

**MILLER, CHRISTOPHER R. 2015. *SURPRISE. THE POETICS OF THE UNEXPECTED FROM MILTON TO AUSTEN*. ITHACA AND LONDON: CORNELL, UNIVERSITY. VIII, 269 pp.**

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There is no doubt that the title of the book that occupies us belongs to the category –highly appreciated in not few academic circles– of the so called analytic titles: They make the reader think that either they constitute the best summary of the whole volume or, at least, that they convey a reasonable idea of the contents and purpose of the book they head.

This is a book about surprise in literary works, the word ‘poetics’ being explicit enough in this respect; it seems that surprise finds its subjective correlative in “the unexpected” (for what we expect cannot surprise us), and the names of Milton and Austen, together with the two prepositions that respectively precede them, are supposed to historically open and close the literary references which the study is constructed upon.

Surprisingly, however, after the chapter devoted to Austen, there is one about Wordsworth, and another one about Keats, plus an epilogue in which the author offers “a few observations about forms of surprise in later fiction” (Introduction, page 15).

Thus, although a punctilious reader could claim the subtitle is not completely accurate, in any case it must be admitted that a first approach to the idea of surprise will rely on that peculiar indefinite description: the unexpected, which is a relevant component of any possible definition, and which is accompanied –and I transcribe from an Internet dictionary– by other features like astonishment, wonderment, shock, or sudden attack, or sudden fortune or misfortune. Notice that all of them

may be seen under an objective light, or alternatively under more subjective perspectives. As we will see they are the main materials that give shape to the idea of surprise, and at the same time it is through them that the links and connections with other ideas are established, and it is also through their mediation that its internal semantic difficulties and even contradictions arise.

In this context, the reader will remember that the unexpected as such is a source of paradoxes (we allude to topics such as the famous “unexpected hanging” scenario, which has become a classic of certain analytic philosophy). And literature poses a double level of expectations: that of the characters in the story, and that of the reader or the spectator. It is with the help of those semantic coordinates that Christopher Miller invites his readers to an exploration that –let us employ the word– will surprise them, because along the pages of *Surprise* they will discover the nuclear role played by expectations or, rather, by their counterpart, the unexpected.

Literary works are artifacts that raise an apparatus with its own logic, a complex sequence of fictional events which dynamically engenders expectations subject to that logic, which can be broken in a more or less artistic manner, with more or less relevant cognitive effects or consequences. Equally, language as a dynamic tool designs new tropes and arranges previously unspoken words to refer, and to conceive, surprise. This way, Miller manages to revise some major titles of literature not in a new, unprecedented mode, but in one in which our knowledge of them gets refreshed as another notion, perhaps somewhat neglected by critics, adds new nuances to the discussion.

It may also be of some interest to mention that the historical period studied by Miller coincides with the beginnings of what perhaps could be called the quantitative formalization of subjectivity, which would appear as a mere consequence of the central position not of the individual as such, but of the subject. The name of Bayes (Thomas Bayes was born *circa* 1702 and died in 1761) does not appear in the pages of *Surprise*. Curiously, however, the author uses an almost technical term like “prior knowledge” that somehow introduces the reader in a recognizable cultural atmosphere.

In any case, Miller’s study follows a widely used model of academic study. There is a first chapter –or an introduction and a first chapter– where the theoretical parameters of the work are established and which open the main body of particular essays devoted to key figures of English literature.

The introduction investigates the main axes of the notion of surprise, without forgetting its twofold nature: “Surprise denotes both an internal feeling and an external event.” (page 5, in bold). There are four formulae like that which help define Miller’s position, which will be refined in chapter one, where the author moves from Aristotle, through Descartes, to the empirical philosophy of the Modern Age.

This does not mean that a theory, a theory of surprise so to say, has been built up at the beginning as a sort of eternal and immutable reference for the subsequent empirical studies. For the truth is that Miller illustrates some moments of the historical development of a notion which is surprisingly recent, and doing so, he is able to construct a more subtle and consistent notion of surprise. And it is also the case that what could be called phenomenology of surprise, i.e., the study of the tropes that have given shape to the idea of surprise, is more important than any abstract reflection.

It is also relevant to bear in mind that if there is something like a classical notion (longer before the term was coined), it includes the idea of wonder and even terror, which is not absent at all in the modern notion not few languages seem to share. Dictionaries still routinely inform that the word keeps its original military meaning, and also precise that the effect of surprise requires a mighty cause.

The implication is that a little meaningless event cannot be a surprise. A surprise, to surprise someone, requires an extraordinary cause. In fact, the terms that could express something close to the idea in Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, were *'ekplêsis'*, to which Miller devotes some attention, and *'thaumasion'*, which Miller seems to dismiss. Both are used by Pseudo-Longinus and, quite obviously, pave the road that leads from our topic to the aesthetics of the sublime.

According to the method that inspired the title of the book, and given the contents we have just enumerated, chapter one is titled with a similar formula; "From Aristotle to Emotion Theory". The author does not commit the mistake of totally separating and old view from a modern one centered on the naissance of subjectivity. In fact, in one sentence, he is able to summarize the literary range of surprise: "This book explores the premise that surprise is both an emotion and an element of poetics –both an object of mimesis (the situated experience of characters) and a feature of narrative (the mediated experience of readers or viewers)". (p. 16)

However, a few things should be said about this. In the first place, literary analysis can be either generic or individual. The canonical structure of a given genre may reserve a place to an episode of surprise (both for the agonist and the spectator), but a given literary piece can modulate that structure in a particular way. Aristotle's discourse in *Poetics* oscillates between the general rule and the individual illustration. Then, there is the other question that pertains to the semantics of the term: not anything can be a surprise. Then, the events narrated impose a certain scale that must be surpassed by the surprising event. Surprised, to put it in Addison's terms, must be great. Finally, spectator and reader experience surprise in a way parallel to that lived by the characters, but evidently not equal.

Many other aspects of the idea of surprise are also the object of Miller's research. An example is the coexistence of surprise and repetition. Surprise does not require the first occurrence of an event. Its repetition may have the same effects, which is perhaps both an instance of the tension between genre and individual work, and a result of the nature of human experience.

The main corpus of the work is constituted by seven chapters that discuss the "trope" that mediate the idea and the effect of surprise in a number of British authors. It is clear that novel is abundantly represented (which historically coincides not only with the structure of narrative, but also with the rise of a certain type of reader). And it must be said that, in spite of our focusing on the "theoretical" foundations established at the beginning of the book, Miller offers abundant and insightful commentaries and, in fact, theory itself grows at every chapter, because, as pointed out above, the program of the authors is the establishing of an organized phenomenology of surprise. Lyric poetry (Wordsworth, Keats) is the object of substantial analysis, and perhaps surprisingly and quite meaningfully, theatre is nearly forgotten. Miller writes:

In focusing on surprise in the novel, I want to advance an affective corollary to prevailing critical accounts that posit the genre as arising from a tension between Romance and Realism (Ian Watt) or through a discursive dialectic between fact and fiction (Lennard Davis and Michael McKeon, *inter alia*).[...] In Adela Pinch's argument, early modern thought treated the passions as "innate, natural forces," whereas British empiricist philosophers "shifted feeling from the realm of volition to the realm of understanding." In eighteenth-century fiction, I argue, surprise occupies that crossroads. (9)

The paragraph shows Miller's ability to link his subject to other concerns of literary history. As he is successful in the task, this contributes to the quality of the whole work. But if we make a quotation of it, that is because it will help introduce a final consideration, one which concerns the limits of literary discourse.

The decision of giving the novel a privileged position sounds quite reasonable when dealing with a historical period which witnesses the rise of the novel, but it also reveals a problem unsuspected so far. Does surprise as such have an intrinsically literary life, or is it the case that it simply reflects what is happening out there, perhaps with the mere addition of a literary shape that is determined by other factors?

Some critics could defend that this should have been the story of the substitution of a public art (theatre) by a privately consumed one (the novel, lyrical poetry). One has its place in a public space, but novels are read indoors. Therefore, it is not about the rise of subjectivity in a theoretical, abstract sense, but about how new spaces were created, spaces where individual actions were performed, actions which replaced, at least in part, other actions more or less analogous that used to

happen in a social context. Then, the phenomenon considered would be a collateral consequence of the mere increase of literacy, which, in turn, was motivated by the social changes that accompanied Reformation. What can be questioned then is to what extent theories (those seen in chapter one among others) are but the superficial reflection of phenomena of a much more practical nature.

An argument like this may be regarded as offering some valuable insights, but the crucial point for any discussion of surprise or any other idea, be in the domain of literature, be in the more general field of human thought, is whether the internal dynamics of that idea is firmly grounded. In other words, a literary study must convince its reader that literary materials obey their own rules. And this is an achievement that this book has reached in a skillful combination of external considerations and purely literary ones. The result is brilliant, always interesting and a sample of well administered erudition. Another question is that the idea of surprise will always surprise us with its unavoidable paradoxes, with the unexpected shapes it adopts, and with the amazing paths it finds to get connected to other literary and non-literary matters.