Foreword: Required Reading or “Some of Us, at Least”

Julian Wolfreys

Why should anyone care about George Eliot? And why should Eliot concern any of us today, especially? These are the interrogative motifs by which J. Hillis Miller introduces and concludes; they are the questions underlying what Miller calls the rhetorical reading of *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*. Acting not only as motifs—“Prelude” and “Coda” might give us insight into the nature of this brilliant, complex, and disarmingly probative reading of Eliot—but also as framing devices, substrates, or both, the questions of Eliot’s significance, the significance of the rhetorical reading, and the concern with why good reading not only matters but must matter, inform and determine *Reading for Our Time*. Indeed, the urgent, ethical, and historical concern is markedly announced in a title, which itself bears the hallmark of all Miller’s writing: at once apparently straightforward, yet also profoundly enigmatic and resistant to the bêtise of so-called common sense—which “time”? whose “time” exactly? who are “we” that the time is perceived as “ours”?—the title, and the study of one of the few novelists for grown-ups (to paraphrase loosely Virginia Woolf) to which this title serves as a gateway, make it clear that “our time” is also that of George Eliot.

To put this differently, the title, which resonates with a seemingly Dickensian echo, invites us to understand that we are not yet done with Eliot’s time. We are not past, post-, or after the moment of Eliot’s text and the careful reading of that text, for the very reason that the questions Eliot asked of her society are questions of overarching importance to us also. That Miller apprehends the necessity of returning to Eliot because she is no more done with in our time than we are done with hers is there to be read also in the title, if we read the title in different directions, as Miller would require that we do. For if the title, *Reading for Our Time*, brings pressure to bear on the very idea of thinking the notion of a period in any discrete manner as being problematic through its implicitly, not to say immanently, abyssal opening of the moment or

the idea of such a determinable moment, it also operates on the question of the reader's responsibility in other ways. Responsibility in reading is crucial for Miller's understanding of Eliot and what Eliot does (as it is elsewhere in Miller's work), and this is a responsibility already in place in Eliot's writing, to which Miller responds, and for which he assumes responsibility. To come back to the title, this is advertised in those terms "reading" and "time" but also in the play of the title in its entirety. We need to read *for* our time; we must take responsibility for reading what is taking place in what we call the present. This is what George Eliot teaches us, says Miller; and this, therefore, is also what Miller has to teach us, if we listen. But, equally, George Eliot is, in the language of college reading lists, required reading. She is required reading *for our time*. There is no escaping this, and there can be no doubt about this requirement. (Why Eliot is required reading, for our time, and for times to come, as she was in her own time, remains for us to understand.) A stronger, stranger reading of the title might suggest that our time is being read by *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*, that these are texts which, if we give close attention, can be read as reading *for* our time, reading for times to come, for a time that can arrive at any time, through reading a time that was Eliot's, a time comprising both that which had been, that which was, and that which was to come.

Still, that said, what does Eliot have to do with "our time" or times? How will reading *Adam Bede* or *Middlemarch* help, apropos global catastrophe, climate change, increasing disparity between rich and poor nations, and all the various worldwide problems that appear often as inevitable as they seem insurmountable? What—to state this as baldly as possible, as nakedly, indeed, as Miller himself puts it before us—does reading a literary critic reading a Victorian novelist reading her times have to do with adversity, tribulation, and calamity on a worldwide scale? And why indulge in rewriting, revising, revisiting material on said Victorian novelist, some of which has already been revisited as Miller confesses, in order to produce a book which the author calls a palimpsest?

To ask such questions, as Miller implies we should, is not to avoid answering, but to accept responsibility, to use that word once more, for those questions, even if there appears to be no direct correlation between the troubles which prompt the questions and particular novels first published in the nineteenth century. That there might not appear to be answers initially is itself part of the difficulty, and taking responsibility for those questions does not necessarily mean that answers are reached, or can be attained. That there *are* questions, Miller would have us understand, is—or should be—where reading might search for a begin-

ning, or, to employ a formula of Eliot's from her final novel, the make-believe of one. For any beginning is also a moment *in medias res*, and our time can only be understood if we begin by recognizing that we are in the midst of an untotalizable process, and so must take up that make-believe of a beginning, and in looking back maintain on the one hand an affirmative openness to the coming of the other, and on the other hand, in response to the possibility of such a coming, an endless, illimitable "yes"; hence Miller's consideration of the process by which *Reading for Our Time* has arrived. For the reading that *Reading for Our Time* is "for"; that is to say the reading it advocates as well as that which it signals it is searching after—"for" in the title making a gesture "toward" a time to come, which can always arrive at any moment, in a manner not dissimilar to that implied in Marcel Proust's use of "du" in the title of *À la recherche du temps perdu*—this "for" directs us toward a reading that remains to be read in our own time, while affirming its own advocacy: this is the reading *for* our time, this is what reading is *for*. This is what good reading should be in our time, and in times to come. "For" signals therefore, with a singularity that is very much the signature of J. Hillis Miller, a seeking-after of a reading to come in another time, in other times, other tempi, in the other's time. Reading is the search as well as the research, the one always already finding itself involved in the other. In being *for* such a reading, such a reading is already moving in the direction of the times it seeks. The reading is actively *for* that time, in the sense that *for* signifies this forward gesture, a motion, the smallest of steps. Affirmation therefore *and* a motion toward, *for*, the undecidable future, in our time; and which "future" can only arrive through the patient effort to read closely, apparently anachronistically, backwards, belatedly, in a gesture that is as much one of remembrance and attestation as it is the signature of a hope, an opening on to that which remains to come. In apprehending the other's time within our own, we might, Miller teaches us, in learning how to read, come to read the signs, if not of *the times*, then at least of our times in the times of the other, in the times of George Eliot.

No one is pretending, though, that reading George Eliot will either change your life or save the planet, J. Hillis Miller least of all. To reduce what Miller says, or what I am seeking to say as a foreword—a foreword which is also a response—to Miller's exhaustive reading of Marian Evans and George Eliot, is as willfully stupid as it is reductive; not that this will stop some people from being both, often at the same time. But a first step, even if we pause to turn around, looking over our shoulders into the past, in order to seek a way forward, involves the labor of reading. Reading is not a one-shot deal; it's not something you

do once and then put down the book, thinking that you've done. At least, not in the work of J. Hillis Miller, for whom reading is always a process, always in process, revisiting, returning, reiterating, and, with patience, attentiveness, care, and responsibility, a continual explication: an unfolding, which, in being open to the coming of the other, in saying yes, unfolds the possibility of readings that remain, to come. This is in evidence throughout *Reading for Our Time*, as it is in all Miller's work: reading as an ethical act, demonstrating in its incompletions and returns a commitment to the other through the work of what the critic calls with disarming straightforwardness "rhetorical readings."

So what does the maintenance of reading, of "rhetorical" or "good" reading, teach? What can Eliot teach us? What can Miller teach us about what Eliot can teach us, if we learn how to read aright, without falling into the mistaken simplicity of a blind belief that one can close the book on reading? Not least—and this is much—in reading carefully J. Hillis Miller reading carefully George Eliot we might come to learn how to read the ways in which those concatenations of events, subjects, experiences, and interpretations we call "society" or "history" are directed by what Miller calls "ideological presuppositions"; such presuppositions, such blind spots in the act of social, political, historical, and ideological reading, where reading comes to a halt in favor of economic calculations, are everywhere in Eliot's representations of society, social groups, and their complex interactions. Learning how to read those interactions, and the often powerful myopia of self-interest by which they are generated, can, as Miller argues, "make some of us at least Ariadnes awakening." Reading Eliot can make you see, if you choose to; but reading Miller can make you want to see. J. Hillis Miller can teach us how to see what we have not seen, how, like those creatures of George Eliot's, we make mistakes in how we read and act according to those misrecognitions and misunderstandings, often with detrimental, and occasionally disastrous, effect. Insight can arrive, even if belatedly, as hindsight. Miller can make you want to see. But you have to *want* to see. You have to say "yes" to seeing clear-sightedly, and this is never easy, nor can it be guaranteed that you will always see at one moment with the insight you have gained at another. But we all have to begin somewhere, and J. Hillis Miller reminds us—he shows us patiently, with good grace but also an ineluctable will toward clear-sightedness that is the hallmark or signature of his work—that we can see. You have to *want* to see, you have to choose to want this. You see?