

ZERO PLUS ONE

J. HILLIS MILLER



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For Manuel Asensi

Faithful Friend

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Preface

I am delighted and honored to have this book published in the *Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-americans* and under the auspices of the Universitat de València. I have visited that university often and have many friends there, especially Professor Manuel Asensi. I begin, therefore, by taking this public opportunity to hail and greet those friends, as well as those unknown readers into whose hands this book may fall. Professor Asensi sponsored the presentation of the two essays in this book in abbreviated form as lectures and it was he who asked me to allow their publication in *Zero Plus One*. I thank him for that, as for many other kindnesses and courtesies over the years, not least for the penetrating book he wrote about my work, *J. Hillis Miller; or, Boustrophedonic Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

I can only hope that my readers will enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. The longer section, “Zero,” was the result of an invitation from Julian Wolfreys to contribute to a book to be called *Glossalalia*, to be published by the Edinburgh University Press. The book was to have twenty-six sections, one for each letter of the alphabet, each on a term in literary theory or criticism beginning with that letter. Professor Wolfreys generously

offered me my choice of letters. I could not accept the invitation then, but I agreed when he came back to me with some urgency a year or more later and said, “I have lost my Z. Won’t you please write something, however short, on Z?” I surprised him a little, I think, by choosing “Zero” rather than “Zeugma.” At first I imagined writing eight or ten pages at most, but the more I read about zero and thought about it the more fascinated I got, the more the topic opened up vistas stretching out to zero’s reciprocal, infinity, and the longer and longer, inordinately long, my essay became. *Glossalalia* has now been published, and I acknowledge with gratitude permission from Julian Wolfreys and the Edinburgh University Press to reuse my “Zero” in the *Biblioteca Javier Coy*. The version in *Zero Plus One* has been revised somewhat and augmented by two new sections, one on Wolfgang Iser, one on Maurice Blanchot, so readers of *Glossalalia* will be encountering something new.

The other section of this book, “The (Language) Crisis in Comparative Literature,” was commissioned as a lecture by Professor Gayatri Spivak. It was initially given as a lecture at Columbia University, where it instigated a lively discussion. Its context is radical changes taking place in the disciplines of national literatures and, especially, the discipline of comparative literature in the United States, as literary study generally is “globalized.” I do not know in any detail whether similar changes are taking place in Spain, but I imagine they are happening, or sooner or later will happen. Spain has its own unique philological traditions and has made brilliant contributions of the theory and practice of comparative literature, for example in the work of Claudio Guillén, so I would not expect the story to be the same in both the United States and Spain. Both Spanish and English are “world languages,” but their ways of being global differ from

one to the other. My essay may possibly instigate readers in Spain to think further about those differences.

What do the two sections of this book have to do with one another? What justifies putting them together within the same covers? Perhaps relatively little. It is a feature of zero that it is incommensurate with all the other numbers, or rather that it is a number and not a number. As I argue in “Zero,” getting from zero to one presents big problems, perhaps insuperable ones. Perhaps you can get from zero to one only by an unauthorized leap over an infinite abyss, so there is irony or temerity in calling a book *Zero Plus One*. Nevertheless, I would argue that the two sections of this book are in resonance, however different from one another they seem. Both have to do with the untranslatable, the idiomatic or obscure, aspect of literary works. One name for this recalcitrance to clear seeing might be “the zero dimension,” while another name might be “the language crisis in comparative literature.”

J. Hillis Miller
Deer Isle, Maine
August 1, 2003

