



## Versions of Pygmalion

*J. Hillis Miller*

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The literary school called “deconstruction” has long been dogged by the charge that it is unprincipled, its doors closed to the larger world of moral and social concern. J. Hillis Miller, one of America’s leading teacher-critics, sets the record straight by looking into a series of fictions that allow him to show that ethics has always been at the heart of deconstructive literary criticism. Miller proves his point not by assertion but by doing?deconstruction is here in the hands of a master teacher.

Miller’s controlling image is Ovid’s Pygmalion, who made a statue that came alive and whose descendants (the incestuous Myrrha, the bloodied Adonis) then had to bear the effects of what he did. All storytellers can be seen as Pygmalions, creating characters (personification) who must then act, choose, and evaluate (what Miller calls the “ethics of narration”). If storytellers must be held accountable for what they create, then so must critics or teachers who have their own stories to tell when they write or discuss stories. If the choices are heavy, they are also, Miller wryly points out, happily unpredictable.

The teacher’s first “ethical act” is the choice of what to teach, and Miller chooses his texts boldly. As an active reader, the kind demanded by deconstruction, Miller refashions each story, another ethical act, an intervention that may have social, political, and historical consequences. He then looks beyond text and critical theory to ask whether writing literature, reading it, teaching it, or writing about it makes anything happen in the real world of material history.

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