

tures and indigenous American cultures) grow “naturally,” as if “in magical correspondence with the matter of which . . . [they are] constructed” (282). In America, we are told, no such organic correspondence exists between the material base—presumably, the natural environment—and the predominantly European culture that has been superimposed on it. This puts us Americans in the position of being able to detect more readily than our European counterparts the “arbitrariness of the decree that makes things into the bearers of significance, matter into signs” (287). In other words, because the gap between the material base and the sign system is conspicuous in our culture, we are both blessed and cursed with being able to recognize a discrepancy that is always there but usually forgotten or avoided. Furthermore, our “privileged” position is reflected in the phenomenon of the triumph of theory in literary studies, where this “incommensurability between the sign system and its material base” (288) is also to be found.

It is here that I begin to have trouble with what Miller means by “material base.” For, in order to talk about the material base of the literary theorist, he finds it necessary to widen his term to include (1) the particular texts that are to be accounted for by the theory; (2) the cultural circumstances of the critic; (3) the physical existence of the critic (“the somatic symptoms, the body that may become the locus of a sign” [288]); (4) “each unique act of reading” (288); and finally (5) the written material itself (books, articles) and all the paraphernalia (typewriters, computers) used to transmit the theories to the reading public. Now, my question is this: how do these different areas of the material base relate to one another? Is there an orderly move from soil to word processor? Is one more “material” than the other? And I wonder: are the relationships between Americans and the different aspects of their social environment as superficial as the one that holds between them and their natural habitat?

My second point has to do with Miller’s use of the term *America*. It seems to me that it is a good example of a practice that he is urging us to avoid: namely, the unexamined adoption of a term whose standard usage, at least in the United States, masks the sort of arrogant, narrow-minded attitude that he, following the lead of William Carlos Williams (*In the American Grain*), ascribes to the New England Puritans. Had Miller inserted “North” or “English-speaking” before America, or had he pointed out in passing that there are important differences between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Americas, his readers would be reassured that he at least was aware of the difference. Instead, however, he conflates the two by mentioning Cortés’s destruction of Tenochtitlán (again, following Williams) almost in the same breath that he speaks of the Puritans’ decimation of the Indians in New England. These two examples of an apparent lack of sensitivity on the part of the European conqueror toward the indigenous American cultures are offered in contrast to the “receptive response” given

the latter by one Père Sebastien Rasles (also cited in Williams), a Jesuit missionary who was eventually killed by the Puritans. Surely Miller knows that there were countless Spanish-speaking missionaries in America who were not killed off by the Spanish settlers and who took the time to learn the Indian languages and familiarize themselves with the native cultures in order better to educate and proselytize their members. As they learned about Indian ways, these missionaries became convinced of the need to help the Indians preserve written records of the Indian languages, customs, and oral literature. They also realized the usefulness of incorporating Indian rituals and symbols into Christian ceremonies. This openness to native American culture on the part of both missionaries and settlers, who were not averse to miscegenation, was at least partly responsible for the fact that the Indian deities, the Indian way of life, did not entirely die out, certainly not in the large population centers. The “radiant gist” remained above ground, though partially submerged.

I wish there were room to say more about the *mestizo* culture of Spanish America and the *cronistas* and their attitude toward the New World. But I have made my point: that in many areas of America the indigenous culture was not stamped out but rather has come to form a curious, sometimes uneasy blend with the superimposed European culture. What this means with respect to the relation between the material base and the ideological superstructure I am not certain, though I suspect that there would be a closer and more natural connection than the one described by Professor Miller. In any case, I do hope that these last traces of the *leyenda negra* visible in Miller’s address will be carefully examined and worked out by him.

ELIZABETH D. SÁNCHEZ
University of Dallas

To the Editor:

Residents of California’s Bay Area are accustomed to seeing Gertrude Stein’s words in their newspapers from time to time. Stein was born in San Francisco, and she once made a San Franciscan’s joke about Oakland. “There is no there there,” she said. At least, this is the context the newspapers give us. I don’t know where the quotation comes from, myself. If I did, I would tell where.

As a San Franciscan’s joke about Oakland, the line at once suggests irony, wonder, and delight in the power of words to refer to things. The first “there” refers to something intangible, the second to something tangible. One infers, also, that there is a there in San Francisco—but you wouldn’t *call* it a there unless you were *there*, in Oakland or someplace else—which proves, of course, that there is a there there.

Well, it was a joke, I thought.

J. Hillis Miller proclaims in his Presidential Address

that the resistance to theory is the triumph of theory, because (if I understand him right) history and “the material base” are fictions too, theories. The upshot of his argument appears to be that critical theory must become required reading, must become “the texts” for all teachers of language and literature, along with those other texts that got us interested in the study of literature in the first place.

I am not about to condemn such a proposal, and I don’t deserve to be caught in a crossfire between the deconstructionists and the new historians, since I am one of those theory-illiterates Miller castigates. I am not totally unfamiliar with theory, but whenever I have tried to read it, I find that it does not require my services as a reader. And this is why I write: it may be that this very response is the one that motivates the new historians and the archivists and the people on the “so-called left and right.” It may be that they have discovered some bad writing that justifies itself by parading its complexity. It is appalling to analyze a sentence in a journal article and discover that, far from enlightening, it is full of little darkneses. Here is such a sentence:

Derrida uses the terms *rupture* and *disruption* to mean at least two things: the radical break of every event with every other, seen thus when comprehended structurally and hence synchronically instead of historically and hence diachronically; and the radical break that such a mode of thinking causes with the tradition of metaphysics and “onto-theology” (Derrida’s term).

This sentence (by Robert Detweiler in *Contemporary Literature* 13 [1972]: 277) occurs in an article about Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” and it is a cruel thing to inflict on someone who loves Hemingway’s prose.

There may be brilliant writers in the field of critical theory or among those who apply theory to texts, and I intend to keep looking for them. But I stumble over phrases such as Miller’s “male or female reproduction.” I stagger when I try to figure out how civilization can be both “not there” and “powerfully imposed” on its incommensurate substratum, *the material base*. I begin to fear my services are not needed. It is not difficult to appreciate the vast erudition of Stanley Fish, but it is disheartening to realize that the same theorists who sneer at “impressionistic” criticism are applauding Fish for asking, “What does the work *do*?”

We have gone beyond the “nothing is real” philosophy that underlies Miller’s address and have progressed to an awareness of the power of choice. I once taught a humanities seminar in a Catholic college, in which one student repeatedly turned in papers describing his Catholic beliefs instead of addressing the subjects in the reading assignments. Ignoring my pleas to address the proper subjects, he made the following idea the thesis of his final paper: “My Catholic beliefs and practices are a way of honoring my parents, and of connecting myself to the past.” There was no mention of the “truth” of those be-

liefs. I gave the paper a D, impressed, all the same, with its profundity.

CLARKE OWENS

Ohio State University, Columbus

To the Editor:

J. Hillis Miller uses poetic license when he writes, “Gertrude Stein’s notorious aphorism about California is true also of America in general: ‘There’s no there there’” (287). Stein, here, was speaking only of Oakland, her childhood home: she did not intend to include all of the great state of California. Stein’s aphorism, however, can be put to even better use as the motto for the Great State of Deconstructionism: “There is no there [author] there [text].”

MARK DUNPHY

Flaming Rainbow University

Reply:

I am grateful for the thoughtful and on the whole good-humored and constructive responses to my Presidential Address. They have given me something to think about, including the question of the there that is not there in Oakland. The letters are also evidence that my talk provoked thought in others. Sometimes, not surprisingly, that thought took the form of a desire to reaffirm as quickly as possible convictions and preconceptions that I was trying to unsettle a little.

William Benzon, for example, writes of “the boring sameness of deconstruction’s results.” In fact, on the contrary, the work of Jacques Derrida, for example, is dazzlingly various, never remaining for long with the same terminology, or topics, or authors, always bringing something new to light in the author discussed in a given essay, as he does in the recent small books on Joyce and C elan. Paul de Man, to give another example, was always able to point to things in particular works that are seen to be indubitably there, and crucially important, once he has identified them, though they have never been identified before. And his work as a whole is a conspicuous example of constant change, development, and deepening. Both Derrida and de Man, in short, are distinguished *readers*, which is what, in my opinion, our teachers and students of literature ought to be. The boring sameness is in what is mistakenly said over and over again, about deconstruction, not in the work of the deconstructionists.

William Benzon says that for younger scholars now “deconstruction was just one intellectual option among others.” One of the paradoxical effects of what I called in my talk the “triumph of theory” is that “theory” begins to be taught as another subject, like Renaissance poetry or the Victorian novel, in smorgasbord courses with