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BOOK REVIEW

Ronald Miller. ***Vygotsky in Perspective***. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 466 pp. $110.00 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-1107001862.

The dust jacket of Miller's book features excerpts from three reviews authored by distinguished scholars, authors of books that came out in the 1990s but remain arguably the best intellectual biographies of Vygotsky. Not much can be added to their laudatory assessment of Miller's work, and, taken together, they forcefully present a strong and fairly balanced overview of the undoubted advantages of this new publication. Thus, according to Alex Kozulin, "You do not need to agree with all Miller's claims and criticisms in order to appreciate his deep understanding of Vygotsky's original texts. *Vygotsky in Perspective* is required reading for everyone interested in Vygotsky's theory of consciousness." Jaan Valsiner comments that the book is "a deeply argumentative tour de force through our contemporary interpretations of Vygotsky's ideas. Miller's is a powerful contrarian voice in the efforts to clarify how the human mind operates through the social world. Hopefully, the book will trigger new interest among young scholars to solve complex theoretical issues in the social sciences that both Vygotsky and Miller have attempted to accomplish." Finally, René van der Veer argues that "Miller's critique is polemic but fair, sharp and entertaining. His message is that we should go back to a painstaking analysis of Vygotsky's writings and not just use his name to make our own ideas more fashionable. His detailed critique of several of the most vocal interpreters of Vygotsky's ideas will hopefully set the stage for a much-needed debate." The present reviewer shares all these highest assessments of this remarkable polemic book but approaches the task of writing yet another review with somewhat mixed feelings for two main reasons.

First, the structure of the book reveals two different parts that in the opinion of this reviewer do not quite make an integral whole. Indeed, preceded by a "preface and acknowledgements" and two introductory chapters ("Introduction" and "A Thematic Overview"), part I of the book, "Vygotsky at Home" (chapters 3–6), is a meticulous and critical analysis of the text of the last three chapters (5–7) of Vygotsky's posthumously published book *Thinking and Speech* (1934). Miller points out that "the chapter headings from the original text are borrowed and used as the headings for the chapters in this section" (p. 7); thus each of Vygotsky's chapters is discussed in a corresponding chapter in Miller's book. The only exception is Vygotsky's penultimate chapter, discussed in two of Miller's chapters: an analysis of Vygotsky's text (chapter 4) is followed by the critique of Vygotsky against the background of Piaget's research on related topics (chapter 5). In contrast, part II, "Vygotsky in America," radically departs from textual analysis of Vygotsky's book and is devoted to a scorching critique of a number of contemporary scholars well known as the "Vygotskian scholars," including, most notably, Michael Cole and James V. Wertsch, in three critical chapters (7–9) that occupy roughly a quarter of the book. In addition, chapter 10 discusses a few other presumably less significant yet "essential commentators." Finally, part III, "Vygotsky over the Rainbow," includes one final chapter, "Vygotsky: Mediation," that "addresses the problem of explaining how learning and teaching occur" (p. 17).

The reader, like the present reviewer, might be left with an uncomfortable feeling of having been treated to a set of loosely related parts rather than an integral whole, which a scholarly book—regardless of the variety of topics covered and the diversity of problems discussed—is supposed to be. Generally, despite the excellence of the analysis of Vygotsky's

text in part I and the fairness of the critique in part II, the reader is left with several questions to which the answers are only implied. Thus, it is unclear why the author chose *Thinking and Speech*, focusing only on the last three chapters for his textual analysis: Are these chapters in any sense "better" than other chapters of this book? Also, what is the place of this publication among Vygotsky's other works? It appears that *Thinking and Speech* is presented here as Vygotsky's most important, concluding work, but this claim is never discussed by Miller in any depth. The reader is left with the mere statement that "in Part I, the last three chapters of Vygotsky's book *Thinking and Speech* provide the material for discussion" (p. 7). Similarly, Miller's most delightful critique of contemporary "cultural-historical-activity-theory" (CHAT) scholarship—both in the Soviet Union (chapter 2) and in the West (chapters 7–10) leaves the reader at a loss as to the criteria for the selection of the protagonists of the story. In other words, is it that the author believes the main actors of his part II are indeed main proponents of Vygotsky's theory in the West, or the most notorious and erroneous, or, possibly, both at the same time? The reader might assume that the combination of the two is in play; however, no explicit answer is given by the author. Furthermore, a closer look at the lineup of the "essential commentators" reveals that what in fact makes all these scholars "essential" in Miller's view is their participation as authors of introductory chapters in a recent volume, *The Essential Vygotsky*, that presents a set of fragments of selected works by Vygotsky that were published by Plenum in the English version of the six-volume collection of Vygotsky's oeuvre (1987–1997). "No compelling reasons are provided for the selections that constitute the book or for why they are regarded as more essential than the chapters that are excluded," complains Miller (p. 316). Curiously, the same criticism can be addressed to his own book, which does not provide compelling reasons for the selection of the material it discusses, leaving an impression of a fairly fragmented narrative that would probably better suit two different books with clearly stated goals: a discussion of the last part of Vygotsky's *Thinking and Speech* against the background of Piagetian scholarship, on the one hand, and on the other hand, criticism of a few contemporary "Vygotskian" scholars. As to the criticism, given the author's youthfully militant standpoint, perhaps it would be worthwhile also to discuss those "Vygotskians" who might be interpreting Vygotsky less erroneously than the criticized authors do. Were one to start at the top of the alphabet, the names of Basil Bernstein, Uri Bronfenbrenner, Ann Brown, or Jerome Bruner first come to mind, and the virtual absence of discussion of the works of such authors leaves the reader in doubt as to whether for some reason they do not deserve criticism or whether their work is not "essential" enough for Western Vygotskian scholarship.

Second, on many occasions Miller mentions "distortions," "misinterpretations," and "misrepresentations" of Vygotsky's ideas in the available English translations of his works and, even more, in the works of his self-proclaimed Western followers. Miller correctly points out that "texts that survived and were translated into English were either abridged and inaccurately translated, in the case of *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1962), or artificially rendered into a book by selecting bits and pieces from various sources, in the case of *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978)" (p. 2). Furthermore, the six-volume *Collected Works* (1987–1997) included along with the translated text "various commentaries in the form of forewords, prologues, introductions, afterwords, and epilogues" (p. 2). Miller openly blames the editors of the translated *Collected Works* for "meddling with the original Russian texts by changing their order or presentation" and "including an additional layer of 'local' commentators," all of which contributed significantly to the misrepresentation of Vygotsky in the West. As a remedy, Miller proposes going back to Vygotsky's translations, which, somewhat strangely, he continuously refers to as "original texts," and reading them disregarding the surrounding voices of editors and commentators. There are essentially two problems with this solution.

For one thing, the translated texts that were published as *Thought and Language* (1962), *Mind and Society* (1978), or the *Collected Works* hardly qualify as "original," due to numerous omissions and errors (inaccuracies, suppressions of terms, passages, and names, nonattributed and suppressed citations, and insertions). A few of these along with incorrect renderings of Vygotsky's phrasings were introduced during the preparation of the English editions of various works and can be best described as involuntary and accidental "losses in translation" (for the discussion of "Vygotsky in English," see Van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011). For another thing, Vygotsky's original Russian texts do not appear that "original" any more: as a series of recent studies show, many texts that have long been considered as Vygotsky's central and most important works were not considered by their author as such. As amazing as it may seem, a number of these works were never published during Vygotsky's lifetime, nor even prepared for publication by their author, and thus represent his earlier periods of theory building, the ideas of which he extensively criticized and mostly rejected in his later writings (for discussion of Vygotsky's self-criticism and rejection of his earlier views, see Yasnitsky, 2011b). Then, during the postwar period, many of these published works and unfinished manuscripts of different periods were uncritically published in Soviet editions without proper acknowledgement of their place in Vygotsky's overall theory development and with considerable editorial interventions—at times even fairly notable distortions of Vygotsky's original text. Several works were constructed by combining a couple of Vygotsky's manuscripts and publishing them as an integral whole under a title that never occurs in Vygotsky's documents or writings (e.g., *The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions*) or even back-translated from an English translation of a Russian text that apparently had not been preserved by the time Vygotsky's *Collected Works* were published in Russian in the early 1980s (i.e., *Tool and Sign in the Development of the Child*). Later, in the words of a witness and participant in these unusual events, this "benign forgery" (Goldberg, 2005, p. 99) was yet again translated into English, without knowledge of the origin of the Russian text—a case of "second-degree translation" (for the discussion of multiple issues of Russian textology of Vygotsky's works, see Yasnitsky, 2010, 2011a, 2011c, 2012; Kellogg & Yasnitsky, 2011; Mecacci & Yasnitsky, 2011; Cole, 2012; Goldberg, 2012; Van der Veer, 2012; Zavershneva, 2012; Zavershneva & Osipov, 2012).[1]

These circumstances make for a rather awkward position for anyone who attempts to make a claim about the "original" or the "real" Vygotsky, and it is from this side that Miller's book is particularly vulnerable to criticism. This, however, does not diminish the value of *Vygotsky in Perspective*, which should be understood not as a definitive book on Vygotsky's theory but, instead, as a meticulous analysis of the second half of his book *Thinking and Speech* and, on the contrary, as a robust critique of the so-called Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (aka CHAT), an expression that, like many other phrases typically associated with Vygotsky's legacy (e.g., "higher mental/psychic functions," "cultural-historical theory," or "cultural-historical psychology"), never occurs in his own texts (Keiler, 2012). Predictably, this book will provoke further discussions and struggles on the "theoretical frontline," hopefully to the benefit of this field of knowledge.

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