

"OUR ARGUMENTS ARE OFTEN MORE ABOUT THE DISPLAY THAN ABOUT THE SEMANTIC DRIFT OF WORDS" - AN INTERVIEW WITH HENRY SUSSMAN, PROFESSOR OF GERMANIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES AT YALE UNIVERSITY

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Interviewer: *Professor Sussman, thank you for accepting this interview as an extension of your lecture for the 2017 Congress of the Romanian Association of General and Comparative Literature. Given this context of shared knowledge between academic peers, what can you tell us about your work with Professor J. Hillis Miller?*

Henry Sussman: I had the enormous good fortune to first encounter J. Hillis Miller in 1968, at the outset of my graduate studies in Literature at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. He immediately struck me as a completely original thinker and, of course, a voracious reader. He had already accessed, for example, Geneva criticism—which was not the normal cup of tea for U.S. English professors. His starting field in the English discipline was Victorian literature. Before completing his transition into the notable, internationally recognized critical theorist, he had already written extensively about the 19th and 20th-century British and American literature. Among his initial books were *The Form of Victorian Fiction* and a study of twentieth-century poetry, *Poets of Reality*. Meeting up and entering an intense collaboration with Jacques Derrida became one of the decisive experiences in his life. I first entered his classroom in 1969. The atmosphere that prevailed there was very much akin to a term I borrow from the political theory of Ernesto Laclau: *radical democracy*. Miller welcomed everyone in the classroom. He had no prejudices about who students were or what they could do. He exposed them to the material and did everything he could with them to strategize their best possible performance. The Derrida that Hillis Miller most intensely connected with was the one who, already by the epoch of *L'Écriture et la différence*, was inquiring into the performative dimensions of language. Derrida had been extremely attentive to J. L.

Austin, the English philosopher and critic who is credited as the founder of speech act theory. Shortly after Hillis's arrival at the Hopkins, the Humanities Centre, then under the direction of Richard Macksey, made a major commitment to serve as *the* U.S. lightning-rod of contemporary critical theory. Samuel Weber, who had studied with Adorno in Frankfurt and been one of Paul de Man's inaugural U.S. students, came to the Humanities Centre along with a group of young theorists that included myself, and a semi-annual publication called *Glyph* was established. Under the auspices of (and between the covers) of *Glyph*, a debate was staged between Derrida and an analytical philosopher from UC-Berkeley named John Searle, over the question of performatives and speech acts.

On this occasion, Derrida insisted that speech acts, in the name of classification or operability, cannot be detachable (or 'iterable') from the text. Texts perform acts and functions all the time, but you can't schematize them and lift them out of context. Derrida's response to Searle, who had criticized his work on Austin, was a text called "Limited inc., abc". I think that Miller was profoundly influenced by this debate and then went on to write distinguished work on speech acts and other performative dimensions of language in literature. I think this defines one major thrust of his enormous contribution to the tradition of critical theory. Over an extended period, he continued to address the full gamut of performatives in the novel. In his book on Henry James, he makes the remarkable formulation: "Speech acts make things happen". He continued to elaborate an entire constellation of tangential socio-political issues, such as the nature of communities and the current status of ecology from a critical point of view—the latter project dubbed 'critical climate change'.

Interviewer: *Speaking of climate change, you actually use Benjamin's image of the angel of history and his portrayal of the future as a backward rupture in which we witness the atrocities and the damage we distance ourselves from. Do you believe that this gaze of the angelic eye of history can make us realize our interconnectedness and where we should look in our society for the warnings, signals and the messages of this so-called angel of history.*

Henry Sussman: It's a beautiful question! And you're right. As Benjamin writes so beautifully in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: the angel is not only pushed forward, but also backward against its will and everything in its vision is a kind of catastrophe. But we need to pay attention to what Benjamin calls the debris that builds up at the angel's feet, because that so-called *debris* is really *les bribes et les morceaux* of history. And it seems to me that the angel of history is the guiding spirit for Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* or *The Arcades Project*, a work that I have tried to teach at every possible occasion over the last two decades.

The strategy that Benjamin devises in that work, which is unfinished, is that Benjamin is the collector of those fragments of culture that capture the historical pulse or the historical moment. Instead of creating a master narrative of conventional history, though, for an audience more and less informed regarding the historical circumstances, Benjamin devises an architecture for the *Arcades* that throws us into the midst of the maelstrom, or in the whirlwind of those remains, and with the same kind of radical democracy with which Hillis Miller teaches, Benjamin asks that each of us make sense on our own of these historical remnants and documents. He decenters his own world, and thereby activates, I think, a very important new figure of the critic as a cultural historian, someone who gathers the materials, who arranges them in a *display*.

The Arcades Project could be called a website of modernization in Paris and Europe before the reality of computers. It is a print-media website of modernization, demanding that each reader become a literate citizen of that age. And speaking of Hillis Miller and all of his works on speech acts within the framework of a deconstructive engagement with Austin and Searle, there's a performative dimension to the *Passagen-Werk*. The performance consists in placing each reader in the midst of socio-cultural turbulence, so that the reader, through a radical immersion in broad cultural literacy, has come to terms with the history in question and attained in the process a level of meta-critical oversight.

Interviewer: Thank you! Let us continue considering the task of critical thinking and the process of emergent critical awareness. In your contribution to *Impasses of the Post-Global* (Open Humanities Press, 2015), you name Naomi Klein and Derrida as two generators of investigative controversy and critical noise. How would you say

that journalism and critical thinking can be similar or different? Do they work towards similar ends? How would you contrast these two or, perhaps, bring them together?

Henry Sussman: Another realization that I couldn't avoid became central to my 2005 book, *The Task of the Critic*. I've taken part in so many sectarian disciplinary arguments, often about interpretations of particular terms, whether metaphor, reality, difference, or even the unconscious at a certain point. I chunked many of them together and I realized in a kind of Marshall McLuhanian sense that our substantive arguments are often more about the display in which the text is arranged than about the semantic drift of the words. (Of course, it remains incumbent on that element of critical practice that is close exegesis to remain vitally rigorous in the elucidation and deployment of terminologies.) Yet I discovered in those days that some of the crucial divides in our world are less about how one defines the terms, and far more about the differences between discursive modes and the text-displays by means of which the articulation is distributed. For example, between political, fictive, philosophical, and even critical modalities of textual composition and display. And when one thinks of text-display as the field to which we contribute, in microscopic increments, with each debriefing or session of writing, a stunning continuum between different modalities of discourse not always liked to one another emerges.

Now let us talk a little bit about Derrida and Naomi Klein. Derrida started out as a top product of the French *agrégation* system, the *École Normale Supérieure*. I learned from his biography by Benoît Peeters, who is both a critical theorist and a participant in the Belgian *Bande dessinée*, that Derrida had already read James Joyce quite seriously early in his career, at the same time that he was writing on the origins of geometry and when, at the *soirées* of the Thévenins, he encountered Jean Genet. So from the beginning Derrida, was, like Miller, incredibly widely read. We think of him nonetheless as a kind of philosophers' philosopher, but he was always open to questions and interests posed by his students. And some of these questions would take him off-center in this role as a philosophers' philosopher. These were not specifically philosophical questions; they were questions about religion, even about how Derrida related to his Jewish heritage. As the interviews that he conducted with Mauricio

Ferraris in *A Taste for the Secret* indicate, he very artfully embroidered on all the categories of identity politics that might have been applied to him. Yet he nonetheless took these questions to heart. Or questions about his political affiliations. And he began to address these issues in a series of essays and books that take up the question of religion (in his great, great essay, *Faith and Knowledge*); also Marxism, in *Specters of Marx*. So you have a philosopher coming out of the most distinguished French background of the *École Normale Supérieure*, who because of his openness is taking up issues not traditionally so philosophical. But then you also have a great journalist in Naomi Klein, a Canadian, who has a vivid sense of current economics and the dominance of corporations and such agencies as the World Bank and IMF, not only in the economic sphere, but in the domain of politics, who is very aware of how corporate entities begin to replace government in assuming functions that have a profound impact on people's lives. And I must say that at this point, early in the century, I had already been placing matters of text-media and text-display on an equal footing with the traditional philosophical disputations over concepts and terms. The powerful commonalities of interest, narrative, and even approach drawing Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* together with Derrida's *Rogues* became readily apparent to me at the time. These works, even in emerging from very different media perspectives, were addressing very similar issues and I hope I was able to do credit to them both; to place them in a supplemental interrelation with one another.

Interviewer: *At the beginning of the lecture you gave at the Congress of the RAGCL, you mentioned Bateson's double-bind theory, which, of course, has been invalidated by clinical research and can no longer function as an explanation for schizophrenia. But there is perhaps something that can be extrapolated at a cultural level concerning this double-bind theory and the inability to connect to meta-communication. So, the question is, can we talk about the symptoms of a cultural schizophrenia generated by contradictory messages within the same social structure of meaning?*

Henry Sussman: First of all, I would say, just to begin, that the double-bind theory applies to both the individuals and to societies. What has absolutely *boulevardisé* myself in my exposure to the Romanian Academy and attending a wide variety of papers and

interventions at the truly remarkable conference of the Romanian Association of Comparative and General Literature, is how so many of the projects, when you look at them together, are really about the theory of openings that can be made in closed systems from many, many different points of view, using many models and with many strategies.

So, my interest in Bateson and his double-bind theory is less clinical and more because it is a brilliant scenario for how circuits of interaction are segmented into closed systems. And one of the premises of my last book, which is called *Playful Intelligence: Digitizing Tradition*--one of my basic premises is that closed systems are what make individuals and groups crazy. And we don't have to stray far from Eastern Europe to find some of the absolutely magnificent instances of Bateson's double bind at work. This would also be a wonderful abbreviation for the novels of Franz Kafka, you know. And we had Kafka long before we had Bateson. Kafka very well understood the double bind long before Bateson came along. Now, about the clinical issue that you raised, I still think that the double bind makes lots of people crazy. It is just that we don't call it schizophrenia any more. We call it mood disorders, we call it depression, we call it manic depression, and we call it bipolar conditions. And surely the toxic cocktail of binary logic and progressive prohibitions against escaping the dilemma that Bateson describes plays a decisive role in these other disorders. Without belaboring the point: what is brilliant about the theory is that we all live in a world of double messages. Many of us who grow up with two parents of whatever variety are constantly caught in self-negating double messages. But that is not the double bind.

The evil of the double bind that Bateson characterizes is what he calls the tertiary level at which all of the exits are closed off. That's what the double bind is. And it's in that context that we can also work through the analog and digital dimensions of communication. For example, when we think of the government, we conjure up an entity that we can communicate with on some level or another. We can address it, we can appeal to it, it may or may not give us what we want. That is not exactly the government that Kafka is describing in *The Castle*. He is imagining a government that operates more like a contemporary corporation. And I think corporations are digital, which is to say they are not attached to any specific geographical or political entity; their workings are hidden, like Klamm in Kafka's *The Castle*. They are closed systems. No

matter how you behave in relationship to them, they will do what they want to, and if you have extended enough interaction with such purely digital entities, with a dearth of analog components, you will go crazy, whether as an individual or a group. The other notion that Bateson among others raises absolutely crucial for us to keep in our pockets and always be thinking about, is the distinction between closed systems and open systems. We always need to keep tabs on the available margins for flexibility, negotiation, and compromise our interactions with systematic organizations afford us. When we eventuate, by choice or accident, in a closed system, we need to assess both the prospects for creating openings, and how best, if need be, to get out of there. Bateson and Wilden, and the systems thinkers of the '70s and '80s were incredibly generous in affording us the resources for making these calculations.

***Interviewer:** Given that the conversation has now shifted more towards digitizing practices and how they may or may not lead to what you identify as a symptom of closed systems and as you also ended your answer by mentioning how important it is to have access to these kind of cultural services, I would like you to comment on your involvement with a major open access press. Our journal also promotes such practices, and we also share the vision that this idea of free access is in itself an important ethical statement. Until now we have more or less discussed the causes behind certain phenomena. Could you suggest to us certain strategies for making people less reluctant to collaborate in these kinds of open access projects? Because, as you mention, with corporations where all issues and processes can be monetized, it is rather difficult to promote such a radical democracy where everybody gets to have a say and build upon previous knowledge.*

Henry Sussman: I just want to go back to the previous question for one addendum. Which is to say that literary study becomes so important because we can think of all literature and its heightened deployment of language as an irreducibly *open system*. So all of the indeterminacies, the ambiguities, the language-plays, that are not only tolerated by literature, but fostered by literature, implicitly turn literature into an agent of the open system.

To go back to your wonderful question about the possibilities of online publishing versus traditional academic publishing, although this is already beginning to sound like an old saw, one could say that traditional academic publishing has a kind of analog feature in that it is associated with particular universities and institutions, and that there is some odd analogy between the importance of the institutions with which they are associated and the prestige of publishing with this or that academic publisher. Whereas website publishing is precisely, by its nature, digital. One of my favorite things about it is that it doesn't rigidly mimic the hierarchy of academic ranks and qualifications. When I got permission from Open Humanities Press to establish *Feedback*, about five years ago, I chose as co-editor Jason Groves, then still a graduate student, who was technologically more advanced than me and whose efforts on behalf of the publication would extend well into the future. As a matter of fact, in a digital publication this inter-generational collaboration contributes to the project's flourishing. But to get back to the big issue, in a world in which we have both analog and digital choices, what becomes the primary purpose of traditional presses, and traditional academic publication? It is analog; its products can hence be used in administrative procedures, such as hiring and promotion, and according tenure or permanent appointment, and that is increasingly the function that it ensures. And there are people who need this kind of information, people whose careers depend on this kind of information, conventional academic publication. On the other hand, for people who don't have those socio-institutional hurdles to cross, digital publishing is characterized by the great advantage that it is available internationally, available for free. Anyone who can find it has access to it; this is an absolutely wonderful thing.

Interviewer: *Taking into consideration the fact that you talk and you work on systems theory, maybe we can also tackle the phenomena of feedback loops. Can there be a connection between how information is being looped back into his own generator and the fact that the human subject gets more and more estranged? In other words, does knowledge become increasingly detached from the thinking subject inside all these feedback loops that deliver the subject back to itself by means of fragments, images, double-mirroring and the whole technological and digital surroundings that portray us to ourselves?*

Henry Sussman: Another crucial question! There are many ways of talking about feedback and the great originators of systems theory in the '60s and '70s. Whether they are Norbert Wiener and Bateson or their peers, they distinguish between positive feedback and negative feedback. Negative feedback is inhibiting while positive feedback is stimulating. Bateson saw that if there was too much positive feedback happening, whether to an individual or a community, the individual or community was at risk of burnout because the feedback would escalate the individual or community into higher and higher gear. So that's one sense of it; it can be gleaned from the pages of Hofstadter, where feedback is a very valuable tool in meta-communication, in meta-knowledge and meta-critique; it is through a form of feedback that we and computing programs learn what we need to, to correct ourselves, to do a job better and, if you will, to project ourselves into a higher version of whatever program we have followed, so, feedback is on one level painful.

It is interesting to think of psychotherapy from a feedback point of view. One way of speaking about the illness that drives so many of us into psychotherapy—a process I firmly believe in and that has assisted me tangibly over many years. But one of the factors that drives us into it is that at any given moment, we may not be quite emotionally strong enough to fully take in the reality that is either pending on us or upon which we are having a destructive impact. Psychoanalysis and psychotherapy may be conceptualized as a mental gymnastics making us stronger, so we can, incrementally, “receive” increasingly negative feedback. Therapeutic intervention is in this sense tantamount to a learning process: we surmise more and more about how we need to comport in confronting our signature situations. From my point of view, loops of feedback can be an incredibly creative source of information and growth.

***Interviewer:** Speaking of growth and possibilities of growth, also looking back on the way in which you managed to draw even more knowledge from two different sources, what is your perspective on the relation between the post-humanist doubts about the limitedness of human reality, and the poststructuralist suspicion about our own thinking tools? Is there a way to correlate the two?*

Henry Sussman: Well, post-human awareness of human precarity and limitation cuts both ways. It can be used by the right, as a justification for an excessive nationalism,

withdrawing from international communication and contact, and I think we should continue to devote in our writings and conferences ongoing attention to the ways apocalyptic ideas are conveyed in all kinds of media and cultural representations. We need to constantly communicate and inform the community regarding the falsehood and the artificiality of certain of these projections, apocalyptic eventualities serving as rationalizations for all kinds of retrograde politics. On the other hand, the resource limitations are a goad to creativity and innovation and, again, this meta-reflection that can enable us to develop new technologies of energy, nutrition, communications, and transportation--we need to develop in these directions with all due haste and creativity. For that, both governmental institutions and corporations need to respect and support science, particularly science as a conducted in an objective, open-minded way. Reactionary attempts to constrain or muzzle science are undoubtedly related to phantasmatic apocalyptic visions of imminent demise.

We should be suspicious of our own thinking tools, as you put it, and as we also saw at our very luminous conference, Romanian intellectuals are thinking this all through on an extremely high level. As merely one instance among many, Professor Braga, speaking with amazing breadth and insight regarding a vast range of epistemological schemata and their underlying architectures. He approaches the task on one inevitable level. When we interpret culture we invariably have recourse to overarching programs designed and structured in very specific ways. These become the framework within which we process the singularity of texts, poems, films, and paintings. But through these very same interpretative interventions, we are performing acts of close exegesis that can be oriented toward a different operating system, the Prevailing Operating System of rhetoric. In this sense, cultural criticism constantly vacillates back and forth between schemata and rhetorical tropes. And we certainly can be suspicious at both levels: the entire discipline of experimental psychology at the moment is calibrated toward maintaining healthy skepticism toward any and all inferences we make regarding what is taking place in another person's mind.

So, suspicion: It's not only a wonderful thing, it's absolutely central. It's ethically fundamental, but, at the same time, we should appreciate the long traditions and the sophistication that have been attained both at the level of schemata and rhetorical programming. We need to persist, with increasing resolve, in this work. As we become

stronger, we will be able to sustain more and more doubt and introspection about what we do, but still go forward. An expanding literature of really brilliant work, here in Romania and all over the world, has been dedicated both to schemata and to textual display and figuration.

Interviewer: *Thank you very much!*

Henry Sussman.: My great pleasure!