Reading Now and Again:
Hyperarchivalism and Democracy
in Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller's
Thinking Literature across Continents

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Abstract:

This review essay approaches Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller's *Thinking Literature across Continents* (2016) from a set of questions about what it means to read in the age of hyperarchival accumulation. Written against the background of events in the United States and elsewhere during the fall of 2017, the essay tracks and assesses Ghosh and Miller's differing methods for approaching literary study in the twenty-first century: indiscriminating catholicity and rhetorical reading, respectively. Through emblematic readings of David Foster Wallace's novel *The Pale King* (2011), the videogame *Katamari Damacy* (2004), and Amy Hungerford's *Making Literature Now* (2016), this essay argues that *Thinking Literature across Continents* self-reflexively models and performs the interested, situated reading practices necessary for continuing the never-ending project of encountering, sharing, accounting for, learning from, and contending with others and their divergent readings, practices that, though many may have lost sight of them today, are fundamental to the project of democracy itself.

Keywords: reading, hyperarchivalism, democracy, David Foster Wallace, Amy Hungerford, *Katamari Damacy*.

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What is it to read now? What is the purpose of turning the pages in Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller's co-authored book, *Thinking Literature across Continents* (2016), re-marking passages I hope to address below, reacquainting myself with their words and arguments, their readings and theories, while I prepare, once again (Fest 2014), to begin reading? What does it matter how or why I read today, 28 August 2017?

For most of those currently residing in literature and cultural studies departments, I imagine that these kinds of questions are old and familiar and, given the number of think pieces defending the arts and humanities published recently, probably somewhat tired. But as I find myself writing in a country where facts have recently become 'alternative' and Heather Heyer was two weeks ago killed by a white supremacist who drove into a crowd in Charlottesville, Virginia, revisiting such questions seems anything but a waste of time. Ghosh and Miller's book invites its readers to think once again about reading in the twenty-first century: where it happens, who it involves, how it gets done, what it can teach us, and why it remains important. For me, today, this means thinking about reading in the awful light cast by Hurricane Harvey, which yesterday devastated Houston. The city's failure to properly prepare for such an event, despite the overwhelming evidence of an approaching catastrophe apparent years in advance (Satija et al 2016), seems like a perfect parable for life in the Anthropocene and for the hazards of not understanding the transforming planet upon which we all live. In the age of climate change and planetary crisis, the cost of *wilfully not reading* can be disastrously high. Further, considering the increasingly precarious and fraught atmosphere surrounding literary study in the second decade of the twenty-first century and the disturbing transformations in United States public discourse in and around the 2016 election (and its interminable aftermath), from within my own admittedly limited US perspective, it appears once again, both inside and outside the academy, that people have uncertain ideas about what reading is and how and why it should happen. In the age of a tweeting US President, flooding in Bangladesh and Nigeria, and yet another once-in-a-millennium hurricane on its way, reading seems at once a superfluous luxury and a disappearing skill in need of defence. The surprisingly tenuous status of the written and spoken word in the US, combined with the nationalist paroxysms democracies are experiencing from India to France, indicate that questions about the role and function of reading, though perennial, deserve to be revisited now and again.

An emphasis on reading literature anew from within one's particular historical moment animates the dialogic project of *Thinking Literature across Continents*, and the book's authors frequently ask questions like those above. The book is a collaboration between Ranjan Ghosh, who has published widely in the fields of transcultural poetics, theory, and philosophy (among many other areas), and J. Hillis Miller, a critic who, after sixty years in the field and over thirty books, remains deeply invested in exploring and determining the role and function of literature at the present time. *Thinking Literature across Continents* unfolds in five parts, with chapters alternating back and forth between Ghosh and Miller, covering sections devoted to the significance, methods, globalisation, pedagogy, and ethics of literary study in the twenty-first century. Though there are a variety of productive tensions and disagreements between Ghosh and Miller's thinking, particularly in terms of their divergent methods, a running concern with reading literature in the present unites their work. Ghosh: 'Literature builds its affective accumulation in making potent investments in the now' (Ghosh and Miller 2016: 7). Miller: 'The reader will also recognize that adding *today* to *literature matters* is a move that matters. Literature's import differs in different times, places, and societies' (Ghosh and Miller 2016: 46). For Ghosh and Miller, thinking literature across continents in the age of globalisation means thinking literature *now*.

Given the complexities of life and the realities of literary study in contemporaneity, the temporality of the present for both Ghosh and Miller is, unsurprisingly, not locatable in some stable, singular, unified historical moment, but a 'now' that is multiple, diffuse, untimely, and transcultural. Ghosh is perhaps the most explicit about theorising his transhistorical presentism:

All my chapters in the book . . . walk across thoughts, between ideas from a variety of cultures and traditions, making for an experience of literature that is diffractive, mostly, out of time, in the whirl of the 'now' – the now that [Karen] Barad argues 'is not an infinitesimal slice but an infinitely rich condensed node in a changing field diffracted across space-time in its ongoing iterative repatterning'. (Ghosh and Miller 2016: 5; Barad 2014)

Ghosh's method, a practice he calls 'the (in)fusion approach' (4), draws upon a heady mixture of literary and theoretical resources from across continents and periods: twentieth-century writers such as Samuel Beckett,

Robert Frost, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Rabindranath Tagore; nineteenth-century romanticism (William Wordsworth); twenty-first-century theory (for example, at one point Ghosh gestures towards the object-oriented ‘literary criticism’ of Graham Harman [228]); and he discusses all this alongside and blended with critical and philosophical thinking from Arabic, Chinese, Hindu, and Sanskrit traditions. Writing elsewhere, Ghosh declares that this ‘(in)fusion approach proposes “otherity” and moves out towards appropriation of other cultures and tradition [*sic*] in a translational matrix. This is not radical subjectivism but is about forming conceptual frameworks that provide more spaces and fluidity in cross-community negotiations’ (Ghosh 2012: 8). To read literature in the present, to communicate to and be understood by the multiplicity of different people who are writing, reading, and speaking around the world, according to Ghosh, one must embrace a ‘trans-moment or trans-now’ that is ‘decartographized’ (2016: 5, 8) *across* geographies, periods, traditions, and places. Thinking literature across continents involves reading within the rich and heterogeneous global archive that presents twenty-first-century readers and writers with astounding possibilities for cross-cultural and transhistorical dialogue. In order to develop a unified, generalised theory of *sahitya* (which he translates as *literature*), a totality he claims exists across time and space beyond the confines of any particular locality, Ghosh fully embraces (if not in name) what Northrop Frye calls in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) an ‘undiscriminating catholicity’ (Frye 2000 [1957]: 25; Arac 2012).

In contrast to such a view of literary activity as a transhistorical totality, Miller stresses his methodological differences from Ghosh at various points throughout *Thinking Literature across Continents*. Rather than ‘affirm a universal system of literary theory’, Miller’s method, famously, ‘is to go the other way, that is, from specific literary works through their detailed reading to whatever tentative generalizations I can make on that basis about literature in general’ (17). He focuses on the actual, physical existence of literature – what Tom Cohen following Paul de Man calls ‘the materiality of inscription’ – and repeatedly stresses that ‘the mode of materialization of a given literary work fundamentally determines its meaning and its performative force. The matter of literature matters’ (Miller and Ghosh 2016: 52; Cohen 2016; de Man 1986 [1981]). Such a McLuhanesque statement should also be understood in terms of what has happened to the materiality of literature in the digital age, a transformation that is a

running concern in much of Miller's recent writing (Miller 2009; Miller 2015; Miller 2016).¹ As he put it to me in an interview,

I think the change from printed books to digital technologies is a millennial change, a total change in the way we live now. I think it is irresistible. It is not anything that is going to stop or that can be stopped. . . . Now the book belongs to the expanse of the enormous, disorderly cyberspace. (Fest 2014: 150–1)

Literature cannot be separated from the twitching electronic vibrations of today's techno-informatic-data fugue, the digital oceanic within which the overdeveloped world finds itself awash and swimming. For many people (though by no means everyone), to read now, whether it be W. B. Yeats's 'The Cold Heaven' (1914) or Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* (1861), is to do so by instantaneously accessing such texts anywhere with an internet connection. For Miller, this is a total change in the experience of reading, a change that no amount of blinkered nostalgia for the age of print can halt.

Thinking literature across continents, then, for both Ghosh and Miller, means reading in an age of *literary and informatic accumulation*, a time when new technological modes of archival access have opened up all manner of literary epochs and traditions to readers and scholars across the world, and, concomitantly, a moment when more literature is being produced by more people in more places and in more ways than ever before. The logic of accumulation provides the material foundation for and describes the situation of reading in the twenty-first century; and like any historical moment, this condition presents possibilities both emancipatory and dangerous. Ghosh and Miller offer two methods for approaching such a landscape: indiscriminating catholicity and rhetorical reading, respectively. One aims to gain a better understanding of how people have understood what literature is and does across time and space, and the other attends to the strange particularities, including the ideological mystifications, involved in reading specific texts. Despite their clear methodological disagreements—which I will explore below by way of a detour through David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011) and the videogame, *Katamari Damacy* (2004)—it is clear from Ghosh and Miller's project in *Thinking Literature across Continents* that both ways of reading are necessary, important, and not inherently opposed to one another. These two critics remain united not only by their commitment to thinking literature

now, however differently, but to thinking literature in a manner rigorously committed to a *democratic* understanding of what it means to read in a globalised, hyperarchival culture. Considering the various forces currently discouraging acts of reading—from the all-too-understandable attraction of disconnecting from the overwhelming waves of text pouring out of our screens, to academics defending their decisions not to read problematic texts, to the clear interest resurgent far-right political forces have in suppressing reading in all manner of ways, including through information overload and outright lies—Ghosh and Miller’s book dialogically enacts the fragile but vital connection between literacy and democracy, a relationship that must be vigilantly and perpetually renewed again and again for either to survive. *Thinking Literature across Continents* self-reflexively models and performs the interested, situated reading practices necessary for continuing the never-ending project of encountering, sharing, accounting for, learning from, and contending with others and their divergent readings, practices that, though many may have lost sight of them today, are fundamental to the project of democracy itself.

For Ghosh, the increase in texts made available by global distributed networks and digital technology is a positive transformation and it grants access to an encompassing sense of what literature is and does across times and places. As mentioned, throughout *Thinking Literature across Continents*, Ghosh unabashedly celebrates a heterogeneous, idiosyncratic, and radically democratic approach to all manner of texts, an indiscriminating and purposefully nonmethodological catholicity. This (in)fusion approach supports and makes possible his larger argument that literature or *sahitya* transcends its particular temporal and spatial locality. The transformations wrought in time and space by an emerging awareness of what Wai Chee Dimock calls ‘planetary’ or ‘deep time’ produce for Ghosh an ‘unexpected web of meaning, which I have termed the “more than global”’ (113; Dimock 2003). The more than global is quite complicated as it is theorised in Chapter 5, but the ‘more’ in the chapter’s title, ‘More than Global’, signals literature’s ‘complex relation to an imaginary realm’, something that ‘is more important than its local and global affiliations’ (111). Reading a ‘supranational’ and transhistorical archive, Ghosh says that all literature shares something, a ‘sacredness’, ‘a mystery and a meaning, a substance and a secret’ (29), and because of this, his goal is ‘to read each literary work more or less in detachment from its local roots in a specific author

and locale, as well as in detachment from its place in so-called world literature' (111). In a rather rich moment of theorisation, Ghosh tells us that the more than global

is the destruction of an expressive and organic 'totality' but is also a way of providing a sense of a totality, a world-wide-forming totality, whose access is not always in accessibility. The more than global is radical immanence, not a choice but an event. (113)

Sahitya's access to what is beyond the concerns of locality explodes the provincialism of any national 'organic' literature for Ghosh. Reading works of literature across continents, disconnected from their particular time and space, allows the more than global critic to encounter *sahitya* as an emergent, not all clear but still palpable global totality, a 'sacred' thing that we engage when reading and writing, even as this thing remains secret (27–44). Reading within a US academic and theoretical tradition that has quite thoroughly put in question and made rather taboo gestures towards something transcendently 'beyond' the historical materiality of the literary artefact makes Ghosh's argument, for me, rather bracing, unfamiliar, and provocative. But rather than use my reading of Ghosh as another occasion for the critique of metaphysics—a critique that I would like to defer here—I suspect that his sense of the sacredness of *sahitya* will provide stimulus for approaching anew a set of issues and terms supplied from a variety of critical traditions different from those provided by the romantics or the New Critics. Such dialogical engagements, as Miller demonstrates throughout his portion of the book, raise important theoretical questions about the horizons of democratic reading and have the potential to invite new and previously unheard voices to energetically take part in the critical discussion of literature. In this, Ghosh's work aims to produce a community of readers, a collective united across time and space committed to a larger, democratic purpose.

But for all the celebration of the universal sacred totality of *sahitya* provided by our access to an immense global archive, it remains rather striking that Ghosh declines to comment at much length on the technological substratum that undergirds and makes possible his totalising gestures. Miller, on the other hand, spends an entire chapter directly confronting literary and informatic accumulation, and appears considerably more sceptical than Ghosh about the transformations wrought by digital

technology. If Ghosh's approach to the archive is voraciously catholic, in Chapter 6, 'Globalization and World Literature', Miller shares Friedrich Nietzsche's concerns in *The Birth of Tragedy* about having too much access to information, that '[o]ur whole modern world is entangled in the net of Alexandrian culture' (Nietzsche 1992 [1872]: 110). As Miller writes, echoing Nietzsche:

[L]ike the citizens of Alexandria in the twilight of the ancient Greek world, we in the modern world know everything and have accumulated all knowledge, such as was gathered in the famous library of Alexandria, or as was collected in the great European university libraries of Nietzsche's time, or as does the Internet encompass today. . . . It might seem a wonderful asset to have knowledge of everything under the sun at one's fingertips. On the contrary, Nietzsche holds that just as a wild animal, a fish, or a bird caught in a net is deprived of the ability to live its life freely, so Alexandrian people are paralyzed. They are prevented from living a normal human life by knowing too much, just as we today, it may be, are made Alexandrian by being entangled in the immense knowledge provided by the Internet. (144)

Miller's invocation of Nietzsche serves simultaneously to highlight modernity's dangerous Faustian bargain for 'total knowledge' (an exchange whose bill may have once again come due) and to interrogate the horizon of possibility for world literature and the kinds of reading practices – including Ghosh's – such Alexandrianism makes possible in the twenty-first century.

Miller is also talking about what I have elsewhere called the *hyperarchival impulse of contemporaneity*. Twenty-first-century Alexandrian culture is marked not just by too much knowledge but, perhaps more importantly, by an economic, ideological, and technological regime that depends for its perpetuation upon a global algorithmic impulse towards informatic accumulation, towards 'big data', towards preserving and collecting as many cultural and textual artefacts as possible. This archive fever, however, often appears to exist untethered from any coherent or discernible purpose. Just as the National Security Agency in the US has been known to gather immense amounts of metadata largely because it *could*, a *hyperarchive* is, as I have defined it elsewhere, 'an archive whose goal, whether stated or not, can be seen in an attempt to gather together as many documents and texts as it can, regardless of content' (Fest 2013: 102 n41). In other words, I believe Miller (through Nietzsche) is slightly understating the

archival situation of contemporaneity. We ‘moderns’ (or rather, perhaps, *contemporaries*) not only turned into glorified librarians long ago, Edward Casaubons (from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* [1871–72], sifting the past into ever new configurations and organisational patterns, ‘wretchedly go[ing] blind from the dust of books and from printer’s errors’ (Nietzsche 1992 [1872]: 114), hyperanxious about the cascading influx of influence from innumerable and multiplying centres of culture that threaten to overwhelm whatever may remain of novelty or ‘authenticity’. There has also been a *systemic* transformation whereby ‘Alexandrian culture’ is no longer merely ‘cultural’ but a *logic* that has become algorithmically automated, immanent in the very protocols that structure the control societies of the twenty-first century. Rather than an occasion for democratic expression and possibility, the immense hyperarchive to which global citizens connect binds its participants ever more tightly to its disciplinary web, paralysing thought, foreclosing any imaginary outside of its social, economic, and computational parameters.

Though Miller does not address this, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche also emphasises that Alexandrianism depends upon and endeavours at every stage of its existence to reproduce profound inequalities:

Let us mark this well: the Alexandrian culture, to be able to exist permanently, requires a slave class, but with its optimistic view of life it denies the necessity of such a class, and consequently, when its beautifully seductive and tranquilizing utterances about the ‘dignity of man’ and the ‘dignity of labor’ are no longer effective, it gradually drifts toward a dreadful destruction. (Nietzsche 1992 [1872]: 111)

It is of little coincidence that though recent political speech has seemingly evacuated any sense of ‘human dignity’, unprecedented inequality on a global scale appears nonetheless to proceed uninterruptedly apace (Piketty 2014). That is, the neoliberal ideology of the market as the ideal data processor has allowed its proponents to dispense both with the old humanistic ideological mystifications along with narratives of imperial, decadent decline. Rather, today’s dominant cultural logic has incorporated the perpetuation of inequality *and* the shocks of disaster capitalism into one seamless whole whose arbiter is another vast, unknowable hyperarchive. The ‘optimism’ manufactured and sung loudly from cable news and by resurgent nationalism around the world, the endless and tranquillising

empty self-justifications for arrogant exceptionalism, the withering of anything like an objective fact, and the slow but palpably observable destruction of the planet today all seem of a slightly different stripe than what Nietzsche critiqued so vehemently 140 years ago (Wark 2016). In what I believe we might well call *hyperarchival culture* (rather than Alexandrian), the will of librarians and the existence of innumerable Casaubons and their ridiculous big data projects have become automated and self-perpetuating, a law of the network societies within which we finitely but inescapably struggle to breathe. No longer do we need any *people* to create an Alexandrian culture; we have written the instructions for the libraries and marketplaces to do it by themselves now and for the foreseeable future. Twenty-first-century realities thus appear to indicate that a culture based on unbounded informatic and economic accumulation dictated by a 'free market' can do nothing but dreadfully drift towards its obvious horizon of ever-increasing suffering, all the while ecstatically embracing its necrotic drive, its jubilant thanaticism, its death by accumulation (Wark 2014).

So how do we read today, 15 September 2017? Do we endorse being the kind of literary sponge Ghosh seems to imply scholars residing in the immense global archive should be, employing a jubilant hyperarchivalism and potentially radical social project of indiscriminating catholicity in order to engage the literary imagination through acts of totalisation, thereby arriving at transhistorical truths about human life? Or should critics retreat, yet again, back to their archives and the text itself, reading for themselves in their time and place someone else's time and place, emphasising all the materially unimpeachable specificity of a given text's particular and local conditions, resisting futilely, and in whatever way they can, the dark logic of accumulation? I believe that, given our hyperarchival situation, we should take seriously Miller's answer to the difficult questions posed by our informatic culture:

We must make do with what we have, which is a worldwide Alexandrian culture. The new efflorescence of world literature as an academic discipline is a natural concomitant of this. Its great value is that even if it does not give 'comfort', it does help us to understand and to live productively in the new, uncomfortable world of global telecommunication and global wandering that Nietzsche calls nomadism. The encounters between me and Ranjan Ghosh in the alternating chapters of this book are attempts to exemplify in another way such an 'understanding and living productively'. (151–2)

Rather than uncritically embrace the avalanche of texts made possible by hyperarchivalism, or retreat into dusty libraries nostalgically pining for the aura of print, Miller's insight is that we must 'make do with what we have' without necessarily any optimism regarding some significant change or transformation, which rings, at least to me, profoundly true (and not just because of the gravitational logic of the present and its apparent lack of any alternative). For Miller, twenty-first-century literature and criticism, at their simplest, help us to understand the strange world in which we find ourselves wandering, to live productively despite the often horrible realities of our age.

To connect Miller's unavoidable and irreversible truth about our present, inescapable hyperarchival situation to an act of actually reading literature that productively reflects on and helps us understand this condition, I turn to a section of David Foster Wallace's unfinished, posthumously published novel, *The Pale King*. Attending the last day of an accounting class at a community college, the narrator of §22, Chris Fogle, hears a transformative lecture by a substitute teacher about the epistemology of contemporaneity:

I think part of what was so galvanizing was the . . . diagnosis of the world and reality as already essentially penetrated and formed, the real world's constituent info generated, and that now a meaningful choice lay in herding, corralling, and organizing the torrential flow of info. This rang true to me, though on a level that I don't think I even was fully aware existed within me. (Wallace 2011: 240)

The content of the substitute teacher's insight into our present is simple, but, at least for the narrator—and, I suspect, for many of Wallace's readers—simultaneously eye-opening, comforting, and invigorating: there are very few areas of human knowledge where new scientific or humanistic advances will tell us all that much about the world we do not already know, and this *massive* amount of information is readily available through digital technology. Consequently, to read in the overdeveloped world in 2017—though yes, of course, it still involves acquiring new knowledge, finding new texts, and making new connections—is to read in a world where *sorting* and *analysis*, because of the incredible amounts of information available at any given time, have become primary among a reader's activities. Indeed, the overwhelming amount of data facing digital subjects means that “the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those

facts. Classification, organization, presentation” (Wallace 2011: 232). Who knows if a great Alexandrian fire looms in the future that would delete the global hyperarchive and plunge humanity back into a different epistemic regime? For now, *this is what we have*, and learning how to exist within the digital oceanic, how to navigate the informatic sublime – especially for a writer such as Wallace, who, towards the end of his life, was increasingly committed to humanistic mindfulness – can be in itself an ethical, heroic act. To approach contemporaneity with open eyes, to understand that reading literature cannot help but take place within the hyperarchival logic of the digital age is the first necessary, difficult, and potentially galvanising step towards beginning to answer the questions posed by reading in the twenty-first century, which once again involve deciding, and, I would argue, with a renewed, democratic urgency, what to read, when, why, how, where, and for whom.

To offer another contemporary cultural analogue to the kinds of reading presented in *Thinking Literature across Continents* – one whose very nonliterary, popular, or ‘low’ status is appropriate, considering – Ghosh’s critical strategy uncannily mirrors that of the Prince in the videogame *Katamari Damacy*. Tasked by his father, the King of All Cosmos, to repair the heavens that the King destroyed in the midst of an alcoholic bender, the Prince must make *katamari*, assemblages of objects rolled up as a dung beetle rolls excrement, which are then flung into the cosmos to reconstitute the stars and planets that had fallen down to earth in the wake of the King’s apocalyptic hedonism. Over the course of the game, the Prince ‘rolls up’ anything and everything in his path, voraciously, catholically, and enthusiastically accepting whatever objects there may be around – candy, bugs, tricycles, people, buildings, landmasses – into his absorptive ball. As the ball increases in size, the bigger the objects he can absorb, *ad infinitum*. If this sounds potentially catastrophic, it is. In the final sequence of a sequel, *Katamari Forever* (2009), the Prince’s *katamari* begins to roll up continents, then the planet itself, rolling on into the cosmos and uniting all creation into one tightly packed, heterogeneous yet uniform and entropic mass, a kind of cartoonish big crunch. Though the pastel aesthetic of *Katamari Damacy* is quite clearly geared towards children, this is the stuff of nightmares.

I draw attention to *The Pale King* and *Katamari Damacy* because they are emblematic of how people often respond to and approach hyperarchival culture. Either a reader can approach cultural production in the digital age

Figure 1. *Katamari Forever* (Tokyo: Namco, 2009), PlayStation 3. In-game screenshot.

by becoming informed and carefully sorting and choosing the content of what they read, or they can and often do just happily absorb whatever is in their path, making whatever connections they can, contentedly ‘surfing’, perhaps unaware that other choices even exist. Further, *The Pale King* and *Katamari Damacy* nicely capture the methodological differences between Ghosh and Miller. Though this is obviously an oversimplification, Ghosh’s more than global (in)fusion approach finds a sympathetic figure in the rolling *katamari* collecting disparate things into new (inorganic) totalities. Though ideally equitable and democratic, the more monstrous possibilities of Ghosh’s indiscriminating catholicity, of unbounded hyperarchival accumulation absorbing and reifying cultural production into one amorphous yet homogenous mass, are nicely suggested by *Katamari Damacy*’s apocalyptic horizon. In contrast, Miller offers repeated injunctions throughout *Thinking Literature across Continents* and elsewhere that ‘what actually happens when I read a poem or a novel . . . is stranger than one might think. It is different for every reader or even different for different readings by the same reader’ (21). The act of parsing the hyperarchive’s gentle yet endless barrage of texts is constant, never-ending, and must be performed again and again, with no possible whole emerging, no matter how refined and thorough one’s reading practices may be. Rather than ‘deconstruction’, Miller has been calling his methodology

rhetorical reading, a process of reading that accounts for the fact ‘that literary works (and philosophical or theoretical works, too) are each sui generis, unlike all others. Each therefore demands its own procedure of being read and accounted for’ (20).² Approached in this manner, reading becomes infinitely granular and fractal, an endless practice of herding, corralling, and analysing the strangeness of texts available within the massive archive of world literature, texts whose mystery has to be revisited anew with each new reader and reading (to say nothing of the heroic acts of sorting and choosing what to read in the first place!).

One might wonder, then, do Ghosh and Miller, through their co-authored dialogue, present their book as offering, implicitly, a synthesis of these methods, a way of reading that avoids the potential catastrophe at the horizon of indiscriminating catholicity or the Casaubon-like infinitude of having to perform a singular reading of each unique text, now and again, forever and ever, until there are no more people to read? Yes and no. One of my disappointments with *Thinking Literature across Continents* is its lack of an explicit discussion regarding what the authors think the outcome of their project actually is. Ghosh and Miller have gathered a number of essays on similar topics that, at times, strikingly disagree with one another. The authors acknowledge these disagreements, sure, but then move on from them fairly quickly. It would have been nice to see both critics try to grapple with the thoughts of the other at greater length (which usually occurs only briefly at the beginning and end of chapters), even if it meant more direct methodological disagreement and less amicable contention. But it is certainly not the book’s fault for suggestively leaving how to navigate these disparate and conflicting approaches to literary study up to the reader to decide, now and again. Indeed, that might be the whole point: to extend the democratic impulse of their collaboration towards a dialogically participatory reader. Indiscriminating catholicity and rhetorical reading may be, at least in some ways, incommensurable, but they are both possibilities, regardless of the local conditions within which readers find themselves reading across time and space; as Ghosh and Miller demonstrate, the critical texts that emerge from discrepant reading practices can exist next to each other happily and, even if in opposition, productively.

At least for this act of reading, today, 22 September 2017, I am led to suggest that *Thinking Literature across Continents* leaves me with something resembling a democratic synthesis between its approaches. That is, on

the one hand, given the decay of ‘monoculture’ in the US, and what Aaron Bady notices as the increasing ‘*lack* of anxiety when it comes to influence’ in contemporary cultural production, assembling a wholly wilful, purposefully chosen archive seems increasingly difficult (Bady 2016, emphasis in original). How can citizens of a global hyperarchive *not* be, each of us, *katamari*, bombarded with influences from all sides, without any particular unifying national culture, rolling along, seeing what sticks? To exist in hyperarchival culture is to be surrounded by texts, texts of all kinds, texts from many different places and times. But contemporaneity simultaneously provides opportunities, like never before, for archival choice. Given our condition, the imperatives to sort and curate, to become ethically *active* in our reading practices, and to approach any and all acts of reading as containing the possibility for radical social and political acts of *understanding each other*, now and again, are as urgent as ever. Within the hyperarchive, we need to become better and more careful readers of specific and concrete things existing in discrete times and places and more willing to explore texts outside of our normatively curated reading practices, letting our *katamari* roll where they may. To put it more concisely, in Jonathan Arac’s words to me: ‘So, one is ideally catholic and then one makes a reading list’ (Fest 2016: 55).

As recent political events in the US demonstrate, both approaches to reading outlined above, done haphazardly, can with surprising speed produce anti-democratic crises on a global scale. Whether such crises arise from close ‘attention’ (the US and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea misreading each other’s insults around the issue of nuclear proliferation), parsing and sorting (the policing by white supremacists and neo-Nazis of what gets read and by whom through censorship, online abuse, trolling, lying, and other means), or through indiscriminating catholicity (watching Fox News with no philter), particular methodologies of reading cannot be *inherently* democratic. Indeed, it appears that any way of reading can, with incredible ease, be yoked to anti-democratic forces. As Ghosh and Miller perform throughout their project, however, it is the rigorous, generous, and collaborative interplay between a commitment to both reading *and* to democratic speaking and listening that allows for more thoughtful, engaged, situated, directed, and ethical acts of reading to take place; reading and democracy are inextricably linked, part of a single project that cannot be divided without one or both suffering profoundly.

If we cannot endeavour to learn from writers and thinkers like Ghosh and Miller committed to the difficult work of democratic reading, if we cannot figure out how to parse the tsunami of texts within which we exist like a submarine beneath an ocean with no surface, there appears to be only one other option available at the present: *not reading*. And I submit that failures of reading, not just limited to haphazard close reading or irresponsible catholicity, but people's refusal or inability to read have, in many ways, led to some of the darker political realities of our time. (As Miller puts it at one point, commenting in April 2016 about revising a section he originally wrote in 2010, '[t]he United States is still hell-bent on autoimmune self-destruction' [Ghosh and Miller 2016: 184].) Approaching literature and culture from the stance of Bartlebian resistance, preferring not to read *at all*, or rather, choosing not to read this or that, now and again declining to read because one does not need to or because one needs to refuse to for some larger ideological reason, appears to be a stance taken up by *many* around the world today. Indeed, not reading might in fact be the dominant approach to literature (and culture and politics) in the US at the present time (including the reading practices of the country's most prominent elected official[s]). And while the idea of literary scholars turning away, deferring their reading to others, choosing, whether purposefully or not, *not to read* when faced with the dilemmas presented by hyperarchival culture may seem the height of absurdity, it will surprise no one that we have indeed entered an era in which certain scholars are arguing that they (and we) should simply not read some things.

This is the somewhat shocking thesis of the final chapter of Amy Hungerford's *Making Literature Now* (2016). Though she is ostensibly studying the work of David Foster Wallace, she writes: '[H]ere is my heretical declaration: I will not read any further in Wallace's work' (Hungerford 2016: 149). Showing little evidence of having read much of Wallace beyond his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987), 'a few of the stories, and those long ago' (149), and the scandalising biography by D. T. Max, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story* (2012), Hungerford refuses to read any further. Even though she is a scholar of contemporary US literature writing a book containing a chapter on a prominent and important writer in her field, she begins and ends by refusing to read. Not *Infinite Jest* (1996), not Wallace's book on transfinite mathematics, not his uncollected essays, and certainly not the posthumous *Pale King*—Hungerford prefers not to

read. Nothing. Her reasons for this are clear: Wallace has been accused of misogyny and sexism and unrepentant narcissism by some, and, ironically, she knows this because she has read Max's biography. She trusts Max and others to do her reading for her. Because of what she has read of other people's reading she will read no further, choosing instead to deescalate the canonisation of what many would agree is a major US writer because Wallace (probably) has little 'to say about women, or gender, or sex, or misogyny that's worth attending to' (149).³ Or at least, so she has heard from others, permitting her to sort and separate Wallace's work from the piles of other texts in her field she, presumably, finds acceptable and worthy of her attention.

Of course, unbeknownst to Hungerford, she might in fact *be* a good reader of Wallace, at least the Wallace who wrote *The Pale King* (who, of course, is not the same Wallace that wrote *Infinite Jest* . . .). For what is Hungerford doing except 'heroically' parsing the archive, sorting, selecting, and choosing what she will spend her limited hours on this earth attending to? Obviously, a scholar of twenty-first-century US literature cannot read everything in their ever-expanding field, no matter how voraciously and tirelessly they try. So, as everyone knows, the first step of any reading project tied to a disciplinary practice, making a list, necessarily leaves some things out, and for any number of reasons. The problem with Hungerford, however, is rooted precisely in the crisis of reading visible now, today, 24 September 2017. (Admittedly, despite its title's presentism, I imagine this crisis was not quite as visible when she was writing *Making Literature Now*.) Hungerford speaks loudly, emphatically, and prominently about something she has not read, condemning it and urging others to share in her ignorance. Other people will (not) read what Hungerford writes, which will cause other failures to read, and these moments of not reading will be celebrated as ethical acts. In the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, this kind of exponential *ressentiment* should concern us. Ignorance being joyfully, confidently, and loudly celebrated in contemporary political speech and the presidential practices of refusing to read in favour of watching Fox News, philtered through the viewpoints he already agrees with and trusts, and skimming the shortest possible presidential briefings, written in the simplest language, all in order to 'better' understand the world, make it all the more distressing that a famous scholar and Dean of the Humanities at Yale University can get away with sweeping declarations about things

she lacks real, material, hands-on knowledge about, or that she defers her responsibility to know about and understand her field to other ‘experts’. That her refusal is viewed *favourably* by some signals that reading is in crisis once again (if it ever was not), and, simply yet surprisingly, trying to read as much as one can (Ghosh) and as carefully as one can (Miller) have again become potentially radical acts.

With *Thinking Literature across Continents* composed, presumably, over many years and published in the winter of 2016, Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller could not necessarily have predicted the rapid and sobering transformations in US, Indian, and global politics that would accompany the publication of their book, let alone the attacks on knowledge and literacy that have grown outside of all reasonable bounds alongside a globally resurgent far-right nationalism. But reading their book now, today, feels both timely and untimely. 2017 has given me the institutional foundation to finally think of what I do – reading, writing, and teaching – as somewhat stable activities, and yet the first thing I write within the confines of this newfound professional stability is about the instability of the written word at the present time. Reading Ghosh and Miller is an exercise in experiencing the power of even small timescales to transform a text and the person reading it, along with the communities in which their reading is situated and to which their reading is a response. Ghosh concludes *Thinking Literature across Continents* by discussing the hope for his and Miller’s shared dialogic project: ‘Our transactional listening to each other has, hopefully, opened literature as a *democratic community* where readers are welcome to install and invest their inputs through a separate level of listening that may not be docile always’ (259, emphasis added). For all their disagreements and as a way of reflecting on these dark times – which today appear capable of producing nuclear catastrophe from a world leader’s (mis)reading of a text less than 140 characters long – Ghosh and Miller rigorously and exuberantly model the democratic power of reading and writing about literature in every facet of their collaboration. In these chilling September days, with every tweet bringing another dramatic display of intolerance and ignorance, we must embrace and remember that we can continue, amicably, contentiously, and without any necessary docility, to read and speak and listen to each other now and again and then again; the future of democracy might very well depend upon it.

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson has described Miller's most recent work as follows: 'But the heart of the work remains the new and urgent, contemporary problem: not what literature is, but whether it can survive in any recognizable form in globalization, a problem that promises to tell us as much about globalization as it does about literature. Miller's wisdom and vast pedagogical experience, however, dictate the right form of the question: not whether people will be reading books in the future (if only on their smartphones), but what will survive of literary study as such in its traditional, modern, or even future forms' (Jameson 2015: xxii).
2. Miller begins his contribution to *Thinking Literature across Continents* by emphatically informing readers on the first page of his introduction that 'I am not a deconstructionist. Let me repeat that once more: I am not a deconstructionist' (9). Among other reasons, he makes such a declaration because deconstruction's 'widely accepted misunderstandings' are 'almost impossible to correct' (10).
3. Admittedly, this quotation is drawn somewhat out of context, as it occurs as a rhetorical question in a series of others. (For example, Hungerford elsewhere in another series of rhetorical questions asks, 'What if we just stop talking about such a work before it matters that much to the culture at large?' [156].) It is clear, however, that the implied answers to Hungerford's questions should be readily apparent. For *excellent* responses to Hungerford, see LeClair (2016) and Liming (2017).

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