One day in the last century, an Oberlin College sophomore set on majoring in physics was looking through his girlfriend’s copy of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*. His eyes lit on the following lines of Tennyson:

*Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,*  
*Tears from the depth of some divine despair*  
*Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes. . . .* (lines 1–3)

He found these words remarkable for how little sense they made. As a budding scientist, he well knew that tears do not flow from the heart but from tear ducts. And what on earth or in heaven could the phrase “divine despair” possibly mean? His questions could not be answered quickly or easily, and soon this physics student became an English major set on getting as close as possible to a scientific understanding of how literary language works.

Thus began the lifelong vocation of one of the twentieth century’s most influential literary theorists, J. Hillis Miller. From his Kenneth Burke–influenced dissertation on the novels of Charles Dickens to his phenomenology-inflected and

**Kurt Fosso and Jerry Harp**

_In each genuine artwork something appears that does not exist._  
—Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

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later, “deconstructive” criticism, in some twenty-six books and through innumerable essays, Miller has continued steadfastly to explore the functions, possibilities, and powers of literary language. As he recalls, in Fiction and Repetition, about the advent and progress of his career, “it seemed to me when I began the study of literature, as it still seems to me now, that one of the most obvious characteristics of works of literature is their manifest strangeness as integuments of words. [. . .] Any way of interpreting literature would need to account for that oddness” (18).

Far from quixotic but perhaps no less possible to conclude, Miller’s lifelong quest to “account” for literary language’s intriguing character can be traced back to that pivotal undergraduate moment at Oberlin. But his avocation was also informed by another, earlier experience of literature’s power. In his study for Routledge, On Literature, Miller recollects how, as a child, he was taken by reading Johann David Wyss’s The Swiss Family Robinson. In that rich and strange encounter, Wyss’s adventure story provided the young Miller with “magical access to a pre-existing world of people and their adventures” (14; emphasis added). Reading Wyss conjured not just an imaginative world, but a world whose reality appeared to preexist both that child reader’s act of reading and the storybook author’s own prior act of writing.

As it turns out, for Miller the literary critic a key part of the “strangeness” and lasting appeal of literature is the way it suggests just such a “world” and reality existing independently of the page or book and its reader. Moreover, the idea of this virtual epiphenomenon is in turn profoundly connected to how literary works function, as well as to how language in general operates. It was an idea of literature and its power that Miller carried with him to Oberlin and into his lifelong vocation as a literary critic and teacher. In Topographies, for instance, he not untypically asserts that the “ideal literary object is both constituted by the words on the page and shown by those words to have already been there, independent of the words that embody it” (302; emphasis added). And again, in his wide-ranging apologia On Literature, he similarly contends that

Most literary works go right on talking as if the virtual realities they describe, with all their contents and events, have independent existence and are only being described, not invented. Who is to say that this is not the case, that all those alternative worlds have not been waiting somewhere for some author to find fit words for them? (44; emphasis added)

Of course, as Miller well knows, to ask “Who is to say?” is not really to present an argument. Nevertheless, what he registers here is more than simply an impression, but instead a key part of what he sees as the deeply performative dynamics, and uncanny powers, of reading literature.

Given that Miller, as a deconstructionist literary critic, is committed to critiquing the metaphysics of presence and the essentialism in which Plato and company specialized, his longstanding insistence on the “validity” (On Literature 15) of such
a preexistent, quasi-Platonic realm is curious, to say the least. Some might regard it even as peculiar. Yet his vision of literary virtual reality1 imparts valuable insights into the persistently mysterious dynamics of reading—dynamics of particular interest at this present moment when so much about our reading lives is questioned, contested, and even at times agonized over. Indeed, with the proliferation of digital technologies and their myriad opportunities for new kinds of virtual experience, reading as such—what it means to read, who of us reads, how much we read, within what technology (book, Kindle, iPad, and so on) we read—has especially come under scrutiny. Amid these cultural disputes about reading and literacy, Miller’s postulating of a virtual realm accessed by, and perhaps only by, reading casts a revealing light. This essay shall therefore set out to clarify and make sense of this critic’s unlikely notion of a preexisting literary reality whose workings and effects significantly depend on the structural, referential, mimetic, and performative potentialities of literature and language.

Ur-language and the Uncanny

In On Literature, Miller enlists what he styles a “motley crew” of theorists and philosophers to help him make the case, intuited far back in his youth, that “literary works refer not to the real world but to an independently existing alternative world” (76, 79). This diverse crew, comprising such members as Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida, has devoted considerable attention to the act of reading as something far more complex than a mere gathering of information, discernment of intention, or recovery of this or that stable meaning. Rather, as this crew’s work discloses, reading literature is always an uncertain negotiation with, and navigation within, a virtual realm. For the literary work does not exist only in this or that copy of a text, nor in the mind of the author, nor in the experience of a reader. Rather, any given piece of literature can be said to exist only in a dynamic interaction of texts, writers, readers, and hermeneutics.

Needless to say, this “motley” insight about literature’s strange ontological status has had a considerable history in twentieth-century literary studies. For example, in their landmark Theory of Literature, published a few years before Miller’s matriculation at Oberlin, René Wellek and Austin Warren decisively contended that a literary work of art “appears as an object of knowledge sui generis” and indeed “has a special ontological status. It is neither real (like a statue) nor mental (like the experience of light or pain) nor ideal (like a triangle). It is a system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective” (157). Of this normative conclusion, Timothy Clark observes that in fact, it is less an answer to the question of what literature is than Wellek and Warren’s “acknowledgment of the empty space left by the various failures of the positivist approach” (Clark 2), an approach that sought to enclose the
literary text and bring its meaning to a stable and clearly limned conclusion. Much as for Wellek and Warren, for Miller's motley marin Blanchot, “The only positivity of the literary space is the strangeness of its approach. It does not exist, but its persistence . . . is uneliminable” (Libertson qtd. in Clark 2).

Miller develops the implications of these insights into literature’s curious existence in part through his emphasis on language itself as a structure independent of any single writer or speaker: as a structure, that is, that includes and precedes all of the linguistic possibilities that can ever be written or uttered. To illuminate this sense of language as a transcendent structure of nearly endless potential, Miller cites Benjamin’s reference, in “The Task of the Translator,” to a “‘greater language,’ exceeding both the original [text] and [its] translation” (On Literature 63). Benjamin here envisions an undifferentiated source language from which all specific languages subsequently derive. Although consisting of all the possibilities of all those languages, that ideal Ur-language exists as a quasi-Platonic realm of potentiality from which any utterance or text—a simple grocery list, The Mahabharata, or Paradise Lost—has descended into the differentiated linguistic world. Hence, for Benjamin, a translation will ideally have the “effect” of reproducing an “echo of the original” from the Ur-language:

For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work. [. . .] If there is such a thing as a language of truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate truth which all thought strives for, then this language of truth is—the true language. And this very language, whose divination and description is the only perfection a philosopher can hope for, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations. (76–77)

The inferred “true language,” consisting of all possibilities of all languages, includes any work of translation and, potentially, any piece of literature, too, including even literary works as yet unwritten.

Given all the capacities of a language’s vocabulary, grammatical structures, and metaphorical relations, the possibilities for writing and utterance indeed are limitless, even within the particular language of any given moment—not to mention the possibilities of language still to come. For as a structure, language always exists elsewhere than here and now (that is, apart from any such specific moment, act, or text) but also necessarily here and now (as what articulates any given moment, action, and text). Language in general, and any particular language, functions as a shifting intersubjective and trans-subjective reality, public even when employed in the most private and creative of ways. It has a force that, Walter Ong observes, directs us necessarily outside ourselves.2 Miller’s virtual literary world likewise exists as a type of uncanny (unheimlich) script whose linguistic possibilities preexist and exceed any given written or oral text, and moreover preexist it outside any author’s mind, much as the underlying structures of language exist beyond as well as within any particular
speaker’s or writer’s mind and work. In this sense, for Miller and his motley crew, literature provides an exemplary means both to assess and to gain access to language’s own fundamental powers and uncanny otherness, which in turn underwrite literature’s enduring value as well as some part of its validity as art.

As mentioned, for Miller, literary works exist apart from the written text not only before their composition but also after they have been written down and read and reread. In explaining this related facet of literature’s virtual, Ur-linguistic character, he draws on Derrida’s remark that, as Miller states, the “ideal literary object” would continue to exist even if every copy of the work were destroyed (On Literature 79)—a notion not far afield from Wellek and Warren’s “ideal concepts.” If, for example, every copy of Hamlet vanished, the play would still variously exist for all who had read or seen it, in much the same way that the work exists for us even when we are not actively engaged in reading or viewing it: as the memory of certain lines (“To be or not to be”), as echoes of other lines (“a guilty thing surprised”), or as a subtler mood or feeling associated with the text. Arguably, because of Hamlet’s particularly tenacious cultural purchase, it would continue “to be” in some sense even for those people who had been exposed to it only in the form of allusions or parodic manifestations in popular culture (as in the episode of Happy Days when Fonzie agrees to play the “melancholy Dane,” or in Gilligan’s Island’s musical rendition of the play to music from Carmen and Tales of Hoffman). For that matter, the play arguably would persist in our collective shades of memory even if the myriad allusions and other references had faded away.

Nor is it so great a mental step from pondering this shadowy existence of the literary work, surviving the loss of all its written copies, to contemplating the more theoretical possibility that, say, Marcel Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu or Dickens’s Great Expectations would, as Miller says, in some way “exist even if Proust or Dickens had not written them down” (On Literature 79). Had these novels never been composed, would they still exist for any of us, on the lower registers of signification, as an eerie aura or cluster of associations? For Miller, in the shifting structure of language and its matrices of culture such literary works virtually exist, and even preexist, as possibilities prior to utterance, composition, and even dreams.

To put matters differently, in the beginning (à la Saussure) what preexists any particular literary or other text is the expansive structure of language with all its realized and unrealized, potential permutations of utterance and iteration, meaning and implication. And once a critic has acquired this conception of the differences between, on the one hand, language’s multiplicity of possibilities and, on the other hand, the delimited specificity of any localized text or verbal utterance, he or she could surely be forgiven for leaning toward the idea of a transcendent Ur-realm of language and its linguistic turns. For that conception is reinforced by the related sense that language as a total structure must necessarily exist independently of any
single human mind or text, while at the same time existing within any particular use of language. Likewise, Miller’s own notion of such a Platonic script draws on language’s virtual, “literary” character, with its sublime store or word-hoard of potential moves and semiotic variations. This quasi-Platonic vantage affords a view of how texts come or came to be, and of the “reality” they convey via reference, especially those strange texts we call literature.

**Idle Mirrors and Virtual Secrecy**

Miller’s *On Literature* enlists the notion of a preexistent, virtual world to take up and revise Roman Jakobson’s influential view of literary language as “manifest[ing] ‘the set of language toward itself’” (44). Such a formalist vantage has long produced a false and “sexist distinction,” Miller contends, between masculine non-literary referentiality and literature’s putatively, in Jakobson’s words, “sterile, feminine, and boring self-reflexivity” (qtd. in Miller 44). Miller, of course, rejects this restrictive view of literature as representation narcissistically divorced from all but self-reference, and attacks it chiefly by counterposing the aforementioned idea of an alternative, largely virtual, means of reference: a mimetic dimension to literature that, although not necessarily verifiable in terms of its signified referents, cannot easily be disproved or dismissed, either. In Miller’s ongoing defense and valorization of literature in this era of its supposed diminishment, such literary virtuality lends referential aid as a *via media* that reconciles the opposed “feminine” and “masculine” modes along with the related strands of their Platonic and Aristotelian critical traditions. Literary language thereby *virtually* refers, and does so in a manner that opens onto language’s delimited powers of reference.

Intriguingly, as an ostensible example of literature’s devalued “feminine” self-reflexivity, Miller considers Henry James’s character Kate Croy, in *Wings of the Dove*, “looking at herself in the mirror, as opposed to the virile use of language to refer to real things in the real world” (*On Literature* 44). Awaiting her father and thinking of the Croy family, Kate stares intently at her reflection. James writes,

> The answer to these questions was not in Chirk Street, but the questions themselves bristled there, and the girl’s repeated pause before the mirror and the chimney-place might have represented her nearest approach to an escape from them. Wasn’t it in fact the partial escape from this “worst” in which she was steeped to be able to make herself out again as agreeable to see? She stared into the tarnished glass too hard indeed to be staring at her beauty alone. (30–31)

Mark Conroy usefully observes of this scene that “a mirror records not a dead person but a living one: her [Kate’s] desideratum is not to be a memory for survivors but to enact a successful (i.e., profitable) performance for a living audience” (138). We
watch her staring at herself and doing so with an energy far too dynamic to entirely fix her, the gazer, self-reflexively on her own image only. She looks at herself, the novel’s narrator deems, “too hard [. . .] to be staring at her beauty alone”—“too hard,” that is, not to be thinking of more than her reflected beauty. For Kate Croy is already thinking well beyond her image, and the tarnish on the old mirror’s glass aids in breaking the circuit between her gaze and its not-quite instantaneous return. By smudging that reflection, the mirror’s material tarnish disrupts her gaze, drawing her implied consciousness of the scene back into Chirk Street, Croy family history, and other concerns related to the world implied to exist there. This dark glass, or at least mirror tarnished, neatly illuminates the circuitous, material basis for mimesis and reference. For in this reflection, as in other forms of representation (for example, that of pages in books), such reference materially depends on imitation.

If this view of mimesis and (or as) reading puts the self-reflexive rather than the referential at the heart of literary experience, it does so because it envisions self-reflexivity as the basis of referentiality, the former becoming the foundation for looking and thinking and for signification’s supposed, valorized “masculine” axis of reference. Because it is so deeply subjective—the basis for what subjectivity is—such a moment of self-reflexivity must remain in excess of any actual representation. The self-reflective self can never position itself fully before its own reflected gaze, and that self must therefore remain in part secreted and uncontained, virtual. James’s mirror scene in this way demonstrates how a self-referential dynamic opens into an expansive circuit of reflection and uncanny virtuality. What’s more, the novel’s *mise en scène* points to the staging of mimesis that underlies reference, making of the image not a secondary effect but something very much like a primary cause, a basis for representation as such.

In addition, James’s tarnished mirror of mirrors functions by withholding (or at least by appearing to withhold) something from *outside* that mirrored limit: an aspect or object of reference lurking beyond the gazing or reading self. If the literary text therefore withholds a secret of sorts it can never fully disclose, it also discloses that the hidden secret nevertheless is or was there. Recalling Kate Croy’s burning of a vital letter, Miller thus observes that it is “an essential feature of literature to hide secrets that may not ever be revealed,” remaining “hidden from the reader’s knowledge” (*On Literature* 40). To read literary works is to discover realities figured but also oddly withheld: siren songs that keep their secrets while at the same time subtly implying and asserting those secrets’ existence. “Who is to say,” Miller echoes, “that all those alternative worlds have not been waiting somewhere for some author to find fit words for them?” (44).

Anticipating this question in an earlier essay, on Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Miller considers another literary instance of such a withheld secret, associated again with a potent occasion of mimetic and critical undecidability. The example
concerns Clarissa Dalloway’s mysterious mental or spiritual connection with the recently deceased war veteran Septimus Smith. What Miller finds so hauntingly undecidable about this scene is the impossibility of ever knowing from the novel whether their union in death exists for Woolf only on the page, or whether the words represent an extralinguistic realm that really is there for the characters, the narrator, and Woolf herself. Miller adds that whatever the answer might be—and for him it remains necessarily undecidable—“the possibility that the realm of death, in real life as in fiction, really exists” is, he is sure, “seriously entertained by Woolf” (“Mrs. Dalloway” 184). For here is Mrs. Dalloway’s deeper secret or beyond, which may underwrite the novel’s other withholdings, gazings through a glass darkly, and histories of interpretation. As for Woolf and other writers, for Miller the literary use of language suggests this general desire for communion, for transit beyond the separate self to some place other than the Dead Letter Office of reference. Virtuality conveys more than mere performative sleight of hand (the mirage of reference); it also presumes a ghostly quality of presence within referentiality as reflection. If presence can somehow be more than virtual, that possibility lurks fleetingly here and elsewhere as a literary secret, a phantom, a world beyond.

Such considerations about the ghostly power of literary communication and communion call to mind Stephen Greenblatt’s provocative statement at the opening of Shakespearian Negotiations: “I began with the desire to speak with the dead.” Greenblatt adds, “This desire is a familiar, if unvoiced, motive in literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum: literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans” (1). Greenblatt’s shamanistic realm of the dead in fact bears a marked family resemblance to Miller’s virtual realm, where a literary work uncannily exists before anyone writes it into the material world. Yet as we shall see, it is a desire for connection—for reference to—based on and revealing more than just a falling or climbing into a looking glass.

**Future Anteriors and “Idle Tears”**

Near the end of Speech Acts in Literature, Miller considers the passage in À la recherche du temps perdu in which Marcel, who knows Robert’s beloved mistress was once a prostitute, sees that she has become for the unwitting Robert a woman of unquestioned elegance. In this scene, Marcel imaginatively transforms the blossoming pear and cherry trees into angels; the moment of imaginative metamorphosis chimes with the way Robert knows his beloved. Miller reads this well-known literary site as a useful example of the transformative powers of language and imagination, powers that give the “mistaken, mystified one access to a realm of beauty that is lost in a past that never was, though it is treasured as a ‘memory,’ a memory without memory, and hoped for in a future that always remains future” (208). According to Miller,
“All works of the imagination,” no matter how “illusory” they may (or may not) be, in fetishizing this or that embodiment of beauty, give us a glimpse of this lost paradise, or rather these lost paradises, since they are multiple and incommensurate, each in its own separate and sequestered place in the capacious realm of the imagination. This multiple and unattainable beauty is allegorized by means of catachreses that employ the illusions of love as well as by the fictitious, factitious creations of poetry. These are used to name something unknown, unknowable, and unnamable in any literal words. (208–9)

The passage conveys a sense of the “magic” of literature, which is at its most powerful, in the terms Miller describes, when it is seen for its referential inadequacy. It may surely enough provide access, but to a literary realm, and to a referent, that may be not just “unknowable” but “unnamable.” By giving a name to something that cannot be named, the linguistic act calls into existence that which exists beyond such denomination, as the phrase “terra incognita” pinpoints on a map a place that has not yet been either mapped or named (Percy 99–100).

At bottom, any work of art affords only a glimpse of what might thus be, and best functions when it alludes to its own mimetic inadequacy. The work thereby proffers the reader, viewer, or listener access to a virtual world to which the artistic act can itself only point. And because of its mysterious referential power, the literary work’s world will appear all the more to have already been: as a future anterior, in Derrida’s meta-grammatical sense of the phrase, that is not merely some frivolous or wishful thought of the reader or author (cf. Of Grammatology 4–5; Resistances 39–40). Such post-facto reference is a condition, rather, of the literary work’s readability as well as of its cultural strength as a domain of imaginative vision.

Citing the example of reading George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda, Miller contends that such an activity is always in practice somewhat like performing a Liszt piano concerto. The novel generates a virtual literary reality that can be “accessed” only by way of the performative efficacy of the words on the page as I read them. Those words call or conjure into existence, like specters in broad daylight, Gwendolyn, Daniel, all the other characters, their “worlds,” and all that they do and say. (For Derrida 173)

Eliot’s novel creates an unpredictable virtuality because it necessarily creates the conditions for actuation that neither the reader nor the author could have fully anticipated, let alone have controlled. Miller explicitly connects this idea of the literary work’s preexistence to Derrida’s emphasis on the à-venir, the special hold exerted in the present moment by what is to come (cf. Derrida, “Force of Law” 969; “Punctuations” 116). As a virtual reality that exceeds both the written page and the mind of any author, reader, or whole community of readers, the literary work exists among all its possibilities of negotiation, interpretation, conjuration, and understanding.
Hence, in discussing *Daniel Deronda*, Miller refers to a similarly uncanny “spectral preexistence of the novel in potential form before Eliot wrote it” (*For Derrida* 173). And because any such literary object is radically unpredictable, in Miller’s view it “call[s] [. . .] into existence” the novel’s characters and world “as inventions or discoveries coming from something wholly other” (173). This performative invention has particular value precisely for this prospect of its otherness: of discovering or inventing persons and ideas beyond the pale of the present, the predictable, and the orthodox. Reading literary works may thus reveal a domain not just of other worlds but also of worlds of others, made as compellingly and virtually real as Wyss’s castaways. Literature, in Miller’s view, thereby expands the possibilities of human being—of ideas, interactions, feelings, and so on—as well as of the (virtual) reality of what is.

In a chapter from *Topographies*, “Temporal Topographies: Tennyson’s Tears,” Miller returns to the poem that arguably initiated his career. Although, as Miller points out, Tennyson’s statements about poetry and poetics were much of a piece with the conventional literary ideas of his day, the poetics that emerge in “Tears, Idle Tears” are by contrast surprisingly innovative. According to Miller’s reading, the poem articulates a feeling of loss that is an “intrinsic and apparently causeless feature of consciousness” (139). He further notes that the poetic language Tennyson employs is similar to that which the poet enlists to memorialize his friend Arthur Henry Hallam in the opus *In Memoriam*. But it “was not Hallam’s death that generated Tennyson’s feeling of loss. Rather, the death gave Tennyson an occasion to personify a loss he already felt” (140; emphasis added). The primary figures in “Tears, Idle Tears” are those human tears, tears that function as ambiguous signs issuing from the body. And whatever these tears are, for Miller they remain ultimately uncertain. As the poem’s speaker himself proclaims, “I know not what they mean” (line 1). Instead, the tears serve, Miller holds, to “bring to the surface the aspect of language or of any other sign that is mute, obscure, opaque, if not meaningless, at least without any ascertainable meaning” (142). In this way, the metamimetic “tears” can be said to function allegorically, as in Paul de Man’s sense of allegory as a system of signs with no intrinsic connection to a particular signification and which can therefore work in accordance with multiple meanings (cf. de Man, *Allegories* 206–20).

Miller reads Tennyson’s poem as profoundly articulating the feeling of utter loss that human consciousness entails. This loss is generalized, “[d]eep as first love” but also “wild with all regret” (19), bringing together the experience of first love and the regret that must come. Our paradises are always lost, in part because language itself necessarily defers and, in so doing, ever generalizes the presence of things and loves. Despite such regret, we readers persist (all the more) in searching and hoping for a true yet fictive world, one that can be virtually regained. As Wolfgang Iser aptly observes, “If representation means mimesis, it always presupposes something that is to be presented in an act of depiction, and so the question arises whether the state
of affairs to be depicted has an existence of its own, independent of the representa-
tion” (Fictive 281). René Magritte’s famous surrealist painting, circa 1928–1929, *The Treachery of Images* (“Ceci n’est pas une pipe”) evokes not whatever pipe was actually copied but some generalized pipe lurking somewhere behind the pictorial representation we see.

The same goes, even more humorously, for M. C. Escher’s *Drawing Hands* (1948), in which the two drawn hands surreally constitute (draw) each other through their mutual, representational acts of prestidigitation. We glimpse this metamimetic, autoperformative realm only in the very moment that its envisioned world is lost, again and again. Moreover, because that glimpse so depends upon loss, we most possess this world when we know that it is already lost and cannot really be regained. Notably, for Iser, the literary reader is thus necessarily “involved in an illusion” perceived to be “play” but nevertheless conveying an unshakeable quality of something real (336). This virtual “quality”—of something putatively real re-presented—arises through representation, whereby mimesis betokens an anterior presence to which it uncannily, and yet also somewhat mechanically, refers (cf. Iser, Fictive 286). Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf hold that such mimesis becomes, at bottom, “self-referential” (318), and yet for Iser it nonetheless betokens a reality or world uncannily referred to via virtual reference within a representational system.

Theodor Adorno similarly claimed that the work of art brings something into being “that does not exist” (109). And for Martin Seel, Adorno’s statement means that the “work of art [. . .] reveals to its beholder that reality is richer than all of the appearances we can fix in the language of conceptual knowledge.” Hence art “unfolds the difference between determinable appearance and indeterminable appearing; it celebrates the fact that reality is not just given to us as a collection of facts” (410). In short, via its material performance, mimesis “turns into the producer of its own reference” (Iser, Fictive 290), with a looming sense not of solipsism or unreality but of virtual reference beyond performance: of reference produced, in part or in its entirety, by performance. Our intuitions of tobacco pipes, writing hands, rotten Danmarks, antique mirrors, and our own selves are products of what we might call literary performance, which is to say of a staging of imitations (cf. Iser, Fictive 303). As Derrida hauntingly argues about “the intimacy entwining image and thing” in writing or speaking, “Representation mingles with what it represents,” producing a “dangerous promiscuity and a nefarious complicity between the reflection and the reflected which lets itself be seduced narcissistically” (Of Grammatology 36). As a result, he continues, within this “play of representation,” for any reader “the point of origin becomes ungraspable” (36). Or, we could as easily conclude, recalling Escher’s pencil-grasping hands, the origin becomes uncannily, but perhaps graspably, virtual.

In a passage from Derrida’s “Double Session,” presaging so much of his and of Miller’s later writing, under the metonymy of “Platonism” Derrida sums up “the his-
tory of Western Philosophy” as that of “the presumed possibility of a discourse about what is, the deciding and decidable logos of or about the on (being-present)” (191). That is to say, such an occidental history of ontology and its dialectics is precisely a history of demoting and denigrating mimesis as secondary and belated. Being, from this logocentric vantage, precedes and is truer than appearance. And in this Platonist genealogy, Miller’s notion of the virtual deftly functions as Platonism under erasure and indeed as Platonism set against the metaphysics and logocentrism of Being as a priori to and apart from (Being’s) appearance in representation. Miller’s postulation of preexistent “worlds” in literature resituates, obviously enough, representation in a linguistic-discursive realm that then mingles imitation with what is imitated, reference, as in Kate Croy’s mirror, with referents. “Virtuality” might then be how mimesis appears from inside Plato’s house of metaphysics: as something “outside” presence and “reference”—as “something [. . .] presented” (Iser, Fictive 281) rather than as something inside. It is something localized neither within nor without, before or after imitation, lurking on the battlements of referentiality. Jakobson’s “masculine” mode of reference, set apart from referentiality as mimesis, here is illuminated as a ghostly effect of reading, however undecidable the referential reality of that virtual “world” (beyond) may remain.

For Miller, the uncanny virtuality that arises from the reading experience is thereby tipped toward credulity and away from mimetic suspicion: toward seeing the virtual world as having a “reality” apart from the material act of reading, and moreover as preceding its production by author and reader. The virtual worlds of signification are always there to be entered, and the performative space created in turn enables a potentially greater awareness of that literary and ultra-linguistic act of entering. The play of virtuality in this way becomes the fuller realization of literary meaning and, perhaps, of the possibilities of human making. Such virtual reality can and does of course invoke varying degrees of mimetic irony as well, particularly regarding the inadequacy of any specific work to represent the signified plenitude, absolute, presence, or origin that appears to precede and exceed it—a problem Plato himself grappled with in his Parmenides. For the literary work represents not the author’s own specific or intended focus (his or her own hands, pipes, or island world) but instead a doubled specter of that act of representation: of mimesis plus performance as reading, conjuring an anterior, spectral world, virtually from text.

Virtual Ethics and the Ends of Literature

Miller’s career as a literary critic has been dedicated to discovering how literature does what it magically does and what, therefore, is particular to and special about its representations. His preferred trope of tropes has long been that of prosopopeia, the figure for poiesis as making. It is this rhetorical trope that, he maintains, endows
the world with voice (literally, a face), and hence that makes possible the created human world. By the same token, “[a]ll prosopopeias are visits to the underworld,” Miller avers, and correspondingly “depend […] on the assumption that the absent, the inanimate, and the dead are waiting somewhere to be brought back to life by the words of the poet or orator” (Topographies 72). Such shadowy virtuality might be read as prosopopeia run Platonically amuck, but it is better read as the effect, if not even the telos, of making as performance. According to Miller’s The Ethics of Reading, this product or end specifically endows literature with its unique value, a value that is in turn, he argues, fundamentally ethical: “something individual and particular, itself a source of political and cognitive acts, not subordinated to them” (5). Reading literature conjures an Orphic power of recovery as well as powers of discovery and invention, within worlds imagined as well as yet to be found.

A few years after the publication of The Ethics of Reading, at a 1993 conference in New York, Miller was asked about the ultimate source of ethical responsibility for our acts of reading: “to whom, for whom, before whom am I responsible?” According to Derek Attridge, Miller’s response proved “somewhat evasive,” curiously “talking about fidelity to the original text and his Protestant upbringing” (223). By contrast, Derrida’s answer the next night was more direct, albeit detoured along the darkling ramparts of Hamlet: that, in Attridge’s paraphrase, “responsibility comes from a ghost, or the ghost; the revenant which is also an arrivant” (224). But if Miller appeared at all uncertain of his response to that very difficult ethical question, he had at least the makings of an answer tucked in his back pocket with old pages from Wyss: that the reader is responsible to, for, and before the imaginative life of the virtual: that mimetic realm from which new ethical, cognitive, and political insights—not to mention new and old children’s adventures—can and do emerge.

In Topographies, and especially in such recent books as On Literature, Miller has returned to his childhood encounters with such virtual realities that call to us and to which we owe a debt. Their “reality” is a force encountered by children and later by students and teachers through acts of reading—as a force, and ethical source, that arguably has lurked in Miller’s professional work since his early mapping of a “world” in Dickens’s novels. As he has said, each “literary work is for me the magic entry into an imaginary world or, as I would call it now and as other people also might, a virtual reality. […] I have always been fascinated by the question of how that magic is concocted, how it works, what makes it happen” (Topographies 405). It may be that the 1990s’ explosion of interest in various virtual-reality technologies prompted Miller to revisit and deploy his remembered alchemy of reading and its compelling ethical call, but his was a notion of virtuality that long preceded the realities of our computer age.

For that new age, Miller’s essay “Literary Study among the Ruins” grimly assesses the “end of literature”: the demise of post–Cold War literary study under the
emerging, intertwined regimes of globalization and digital communication. Here and elsewhere, he associates literature’s continuing “authority” with its special, virtual capacity to “exert [. . .] magic power” (57)—powers and dynamics that seem all the more relevant and desired in our present moment of shifts in cognition and rampant changes concerning the very meaning of literacy. Yet through its specifically virtual work, literature is necessarily “a cause and not merely an effect,” with a cultural value that is all its own and not merely “the epiphenomena of society, part of the technological assimilation or assertion of mastery over all features of human life” (Ethics 5).

The ethical here stands in direct relation to this prosopopeic, world-making activity that opens onto what is yet to come but that may at present be only possible. That decidedly literary virtuality discloses not only a means of challenging Platonist metaphysics’ (mis-)representation of the secondary, belated character of mimesis (and of all its many fictions and putative sophistries); it also discloses, beyond the Heideggerian Dichtung, a space for the new and the Other, for new knowledge and new possibilities only dreamt of, if ever even dreamed. Such virtual reality is a product of mimesis’s uncanny conjuring, including, fundamentally, the materiality of its performance. Yet for Miller, again, that “virtual” reality is not merely a mirage, some pataphysical afterimage of reading; it is also, albeit undecidably, something considerably and significantly more: something prior, other, and virtually real. A glass or mirror darkly lends the power of secrets and of communion, à venir, as well as of an ethical charge, including an ethical regard for reading.

Entering more deeply into virtual realities thereby means entering more deeply, as well as more problematically (because virtually), into cultural experience as both a maker and a discoverer of meaning through the looking glass, “beyond” and yet inexorably linked to place, history, meaning, and time. Should readers then commit to this void-like virtual “world” with Miller the literary shaman and scientist? Yet can we read, and can we love, literature and not in some way commit to the strangely compelling reality of its wondrous representations? In the end, it is in this prestidigitive rather than merely digital power of the literary, and in its uncanny capacity to discover brave worlds old and new, that Miller intriguingly discerns literature’s ongoing, virtually limitless value.

Notes

1. Marie-Laurie Ryan’s Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media provides a helpful parsing of the three common uses of the term virtual: optical (as illusion), scholastic (as potentiality), and technological (as computer-mediated). The first two senses particularly pertain to literary virtuality, because “the immersive dimension of the VR [virtual reality] experience” is “facilitated by the illusionist quality of the display”—qua text—and as an “interactive system, VR offers to the user a matrix of actualizable possibilities” (13). In a similar vein, concerning virtual reality and Cervantes’s Don Quixote, John Beusterien argues that “both Cervantes and computer virtual reality make
clear that the promise of reality (the true Platonic form, for instance) is just that—a promise of reality." As with computer reality, the virtual reality of Cervantes’s novel “depends on declaring itself fiction” (437).

2. For an illuminating perspective on how language directs us beyond ourselves, see Walter Ong and Wayne Altree’s *Why Talk?*, especially page 2.


5. On this point Iser appears to hesitate: “Only the pregiven binds performance mimetically, though at times even the pregiven appears to have been produced by performance” (Iser, *Fictive* 291).

6. Plato’s *eidos* (idea, form) is at bottom representational, which is to say it is an effect of representation. Suitably, for Plato, truth must always be approached through fiction.

7. Heidegger’s theorized *Dichtung*, loosely translatable as “poetizing,” “cannot be described,” Clark holds, “as any kind of intentional object,” nor can it either “arise from any meaning-bestowing act.” *Dichtung* is, in this light, a “non-human *daemon*, as it were, within the activity of poets; something received and not bestowed” (41). Although one can detect Heidegger’s poetizing, theorizing influence on Miller, that influence seems often to have flowed through Derrida and de Man, and as a theorist Miller importantly resists—and, more to the point, his notion of *virtual reality* resists—the *Dichtung’s* topographical, and thereby its potential folk, grounding and tendency toward nationalism and racism (see Miller’s “Slipping Vaulting Crossing: Heidegger,” in *Topographies* 216–54; cf. *The J. Hillis Miller Reader* 331). Miller’s virtuality is notably *placeless*, a virtual *dichtung* of indeterminate and open origins.

**Works Cited**


