



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

54 | Spring 2010
General issue

Steven Millhauser, a *Very* Late Modernist

Earl G. Ingersoll



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1046>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2010

ISBN: 0294-0442

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Earl G. Ingersoll, « Steven Millhauser, a *Very* Late Modernist », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 54 | Spring 2010, Online since 01 December 2010, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1046>

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

© All rights reserved

Steven Millhauser, a Very Late Modernist

Earl G. Ingersoll

- 1 Steven Millhauser represents a paradox in contemporary fiction. As Danielle Alexander notes in a recent article, Millhauser's work has enjoyed a small but enthusiastic audience of critics and other readers, yet generally he has suffered from relative obscurity among the larger reading public, even after he won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Martin Dressler* in 1996.¹ Anyone who chooses to write about his earlier work, such as the stories in his collection *In the Penny Arcade* (1986), may well feel like an archaeologist, examining artifacts from the past with an eye to assessing their value, sharing an awareness of their existence, and attempting to testify to their potential significance to readers in the present as well as the future. Several of Millhauser's stories and some of his interviews point to his awareness that although he is a critically acclaimed writer his work is not widely known. Millhauser's situation is further complicated by his attraction to the modernism of the earlier twentieth century, especially its formalism and its dedication to aesthetics, both stylistically and thematically, even though such values have made modernism seem out-of-fashion to many and a writing for a coterie. The stories collected as *In the Penny Arcade* testify to Millhauser's commitment to modernist values, making him—over a half-century after the end of modernism—something of a very late modernist.² For those who have become accustomed to dating the end of modernism by the middle of the past century, there can be an element of surprise in encountering the most memorable stories in his first collection, *In the Penny Arcade*, stories more reminiscent of modernist masters of the short story such as Franz Kafka³ and James Joyce than later twentieth-century writers, such as Donald Barthelme and John Barth, often identified as “postmodernists.”
- 2 “August Eschenburg,” the novella with which the collection begins, offers an excellent example of Millhauser's late modernism. In several notable ways the story recalls the Kafka of “A Hunger Artist” as well as the Joyce of “Araby.” Kafka's story comes to mind in part because of August Eschenburg's terrible sense of isolation as a creator, dedicated to a

form of aesthetic production that most readers are unlikely to identify as Art—the producing of theatrical performances with automatons, or mechanical figures, he has engineered—in much the same way most readers are likely to be surprised that Kafka turns fasting into an “art.” Clearly Millhauser as a latter-day modernist is encouraging us to focus on concerns with art and the artist’s audience. What August creates and the dramatic performances he stages with those creations are meant to be “works of art,” created for the aesthetic pleasure of a discriminating but understandably small audience in a modernist world where it was still possible to use the term “work of art” (rather than “text” or “cultural object”) without any hesitation that one might be accused of “elitism,” or pandering to the precious taste of a pampered few.

- 3 “August Eschenburg” clearly establishes these modernist concerns with art and the artist’s audience. Millhauser may indeed be signaling his intent to read August as an author-surrogate. Like August, his maker of automatons – works so exquisitely crafted they allow viewers to suspend disbelief for a time and accept them as “people,” even though they are obviously “clockwork” – Millhauser as a realist aims at a verisimilitude that encourages his readers to believe in the reality of his characters’ experience. But more important, Millhauser as a realist immerses his text in such an extensive representation of detail as to create the illusion that he is just as well schooled in the art of automaton-making as his viewpoint character. Furthermore, like August, he is something of a “magic realist,” who balances the plethora of minute details, amassed in the service of mimesis, with the viewer’s/reader’s growing sense that the narrative is moving over into a world of fantasy in which August’s automatons and Millhauser’s text preserve their credibility precisely because they are so firmly grounded in the artifacts of “reality.” The viewer or reader is likely to enjoy what Keats called “negative capability,” a not-knowing whether August’s clockwork figures or Millhauser’s rendering of them is possible in a real world, or only in a world of magic interpellated in everyday reality. Has Millhauser, we may well wonder, researched antique automatons so extensively that he is aware of more than what is conventionally known about their potential to imitate human behavior, or is he – like the clockwork-maker within his own clockwork-making – a variety of magician, amazing his readers with this spectacle of artistry?
- 4 These questions are particularly pertinent because Millhauser seems to share August’s flirtation with something approaching mad genius. In this context another modernist William Faulkner comes to mind in his notion of the artist as “demon-driven”; as he told an interviewer: “An artist is a creature driven by demons. . . . The writer’s only responsibility is to his art. . . . If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is worth any number of old ladies” (Stein 30). August is well aware that, like the modernist artist in particular, he is constantly pushing against the limits of the possible. He knows that he could easily be tempted into repeating earlier constructions by merely changing a bit here or there. August, however, follows in the modernist tradition of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce in disciplining himself to “make it new,” to construct each new production as a technical and aesthetic advancement into the terra incognita of the possible. The narrator indicates: “Technically, August had carried his art beyond any point it had reached before; and it was clear that he would never rest until he had created a figure capable of all the motions of the human musculature. In this striving, there was madness; but no doubt it was as good a way as another to pass the time” (38). For those familiar with Millhauser’s longer fiction such as *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954* by Jeffrey Cartwright

(1972), it is clear that Millhauser is fascinated with the proximity of art to madness, for in this first novel Edwin's boyhood chum, Jeffrey Cartwright, who is supposedly writing the novel as a biography, ends up murdering his subject to transform him into art. In this way Jeffrey demonstrates the relevance of Jacques Lacan's notion that the letter kills, i.e., signification, or representation, is a murdering of the signified so that it may be raised to the Register of the Symbolic.⁴

- 5 And like Millhauser himself, August is something of a throwback to the modernist era in which creators and writers could think of their work as Art within a quasi-religious mode. One recalls Joyce's "Artist" Stephen Dedalus who tropes himself as "a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everlasting life."⁵ Millhauser constructs his artificer August as wholly invested in his art. August cares about the impact of his art on his audience, but he is certainly unconcerned about profiting from his art, beyond what is necessary to support himself modestly.⁶ His first employer, the department store owner Preisendanz, provides him with more than adequate living quarters; August, however, eventually chooses to sleep in the store where he creates the automatons his employer displays in his windows to lure customers in to purchase his wares. August has no friends, and by the end of the narrative when he mourns the loss of his innocence, and his youth, he is apparently still a virgin.
- 6 In this context Millhauser craftily introduces Hausenstein (no apparent given name) as August's double. Virtually from the beginning, the narrative suggests that the success of August's automatons as a marketing ploy will not last. August himself expects that all will not turn out well; perhaps he even *wishes* that this perversion of his craft will eventually fail. Thus the narrative seems to allow a figure such as Hausenstein simply to generate himself as the extreme perverter of automaton-making that August senses in his own selling out to Preisendanz. As it eventually becomes apparent, Hausenstein succeeds where August is doomed to fail because he cynically reads his audience's appetite for "soft porn," which he feeds by injecting an increasingly blatant undertone of eroticism. When Preisendanz leads August off to see how the competition is "killing" them, August is appalled by the way in which the art he has devoted his life to is being perverted to titillate the "decent" Berliners who enjoy a bit of smirky, semi-concealed smut.
- 7 This sense of the difficulty that art has in competing with kitsch clearly positions Millhauser as a modernist. Indeed, Millhauser's construction of his Hausenstein is reminiscent of Ezra Pound's crafting of his writer, "Mr. Nixon," the savvy analyst of the "market" for writing.⁷ August is forced to confront the reality of the artistic marketplace in the modern world as a competition among "makers" of one kind or another. In that market a variety of Gresham's Law dictates that "cheap money (kitsch)" drives out the more precious currency of true art, which the modernist often sees as partaking of the sacred. Art is not merely a commodity to "sell," a novel engineered to hover on the bestseller list long enough to make the crafty writer millions, along with the extra lucre of a "film deal." Hausenstein enjoys the confirmation of his street-smarts in being able to read his audience's tacky desires and hidden lusts. Thus when August's Magic Theater, an emblem perhaps of Millhauser's fiction, begins to lose its audience to Hausenstein's peepshow, Hausenstein is determined to maintain both enterprises to prove that he too has taste but it just doesn't "pay." In this way Hausenstein can have his cultural cake and eat it too. He needs August as his own variety of Secret Sharer, one to whom he can confide both his admiration for High Art and his cynical awareness of the schlock that

passes for art among the burgers of Berlin – those whom Hausenstein terms the *Untermenschen*.

- 8 Drawing on Nietzsche's romantic notion of the *Übermensch*, Hausenstein constructs this concept of the modern *Untermensch*. Hausenstein makes clear that he is not pillorying "the masses," but their "betters" in the bourgeoisie. Millhauser sets the narrative in Germany, or more particularly Berlin, to justify Hausenstein's analysis of the disconnect between German reverence for, say, "first-rate lenses for their cameras . . . yet when it comes to clockwork they can admire the cheapest, most technically mediocre work. So long as it's accompanied by lots of fat behinds" (52). Long before he drags August along to an establishment called "At the Sign of the Black Boot" – Hausenstein's competition to the Magic Theater, as August will subsequently learn – Hausenstein encourages August to eroticize the female figures in their Theater. When August is too offended even to respond to this outrageous suggestion, Hausenstein feels licensed to blame the automaton-maker for the failure of the Theater.⁸
- 9 Before August abandons the Magic Theater, Hausenstein shares his experiences as a young lover. Given August's virtually monkish commitment to his art – Hausenstein is the only friend he has of either sex – these experiences provide important background to that friend's satanic impulse to disillusion August, even destroy his dedication to art, as Hausenstein's own dedication was ravaged when he was young. At sixteen, Hausenstein tells August, he became attracted to a "blue-eyed maiden from a cultured family," her father a successful pork butcher and her mother a lover of Nietzsche and Wagner. Eventually the mother becomes his "maternal Beatrice," one to whom he could talk about the *Übermensch*, along with Love and Beauty. When the inevitable seduction of the boy occurred, he was struck by her speaking of her orgasms as the "Liebestod," sighing, "Beautiful ... oh, beautiful" with "the frequent interpolation of choice obscenities" (58). Following that traumatic Fall, Hausenstein seems to have locked himself into a kind of repetition-compulsion of demonstrating that the highest culture is merely a mask for the grossest lust, and he has arrogated to himself the role of the demonic unmasker of such fraud, with August as his most important pupil. August may be nearly middle-aged, but from his friend's point of view he is more "naive" than Hausenstein was at sixteen.⁹ Betrayed as a boy, Hausenstein seems compelled not only to demonstrate the potential for betrayal in love and friendship¹⁰ but also to call attention to the exquisite nature of his soul that it could have fallen into such benighted cynicism.
- 10 In his own perverse way Hausenstein believes he is August's friend, helping him to shed his self-delusion that the "pure art" of the Magic Theater can survive without the "dirty money" supplied by the Black Boot. Although August clearly remains the central consciousness, the narrative allows Hausenstein the complexity of a more formidably tempting demon than some pasteboard Satan from a medieval morality play. The narrative allows him to raise questions: "he believed in August. Or did he? Did he want him to fail? Did he take some secret delight in undermining the Zaubertheater? Did he want to drag him down into that trough of his, whose true vice was not its filthiness but its coziness, its air of conspiratorial chumminess, its secret banality masquerading as boldness?" (60).
- 11 Devastated by Hausenstein's "frank" offer to continue supporting the Magic Theater with the profits of the "adult shows" at the Black Boot, August struggles to salvage his faith in the art that is "all" he has in the world. He acknowledges that "Hausenstein was right: automatons were dead" (61), a conclusion he also reaches after he takes his theater on the

road. He thinks: “Yes, the art of the automaton was a magical art, for when all was said and done there was something mysterious and unaccountable about clockwork: you breathed into the nostrils of a creature of dust, and lo! it was alive” (61). The image here of the Maker breathing life into the nostrils of his creatures seems to recall rather self-consciously an Edenic creation, or a Prometheus making the first man and woman, yet another suggestion of the modernist notion of the holiness of artistic creation. But that faith eventually falters, and August seems to reach his end just before the narrative does. When he buries his case of automatons under leaves, on the chance that children may discover them one day and perhaps be entranced, August is forced to confront the large metaphysical questions from which his dedication to art may have diverted his attention.

- 12 August recalls, or constructs memories of, the way his commitment to clockwork began. His reveries leaf through the details of the earliest pages of this narrative: his fascination with the cruel boy’s game of trapping a bird in a paper figure, his father’s opening the back of a watch to show him its “works,” his seeing the first clockwork figures in the green tent of a sideshow. He attempts desperately to understand “Was that his life?” Was it all fated? Or are these merely the memories he has constructed to fit who he is now? “Had it all been a mistake? His art was outmoded: the world had no need for him. And so it had all come to nothing. He had given his life away to a childish passion. And now it was over” (63). It is difficult here to resist seeing Millhauser’s representation of August’s state as a radical critique of the modernist heading toward a kind of artistic depression: The struggle to turn the bread of everyday life into the sacramental wafer of eternal beauty is in the end a futile competition with the manufacturers of Pringles and Fritos. August’s heady considerations so exhaust him that his consciousness gives way to sleep, leaving the story’s audience in a high state of anxiety.
- 13 The end of this long story is at hand.¹¹ How will it end, when/if August awakens? True to its nature as a modernist narrative, “August Eschenburg” offers at most an open ending. The narrative draws its audience into its own difficulty in finding an ending to provide a satisfactory resolution of the very large issues it has raised. In the end it makes a postmodern gesture toward itself as a modernist narrative. And here we find ourselves confronting a term in contemporary discourse perhaps even more difficult to “define” than the term “modernist”–“postmodern.” For the present circumstances, one characteristic for which there appears to be some consensus among those who use the term “postmodern” is reflexivity, or the tendency of a literary text to call attention to itself as a text, and in the process foreground the interconnections between modernist and postmodernist, with postmodernist reflexivity being a logical extension of the self-consciousness inherent in many modernist poems, for example, those of W. B. Yeats that offer the illusion of the poet composing the poem in the reader’s presence.
- 14 Millhauser’s story seems to be acknowledging its own awareness that like August’s art of automaton-making, modernism itself is probably “dead,” given that cultural production may have been contaminated by consumer marketing, bent on endless replacement of the outmoded. The central strategies of the modernist faith in the power of art to transform experience into an ordered structure of meaning – one almost wants to say a “machine for meaning” to point up the connection with August’s clockwork figures – have perhaps become as “old-fashioned” as the reading strategies of a half-century ago, strategies focusing on *how* a story or poem means. August does *not* leave his suitcase of artifacts for children, or future archaeologists, to find. He is relieved to remember he covered the case with leaves so it was not stolen by thieves.

- 15 Millhauser's modernism in these last paragraphs is especially apparent in his concerns with "distance" and "formality." He tells Jim Shepard: "To say I prefer distance isn't to say I prefer coldness, haughtiness, lack of feeling, deadness. In my view, it's precisely that 'little distance' that permits genuine feeling to be expressed. My dislike of warm, cozy, chummy writing [reminiscent of Hausenstein's smutty productions?] is that it always strikes me as fraudulent – a failure of feeling. Passion, beauty, intensity – everything I care about in art – is made possible through the discipline of distance. Or to say it another way: Powerful feeling in art takes place only through the particular kind of distance known as form." In its way Millhauser's attraction to "distance" recalls T. S. Eliot's famous assertions in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (43).
- 16 The descriptions of August in the closing paragraphs are subtly positive. Once again he resumes his function as the narrative's central consciousness so that even though he is being described, the description implicates him in its awareness. "His heart was beating quickly, and he noticed that a hand was trembling" (64). Both are good signs he is still alive, spiritually as well as physically. Similarly his aesthetic sensibility focuses upon the warmth of the day, even in the shade of the tree he has slept under, and the smokestacks of a factory that are "bright white." The narrative notes August's awareness of how tired he has been for a long time, but how "his little nap had refreshed him" (64). This is an artist who has definitely *not* surrendered to Hausenstein's cynicism and nihilism. He will go on, even if his audience continues to dwindle, even if his art is no more than an old-fashioned, historical curiosity for archaeologists to unearth.
- 17 The artistic desperation of August's "mad" impulse throughout his professional career to imitate human musculature surfaces again in a very different narrative – "Snowmen." Millhauser alerts us to this story's investment in themes of creating by positioning it as the first in the triad of narratives with which the collection concludes.¹² Like "In the Penny Arcade" and "Cathay," "Snowmen" is first-person narrative. The strategy aptly represents the persona of the child on the brink of the young adulthood toward which "August Eschenburg" moves its central consciousness – and beyond. In "Snowmen" and "In the Penny Arcade," however, the voices of these older children seem more justifiably overwhelmed with an excitement that moves in the adults of "Cathay" dangerously close to an aesthetic mania, or artistic madness. Once again Millhauser is attracted to the creative impulse in the "artist," professional or otherwise, an impulse recalling Faulkner's notion of being "demon-driven" in the effort to challenge the limits of what can be created.
- 18 In its title, "Snowmen" locates itself in the ordinary world of children as the starting point for another rendition of the modernist impulse to extend the range of the possible in artistic representation. The figures the children make are typically snow *men*, even when they depict women or children. This context is merely the grounding for the narrative, however, because what soon happens is a pursuit of extravagance as the sculpting escalates into such complexities and intricacies of representation as to seem possible only in the realm of imagination, fantasy, or madness. In these Millhauser stories a sub-text often seems to be Shakespeare's perception that "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet are of imagination all compact." In any case, as the "I" describes the manner in which the children "surrendered utterly to the inventions of snow" (127), the narrative catches the

powerful energy of the child's imagination in transforming this fragile matter into something commensurate with a magical vision not yet dulled by adult consciousness.

- 19 From the beginning, the narrative posits the agency here of a creativity like magic, a magic that may get out of control as in Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Millhauser wisely enlists one of the children to narrate "Snowmen" to lend the story the over-the-edge excitement of a boy who is perhaps nearing puberty, with its super-charge of intensity and excitement. The narrator's innocent excitement becomes contagious, and writing about the story one occasionally struggles to resist long quotations of his high-pitched descriptions of the experience as he voices his awareness of a restless sense of creative rivalry, generated by the sudden and immense snowfall. What might sound forced coming from a third-person narrator seems appropriate to the voice of the child who cannot remember so much snow: "Perhaps the truth was that a child of genius, maddened and inspired by our fervent snow, had in a burst of rapture created a new kind of snowman, perfect in every detail, which others later copied with varied success" (127-28). Seeing these snowmen, the narrator adds: "My hands were inspired, it was as if I were coaxing into shape a form that longed to spring forth from the fecund snow" (128). That first night, like many of the other children, the narrator cannot sleep in anticipation of a new day and more making. He is overwhelmed by the sculpted world he sees, a world perhaps created overnight by other children who were unable to sleep: "Perhaps bands of feverish children, tormented by white dreams, had worked secretly through the night" (129), creating snow-art on such a high level as to make what was done the day before appear crudely primitive. The narrator speculates that "it was precisely a feature of that second day, when the art of the snowman appeared to reach a fullness, that one could no longer be certain to what extent the act of seeing had itself become infected by these fiery snow-dreams" (129).
- 20 On this second day, the narrative makes a fascinating turn, as the narrator expresses his sense of how much "these fiery snow-dreams" have "infected" the imaginations of the children, including of course himself. "Sick with ecstasy, pained with wonder," he tells us, he is overwhelmed by how the town has been "struck with genius" (130). The narrative itself seems similarly "infected" by desperate competition to transcend earlier efforts; the narrative describes, for example, "[t]rees of snow . . . composed leaf by leaf, with visible veins" (130). Thus "Snowmen" seems to be veering toward the narrator's "first stirrings of uneasiness" as the snow figures "were showing evidence of a skill so excessive, an elaboration so painfully and exquisitely minute, that it could scarcely conceal a desperate restlessness" (130).
- 21 When the inevitable thaw begins, the narrator indicates that the children are surprisingly "filled with happiness." Nature begins to restore a welcome sense of balance, fashioning "gargoyles of snow" to mock the children's mad art: "those bird-filled maples, those lions, those leaping ballerinas and prancing clowns" (131). Nature's "art" becomes a "protest against the solemnity, the rigidity, of our snowmen." As those *snowmen* (and appropriately the term signals a return to balance), "weary with consummation," begin to "swerve" toward dissolution, they take on a being beyond the fevered imaginations of their makers. "And yet [the narrator asserts] I sensed that they were not distortions, those ungraspable figures, but direct expressions of shadowy inner realms. To behold them was to be filled with a sharp, troubled joy" (132).
- 22 In these ways, "Snowmen" offers a fable of feverish creativity. "Drained by these difficult joys [the narrator concludes], I was not unhappy when the rain came" (132). The creative

impulse can be a form of mania, a mad effort to impose the brain's imaginings upon the raw material of nature. The desperate and compulsive pursuit of control as a means of demonstrating the power of the maker can turn the artist into a cousin of Dr. Frankenstein, the archetypal Mad Scientist whose culturally sanctioned efforts to know and to make can produce creatures whose "monstrosity" may be no more than a trope for the maker's idealistic, yet mad impulses. Accordingly the narrator of "Snowmen" ends up happy to return to the world of childhood, "our boots scraping against the asphalt, our boot buckles jangling" (133). He speaks for a salutary perception: "We did not discuss the events of the last few days, which already seemed as fantastic as vanished icicles, as unseizable as fading dreams" (133). He at least has learned something vital in this apprenticeship to adulthood.

- 23 Millhauser positioned the title story "In the Penny Arcade" immediately after "Snowmen," perhaps to connect these two stories with children as viewpoint characters and to resist the more conventional and expected impulse to conclude the collection with its title story. In several important ways, however, "Cathay" develops the concerns with art in "Snowmen," especially in its return to the manic potential of artistic creativity, now locating itself exclusively in adult consciousness. Millhauser may well have left "Cathay" to the end of the collection because it is in many respects not a "story" at all. Instead of the strong sense a forward motion in a story such as "Snowmen," with the reader's anticipation of what will inevitably happen to the snow sculptures, "Cathay" offers a series of vignettes, and occasionally something like a truncated prose haiku. One section, for example, called "Blue Horses" is restricted to this series of phrases: "The Emperor's blue horses in a field of white snow" (160). As with a collection of poems or short fiction, "Cathay" tempts the reader to test the "structure" by reading its sections in one or another random order.
- 24 Millhauser's attraction to literary modernism is immediately apparent in the title of this piece, "Cathay," the old or rather romantic name for China. One of Ezra Pound's major contributions to modernist writing was his investment in Asian culture, especially evident in his efforts to "translate" Japanese ideographs into poetic images. As a literary mentor to T. S. Eliot, Pound may have been frustrated to see so little evidence of Asian culture in Eliot's poetry, but he must have been gratified to see how much the later, more modernist poetry of W. B. Yeats, another poet for whom he served as mentor, revealed the appeal of Chinese art. A classic example occurs in what is arguably Yeats's greatest poem "Lapis Lazuli," which ends with the poet's reading of a tragic scene on a Chinese jade sculpture.¹³
- 25 In "Singing Birds" "Cathay" begins with a clear homage to the Yeats of "Sailing to Byzantium," often read as his first clearly modernist poem, and in this way announces a Yeatsian engagement with the complex relationship between art and life. "Singing Birds" shares Yeats's own fascination with the legends of Eastern emperors who commissioned their artificers to craft "golden birds," mechanisms reminiscent of August Eschenburg's automatons. These works of art in "Cathay" not merely imitate Nature but transcend it because the birds have been empowered to lift themselves out of what Yeats called the "fury and the mire" of our experience in time. In line with "The Contest of Magicians," the last and longest section of "Cathay," Millhauser emulates Yeats, but his birds go their predecessors in Byzantium one better: Millhauser enables his golden bird to fly down to the Emperor's shoulder, while Yeats's bird was immobilized by its creator, merely "set upon a golden bough to sing," the suggestion being that one of the "Grecian goldsmiths"

put it there. And yet the artificers of Millhauser's Emperor also foreground their birds as artifice: "The shape and motions of the birds are so lifelike that they might easily be mistaken for real birds were it not for their golden forms, and many believe that it was to avoid such a mistake, and to increase our wonder, that the birds were permitted alone to retain the appearance of artifice" (148).¹⁴ In this way the magicians or artificers of Millhauser's Emperor make a gesture to Yeats's craftsmen who also schooled their audience to appreciate the intricacy of the relationship of art to life— aspiring to create the illusion of art as life and yet reverencing art's superiority.

- 26 If "Cathay" is a land of magic, it is also a world of miniatures, just as the story itself is structurally committed to miniaturization.¹⁵ The Emperor's palace is replete with the work of miniaturists, ranging from the fragile art of painting to the fashioning of a tiny hourglass sewn into the Emperor's robe, perhaps to remind him that even the mightiest man in the realm is powerless in the face of the relentless passing of time. As painters, these miniaturists decorate the eyelids of court ladies, who entrance men with the possibility of revealing these tiny paintings by closing their eyes. Some ladies have paintings on the areolae of their breasts, and, once again to transcend the boundaries of such miniaturizing art, some ladies have commissioned miniaturists to paint tiny scenes on their nipples as well.
- 27 A similarly extravagant –or mad– impulse to push against the limits on artistic representation is foregrounded in a section of "Cathay" called "Miniatures." Here the narrator describes a miniature replica of the Imperial Palace, placed beside the Emperor's tree with its twelve golden birds. This replica is said to contain everything to be seen in the Palace itself, down to "a pair of scissors so tiny that when fully opened they can be concealed behind the leg of a fly" (154). If readers are willing to accept this expression of mad art, the narrator focuses the eyes of their minds on the throne room, where a replica of the replica sits upon its own jade cabinet, presumably with a miniature pair of scissors it would require an atomic microscope to view, perhaps behind a molecule.¹⁶ In addition to the obvious sense here of *mise en abyme*, or nested Russian dolls, the narrative offers a clear representation of its own unwillingness to resist the impulse to pursue the impossible – whether in August's futile attempt to duplicate human musculature in an automaton or in Cathay's artists making ever-smaller replicas of the Imperial Palace, much of it beyond the willingness of readers to believe in such minutely detailed reconstruction. This latter challenge to the willingness to suspend disbelief is multiplied by the section of "Cathay" in which the Emperor is shaken to the core of his being one day when he discovers his palace is so immense that it houses "distant relatives" with whom he shares a great-grandmother but whose rooms in the building are so far removed from his court those "distant relatives" speak a different dialect.
- 28 In these ways "Cathay" offers a final rendition of the themes announced in "August Eschenburg" with which this collection began. Despite his predilection for strategies such as *mise en abyme*, usually associated with postmodernism, Millhauser seems more fully engaged in traditionally modernist concerns. Uppermost among those concerns is the artist's pursuit of a realm beyond the possible. Millhauser's artists dedicate themselves to attempting to grasp what the reader suspects they *know* to be impossible. This commitment to art is reminiscent of the saint's passionate dedication to a world beyond the mundane, a world beyond the getting and the spending, a world in which even the response of their audience pales in the face of their devotion. And these saints of art tend, not surprisingly, to be isolates, their art exhausting their energies and their desires for

the everyday, for sociality, and even perhaps for love. As Yeats himself noted in his poem, "The Choice," "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work" (246). That such devotion to a sacred "work of art" serves modernists as a substitute for traditional religious faith has become virtually a cliché in talking about writers such as Yeats and Joyce.

- 29 The last section of "Cathay," "The Contest of Magicians," is clearly an illustrative fable. A legendary emperor, not the present Emperor of Cathay, constructs an elaborate competition of 128 magicians who vie with each other in pairs, eliminating first 64, then 32, and so forth until at last a single pair competes to be elevated to the position of Court Magician. The loser (as it turns out) so astounds the court by transforming a jade statue into a woman, who speaks and laughs, that his competitor, a much older man, is temporarily ignored. When this older competitor also calls for a statue to be brought out, the court is unimpressed, assuming that he can at best equal his rival's miraculous feat. This second contestant wins, however, as readers are led to expect he will. He produces a woman who not only speaks and laughs but also *breathes*.
- 30 Much as they may be leaning forward to experience the older magician's triumph, readers risk missing the "how" of that triumph. And therein may lie the "moral" of the fable. The audience may be so amazed by the earlier woman's transformation that they presume she can breathe, but there is no indication that her attributes include the ability that makes her a possessor of life itself. The first woman to step out of stone reminds us of the golden birds in the first section of "Cathay": she is *life-like*, the expression of an art that simulates life at the same time it announces it has bettered life by being immortal, foregrounding itself as a simulacrum, a higher form of life. The winning artificer succeeds where August feels he failed: this artificer creates life itself, or at least an illusion so powerful as to seem life. If it's any consolation to August in his sense of failure, in the end "perfect" art is possible only in the realm of magic.
- 31 Finally, more than its privilege of being the collection's title story justifies the attention "In the Penny Arcade" garners, for it opens up what may be Millhauser's fullest rendition of his concerns with art and the artist's audience. The story is classically modernist in the Joycean mode; indeed, the narrative seems to be making gestures toward "Araby," in a sense "deconstructing" it, to use a term less common than a generation ago. Millhauser's boy places himself firmly in this setting, with none of the awareness of Joyce's narrator that he may be too good for this fallen world.¹⁷ Like the boy in "Araby," this boy is unnamed and also on the cusp of young manhood, for he tells us he is twelve. Millhauser allows his central consciousness a clear perception that this return to the penny arcade after a couple of years is a self-conscious journey back to a locus of childhood, a site he expects to use in measuring his sense of distance from that child who earlier enjoyed the arcade. The narrative announces that the boy is aware of an impending revelation as he moves from the bright light of the world around the green bench on which his parents anxiously await his return from that world of darkness into which he must go, almost as though they have some sense, too, of an impending revelation and transformation for their son. In very important ways Millhauser's boy reverses the path of Joyce's visitor to Araby, who has gorged his imagination on the junk food of romantic idealism in order to elevate himself to some plane of personal magnificence he cannot find in his fallen, mundane world where he is the Little Prince being cared for by the Miller and his Wife. Millhauser charts the path of a boy who sets out on a journey to prove that childhood with its romantic "excitements" is already dead and he is launched as a young adult for

whom such excitements are self-conscious constructions, a kind of autoerotic escape from the tedium of a world whose gratifications are eternally insufficient for the voracious imagination of the young.

- 32 Accordingly Millhauser's boy enters the penny arcade, expecting it to confirm his cynical conclusions that all these things that once drew him unself-consciously into a world of "enchantment" are now "dead" and "wooden." The first relic of a past he prides himself on having sloughed off is the derrick with its heap of elusive prizes that might have earlier drawn him in with their false promises that his "specialness" would make him a "winner": "For a moment I was tempted by the derrick, but at once despised my childishness and continued on my way. It was not prizes I had come out of the sun for. It was something else I had come for, something mysterious and elusive that I could scarcely name. Tense with longing, with suppressed excitement, and with the effort of appearing tough, dangerous, and inconspicuous, I came at last to the old fortune teller in her glass booth" (136). She is the dowager queen of the penny arcade, whose eyes he had once feared to confront, "unwilling to be caught in that deep, mystical gaze" (137). Now she has "aged," and he adds: "Her one good eye had a vague and vacant look, as if she had misplaced something and could no longer remember what it was. She looked as if the long boredom of uninterrupted meditation had withered her spirit" (136-37).
- 33 The boy moves on to the other machines in the penny arcade, each in its own way confirming how the death of childhood has left only its integuments behind. The central arcade figure of the Western gunslinger, who once thrilled him with the excitement of being challenged to beat him to the draw, now moves and speaks "wearily," and the boy turns away in "rage and sorrow." "Even the real, live people strolling noisily about had become infected with the woodenness; their laughter sounded forced, their gestures seemed exaggerated and unconvincing. I felt caught in an atmosphere of decay and disappointment" (138). More apropos is the peepshow "A DAY AT THE CIRCUS" with its female horseback rider. His response is revealing: "I waited for something to happen, for some unspoken promise to be fulfilled, but all at once the movie ended" (139). He adds: "Desperately dissatisfied I tried to recall the troubling, half-naked woman I had seen two years earlier, but my memory was vague and uncertain; perhaps I had not even dared to peer into the forbidden viewer" (139). In a gesture reminiscent of "An Encounter" – the *Dubliners* story immediately before "Araby" – the boy is becoming aware that these "excitements" have their matrix in incipient sexuality, a peeping into the adult world of eroticism.
- 34 Turning from these machines in the "loud hall, savoring its shame, its fall from mystery" (139), the boy seeks the "true penny arcade that had enchanted my childhood" (139). He speculates that "a blight had overtaken the creatures of this hall: they were sickly, wasted versions of themselves" (139). In the darkness of an alcove, the boy finally discovers the "true machines and creatures of the penny arcade," which make him "painfully alert" to "the mystery of these banished machines, their promise of rich and intricate excitements" (140). The absence of others and the sudden hush of the alcove suggest he has moved toward what is central to his psychic journey to recuperate the penny arcade of his childhood, the very locus of his earlier, self-conscious gesture of disdain for those childish excitements he felt he had outgrown.
- 35 This experience of recuperated memory, enhanced by creative imagination, is powerfully rendered through the boy's articulate reporting of his feelings as these "creatures of the penny arcade were awaking from their wooden torpor" (141). Not surprisingly, much of

that waking is represented through the eyes of the figures: "From the shadow of his hat brim" the cowboy's "eyes blazed darkly" and almost immediately the boy senses "the fortune teller staring at me with piercing blue eyes" (141). With this dramatic reversal of looking, the boy is now the object of the gaze, directed upon him by figures that have come fully to life, rather like August's automatons for those select (or self-selected) audiences with the power to give themselves up to the magic of his creatures' life-likeness. Since Laura Mulvey published her ground-breaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," we have been accustomed to reading the gaze as male, given that the context of Mulvey's analysis of the gaze was narrative film in which the camera's eye has typically focused the audience's vision on the eyes of a male actor looking at the female objects of his desire. One consequence of Mulvey's theorizing has been an effort to read gender as the subject's position in the system of looking and being looked at. Accordingly the power position of the looker becomes "masculine" while the object position of the one who is looked at becomes "feminine," regardless of whether the looker or the looked-at is female or male. In the context of the unnamed boy in the arcade, his empty, unproductive "masculinity" as a cynical, abusive "looker" gives way in part to a more fertile and enabling "femininity" as the one "looked at" by the powerful gaze of these automatons, eventually liberating him to "see" in a wholly new and more profound manner than the cheap cynicism of a figure such as Hausenstein in the opening story.¹⁸ As the boy describes it, empowered by the reversal of the gaze, the cowboy's "black eyes blazed. I could see one of his hands quiver with alertness. A muscle in his cheek tensed. My temples were throbbing, I could scarcely breathe. I sensed that at any moment something forbidden was going to happen" (141).

- 36 And it does. In the "dusky recess near the back" of the alcove, the boy encounters the "banished" machine of his earlier visit, a machine that makes its present version seem just another "impostor." This time when he presses his "hot forehead onto the cool metal" of the circus peepshow viewer, he knows that the horseback rider will begin to shed her scanty costume, "tossing each piece aside and revealing new and unsuspected depths of silken concealment, and always I had the sense that I was coming closer and closer to a dark mystery that cunningly eluded me" (143). The narrator is brought back into the public world of consciousness by the shouts of others in the arcade, as a signal perhaps that the narrative is shifting ground from this erotic striptease in which the privates must never be exposed, lest they lose their power to represent a Desire beyond the merely sexual.
- 37 In this way the narrative exposes its own striptease as a modernist text. Through the narrator's growing expectancy of some larger revelation, or "showing forth," the text has been moving its audience toward an epiphany, and not just a glimpse of a pudendum. The narrative is running out of time: it has moved the boy "sadly" back into the world of "old broken pinball machines" and the "faded fortune teller." Having decided the "strange hush, the waking of the creatures from their wooden slumber" has also faded, the boy is drawn back into alertness by the "mocking laughter" of a boy like himself when he earlier entered the arcade, expressing cynical disappointment with what had once excited him as a child. But the narrator notes that the mechanical cowboy "cast at me a knowing gaze," and the boy bursts out: "All at once I had understood the secret of the penny arcade" (144).
- 38 That "secret" takes the narrative to the heart of the matter for Millhauser as an artist. The boy suddenly understands that the penny arcade figures had not "betrayed" him; it

was *he* who had betrayed *them* through the “constricting gaze” he recognized in that boy with the “mocking laughter.” Like that boy, the narrator might well have missed the “fertile inner nature” of these creatures, had he not been able to participate in the process by which “the creatures had been freed from the paralyzing beams of a commonplace attention that held them down as surely as the little ropes held down Gulliver” (145). Recognizing his own membership in the “conspiracy of dullness,” he asserts an awareness “that I was in danger of becoming ordinary” and with that awareness, he cautions himself to be more “vigilant” in the future. “For this was the only penny arcade, the true penny arcade. There was no other” (145).

- 39 Like the *early* modernist Yeats, the Millhauser of this story foregrounds the creative participation of an audience in the aesthetic experience.¹⁹ Works of art, to use that old-fashioned term, are made for those, perhaps only a few, in whose eyes the beauty and meaning of the works come alive, just as the sculptures in “Snowmen” were created by those whose eyes were brought alive by the creations of other children. Without the knowing and loving gaze of those with the most highly perceptive eyes, the arcade figures, and August’s automatons to which they are intimately connected in Millhauser’s world, become faded and wooden. Such works have the power to remind their viewers and readers, as they do the boy in the arcade, that *excellence* is not a “four-letter word” but *ordinary* may be. In the end the “secret” rendered up by the “true penny arcade” may be the truism that art is possible only in a world where some can still “see.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Danielle, Pedro Ponce, and Alicita Rodriguez. “Steven Millhauser.” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 26.1 (Mar 2006): 7-71.
- Dunn, Robert. Review of *In the Penny Arcade*. *New York Times* 135 (Jan 19, 1986): 9.
- Eliot, T. S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” (1919) *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
- Fowler, Douglas. “Steven Millhauser, Miniaturist” *Critique* 37.2 (1996): 139-48.
- Howard, Maureen. Review of *In the Penny Arcade* et al. *Yale Review* 77.2 (1988): 243-58.
- The Illusionist*. Dir. Neil Burger. Perf. Edward Norton, Paul Giamatti, Jessica Biel. Yari Film Group. 2006.
- Ingersoll, Earl G. “Writing Like a Boy: Steven Millhauser’s *Edwin Mullhouse*” in *Waiting for the End: Gender and Ending in the Contemporary Novel*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. 47-54.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. New York: Viking, 1968.
- . *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Viking, 1956.
- Keats, John. “Letter to George and Thomas Keats.” *Selected Letters of John Keats*. Ed. Grant F. Scott. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. 59-60.

- Kinzie, Mary. "Succeeding Borges, Escaping Kafka: On the Fiction of Steven Millhauser." *Salmagundi* 92 (1991): 115-44.
- Lavoie, Thomas. Review of *In the Penny Arcade*. *Library Journal* (Jan 1986): 103-104.
- Leavitt, David. Review of *In the Penny Arcade* 105.2 (Feb 1986): 117-18.
- Millhauser, Steven. *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer 1943-1954* by Jeffrey Cartwright. New York: Knopf, 1972.
- . "The Fascination of the Miniature." *Harper's* 268 (May 1984): 33-34.
- . *In the Penny Arcade*. New York: Knopf, 1986.
- . *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*. London: Phoenix 1996.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.
- Pound, Ezra. *Selected Poems*. New York: New Directions, 1957.
- Shepard, Jim. "Steven Millhauser (Interview)" *Bomb* (Spr 2003): 1-5.
- Stein, Jean. "The Art of Fiction XII: William Faulkner." *Paris Review* 12 (1956): 28-53.
- Yeats, William Butler. *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Richard J. Finneran. New York: Macmillan, 1983.

NOTES

1. . One wonders if the recently released film adaptation of Millhauser's short story "The Illusionist," starring Ed Norton, will make a dent in the writer's obscurity. As various writers have noted, Millhauser has sought that obscurity, seldom giving readings from his fiction, going on book-promotion tours to sign copies of his books, or just generally promoting himself as publishers have encouraged their writers to do. Millhauser did not even believe the news that he had received the Pulitzer Prize for *Martin Dressler* in 1997 but thought it either a mistake or a hoax. He has been no stranger to awards, however, his first novel, *Edwin Mullhouse* having received France's Prix Medicis Étranger in 1972, as the outstanding novel by a foreign writer.
2. . The collection also contains three stories clearly in the realist mode—"A Protest Against the Sun," "The Sledding Party," and "A Day in the Country"—which Millhauser included as "a way of saying farewell to those middle stories, which I knew I would never return to, and also honoring them in a sense" (e-mail correspondence).
3. Mary Kinzie claims that while writing her essay on Millhauser she told him she saw him as "wrestling with and trying to extend the literary example of Borges," whereupon he admitted familiarity with the writing of Borges but added that "Franz Kafka had exerted a far greater influence on his career as a writer, and that he had passionately 'wrestled' with certain of Kafka's works" (132).
4. . Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* 158. Millhauser has experienced some frustration with some of the published readings of *Edwin Mullhouse*. When I told him I had begun to doubt my own interpretation, published as a chapter in my book *Waiting for the End: Gender and Ending in the Contemporary Novel* he responded: "Just to set your mind at rest: yes, Jeffrey is the murderer. I'm pleased you saw that. Many people have misread the ending, which for me is crucial: a biographer, my cruel book suggests, is someone who murders his subject. The book is Jeffrey's oblique confession" (e-mail correspondence).
5. *Portrait of the Artist* 221. Joyce is generally read as an ironist in his young double's pretension to having yet become an "Artist" even though he has written very little.
6. . Pedro Ponce disagrees, arguing that August is more fully invested in the profits to be made from art. Ponce notes August's perception of the necessary of novelty in marketing, along with the short shelf-life

of novelty. At the same time, August is not benefiting from any “profit-sharing” from the success of the Preisendanz Emporium, merely aware that he will lose his job when his art no longer draws in customers.

7. . “In the cream gilded cabin of his steam yacht,” Pound’s figure of the successful writer, “Mr. Nixon,” admits to his listener that he too was once poor but learned how to promote himself as a writer, who obviously became successful enough to own a yacht.

8. . Critics have often read “August Eschenburg” as a parable, but with decidedly different senses of Millhauser’s success. Robert Dunn found Millhauser’s representation of August’s defeat by other automaton-makers such as Hausenstein “an overly obvious depiction of artistic debasement . . . “(9), while the *Yale Review*’s Maureen Howard was much more positive, writing that “the artistic pressures upon August are recognizably those of today, and the story’s theatrical recall of [Thomas] Mann’s Germany, done in eerie, mesmerizing detail, is an inspired way to suggest that we take a look at what we are up to in the so-called arts”(257-58).

9. . Hausenstein seems to have entrapped himself in a perpetual adolescence of disillusionment, like Holden Caulfield, and perhaps Salinger himself who seems to have become fixated in his character’s self-congratulatory perception that everyone else is a “phony.”

10. Millhauser himself indicates: “Betrayal is the dark other side of friendship and love—it’s, if you like, the monster that friendship and love are always threatened by” (Shepard).

11. . Probably “novella” is the more appropriate term. In his interview with Jim Shepard, Millhauser calls the novella “immensely seductive,” but not “really a form at all.” He goes on to say: “It’s a length, and a very rough length at that (sixty to a hundred pages? Seventy-five to one hundred twenty-five pages?). In this it’s no different from the short story or the novel, which are frequently called ‘forms’ but are in fact nothing but rough lengths.”

12. . The structure of the collection *In the Penny Arcade* is worth pausing over. Following the novella “August Eschenburg,” the next three narratives form of a triad of contemporary settings. Each is set in the United States, in a different season of the year, but all three have female viewpoint characters. As I have indicated, the last three stories in the collection are first-person narratives (although “Cathay” has an indefinite “we”). The first two in this triad are set in the United States, the third in a mythical realm. The concerns of this triad are shared by “August Eschenburg,” and together the three stories function as a balance to that long narrative, with the setting of “Cathay,” perhaps echoing the imaginary “Germany” of the novella.

13. A corresponding interest of modern painters in Asian art is clearly evident in the work of Paul Gauguin, not only in his occasional use of Asian content but also in his experimentation with the Asian rejection of Western perspectivism in the “flatness” of his paintings.

14. . The word “artifice” itself is one that readers are likely to associate with Yeats, especially with his “Sailing to Byzantium,” a hallmark of his modernism.

15. . In his article “Steven Millhauser, Miniaturist” Douglas Fowler notes Millhauser’s *Harper*’s essay, “The Fascination of the Miniature,” and focuses on miniaturization in *Edwin Mullhouse*. His discussion of that novel is flawed, however, by his assertion that Edwin “kills himself on his eleventh birthday.”

16. David Leavitt comments: “Millhauser’s Vermeerian gift for the tableau-vivant rendering of detail is given full reign [sic] in the odd and beautiful ‘Cathay,’ less a story than a catalog of wonders from a mysterious kingdom dedicated to the creation of complex miniatures — to precision and order” (118).

17. In his review of *In the Penny Arcade*, Thomas Lavoie notes the suggestions of not only Joyce’s writing but also Updike’s in the way the title story “shows us a young boy discovering adolescence” (104).

18. It is difficult to believe that Laura Mulvey’s article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” was published thirty-five years ago.

19. One recalls, for example, Yeats’s poem “Lapis Lazuli” in which the poet has invited readers into the process by which the poem is being constructed with their assistance.

ABSTRACTS

Durant les quarante dernières années, Steven Millhauser s'est opposé à la façon de penser conventionnelle qui veut que, lorsqu'un mouvement littéraire, comme le Modernisme, touche à sa fin, les écrivains n'ont pas d'autre choix que de s'adapter au mouvement littéraire dominant de l'époque, dans ce cas le Post-modernisme. Dans son recueil de nouvelles de fiction intitulé *In the Penny Arcade* (1986), Millhauser montre la persistance de valeurs modernistes, établies précédemment au cours du vingtième siècle par des auteurs aussi divers en termes de milieux culturels que James Joyce ou Franz Kafka. Ainsi, la nouvelle dont est tiré le titre du recueil, 'In the Penny Arcade', relate l'histoire brève d'un jeune homme qui retourne à la galerie de jeux qu'il fréquentait lorsqu'il était enfant, et pour qui ce retour devient un voyage vers une épiphanie qui lui permettra de donner forme à son expérience d'adulte. L'œuvre centrale du recueil, la nouvelle longue intitulée 'August Eschenburg', met en évidence la passion absolue du personnage éponyme pour l'art de créer des automates capables de se mouvoir comme des êtres humains, mais cet engouement pour des valeurs esthétiques l'abandonne dans son art au point qu'il se retrouve finalement seul au monde.

AUTHORS

EARL G. INGERSOLL

Earl G. Ingersoll is a Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus at the State University of New York at Brockport. He is the author or editor of a dozen or more books on twentieth-century writers, including *Engendered Trope in Joyce's "Dubliners"* and *Waiting for the End: Gender and Ending in the Contemporary Novel*. At present he is working on an extended study of Steven Millhauser's fiction.