’ [laughter] so they could know what to say when they went to Paris in the summer. She thought the English Department would be a happier place for her, a place where she could teach more usefully. That move always seemed to me somewhat ironic, because as far as I know the only institutional authorization whatsoever that she had to be a Professor of English at Harvard was that examination I gave her on Wallace Stevens [laughter]. It was a great sadness to me when she died so young. She *was* brilliant, really gifted.

MICHAEL O’ROURKE: In their movie *Derrida*, Kofman and Dick ask him: ‘if you had a choice what philosopher would you like to have been your mother?’ He responds by saying this would be impossible because the figure of the philosopher is always a ‘masculine figure’ for him.¹⁹ I want to put the same question to you

¹⁹ Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (Dir.) (2002), *Derrida* (Jane Doe Films, 2002). See also Dick and Kofman, *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

slightly reframed: firstly, if it were possible for you, what philosopher would you like to have been your mother? And, since we know so much about your relationship with your father, can you tell us a little about your mother and whether she in any way influenced the shape of your thinking?

HILLIS MILLER: I see what Derrida meant. It's true, the figure of the philosopher is masculine. When I read this question, I asked myself what in the world would I say? Which philosopher would I choose to be my mother? And I had two answers. It's a question of the mother/son relation. For me, it wouldn't be Derrida or De Man or Kant or Hegel, but Nietzsche or Austin. I think I would have liked to have had J.L. Austin, the author of *How to Do Things With Words*, as my mother because I never met him.²⁰ I don't think of him as particularly motherly but nevertheless it's a nice fantasy [laughter]. He was a very quirky and very funny man who died young, like Barbara Johnson. But his personal life is a mystery, to me at least. If you just read the books (*How to Do Things with Words*, plus a book of collected essays, there isn't very much), you don't find out much about his personal life. All I know is that he was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford. That boggles the mind. The man who invented that subversive thing, the speech act, and who was so funny and witty, being in charge of 'moral philosophy'! As you know Austin gave *How to Do Things with Words* as lectures at Harvard for an annual lecture series in the Philosophy Department. There was a confluence, a convergence not of the twain, as in Hardy's poem about the Titanic and the iceberg, but of three or four people, a convergence that never really happened. The year that Austin's lectures were given was a year or two after Derrida was at Harvard for a year. (I'm thinking of the way in which speech act theory is so important for me and for Derrida and De Man). I graduated from Harvard in 1952, two or three years before Austin came. He gave these lectures in 1953 or 1954 or something. Paul de Man was a junior fellow at Harvard at the same time but I think this was the year that he decided to go to Ireland. He was here [Dublin] for a year studying Yeats because Yeats was part of his dissertation. So he just missed him. Derrida was there on the exchange with the École Normale but I think not in the same year as Austin's lectures. John Hollander was also a junior fellow at the same time. One of the people who did hear the lectures on *How to do Things with Words* and whose professional life was transformed by it was Stanley Cavell. Cavell talks eloquently about having heard these lectures and thinking they were wonderful. What I remember de Man saying is that Austin was known as this crazy Englishman who was giving a set of lectures that nobody understood, just as Derrida was known as a crazy Frenchman who had come all the way to Harvard to study phenomenology. Harvard is not exactly the place you would think to do that. In fact he [Derrida] was living with his wife to be. They were married in Cambridge. They were living

²⁰ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

surreptitiously in a graduate dorm. He had to sneak Marguerite into his apartment at night [laughter].

I think of Austin's speech act theory as being incredibly problematic, complicated, and contradictory. Austin had a brilliant gift for choosing examples that go against what he is trying to say [laughter]. It is hard to tell whether that is deliberate or not. For example the theory of speech acts, as you know, posits that an ideal speech act uses a first person pronoun with a verb in the present tense: 'I promise', 'I confess', 'I warn' etc. One of his examples is this: you are standing in a field and there's this enormous bull about to charge. You don't say 'may I respectfully warn you that there is an enormous bull in the field about to charge'. There isn't time for that. You just say 'BULL!' No first person pronoun, no present tense verb, but it is a felicitous performative. Two other examples, one of which recurs in one of his philosophical essays: There's a great British war ship and someone goes down with a bottle of champagne, cracks it on the prow, and says 'I christen thee the Joseph Stalin'. This would have been during the cold war. Austin asks, 'What would you say about that?' Two things, he says first that it's a damn shame and secondly that the ship is not really christened the Joseph Stalin. Because it's the wrong person, without authority, at the wrong time and so on. But then you say to yourself 'Gee, I don't know, can you really be sure that this was not going to be effective, a 'felicitous' speech act?' What constitutes a felicitous christening? It's not so easy to decide about that. The other example is even more problematic. He says that for a felicitous performative I must not be acting on the stage, or writing a poem (as he says elsewhere), or making a joke. These would be make-believe speech acts. The example is of a marriage performed on the stage. The couple of actors are surely not really married. That seems sensible, otherwise the actor and actress in the play would be married in the make-believe ceremony. But when you begin to think about it, you realize that a wedding ceremony is also a kind of play. It is a text that is performed over and over, an example of iterability. It is a performance. Therefore you *are* in a way an actor in a play even at your own wedding. Nobody doubts that they aren't exactly the same thing, but nevertheless the similarity leads you to begin to think about it. For anybody that's been married—and I have been married for over sixty years—there are still moments where you ask yourself, 'When the minister said "I pronounce you man and wife" were we really married? Maybe we've been living in sin for all these years' [laughter]. 'How do we know the minister was authorized to perform a marriage?'

Another of Austin's examples is the purser on a boat. The captain can marry people but nobody else on a ship can do so. So if you were married by the purser it wouldn't be a valid marriage. This leads you to think about what constitutes a valid marriage. There have to be witnesses and so on. The apparently straightforward example now begins to appear problematic and leads you to

think about marriages in general. I don't know how it is here in Dublin but in the States—I know about the customs of Protestant weddings—there is a practice wedding beforehand. The minister instructs the couple: 'And then I say "now you say I do" and you say "I do" and then I say "I now pronounce you man and wife"'. There's a superstition about this against the bride playing her own role in the practice wedding. The maid of honour plays the bride's role. Why are they then not married at the practice wedding? The minister has said the right words. He has the power to do this. The couple have given the right responses. The obvious question is: 'Why is the bridegroom not married to the maid of honour?' [laughter]

Austin is wonderful. He never authorized the publication of his lectures, claiming they were provisional and needed more work. The very end of *How to Do Things with Words* recalls Socrates in one of the Platonic dialogues, the *Protagoras*. Austin ends his lectures by saying it is clear that we haven't really straightened this out. We need to go back and work on it some more. This is like Socrates saying to Protagoras, 'We really don't yet know what virtue is; we need to go back and start over again. Are you ready?' And Protagoras says 'no Socrates, I suggest that we come back to this at some future time'. And that's the end of the dialogue. And *How to Do Things with Words* ends somewhat in the same way. It's high praise to say that the rhetoric of Austin's book overall is structured somewhat like this Platonic dialogue, with Austin playing all the roles, and with a similar conclusion in uncertainty.

I was going to explain why I wish I had had Nietzsche as my mother [laughter], my mother philosopher, but there isn't time to explore this. We need to come back to it at some future time. You can see why I also have a filial relation to Austin. About my mother: Whenever I am asked about my relation to my mother, I think of that Freudian joke: 'Oedipus schmedipus, so long as you love your mother!' My father was a very competitive person, a college and then University president. We used to play tennis together until I was about 13. I then beat him one time. He never played with me again. He was a very competitive player of—I'm not so competitive at that—the card game 'bridge'. He used to play with my brother and me and my mother. He always won. My mother would be my partner usually, since my brother was younger. That was supposed to give my mother some slight advantage, but she was as expert a player as my father. My father always won because he had the courage to bid competitively and daringly, whereas my mother and I would look at our cards and say 'three spades'. He would bid on the same hand a grand slam. He made good on those extravagant bids just often enough to end up with the top score.

My mother was a farm girl as my father was a farm boy. When my father was courting her she was still at home on the family farm in Virginia. She was the

oldest of a farm family of five children. She had beautiful chestnut colored hair. Pictures of her as a young woman are really striking. I can see why my father fell in love with her. He was a marathon runner. He would come to court Nell (Critzler) at her home, but he would also be practicing for his next marathon run at the University of Richmond in Virginia. He was known as Nell's crazy boyfriend who runs the roads around rural Virginia in his underwear [laughter]. You can see that I have trouble talking about my relation to my mother rather than my relation to my father. I think it was because she had very high hopes for me as they both did, but mother was more inclined to think that she knew how these hopes should be fulfilled: I should become a doctor, or I should write romances rather than getting a PhD in English [laughter]. I had somehow to resist her power much more than my brother did (I have a brother three years younger). I didn't have the feeling that his life had been planned for him by her. When I used to go off to Oberlin by train I would get on the train, and I would immediately light a cigarette. At the age of 16 smoking was an act of defiance, of filial defiance, because I knew my mother—not my father, my mother—would greatly disapprove of this. Going off to college was a form of freedom. It is very hard thinking back on it to see how my mother's force of personality was experienced by me as a threat. Because it was entirely loving, benign, and so on. My father died at the age of 53 of a rheumatic heart which now would be operable, including at the hospital at Gainesville, Florida, part of which is named for him. This is because the last thing he did as President of the University of Florida before his final illness was to get money appropriated to establish a medical school there. He had to persuade the Florida legislature to do that. My mother lived for another 30 years working in that hospital as a patient counsellor. If somebody was a patient there who was going to be in hospital for a while for a serious operation, mother would find the family a place to stay, talk to them, and so on. She did that for a long, long time for a not very big salary. She lived in a small apartment in Gainesville. She died in 1983 in the hospital named for her long-dead husband. My brother and I when we knew that she wasn't going to live much longer would go down on alternate weekends to visit her. I used to feel that it was really weird to be walking into a hospital called the J. Hillis Miller Health Centre, passing the portrait of my father which hung in the hallway, and then going up to see my mother on her death bed. I've always thought that I have a great opportunity since I have the same name as my father. If I'm ever ill I will present myself at the J. Hillis Miller Health Centre and say 'I am J. Hillis Miller! Take care of me!' [laughter]. As you can see, it's difficult for me to reflect clearly about my relation to my mother, so it was a sharp question and one I've never been asked before. Bottom line: Oedipus Schmedipus.



L-R (back): Christopher Stokes, Graham Price, Michael O'Rourke, Martin McQuillan, Graham Allen, Jonathan Mitchell.

L-R (front): Dragan Kujundžić, Nicholas Royle, J. Hillis Miller, Éamonn Dunne