Preface

J. Hillis Miller and Julian Wolfreys

Tell you my author
I knew his hand
Susan Howe

The J. Hillis Miller Reader gathers edited essays from fifty years of a remarkable career. From 1955 to the present, as many facets of J. Hillis Miller's critical interests as it is possible to represent in one volume are offered here: essays on Victorian literature; on modernism and twentieth-century British, North American and European writers; on philosophers, poets, and novelists; on ethics, poetics, politics, and aesthetics, on the disruption within writing that is the performative speech act, and on the demands of the act of criticism and what Miller calls good reading. There is, there can be, no introduction to such a diverse and heterogeneous body of work that is justified, so it is enough to say read J. Hillis Miller, but first understand what Miller means by reading before you attempt to read him.

The choice of pieces for the reader was by no means easy, and a balance, doubtless precarious, has been sought between providing a comprehensive view (one among many others) and offering the reader of this volume a detailed sense of the subtleties of Miller's thought and the close, careful scrutiny that he gives to the texts of others, whether Kant or Kafka, Derrida or de Man, the university today or the work of trope in linguistic and literary structures. In most cases, the essays have been edited from their original length, in order to be able to include twenty-two chapters. At the same time, responses have been included, commissioned from a number of leading critical voices, in order that the reader might find illuminated the profound, wide-reaching effect of Miller's reading and writing in so many ways and in so many areas, in what we call literary studies, the humanities, literary theory, the university. This effect is without parallel, and has both touched and called so many of us, who read, who write, and who teach, not merely as a profession, but from a sense of calling and in response to that calling issued from every page, in the turn of every phrase, and across the years.

Where essays have been edited, I have sought to maintain the contours of an argument, even though, inevitably, details have been sacrificed. On several, though not all, occasions, I have supplied a brief footnote to indicate in

paraphrase the focus of the excised material; though doubtless there can be no justification for such a procedure, I have offered paraphrase where the elided passage can be read as offering a significant transformation of the argument rather than functioning in a purely illustrative manner of an argument in which it is embedded. (However, I would, in any case, urge the reader to locate the original versions in every case; even supposing my paraphrase to be more or less in keeping with what has been removed, it is in the very nature of language that, in my effort at fidelity, I will have betrayed the other to which I am responding.) This occurs usually when a paragraph or more than a paragraph has been deleted. Because the motion of Miller's analyses is so densely enfolded at every point, in every line, it has often been the case that I have removed only a line or two, often merely a phrase. Where this has happened, no ellipsis has been included so that the page not look untidy and the eye distracted. As a rule of thumb, an ellipsis is included only when three or more lines of text have been removed. The ellipsis fills the place of the missing lines within paragraphs. When a paragraph or more has been cut, then the ellipsis appears in square brackets in the place of the missing paragraphs.

Julian Wolfreys
April 2004

It is a great honor to have a *J. Hillis Miller Reader*, especially one gathered and edited by so distinguished a scholar, critic, and theorist, my friend Julian Wolfreys. Except for one or two suggestions I made, the selections in this reader have all been made by Julian Wolfreys. I have found it extremely interesting to see the implicit portrait of myself generated by the choices made in this reader. As I say in the interview that completes this volume, my interest in literature over the years has been primarily focused not on the generation of theoretical paradigms but on the act of reading specific works and attempting to account for their singularity, peculiarity, or strangeness. That remains, even now, what most interests me about literature.

J. Hillis Miller
April 2004