6.1 - Rev. of Richard Miller

Everybody is Working-through Something

Sandie Friedman

A Review of *Writing at the End of the World* by Richard Miller (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005)

Enculturation 6.1 (2008): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/6.1/friedman

Richard Miller's excellent collection of essays, *Writing at the End of the World,* introduces a new form, the "institutional autobiography." This form unites "the seemingly opposed worlds of the personal—where one is unique, free, and outside of history—and the institutional—where one is constrained, anonymous, and imprisoned by the accretion of past practices . . . shifting attention from the self to the nexus where self and institution meet" (138). His book brought me back to an uncomfortable moment in my own institutional history: a meeting with a dissertation reader about the first chapter I'd written. The dissertation was meant to trace the recent history of representations of the Holocaust in the U.S., but the first chapter was entirely personal—the story of my mother's journey as a child refugee from Nazi Germany. The reader tried to let me down gently: "Everybody is working-through something," he said.

What he meant was: "Everybody who does scholarship has a hidden personal motivation, an emotional reason for writing about her topic." What he also meant was: "You can't experiment with form in a dissertation. This is not the place for writing your mother's history, even if it was part of the historical trauma that is your topic." It wasn't my reader's intention, but I found this exchange humiliating, and from then on, I sliced out the personal and dutifully worked to elaborate the historical. However, Richard Miller would have responded differently to that first chapter; under his guidance, I might have written a very different dissertation, one in which I tried to interweave the personal and the academic, the private and the historical. And looking back, he might name that meeting as moment when we were constrained (and perhaps also enabled) by the institutional context, the conventions of dissertation-writing at our university; also as a moment when the institutional became personal, shutting down the impulse to write about my mother.

My dissertation reader was right: everybody *is* working-through something in his academic writing, whether it reaches the surface or not. Miller writes out of the conviction that in order for academic writing to remain meaningful, we must acknowledge the personal dimension—recognize how it shapes the questions we take on in our scholarly work. The traumas Miller works-through are present on the surface of his book, and they are both private and public. In one of the many purposeful digressions, Miller reflects on a statue on his campus, commemorating those who died on Pam Am Flight 103, which exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland. The statue's suffering figures are all women, and Miller wonders: "Where are the men, the fathers, the sons, and the husbands of those who fell from the sky? Why was their grief kept from view?" (190). *Writing at the End of the World* exposes male grief to view: grief over events such as Pan Am Flight 103 and September 11th, as well as mourning for the writer's father: his father's frustrated career as a writer, his depression late in life, his suicide attempts, and his death after a stroke.

The death of Miller's father takes its place among many losses in the book: Chernobyl (the book's cover shows an empty classroom in the contaminated zone around the Russian nuclear power plant), the shootings at Columbine High School, September 11th, the war in Iraq. The overarching problem Miller works through in the book is: how can the humanities have meaning in the face of senseless violence? Or, as he bluntly puts it: "Why bother with reading and writing when the world is so obviously going to hell?" (16). "The dark night of the soul," for teachers of writing, for those of us who have placed our hope in books, "comes with the realization that training students to read, write, and talk in more critical and self-reflective ways cannot protect them from the violent changes our culture is undergoing" (5). If books do not have the redemptive power we thought, how can we keep doing our jobs as teachers of writing? What can sustain us through the demanding routines of teaching, semester after semester?

Miller's response to these questions comes through the form of the book itself, the "institutional autobiography." The form answers these questions, illustrating how academic writing can begin to break down "the opposition between the personal and the academic, lived experience and the world of ideas, local history and global events, the teaching of writing and the teaching of reading" (187-188). We can make writing meaningful, Miller argues, by bridging these gaps, by using writing as a vehicle to work- through (to process emotionally), and to think through, the problems that are most immediate for us. Miller shifts between the realms of the public, the academic, and the personal, allowing the issues in each sphere to resonate with one another—in part because this gives the book a texture close to the complexity of lived experience.

And yet it also, like the memoir he analyzes in the first chapter, Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club,* lends order to the chaos of lived experience through writing. Karr's memoir enables working-though; "institutional autobiography," like memoir, "allows one to plunge into the darkness of the past; it provides the means both for evoking and for making sense of that past; and it can be made to generate a sense of possibility, a sense that a better, brighter future is out there to be secured" (20). He later puts it more succinctly: "Writing, as [Karr] uses it, is a hermeneutic practice that involves witnessing the mundane horrors of the past in order to make peace with the past" (24). We see Miller put the concept into practice most effectively in Chapter Four, on September 11th, "Falling Bodies: Cleaning Up After the Apocalypse." Taking inspiration from a reading of Don DeLillo's novel, *Underworld*, Miller witnesses the event by contemplating the aftermath: the tons of toxic detritus left behind after the planes hit the towers. Working-through the trauma of September 11th becomes a matter of contemplating both the massiveness of the garbage and the poignancy of the buildings' contents: "Tissues, forks and knives, plates, tablecloths, salt-and-pepper shakers, salad bowls, banquet tables, . . . raincoats, suit coats, pants, dresses, skirts, pocketbooks, wallets, watches, wheelchairs" (94). In listing these objects, Miller undergoes a process similar to the one Freud explains in "Mourning and Melancholia," in which each memory is revisited and re-invested with emotion before the mourner can detach himself from it. The autobiographical dimension of the book is about mourning both personal and public losses.

As a reflection on Miller's life within institutions, it also works-through a series of losses: the erosion of his belief in some of the academy's central myths about itself. Aside from his undergraduate education in the Great Books program at St. John's College, Miller doesn't say much about the specific institutions that shaped him (he now teaches at Rutgers). Rather, it focuses on the ideology of the academy, and why Miller has come to doubt some of its most alluring concepts. In chapter three, "Smart Bomb," Miller dismantles what he calls the "schoolhouse melodrama" (52), which casts teachers as bravely struggling against a mammoth, indifferent bureaucracy—or else against the numbing forces of consumerist culture. Miller contends that "the greatest impediment to institutional change" is "not the stupidity of the system, but rather the mystifying appeal of 'smartness'" (53). By "smartness," he means the notion that intelligence is natural and inherent, not culturally constructed. Working within the academy as students or teachers, we absorb this belief in the power of the individual mind, as well as the haughty conviction that our words on the page can change the world. We accept the notion that the university is capable of judging who is worthy to receive an education—especially a prestigious one—and who isn't; we place our faith in the institution that has accepted us into its fold and confirmed both our smartness and our moral diligence by awarding us a degree.

Miller suggests that ideologies of schooling shape our experience at every stage, and especially when we cross over and become teachers ourselves. The most seductive of all the academy's myths, for those of us who become teachers, must surely be "the image of the teacher as liberator" (121). This myth holds a special appeal for teachers of writing, because, laboring at the margins of the institution, we often see ourselves as working *against* it. (In fact, it was teaching in the undergraduate Writing Program that made me think I could get away with writing about my mother in my dissertation.) Miller reminds us that in spite of our adulation of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and our efforts to create to create "problem-posing" classrooms in the spirit of Freire, we writing teachers are still "functionaries of the administration's educational arm" (130). The institutional autobiography is a sobering exercise for Miller, no doubt, and it would be for us, too. He calls upon us to question beliefs that are at the core of our identities as academics: our natural, in-born "smartness"; the legitimacy of the university's capacity to recognize and reward it; and the image of ourselves as liberators, working to free students by offering them "the emancipatory possibilities of critical thinking" (as he self-ironically puts it in his

1998 book, *As If Learning Mattered*).

While Miller illustrates how this kind of hybrid writing can both challenge us and re-infuse our work with meaning, he is less clear about the practical, pedagogical aspects. Miller suggests that his courses offer students "other ways of framing their experience of schooling" and the "opportunity to formulate more nuanced understandings of the social exercise of power" (136). Part of this, I'm guessing, means asking them to read Michel Foucault and James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* and, informed by these theorists, to undertake their own institutional autobiographies—critical narratives of schooling. Even prior to the reading of critical theory, Miller writes, "students must first be provided with genuine opportunities to discover the virtues of discursive versatility, by which I mean opportunities to acquire the skills to speak, read, and write persuasively across a wide range of social contexts" (136). How do we give students access to a "wide range of social contexts" in a first-year writing course, or even in the span of a university career? Service learning courses certainly give students some of these opportunities, but how might we offer them in a more traditionally structured course?

Even without specific techniques to put into practice, however, I am excited by the prospect of helping students to write in the spirit of Miller's work, even perhaps in this new form. *Writing at the End of the World* has opened up a possibility that was shut down when my advisor suggested that a dissertation was not the place for explicit working-through. Perhaps academic writing can, after all, become a means of revisiting the dark past in order to "generate a sense of possibility, a sense that a better, brighter future is out there to be secured"(20). *Writing at the End of the World*, in spite of its dark title, renews the hope that academic writing can be emotionally and intellectually transformative, both for the writer and the reader.