



**Joseph Hillis Miller.** *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz.* Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2011. 336 pp. \$29.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-52722-2; \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-52721-5.



**Reviewed by** Lee Prescott (Palm Beach Atlantic University)

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**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

## **Broadly Speaking: J. Hillis Miller's Study of Pre- and Post-Holocaust Literature**

Among the many strengths of J. Hillis Miller's *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz* are his theoretical handling of the concept of "community" and his erudite familiarity with languages, both of which prove foundational in the opening chapters. The bedrock upon which he builds his literary criticism is his examination of Theodor Adorno's assertion, "Nach Auschwitz noch ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch," which serves as the epigraph for the book's preface. Miller's exploration of that statement's ramifications in its various translations is worth the cost of the book, but here is his own translation: "After Auschwitz, to write even a single poem is barbaric" (p. ix). In the original German as well as its various English renditions and interpretations, Adorno's dictum has hung over post-World War II literature as its own peculiar sword of Damocles. By contextualizing Adorno, Miller identifies his own purpose for the book as this: "If doing that remains still suspect [writing literature after Auschwitz], how much more suspect it may be to spend one's time analyzing literary works, even those that are part of

what is called "Holocaust literature." That is nevertheless what I am doing in this book" (p. xii). When analyzing such Holocaust literature, Miller is accomplished; however, the literary scope implied by the book's subtitle is such that the entire field of literature, be it Holocaust-associated or not, is invoked. Whether or not this was a wise decision will be considered later in this review.

If the Nazi death machinery shattered the notion of community, then the idea of community, pre-Nazi and post-Nazi, is well worth examining. Miller establishes a thoroughly academic analysis of the concept of community as he navigates amidst several conceptual models of community, citing Jean-Luc Nancy, Wallace Stevens, Matthew Arnold, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Blanchot, to name most, but not all, of the thinkers whose concepts he considers. He argues in two chapters that Franz Kafka's unsettling novels, particularly *The Trial* (1925) and *The Castle* (1926), foreshadowed Auschwitz. This is a useful, albeit not unique, stance. Miller is not the first to recognize Kafka as an eerily prescient observer of the human condition in extreme circumstances, a condition

that created and descended into the unimaginable hell of the Shoah. Kafka's unsettling tone, theme, and vision indeed prophecy the inferno that was to swallow up Kafka's three sisters.

Miller is at his best when considering Holocaust literature, by which he means fiction based on the events of the Shoah. More broadly, Holocaust literature may also include the nonfiction accounts, which are arguably the most important contributions to Shoah studies and to literature, but Miller lets readers know that his focus is upon fiction. Interestingly, some Holocaust fiction blurs the lines of fiction and nonfiction, as do the texts Miller studies in *Three Novels about the Shoah* and *Imre Kertész's Fatelessness: Fiction as Testimony*. In the *Three Novels* chapter, Miller examines *Schindler's List* (1982), *Black Dogs* (1992), and *Maus* (1980-91). Each novel, if novel we may call it, is worthy of critical analysis, if for no other reason than those texts are excellent examples of critical boundaries that slip and slide. *Schindler's List*, for instance, was written by a journalist, was based in fact, yet bears the disclaimer that it is a novel; *Fatelessness* (1975) is a novel wherein the protagonist's adventures and misadventures during the Holocaust mirror the author's. The tension and the play between fact and fiction, between nonfiction and fiction, are productively examined in those two chapters.

Three areas of the book prevent me from giving it a thoroughly positive review; two of those areas may have less to do with Miller and more to do with his publisher, the University of Chicago Press. Readers expect exceptional quality from the University of Chicago Press, so the abundance of typographical errors and misspellings hampered my enjoyment. The University of Chicago's prestige is such that one does not expect typos such as *acired* instead of *acited* (p. 265). Oddly enough, the word *foremost* is spelled *4most* (p. 33). Perhaps it is cutting-edge to integrate the spelling charms of texting into academic writing.

Those problems, which diminished my appreciation of the book, are in fact minor to more major objections. Miller's scholarly work fulfills the main title of his book. Many, but not all, readers think that the Shoah was a unique event, although there have been, of course, genocides and pogroms before and after World War II; and that Auschwitz proved to be disruptive, a conflagration, in such a way that it caused a permanent rupture. However, despite Miller's superior knowledge of literature, languages, and philosophy, the book's subtitle, *Fiction before and after Auschwitz*, is too broad, and such broad-

ness is my chief criticism of the work as a whole. Is it possible to cover *fiction before and after Auschwitz*? Of course not. Thus his choices of a small handful of fiction seem arbitrary. Arguing that Kafka's novels and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) are works that either predict the Holocaust or articulate trauma to the post-Auschwitz world is legitimate but not groundbreaking. Those texts are appropriate to his theme but, if anything, raise the question: Why not this book? Why not that novel? The subtitle bears an unrealistic broadness of scope; it so happens that other overly broad assertions, sprinkled throughout the text, also invite incredulity.

Statements that are sweepingly broad yet not quite accurate cause the argument to undermine itself. One example, early in the text, is this: *Christian church services ... include each week readings from the Old and New Testaments that are synecdoches for a recital of the whole Bible* (p. 14). Such a pattern of readings is true within liturgical churches, but by no means all Christian denominations. Another example: in considering a plot/metaphoric device in Kafka's *Amerika* (1927), Miller says that it reminded him of *those many millions who took the train ride to Auschwitz under the impression that they were on the way to a happy family settlement with work for everyone* (p. 66). Yes, there were some Jews who boarded the cattle cars with the precarious hope that they were indeed being transported to a work camp, but the historical evidence of those departures, combined with autobiographical accounts by survivors, overwhelmingly show that most of the deportees feared that their future would be bleak indeed, even if no one could imagine gas chambers and constantly burning crematoria. My final example of the too-broad assertion: in his examination of *Schindler's List*, Miller asserts that, in both the novel and the film based upon it, the *triumphant celebration of togetherness by the Schindler Jews and Schindler himself* may easily *mislead* the audience who will believe that it is *a representative picture of Germany during the Shoah* (p. 160). For all the many legitimate criticisms leveled at Keneally's book and Spielberg's 1993 film, I personally have never heard of anyone interpreting *Schindler's List* as indicative that there were many good Germans who helped save Jews during the Shoah. Rather, Oskar Schindler stands as an exception that bitterly proves the rule.

In conclusion, Miller's *Conflagration of Community* is not a perfect book, but it is an intriguing one. It should be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of those who are interested in Holocaust fiction and the theoretical nature of community. I recommend the book to anyone

who wants to consider those topics in particular, as well as Miller's individual critiques of the specific Holocaust texts, or Kafka, or Morrison's *Beloved*. I look forward to Miller's next contribution to literary studies, and I hope that the publishers will do a better job at presenting the manuscript in the best possible fashion.

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