Derrida and Victorian Studies

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Theoretical Foundations of Victorian Studies
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Three quick points ...

- Derrida’s work has had minimal influence on Victorian studies -- or on any literary period/field
- His immense corpus has mattered thematically (e.g. “writing,” “hauntology,” “speech acts”) for *deconstructive criticism*, but criticism assumes author, work, period, genre, language, nation, literature as its objects; Derrida’s interests lay elsewhere
- **J. Hillis Miller** has been the consummate deconstructive critic -- of Victorian fiction and poetry and much else; his defense of the immanent or rhetorical reading of a work from its cultural or historical contexts recalls Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature* (1956) more than *Dissemination* (1969/1983)

“Though brilliant work is being done in literature departments all over the world these days by amazingly learned and original scholars, often by younger scholars working in difficult circumstances (underpaid, little or no benefits, little or no job security), many of them nevertheless seem to have forgotten that literature is made of language and to focus on contextual backgrounds in the life or social conditions of the author. This is sometimes a return to the old-fashioned assumptions that literature ‘mirrors’ life. That is too bad, since there is no reason why one cannot combine rhetorical reading with ‘Cultural Studies,’ and the latter would be done better if the combination were performed.” (69)

“… [Derrida’s] shadow falls more heavily on academic romanticists than on scholars in other literary-historical fields. We know this intuitively. If in mock-Husserlian spirit we try replacing the word ‘Romanticism’ in the title of this collection with another literary-historical period metaphor (‘Derrida and Victorian Studies,’ ‘Derrida and Renaissance Studies,’ even – though we come close – ‘Derrida and Modernism’) we lose something.” (229; my emphasis)
“The relatively minor impact that J. Hillis Miller’s deconstructive writings had on Victorian studies in the United States makes for a useful comparandum. I stress relatively minor, and deconstructive writings: obviously Miller, a towering figure in Victorian studies for nearly half a century, has left a rich legacy here. Many of his post-1960s books and essays have become classics in Victorian studies, as in the literary academy generally....
"But whereas romantic studies has remained to this day buckled and disturbed by de Man and by deconstructive criticism, it seems fair to say that Victorian studies absorbed Miller as a sanctioned anomaly. Victorian studies has always been a species of ‘cultural studies.’ Romanticism, ravaged by more intense aesthetic problems, has a less stable relationship to its own normative historicism. In consequence, deconstructive criticism, though abjected and ghettoized, nonetheless continues to draw adherents, critics, and controversy in romantic studies in the United States." (237 n.21)