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HENRY MILLER, SPIRITUAL ANARCHIST

by
Carmine Thomas Sarracino

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of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER I

SPIRITUAL ANARCHISM

Though Henry Miller's "anarchism" has been a major topic of several critical discussions of his work,[1] few critics have pursued the subject beyond its purely political dimensions. That Miller has been an outspoken anarchist at certain points in his life is indisputable. As he says in Tropic of Capricorn:

> I wanted to see America destroyed, razed from top to bottom. I wanted to see this happen purely out of vengeance, as atonement for the crimes that were committed against me and against others like me who have never been able to lift their voices and express their hatred, their rebellion. . . .[2]

And later in the book, in a characteristic comic tone, he even outlines his view of a purely anarchic society:

> Maybe there wouldn't be macadamized roads and streamlined cars and loudspeakers and gadgets of a million billion varieties, maybe there wouldn't even be glass in the windows, maybe you'd have to sleep on the ground . . . maybe people would kill each other when their patience was exhausted and maybe nobody would stop them because there

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[1] See, for example, Kingsley Widmer, Henry Miller (New York, 1963), Ch. V. or Wickes, Henry Miller (New York, 1957).

[2] Henry Miller, Tropic of Capricorn (New York, 1961), p. 13.

> wouldn't be any jails or any cops or judges, and there certainly wouldn't be any cabinet ministers or legislatures because there wouldn't be any goddamned laws to obey or disobey, and maybe it would take months and years to trek from place to place, but you wouldn't need a visa or passport or a carte d'identite because you wouldn't be registered anywhere and you wouldn't bear a number and if you wanted to change your name every week you could do it because it wouldn't make any difference since you wouldn't own anything except what you could carry around with you and why would you want to own anything when everything would be free?[3]

But to examine critically only such fanciful, simple-minded expressions of Miller's anarchism is to overlook aspects of his anarchism which are of far greater importance to his work and which qualitatively change his anarchism from a purely political anarchism to what might be termed "spiritual anarchism."

When Miller describes Whitman as an "anarchist" it is clear he is using the word in a special way:

> Whitman demolishes every flimsy barrier behind which man has sought to take refuge. He expresses utter confidence in man. He is not a democrat, he is an anarchist.[4]

Similarly, in Miller's "Preface" to Thoreau's Life Without Principle, reprinted in Stand Still Like the Hummingbird, Miller describes Thoreau as an anarchist who is not interested in politics:

> He is nearer to being an anarchist than a democrat, socialist, or communist. However, he was

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[3] Ibid., p. 281.

[4] Henry Miller, Stand Still Like the Hummingbird (New York, 1962), p. 109.

> not interested in politics; he was the sort of person who, if there were more of his kind, would soon cause governments to become non-existent.[5]

The quote is significant not only because it denies that Thoreau had strictly political concerns, but also for its suggestion that the political ramifications of Thoreau's anarchism are the inevitable results of living an "anarchism" of broader scope than the merely political. For in the essay itself, "Life Without Principle," Thoreau asserts, in impassioned voice:

> America is said to be the arena in which the battle of freedom is to be fought; but surely it cannot be freedom in a merely political sense that is meant. . . . Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free of King George and continue the slaves of King Prejudice? What is the value of any political freedom but as a means to moral freedom? . . . We quarter troops, we quarter fools and cattle of all sorts upon ourselves. We quarter our gross bodies on our poor souls till the former eat up the latter's substance.[6]

The last three sentences, particularly Thoreau's question "What is the value of any political freedom but as a means to moral freedom?" add the dimension of "spiritual growth" to Thoreau's thought and point the direction for Miller's own brand of anarchism. For Miller too has frequently expressed indifference to "mere" politics. In Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch Miller

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[5] Ibid., p. 111.

[6] Henry David Thoreau, Life Without Principle (New York, 1946), p. 18.

asserts that political revolution as a solution to human problems is futile:

> Nor will they struggle to create a bit of paradise in the hell they find themselves. It is so much easier, and gorier, to make revolution, which means, to put it simply, establishing another, a different, status quo.[7]

In The Cosmological Eye Miller asserts:

> I am against revolutions because they always involve a return to status quo. I am against the status quo both before and after revolutions. I don't want to wear a black shirt or a red shirt. I want to wear the shirt that suits my taste. And I don't want to salute like an automaton either. I prefer to shake hands when I meet someone I like. The fact is, to put it simply, I am positively against all this crap which is carried on first in the name of this thing, then in the name of that. I believe only in what is active, immediate and personal.[8]

Miller emphasizes the personal nature of this "revolution" in Nights of Love and Laughter:

> I was always between two fires, from above and from below. I saw finally that no matter how much I did it was just a drop in the bucket. I'm not saying that I grew indifferent or hardened. No, but I realized that it would take a revolution to make any appreciable change in conditions. And when I say a revolution I mean a real revolution, something far more radical and sweeping than the Russian revolution, for instance. I still think that, but I don't think it can be done politically or economically. Governments can't bring it about. Only individuals, each one working in his own quiet way.

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[7]Henry Miller, Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch (New York, 1957), p. 24.

[8]Henry Miller, The Cosmological Eye (New York, 1939), p. 160.

> It must be a revolution of the heart. Our attitude towards life has to be fundamentally altered.[9]

And in The Colossus of Maroussi he echoes Thoreau:

> It is not enough to overthrow governments, masters, tyrants: one must overthrow his own preconceived ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. . . . We have enslaved ourselves by our own petty, circumscribed view of life.[10]

Rather than being purely political, then, the repercussions of Miller's anarchism extend into all fields of human conduct and experience. Miller expresses increasingly less interest in purely political concerns in his later writings--as can be seen in the above quotes he is often, in fact, contemptuous of politics--and if his anarchism may be said to be political at all, it becomes finally only incidentally so. More and more Miller's anarchism has become simply a vehicle for his personal development as an individual and as an artist.[11] Miller's anarchism has changed, in other words, from "mere" political anarchism to what might be termed "spiritual anarchism."

While the entire present paper might be regarded as an attempt to define Miller's "spiritual anarchism"

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[9]Henry Miller, Nights of Love and Laughter (New York, 1955), p. 39.

[10]Henry Miller, The Colossus of Maroussi (New York, 1941), p. 82.

[11]The relationship between Miller's "spiritual anarchism" and self-realization will be more fully explored in Chapter V.

within the context of his major autobiographical novels,[12] a kernel definition, which will be enlarged and qualified throughout the paper, may be offered at the outset.

Miller's spiritual anarchism springs from a belief held also by Thoreau and, to some extent, by Whitman, his most important American influences, that the possibilities of human existence far exceed what has been realized to date. Moreover, those possibilities have never been adequately explored and have, in fact, been hindered by all the traditions, practices and institutions which define "humanness" (and thus set limits artificially), prescribe behavior, or in any way restrict exploration of what it means to be human, to live a human life. The life of the spiritual anarchist, then, is something of an experiment: he constantly tests the limits of all boundaries--social, moral, psychological, spiritual--and rebels against their artificiality. Ideally, boundaries should collapse as the hitherto unrealized potential of man is revealed by the example of the spiritual anarchist's own life.

In Walden, a book Miller greatly admired,[13] Thoreau himself comments:

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[12]"Autobiographical novel" is the term Miller uses to make clear that he is writing autobiography (the "I" in his writing is himself), yet "facts" may be rearranged, altered, to present a "truer" representation of his life than strictly "accurate" accounts could convey.

[13]Miller expresses his admiration for Thoreau throughout Big Sur and in Hummingbird (pp. 111-118) as well as in scattered references throughout his writing.

> But man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what we can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. Whatever have been thy failures hitherto, "be not afflicted, my child, for who shall assign to thee what thou hast left undone?"[14]

And later in the same work:

> The learned societies and great men of Assyria--where are they? What youthful philosophers and experimentalists we are! There is not one of my readers who has yet lived a whole human life. These may be but the spring months in the life of the race. . . . We are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live. Most have not delved six feet beneath the surface, not leaped as many above it. We know not where we are. Beside, we are sound asleep nearly half our time.[15]

Of Whitman Miller says:

> What would he say if he could see America today? I think his utterances would be still more impassioned. I believe he could write a still greater "Leaves of Grass." He would see potentialities "immenser far" than those he originally envisioned.[16]

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[14]Henry D. Thoreau, Walden (New York, 1960), p. 11. Miller virtually echoes this in Stand Still Like the Hummingbird, p. 15: "Man, as man, has never realized himself. The greater part of him, his potential being, has always been submerged. What is history if not the endless story of his repeated failures?"

[15]Ibid., p. 220.

[16]Stand Still Like the Hummingbird, p. 110. Whitman's view of human potential was indeed "immense." In "Song of Myself" (Leaves of Grass, New York, 1959), Whitman claims all men are "immortal" and that he is unique among men only in that he knows he is immortal:

> I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth
> I am the mate and companion of people, all
> just as immortal and fathomless as myself;
> They do not know how immortal, but I know.
> (p. 31)

Whitman repeats the claim of "immortality" throughout "Song

And, Thoreau, again, adds in the "Conclusion" of Walden, at the end of a discussion of the vast and unrealized potential of human life:

> Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodeness in the dead deep life of society . . . may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last![17]

Miller, it will be seen, would not only accept Thoreau's and Whitman's vision of the possibilities of human existence, but he would also enlarge that vision. For Miller, human potential is not only unmeasured but also unmeasurable; the possibilities of human existence are not merely more numerous than has been realized: they are infinite.

Thus, at the end of his "Preface" to Life Without Principle, Miller cautions the reader not to make Thoreau a "symbol," not to honor him so extravangantly as to remove him from the sphere of the human. For it

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of Myself." For example:

> And I know I am deathless
> I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass . . . (p. 43)

And Whitman's "immortality" is associated with a "divinity" within man:

> Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from. . . . (p. 49)

As shall be pointed out later in the present chapter, Miller would take this view of the "divinity" of man and enlarge upon it.

[17] Walden, p. 221.

is only by insisting on his humanness that the possibilities of "humanness" are consequently expanded. Further, the reader should not take those limits established by Thoreau to be absolute. They too should be surpassed:

> Thoreau himself has become a symbol. But he was only a man, let us not forget that. By making him a symbol . . . we defeat the very purpose of his life. Only by living our lives to the full can we honor his memory. We should not try to imitate him, but to surpass him. . . . We should not strive to become like Thoreau, or even like Jesus Christ, but to become what we are in truth and essence.[18]

The inclusion of Jesus Christ, of course, expands the envisioned "limits" of humanness much farther and indicates what Miller believes "we are in truth and essence": divine, or at least "divine-like." In a theme which shall be more fully explored later in the present paper, Miller frequently describes the "fully-realized" man, the man of "restored vision," as an angel, or angelic:

> The angel in man is ready to emerge whenever that dread human will to have its own way can be kept in abeyance. Things not only look different, they are different when perfect sight is restored.[19]

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[18] Stand Still Like the Hummingbird, p. 118. This same thought is given expression in an essay called "Children of the Earth" in Stand Still Like the Hummingbird, p. 18: "'Kill the Buddha!' the Zen master is known to say occasionally. Kill the futile stirring is the thought. Do not put the Buddha (or the Christ) beyond, outside yourself. Recognize him in yourself. Be that which you are, completely."

[19] Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch, p. 144.

And, at the end of his long "spiritual voyage"[20] through Greece described in The Colossus of Maroussi, Miller employs the same language of vision to resolve:

> The light of Greece opened my eyes, penetrated my pores, expanded my whole being. I came home to the world, having found the true center and the real meaning of revolution. . . . From that day forth my life was dedicated to the recovery of the divinity of man.[21]

For Miller, then, political anarchism is incomplete and finally futile. The only kind of anarchism which can attract him is one which leads one to "become what we are in truth and essence." Miller's anarchism serves the broader purpose of "self-realization," or the discovery of one's full and infinite potential: what Miller calls "the divinity of man." His anarchism is, then, much broader and qualitatively different from political anarchism. Thus it might be termed "spiritual anarchism."

The most important influences on Miller's spiritual anarchism were Thoreau and Whitman and Miller's own childhood. And the experiences of Miller's childhood, which shall be discussed shortly, seem to have been vastly more important than any other influence.

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[20] This is Miller's term to describe his trip through Greece: see, for example, The Colossus of Maroussi, pp. 57, 79, 81.

[21] Ibid., p. 241.

Thoreau and Whitman were, for Miller, "kindred spirits," artists whose work and whose lives were an inspiration to Miller. He greatly admired and attempted, in his own way, to emulate the linguistic inventiveness of Whitman. And his experiment in anarchic living at Big Sur was largely inspired by Thoreau's own life at Walden.

Miller's writing has been frequently called anarchic, usually in the sense of "chaotic." His experimentations, however, have been at least partly inspired by his frequently expressed admiration for the inventiveness of Whitman, and have been, at least partly, attempts to emulate what Miller judged to be one of Whitman's outstanding achievements: a totally new use of language. Miller sometimes even suggests Whitman's "vision" created a "new" language:

> . . . (Whitman) had no respect for tradition; that he forged a new language is due entirely to the singularity of his vision. . . .[22]

With his spiritual anarchist's urge to go beyond established limits Miller conducted his own experiments with language through surrealism, dadaism, and "nonsense."[23] The surrealist, dadaist and nonsense passages frequently do seem purely chaotic; as shall be discussed

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[22] Stand Still Like the Hummingbird, p. 109.

[23] Miller regarded the experiment with surrealism a failure, all in all. For a discussion see: Miller, The Cosmological Eye (New York, 1939), pp. 151ff.

in the next chapter, however, they must be seen as an effort to represent, or give expression to, a "higher" order,[24] as Miller believed Whitman to be "in tune" with a higher order.[25]

Like Thoreau, Miller retired to a place of natural beauty, the Big Sur, in an attempt to "simplify" his life through an experiment in anarchic living:[26]

> To simplify one's life! It seems the most natural thing in the world to undertake, yet it's just about the most difficult. Everything stands in the way. Literally everything. How did Thoreau put it? 'I am convinced that to maintain oneself on this earth is not a hardship, but a pastime, if we live simply and wisely.'[27]

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[24]This sense of an "order" which is qualitatively different from what is commonly perceived as "order" is essential to understanding Miller's spiritual anarchism and will be discussed in the next chapter.

[25]In Big Sur (p. 94) Miller states:

"Sometimes I come home double-quick, my mind so saturated with ideas and impressions that I feel I must hasten to make a few notes. If I have been writing, these thoughts and sensations have to do with pure irrelevancies. Useful ones, however, since they are often completed thoughts which had made themselves known in embryonic form months, even years, ago. This experience, which happens over and over, convinces me more and more that "we" create nothing, that "it" is doing it for us and through us, and that if we could really tune in we would do as Whitman said--make our own bibles."

The nature of the "it" from which personal creativity comes shall be clarified in the next chapter in the light of Bergson's idea of "Vital Order" (as opposed to "Physical Order").

[26]Unlikely as "anarchic living" in Big Sur may seem now, when Miller went there in the early forties there were, by his accounts, only a "few dozen" artists scattered throughout the entire region.

[27]Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch, p. 263.

Simplifying one's life is appealing to Miller as a technique of spiritual anarchism. It means, for Miller, that he must assault societal notions of what is important or necessary in his life and, stripping away conventional habits, ideas, practices, discover for himself what is truly necessary in his life. It is, in other words, a method of exploring further possibilities of human existence. Just as Thoreau experiments with various methods of cooking, of farming, of eating--always exulting over a discovery which contradicts an accepted truth in Concord,[28] so Miller similarly experiments with methods of acquiring shelter, food, clothing; experiments with living in such a way as to minimize his dependence upon what he sees as the rock upon which society is built: money.[29]

But perhaps the most important way in which Thoreau and Whitman influenced Miller lies in their insistence upon "personal" or autobiographical writing. Leaves of Grass is, of course, intensely "personal" and

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[28]For example, vegetarianism:

"One farmer says to me. 'You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with;' and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw material of bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plow along in spite of every obstacle." (p. 11)

[29]Stand Still Like the Hummingbird, p. 119, for a discussion of "Money and How it Gets That Way."

autobiographical. Thoreau even begins Walden with a discussion of the rationale for autobiography:

> In most books the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person speaking. I should not talk about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. . . . Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first and last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred in a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely it must have been in a distant land to me.[30]

Throughout his writing Miller similarly insists upon the particular "validity" of autobiography, and contrasts autobiography with "literature," which is all technique, device and polish: "sham," in Miller's judgment.

> What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, literature.[31]

Or, again, in The Cosmological Eye:

> I mention this only because this book marks a turning point in my literary career--I should say, in my life. At a certain point in my life I decided that henceforth I would write about myself, my friends, my experiences, what I knew and what I had seen with my own eyes. Anything else, in my opinion, is literature and I am not interested in literature.[32]

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[30] Walden, p. 11.

[31] Henry Miller, Black Spring (New York, 1963), epigraph to "The Fourteenth Ward."

[32] The Cosmological Eye, p. 161.

Miller frequently recalls that his largely unpublished early writing was not autobiographical and was, in fact, "literary."

> The real effort was going into letter writing, and perhaps it was best so, now that I look back on it because it preserved the speed and naturalness of my true voice. I was far too self-conscious, in the early days, to use my own voice. I was the literary man through and through. I made use of every device I discovered, employed every register, assumed a thousand different stances, always confusing the mastery of technique with creation.[33]

Miller's life as a "true" artist, rather than as a "literary man," begins when he writes in his own voice, and writes about his own life:

> I told myself that my true purpose was merely to relate--"merely!"--the story of my misfortunes.[34]

Spiritual anarchism, as it has been outlined, lends itself almost inevitably to autobiographical expressions. The inevitability must be partly because of the premium placed upon personal experiment[35] by Thoreau, Whitman, and Miller, and partly, as the above quote makes clear, because of the importance to them of personal experience. In Miller's accounts, his life as a writer did not truly

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[33]Henry Miller, Nexus (New York, 1965), p. 166.

[34]Henry Miller, Plexus (New York, 1965), p. 50.

[35]Thoreau continually refers to life itself as an experiment. For example, in Walden, p. 11: "Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me...." Or, p. 39: "How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?"

begin until he abandoned all literary devices, all posturing as an "author," and gave a "simple and sincere account of his life." He did not write, in his judgment, until, like Whitman and Thoreau, he began to write autobiography.

And thus for many reasons no writer, book or idea has been so influential upon Miller's spiritual anarchism as his own childhood. Or, perhaps more accurately, his recollection of his childhood. For in the retelling Miller lives his childhood in an anarchic paradise of children who are free and easy in their thought, never work or worry, enjoy play, and are totally uncorrupted and unshackled by middle-class values and societal laws. In contrast to the adults' circumscribed life of habituated routine, life to the children is an exciting experiment, a chance to explore unbounded possibilities:

> The air was full of tension--nothing could be predicted for the morrow. . . . Nothing was taken for granted; each day demanded a new test of power, a new sense of strength or failure. And so, up until the age of nine or ten, we had a real taste of life. . . .[36]

Intellectually, too, Miller's boyhood comrades were not bound by narrow modes of thinking, by prejudice or habit. "Facts," which for Miller are bricks in the mental prison of the bourgeoisie, are boring and irrelevant to children:

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[36]Tropic of Capricorn, p. 129.

> Facts had little importance for us, what we demanded of a subject was that it allow us opportunity to expand.[37]

In much criticism of Miller[38] he is called "anti-intellectual." His contempt for "intellectualism," for academies and academics, is rooted in his spiritual anarchism. It is contempt for formalizing and thus restricting curiosity and study. As anarchic children Miller and his friends were "true" intellectuals, with limitless interest in an infinite world:

> We talked about ghosts, about God, about transmigration of the souls, about Hell, about astronomy, about strange birds and fish, about the formation of precious stones, about rubber plantations, about methods of torture, about Aztecs and the Incas, about marine life, about volcanoes and earthquakes, about burial rites and wedding ceremonies in various parts of the earth, about languages, about the origin of the American Indian, about the buffaloes dying out, about strange diseases, about cannibalism, about wizardry, about trips to the moon and what it was like there, about murderers and highway men, about miracles in the Bible, about the manufacture of pottery, about a thousand and one subjects which were never mentioned at home or in school and which were vital to us because we were starved and the world was full of wonder and mystery. . . .
>
> The wonder and mystery of life--which is throttled in us when we become responsible members of society![39]

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[37] Ibid., p. 128.

[38] Criticism of Miller, including the specific criticism of anti-intellectualism, shall be more fully discussed in the last chapter of the present paper.

[39] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 144.

Indeed, the end of childhood occurs when an institution intrudes with its limits and confinements:

> From the moment when one is put in school one is lost; one has the feeling of having a halter put around his neck.[40]

Also, Miller is "anti-intellectual" because to him children live in a sensory world the borders of which never exceed the child's arm length. The child's world is small, but concrete and intimate. As Miller says in Plexus:

> Whenever I went deep enough into my childhood I was no longer outside, on the fringe, but snuggly inside, like a pip in the fleshly heart of a ripe piece of fruit. I might be standing in front of Annie Meinken's candy shop, in the old 14th Ward, my nose pressed against the windowpane, my eyes aglitter at the sight of some chocolate covered soldiers. That abstract noun, "the world," hadn't yet penetrated my consciousness. Everything was real, concrete, individuated, but neither fully named nor wholly delineated. I was and things were.[41]

But schooling destroys this world, replacing it with a "larger" world of ideas rather than of things; a world which is abstract rather than concrete. One of Miller's efforts as a spiritual anarchist is to destroy this abstract creation of the adult world, a creation which is alien and hostile rather than familiar and intimate, and return to the concrete, sensory world of preschool children:

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[40] Ibid., p. 129.

[41] Plexus, p. 607.

> I want to pass beyond the responsibility of fatherhood to the irresponsibility of the anarchic man who cannot be coerced nor wheedled nor cajoled nor bribed nor traduced. . . . I must do this in remembrance of a life beyond all comparison with the life which was promised me, in remembrance of the life of a child who was strangled and stifled by the mutual consent of those who had surrendered. Everything which the fathers and mothers created I disown. I am going back to a world even smaller than the old Hellenic world, going back to a world which I can always touch with outstretched arms, the world of what I know and see and recognize from moment to moment. Any other world is meaningless to me, and alien and hostile.[42]

Pre-school children are thus not merely beyond the conventions and laws of society; they are morally superior to them. Their anarchism fosters in them contempt for the corrupt lawfulness of society, scornful contempt for the adults who degrade themselves by their daily participation in the mean struggle to survive, to get ahead.

In Tropic of Capricorn Miller describes his involvement in a rock-fight which erupts spontaneously and viciously between two groups of boys. The fight itself is capricious, but brutal:

> We didn't know which side we were fighting for but we were fighting in dead earnest amidst the rock pile by the river bank.[43]

In the fury of the fight, Miller's cousin hits the ringleader of one of the gangs in the belly with a large

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[42] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 145.

[43] Ibid., p. 124.

rock. At the same instant a rock thrown by Miller strikes the boy in the temple. The boy crumples to the ground and the gang scatters. When the police arrive they find the boy dead.

Rather than being remorseful, the boys return home nonchalantly:

> We walked in looking almost as immaculate as when we had left the house. Aunt Caroline gave us our usual two big slices of sour rye with fresh butter and a little sugar over it and we sat there at the kitchen table listening to her with an angelic smile.[44]

As Miller considers the killing further, he decides that it only illuminates the moral superiority of the anarchic children over their law-abiding parents who commit the unforgivable crime of submitting to the drudgery of "earning a living":

> For, with each slice they fed us we became more and more superior to them. In our ungratefulness was our strength and beauty. Not being devoted we were innocent of all crime. The boy whom I saw drop dead, who lay there motionless, without making the slightest sound or whimper, the killing of that boy seems almost like a clean, healthy performance. The struggle for food, on the other hand, seems foul and degrading and when we stood in the presence of our parents we sensed that they had come to us unclean and for that we could never forgive them.[45]

All such characteristics of Miller's childhood--the expansive, chaotic intellect contemptuous of logic,

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p. 127.

facts, and "learning," the hunger for new experience to test the limits of experience, the scorn for narrow, conventional notions of right and wrong, the sense of the infinite wonder and possibility of the world and of the limitless potential for human "spiritual" growth--would reappear throughout his writing, constantly elaborated and expanded with new experience, to form a vital part of his "spiritual anarchism."

CHAPTER II

TRUE ORDER VERSUS FALSE ORDER

Another means of distinguishing Miller's spiritual anarchism from political anarchism and, at the same time, of elaborating and clarifying Miller's stance as a spiritual anarchist involves, perhaps not surprisingly, Miller's concept of "order." Miller frequently gives the impression of being scornful of all forms of order, whether it be the compulsive order of the petty bourgeoisie who must have everything tidily in place, or societal order imposed by the various agencies and institutions of government, or even cosmic order. Order itself is, to Miller, contemptible.

Part of Miller's disdain for his family (particularly for his mother) is rooted in his disdain for their, in his view, "Nordic" sense of orderliness:

> Never once had they opened the door which leads to the soul; never once did they dream of taking a blind leap into the dark. After dinner the dishes were promptly washed and put in the closet; after the paper was read it was neatly folded and laid away on the shelf; after the clothes were washed they were ironed and folded and then tucked away in the drawers.[1]

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[1]Henry Miller, Tropic of Capricorn (New York, 1961), p. 11.

But Miller is more than merely annoyed with such obsessive manifestations of a superficial kind of "order." He is resentful of order itself:

> Order! This word is foreign to me. If occasionally I put a little order in my affairs its because I need a bit of fresh air from time to time. At bottom I hate order. I was born in a state of disorder, of that I'm sure.[2]

Indeed Miller often suggests that disorder, chaos, is his natural milieu, the environment into which he was born and the only one in which he is "comfortable":

> From the beginning it was never anything but chaos: it was a fluid which enveloped me, which I breathed in through the gills. In the substrata, where the moon shone steady and opaque, it was smooth and fecundating; above it was a jangle and a discord. In everything I quickly saw the opposite, the contradiction, and between the real and the unreal, the irony, the paradox.[3]

The many long surrealist passages in his early books, his descriptions of making watercolors by slapping on paint as he dances round the paper whistling, throwing the painting to the floor and dancing on it, and his frequently voiced contempt for "order" give the impression of an artist who creates with total abandon, with complete disregard for any sort of order. But again, the impression this pose conveys of superficiality, of

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[2]Henry Miller, Order and Chaos/Chez Hans Reichel (Tucson, 1966), p. 24.

[3]Tropic of Capricorn, p. 9.

simple-mindedness, is as incomplete as his apparently simple-minded anarchism.

Miller is indeed contemptuous of "order," but a fuller understanding of his feelings reveals that his contempt is directed against what he regards as a narrow, "artificial" sort of order. He clearly has a sense of a "higher order" which is never fully defined, but of which he is hardly scornful.

This dualistic sense of "order" is hinted at in Big Sur:

> In following this fantasia the reader should bear in mind that order of any kind--except the illogical order of life itself--is absent.[4]

This passage suggests that Miller recognizes two sorts of order. As shall be pointed out later in the present chapter, his reference to the "order of life" as "illogical" is important in understanding his concept of a "higher order." In Sexus he similarly refers to a "world order," again distinguishing it from other kinds of order.

> The world has not to be put in order: the world is order incarnate. It is for us to put ourselves in unison with this order, to know what is the world order in contradistinction to the wishful-thinking orders which we seek to impose on one another.[5]

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[4]Henry Miller, Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch (New York, 1957), p. 42.

[5]Henry Miller, Sexus (New York, 1965), p. 270.

As one looks carefully at Miller's thoughts on order there gradually emerges a sense of a "true order," which he refers to by various names ("world order" or "the order of life") and which is distinct from other sorts of "false order" which are unnatural ("wishful-thinking") and arbitrary (they are "imposed"). In the above quote from Big Sur Miller referred to the order of life as "illogical." The idea, central to his conception of "true order," is elaborated in Tropic of Capricorn:

> Confusion is a word we have invented for an order which is not understood. I like to dwell on this period when things were taking shape because the order, if it were understood, must have been dazzling.[6]

For Miller, then, there are essentially two kinds of order, which are not merely different but are, in fact, opposed. The two might be called, temporarily, "true order" and "false order." The category of "false order" is composed of various kinds of "orders," all of which are imposed and unnatural, rather than emergent and natural. Miller's detestation of societal order, whether on the level of the tidy order of the householder or the order imposed by the laws of governmental agencies, is detestation of false order.

True order, on the other hand, is "natural" rather than "imposed"; it is the "world order," the "order of

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[6]Tropic of Capricorn, p. 176.

life itself." Where false order is obvious and gross, a kind of "everything in its place" order, true order is so subtle it may often be mistaken for "confusion" or disorder.

These ideas are further elaborated in a little known, limited edition book by Miller, Order and Chaos/ Chez Hans Reichel:

> I like desire. . . . Creation is pure desire. One possesses nothing. One creates, one lets go. . . . Deed is desire and desire deed. A complete circle. Moreover, where the circle is concerned no grandeur is involved. The circle completes itself without aid. It's the alpha and the omega at one and the same time. Finis.
>
> The square, on the other hand, demands great effort. Nothing is more difficult. It's against all natural logic. It's an invention of abstract beings. (Egyptians, Greeks, for example. And Hindoos!)
>
> The square is the symbol of an order imposed upon nature--by men. It's a kind of logic-created prison. . . .[7]

Miller's ideas about order are markedly similar to those of a philosopher Miller greatly admired, Henri Bergson. In Tropic of Capricorn Miller mentions having read Bergson's Creative Evolution and having been deeply affected and impressed by the book:

> There is absolutely no transition from this, the most pleasurable dream I know, to the heart of a book called Creative Evolution. In this book by Henri Bergson, which I came to as naturally as to the dream of the land beyond the boundary, I am again quite alone, again a foreigner, again a man of indeterminate age standing on an iron bridge observing a peculiar

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[7]Order and Chaos/Chez Hans Reichel, p. 25.

> metamorphosis without and within. If this book had not fallen into my hands at the precise moment it did, perhaps I would have gone mad. It came at a moment when another huge world was crumbling on my hands.[8]

Concerned with the question of "disorder" Bergson proposes two sorts of order. The first is called "vital" order, and the second "physical" order. Vital order is associated with the "natural" direction of the mind, with creation, with life itself "in its entirety." Physical order, on the other hand, is associated with an "inversion" of the mind, with geometry, or mathematics.[9]

> In a general way, reality is ordered exactly to the degree to which it satisfies one's thought. Order is therefore a certain agreement between subject and object. It is the mind finding itself again in things. But the mind, we said, can go in two opposite ways. Sometimes it follows its natural direction: there is then progress in the form of tension, continuous creation, free activity. Sometimes it inverts it, and this inversion, pushed to the end, leads to extension, to the necessary reciprocal determination of elements externalized each by relation to the others, in short, to geometrical mechanism. . . . The order of the second kind may be defined as geometry, which is its extreme limit; more generally, it is that kind of order that is concerned whenever a relation of necessary determinism is found between causes and effects. It evokes the idea of inertia, of passivity, of automatism. As to the first kind of order, it oscillates no doubt around finality; and yet we cannot define it as finality, for it is sometimes above, sometimes below. . . . Life in its entirety, regarded as a creative evolution, is something analogous; it

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[8] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 219.

[9] The association is, of course, similar to Miller's above association of "imposed" order with "the square."

> transcends finality, if we understand by finality the realization of an idea conceived or conceivable in advance. . . . We may say then that this first kind of order is that of the vital or of the willed, in opposition to the second, which is that of the inert and the automatic.[10]

Bergson goes on to associate physical order with "astronomical phenomena," asserting that astronomical phenomena are seen to be ordered because they can be foreseen mathematically. Vital order is associated with a Beethoven symphony, the order of which cannot be predicted mathematically, since its nature is "genius, originality, and therefore unforeseeability itself."[11]

Vital order is linked not only with creativity (the "willed") but with creation itself:

> It is due to the fact that the "vital" order which is essentially creation, is manifested to us less in its essence than in some of its accidents. . . .[12]

Vital order, then, is associated with will, creativity (the Beethoven symphony) and with creation itself. Physical order, on the other hand, is "automatic," mathematical and "inert." Further, physical order is cast in a light of "artificiality" since mathematics, according to Bergson, is an artificial way of formulating natural laws:

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[10]Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution (New York, 1911), p. 223.

[11]Ibid., p. 224.

[12]Ibid., p. 230.

> We cannot insist too strongly that there is something artificial in the mathematical form of a physical law, and consequently in our scientific knowledge of things.[13]

Bergson suggests, then, through his reference to physical order as "automatic," and through associating physical order with the "artificiality" of mathematics, that it is an imposed order. Vital order, however, is "natural" since it is the order of "life in its entirety," of "creation."

The distinctions Miller makes between kinds of order are, of course, remarkably similar. "Physical order" corresponds to what Miller regards as "false order": to those manifestations of superficial, petty order characterized by the obsessive tidiness of the bourgeoisie, by the rules and regulations of governmental agencies and societal institutions, by the "orderliness" of logic, language, and thought itself, all of which inhibit creative expression. Such order, as Miller says, "is imposed upon nature--by men." It is a "logical," artificial order typified, to Miller as it is to Bergson, by geometry, by "the square."

Like Bergson's "vital order," Miller's "true order" is linked with creativity, with creation itself (the "world order"). Whereas Bergson claims vital order is

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[13] Ibid., p. 218.

not "predictable," Miller adds that world order is not even "logical" (the "illogical order of life").

Bergson's solution to the problem of disorder is also of great significance for Miller. Essentially, Bergson denies that disorder exists. One is simply confused into thinking disorder exists when one expects to encounter one type of order, and instead encounters the other. The mind then "sways between the two" kinds of order and imagines "the incoherent" or "disorder":

> Either the incoherent is only a word, devoid of meaning, or if I give it meaning, it is on condition of putting incoherence midway between the two orders, and not below both of them. There is not first the incoherent, then the geometrical,[14] then the vital; there is only the geometrical and the vital, and then, by a swaying of the mind between them, the idea of the incoherent.[15]

The denial of disorder which Bergson formulates is crucial to an understanding of Miller's spiritual anarchism. According to Bergson, what one thinks of as disorder is in actuality an unrecognized order. The concept of disorder arises, essentially, from the narrowness of one's perceptions.

Miller's expressed ideas about order may be seen to be direct outgrowths of Bergson's thoughts. Miller would accept as premises all that Bergson asserts, and then go on, in his own way, from there.

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[14] Another name for "physical" order.

[15] Creative Evolution, p. 236.

Since, in Miller's view, people commonly see something as "ordered" only when it represents the grossest, most superficial sort of order,[16] whatever they call "chaotic" or "fantastic" or "nonsensical" must, in actuality, be the embodiment of a higher order. "Chaos" then becomes, in Miller's language, a synonym for "higher order," or "world order." Thus, if he is enamored of chaos, it is not in some simple-mindedly anarchistic way. He does not exalt chaos "in and of itself." Chaos is simply the means by which Miller can directly experience and hopefully "tune in to" a higher order,[17] just as anarchism is simply the vehicle for Miller's spiritual growth.

As has been seen, both Bergson and Miller link this higher order with creation and creativity, and in Sexus Miller discusses this association in terms of the artist:

> The great joy of the artist is to become aware of a higher order of things, to recognize by compulsive and spontaneous manipulation of his own impulses the resemblance between human creation and what is called "divine" creation. In works of fantasy the existence of law manifesting itself through order is even more apparent than in other works of art. Nothing is less mad, less chaotic, than a work of fantasy. Such a creation, which is

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[16] Which corresponds, of course, to Bergson's "physical order."

[17] Just as Miller claims Whitman was successful in "tuning in" to a higher order (see Chapter I).

> nothing less than pure invention, pervades all levels, creating, like water, its own level. The endless interpretations which are offered up contribute nothing, except to heighten the significance of what is seemingly unintelligible. This unintelligibility somehow makes profound sense.[18]

And a little later in the same work discussing "pure nonsense" Miller makes the point, similar to Bergson's, that what is considered "nonsense" is simply what is outside one's framework of comprehension. But quite unlike Bergson, Miller goes on to imply that all instances of "nonsense" must necessarily be examples of a higher order (rather than a confusion of the two types) and must, in actuality, have affinities with "the profound":

> This mysterious element, often referred to as "pure nonsense," brings with it the flavor and the aroma of that larger and impenetrable world in which we and all the heavenly bodies have their being. The term nonsense is one of the most baffling words in our vocabulary. . . . Nonsense belongs to other worlds, other dimensions, and the gesture with which we put it from us at times, the finality with which we dismiss it, testifies to its disturbing nature. Whatever we cannot include within our narrow framework of comprehension we reject. Thus profundity and nonsense may be seen to have certain unsuspected affinities.[19]

A sort of reversal, then, takes place in Miller's scheme of values. Since what we can include within our narrow framework of comprehension must necessarily be narrow, trivial, then what is outside our comprehension

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[18] *Sexus*, p. 270

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 271.

must be profound--and profundity and nonsense "may be seen to have certain unsuspected affinities." Just as the "chaotic" unintelligibility of fantasy "somehow makes profound sense," so the "ordered" intelligibility of logical thought somehow makes quite unprofound non-sense. Language and thought become, for Miller, artificially imposed barriers upon creative expression, barriers which his spiritual anarchism must topple. Thus, in Tropic of Cancer he says of thought and language:

> The great incestuous wish is to flow on, one with time, to merge the great image of the beyond with the here and now. A fatuous, suicidal wish that is constipated by words and paralyzed by thought.[20]

As shall be discussed in Chapter VII, in Miller's later life and writing Zen would assume increasing importance as a means of transcending the limits of words, of escaping the paralysis of thought.

In Miller's view, then, false order must be resisted, defied, whether it be the false order imposed upon behavior by traditional codes of conduct, styles of life, or the false order of logic, of language, of thought itself. The necessity for resisting false order adds the dimension of militancy to Miller's "spiritual anarchism" and gives rise to a distinct role for Miller: the rebel.

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[20]Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer (New York, 1961), p. 233.

False order is mechanistic and deadening. For Bergson as for Miller it is opposed to "will" and creativity; for both it is "inert"; for both typified by "the square." Both also recognize the "artificiality" of such order and for Miller artificiality means "vulnerability." Another role for Miller, then, rather spontaneously emerges as part of his spiritual anarchism: the clown. The anarchic zaniness of the clown becomes for Miller a natural way to expose the vulnerability of the existing order, an order which, despite its rigidity, is so frail it may be shattered by a "cream pie in the face." Indeed, such order must be so strictly maintained and enforced precisely because it is unnatural and frail.

False order prohibits growth, stifles self-realization. So long as one remains within the confines of its restrictions, accepting as possible only what has been realized in a dismal history of timidity, or what has been imagined as possible by the paralytic minds of educators and thinkers, so long, in other words, as one conforms to the false orders imposed upon him, the limitless potential of man will never be realized. Now and then a "realized man" will appear among men--a Christ, a Buddha, or to a lesser extent, a Whitman, a Thoreau--only to be either defamed as an outlaw, a degenerate, or a lunatic, or exalted as a savior, a saint. Anything, in Miller's view, to avoid accepting his <u>humanness</u>, and thus accepting one's

own human responsibility for similar development. This vision of human potentiality, more and more important in Miller's development as a writer, gives rise to a third role for Miller: the "saint."

These three principal roles, which are directly related to Miller's view of order and which are, in a sense, the behavioral components of his spiritual anarchism shall be more fully discussed later in the present paper. Of more immediate importance for an understanding of Miller's spiritual anarchism is a topic also closely related to his view of order: Miller's sense of history, his conception of his times.

As shall be seen in the next chapter, the struggle to resist false order and to establish, or, perhaps more accurately, re-establish, a true order based upon creativity and individualism is frequently expressed by Miller in "life" and "death," or "Life vs. Death" terms. To some extent Bergson himself encourages this sort of dualism by labeling one kind of order "vital" and the other "inert."

But Miller goes on further to weave these ideas of the Life vs. Death struggle of true order against false into an interesting conception of his times, expressed in terms of the co-existence of two worlds: the "Old World," typified by art, passion, and joy and represented by pre-Industrial-Revolution Europe, by ancient Greece, and by Miller's purely psychological place, "China," and the

"new world," typified by the machine, logic, and suffering, and represented by twentieth century America. Needless to say, Miller sees the logical, mechanical new world as the embodiment of false order and "Death," and the creative, passionate Old World as the expression of true order and "Life."

CHAPTER III

THE DEBRIS OF VANISHED WORLDS

Just as Miller's "anarchism" has generally been criticized in an overly simplistic way, so has his "apocalyptic vision" often been unfairly regarded as merely "prophet-of-doom" sort of raving. And, as with his anarchism, Miller himself lends fuel to such a view:

> Nothing will avail to offset this virus which is poisoning the whole world. America is the very incarnation of doom. She will drag the whole world down to the bottomless pit.[1]

Or, again:

> We are all going down together--red shirts, black shirts, pacifists, militarists, dadaists, surrealists, nonconformists, all kinds of ists and isms together. Down into the bottomless pit.
>
> Now my dear fellows, my dear Belgian, Swedish, Japanese, Dutch, British, French, American, Rhodesian, Arthurian, Cro-Magnon, Neanderthalian Surrealists, now is the time to grab hold of that most wonderful prehensile tail which has been dragging in the mud for countless centuries. Get hold of it, if you can, and swing for your lives! It's one chance out of a million and I wish you luck, you poor bleeding bastards.[2]

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[1]Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer (New York, 1961), p. 86.

[2]Henry Miller, The Cosmological Eye (New York, 1961), p. 196. Miller's "prophet of doom" voice is at its shrillest in works written just prior to the outbreak of World War II--most especially the Tropics books and The Colossus of Maroussi. While he seems to have

Such "bottomless-pit raving" notwithstanding, Miller's apocalyptic vision, to be understood fully, must be seen in the broader scope of his sense of history, his conception of his times. As such, it may be seen to be closely connected to his ideas on "order" outlined in the previous chapter.

To Miller, the world which is ending is the "Old World," a world of "true order" which may appear chaotic but which is the order of passion, creativity, the "illogical order of life itself." Geographically the Old World is identified with Europe, and later with ancient Greece and with China. But no matter what its geographical setting the Old World consists of an old way of life which can no longer be lived in the "modern world," of old sets of values, artistic and spiritual, whose significance and vitality have been lost. As the Old World passes away, then, passion, art, creativity--life itself--are dying.

As the Old World of true order dies, a new world of "false order" is undergoing a strangulated stillbirth.[3] Geographically, the new world is identified specifically

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anticipated a global holocaust which could extinguish life on earth, even after WW II he continues to speak of the "apocalypse," of the ruin descending upon America in particular and on the world in general.

[3]Later Miller will capitalize the term "New World," but he does so to distinguish it from the "new world" or "new order" of machinery, logic, efficiency. As shall be discussed in the present chapter, the "New World" is a visionary place in which true order is restored and man once again lives his "godlike" potential.

with the United States, but more broadly all institutionalized, mechanized civilizations are part of the new world. If the Old World is passion, art, creativity, Life itself, the new world is efficiency, machinery, logic--Death itself. In Miller's terms the passing of the Old World is the death of Life; the arrival of the new world is the birth of Death.

Miller's apocalyptic tone is largely a result, then, of his view of modern history as a struggle between the Old World and the new world, between vital "true order" and inert "false order." Or, more metaphorically, a struggle of Life vs. Death.

Miller is not, however, a sentimentalist who quixotically desires to return to an idealized past. However much Miller may idealize the past he recognizes that it is irretreviably gone. Rather than futilely attempt to revive the Old World Miller, in fact, wants to administer its coup de grace.

In Miller's judgment a main purpose of his own writing is to end the death throes of the Old World, to "finish it off." The Old World must be put to rest and forgotten because Miller wants to advance toward an envisioned "New World" (now capitalized by Miller) different from the new world of false order. As men lead lives of spiritual anarchism, resisting false order wherever it is encountered, this New World will be realized: a world

in which true order will be restored, and in which man will be restored to his "godlike" stature.

The past of European culture, like the past of Miller's own childhood, is idealized, and the "Old World" represents, for Miller, a place in which art and artists thrived in a "pastoral" world of "wine and fornication," in contrast to the new world of boiler plates and pistons:

> The world of Matisse is still beautiful in an old fashioned bedroom way. There is not a ball bearing in evidence, nor a boiler plate, nor a piston, nor a monkey wrench. It is the same old world that went gaily to the Bois in the pastoral days of wine and fornication.[4]

Part of Miller's attraction to Europe is an attraction to the past of the Old World, and Miller is himself, he claims in Black Spring, a "man of the old world":

> I am a man of the old world, a seed that was transplanted by the wind, a seed which failed to blossom in the mushroom oasis of America. I belong to the heavy tree of the past. My allegiance, physical and spiritual, is with the men of Europe. . . . I am proud not to belong to this century.[5]

When Miller leaves Europe for Greece, just before the outbreak of World War II, he encounters there an even older "Old World" with an even richer past. Whereas the Old World of Europe is valued chiefly for its "passion" and for its legacy of art works, Greece is praised for

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[4] Tropic of Cancer, p. 149.

[5] Henry Miller, Black Spring (New York, 1963), p. 25.

its "spirituality," for its ruins which hint of a glorious culture of unsurpassed human achievement.

For Miller, the pastoralism of Europe was, as he says in Tropic of Cancer, one of "wine and fornication." But the pastoralism of Greece was transcendental, metaphysical:

> Here the palate itself became metaphysically attuned: the drama was of the airs, of the upper regions, of the eternal conflict between the soul and the spirit.[6]

Or, again:

> Light acquires a transcendental quality: it is something more, something unfathomable, something holy. Here the light penetrates directly to the soul, opens the doors and windows of the heart, makes one naked, exposed, isolated in a metaphysical bliss. . . .[7]

Indeed, Miller becomes so enamored of the expansive spirit of the ancient Greeks, reflected in their ruins, that he scorns the small-mindedness of Europeans:

> He doesn't have le sens de mesure, as the French say. There you are--mesure. What a mean little word! They look at the Parthenon and they find the proportions so harmonious. All rot. The proportions which the Greeks extolled were superhuman. They weren't French proportions. . . .[8]

Consistently throughout his writings Miller refers to a still older place, a place which is, to a large

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[6]Henry Miller, The Colossus of Maroussi (New York, 1941), p. 20.

[7]Ibid., p. 45.

[8]Ibid., p. 65.

extent, more a psychological than a geographical place,[9] "China." The progression from New York, to Paris, to Greece, to "China" is, of course, a progression Eastward, and the influence of Eastern modes of thought on Miller is something Miller himself insists has been vastly underestimated[10] and shall be explored further in a later chapter of the present paper. But as Greece is a more mysterious and "spiritual" place than Paris, so is "China" an "older" and still more mysterious and spiritual place than Greece:

> One never thinks of China, but it is there all the time on the tips of your fingers and it makes your nose itchy; and long afterwards, when you have forgotten almost what a firecracker smells like, you wake up one day with gold leaf choking you and the broken pieces of punk waft back their pungent odor and the bright red wrappers give you a nostalgia for a people and a soil you have never known, but which is in your blood . . . a fugitive constant value to which you turn more and more as you get old, which you try to seize with the mind, but inefficiently, because in everything Chinese there is wisdom and mystery. . . .[11]

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[9]All "places" in Miller's writing are more than merely geographical--are largely "psychological landscapes," and this aspect of his writing has already received quite alot of critical attention (see Jane Nelson, Form and Image in the Fiction of Henry Miller, for example). But "China" is the most purely psychological or spiritual of "places."

[10]Miller insists upon this most emphatically in correspondence with Gordon (Writer and Critic).

[11]Henry Miller, Tropic of Capricorn (New York, 1961), p. 286.

That "China" is more than a geographical place is suggested by Miller's reference to it as a "constant value." But in Hamlet, a collection of correspondence between Miller and Michael Fraenkel, Miller compares "China" with Milton's "Paradise" and deals quite explicitly with its psychological, or spiritual, significance:

> China is a projection into the spiritual domain of this biologic condition of non-being. To be is to have mortal shape, mortal conditions, to struggle, to evolve. His Paradise represents--like the dream of the Buddhists--a Nirvana where there is no more personality and hence no conflict. It is the expression of the wish to triumph over reality, over becoming. To be.[12]

The Old World, then, is represented by Paris, by Greece, and by "China." All represent, to Miller, past cultures based, to a greater or lesser extent, upon "true order": upon passion, creativity. All represent some unfoldment and realization of the limitless potential of man, whether through artistic achievement, as in Paris, or through spiritual development, as in Greece and China.

Yet the Old World, whether represented by Paris or Greece or "China" is dead. Miller's early work, particularly Tropic of Cancer, is filled with images of death and decay partly because, in Miller's view, Europe is covered, quite literally, with the rotting remains of the

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[12]Henry Miller, Hamlet (New York, 1943), p. 82.

Old World, the "debris of vanished worlds."[13] Metaphorically, the world is covered with the moldering remains of an old way of life which can no longer be lived in the "modern world," of old sets of values, artistic and spiritual, whose significance has been lost and whose vitality is expended. Thus, for example, in Tropic of Cancer Miller walks by a cemetery in Paris:

> In the evening now and then, skirting the cemetery walls, I stumble upon the phantom odalisques of Matisse festered to the trees, their tangled manes drenched with sap. A few feet away, removed by incalculable eons of time, lies the prone and mummu-swathed ghost of Baudelaire, of a whole world that will belch no more.[14]

Even Greece and China are in a state of dissolution, decay. As Miller says in The Colossus of Maroussi:

> The game is played out, the figures have melted away, the lines are frazzled, the board is mildewed. Everything has become barbarous again.[15]

And, of "China":

> And all the while China hanging over us like Fate itself. A China rotting away, crumbling to dust like a huge dinosaur. . . .[16]

As the Old World slowly dies and leaves its moldering remains upon the earth, a new world is coming into

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[13] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 197.

[14] Tropic of Cancer, p. 149.

[15] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 144.

[16] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 146.

existence stillborn. Thus, added to the many images of corpses and decay found in Miller's early writing and caused by the slow decomposition of the Old World (part, of course, of the significance of the title Tropic of Cancer) are images of strangulated foetuses, for the new world of machinery and death (the two become almost synonymous for Miller) is arriving stillborn. Thus, in Tropic of Cancer Miller bitterly observes:

> To fathom the new reality it is first necessary to dismantle the drains, to lay open the gangrened ducts which compose the genito-urinary system that supplies the excreta of art. The odor of the day is permanganate and formaldehyde. The drains are clogged with strangled embryos.[17]

Or, again, a bit later in the same work:

> Over all the earth a grey desert, a carpet of steel and cement. Production! More nuts and bolts, more barbed wire, more dog biscuits, more lawn mowers, more ball bearings, more high explosives . . . forward! Time presses. The embryo is pushing through the neck of the womb, and there's not even a gob of spit to ease the passage. A dry, strangulating birth. Not a wail, not a chirp. Salut au monde![18]

As has been mentioned, the machine, which for Miller is emblematic of the new world, becomes synonymous with "death":

> Mechanical devices have nothing to do with man's real nature--they are merely traps which Death has baited for him.[19]

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[17] Tropic of Cancer, p. 149.

[18] Ibid., p. 240.

[19] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 113.

And America itself is seen as one enormous "death machine":

> By simple external pressure, by force of surroundings and example, by the very climate which activity engenders, one can become part of a monstrous death machine, such as America. . . . What does a dynamo know of life, of peace, of reality?[20]

But in Miller's larger anarchic view, America is not the only "death machine," though it may be the principal one. All modern, mechanized, institutionalized civilization is, to Miller, a "bringer of death":

> The aeroplane brings death; the radio brings death; the machine gun brings death; the tinned goods bring death; the priest brings death; the schools bring death; the laws bring death, the electricity brings death, the plumbing brings death. . . . No matter whether we are friends or enemies, no matter whether we call ourselves Jap, Turk, Russian, French, English, German or American, wherever we go, wherever we cast our shadow, wherever we breathe, we poison and destroy. . . . Hooray for civilization! Hooray! We will kill you all, everybody, everywhere. Hooray for death! Hooray! Hooray![21]

Or, later in The Colossus of Maroussi, in a quasi-nonsensical passage:

> Should you wish to buy a second-hand sewing machine get in touch with Murder, Death, & Blight, Inc. of Oswego, Saskatchewan, as I am the sole, authorized, living agent this side of the ocean and have no permanent headquarters. As of this day forth, in witness whereof, heretofore solemnly sealed and affixed, I do faithfully demit, abdicate, abrogate, evaginate and fornicate all powers, signatories, seals and offices in favor of peace and joy, dust and heat, sea and sky,

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[20] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 289.

[21] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 128.

> God and angel, having to the best of my ability performed the duties of dealer, slayer, blighter, bludgener and betrayer of the Soiled and Curlized Sewing Machine manufactured by Murder, Death & Blight, Inc. . . .[22]

As the Old World dies off not only are artists succumbing to the engineers and mechanics of the new world, but all flesh and blood "loving" people are becoming as extinct as "buffalo" as the "steel and concrete carpet," the terrain of the new world, continues to spread:

> I should be saying Good Morning now to Tom Jordan, but it hangs there on my lips trembling. What morning is this that I should waste in salutation? Is it <u>good</u>, this morning or mornings? I am losing the power to distinguish morning from morning. In the ledger is the world of the fast disappearing buffalo; next door the riveters are sewing up the ribs of the coming skyscrapers.[23]

And, a bit later in <u>Black Spring</u>:

> Twenty years ahead of me and this thing growing worse by the hour. It's throttling me. In twenty years there won't be any soft, lovable men waiting to greet me. Every bosom pal that goes now is a buffalo lost and gone forever. Steel and concrete hedging me in. The pavement getting harder and harder. The new world eating into me, expropriating me.[24]

As the "soft," "loving" men of the Old World die off, they are replaced by the hard, emotionless, machine-like men of the new world. In all of Miller's writing

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[22] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 144.

[23] <u>Black Spring</u>, p. 100.

[24] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 111.

perhaps the prime example of the man of the new world is Karen Lundgren, an acquaintance of Miller's who appears in Plexus to hire Miller, during one of Miller's many penniless, jobless, prospectless periods, as his assistant. Lundgren is building a house, and writing a book, fittingly, on statistics. Miller is hired to assist on a menial level in both projects.

Lundgren is a somewhat comic example of the man of the new world, a man who so cherishes the ideals of the new world he inadvertently becomes a walking parody of those ideals. His obsessive concern to apply logic in every situation is totally illogical; his excessive desire for complete efficiency makes for gross inefficiency; his self-conscious need to maintain self-control leaves him constantly on the threshold of hysteria.[25]

Lundgren is, above all, machine-like:

> He was a giant with curly blond hair, soft-spoken and excessively polite. He possessed the combined instincts of the ant, the bee and the beaver. Thorough, systematic, tenacious as a bulldog, whatever he engaged in he pursued to the limit. He played as hard as he worked. Work, however, was his passion. . . . He was nothing but a walking, talking, labor-saving device.[26]

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[25]When, for example, he begins to laugh at an amusing story read after dinner, his laughter becomes increasingly uncontrolled until he becomes hysterical and Miller must slap him to "bring him to."

[26]Henry Miller, Plexus (New York, 1965), p. 322.

If work is Karen's passion, it is his only passion. Like a machine he functions without emotions, without feelings:

> Now and then, to be sure, he indulged in a hearty laugh. He laughed too heartily, I might say, and always at the wrong time or for the wrong reason. This ability to laugh he cultivated, just as he had once cultivated his muscles.[27]

Even eating is performed mechanically:

> He ate without relish, to stoke the furnace, and when he was through he pushed the dishes aside and began figuring on the tablecloth, or if there were no tablecloth, on the bare boards. . . . If the knife he grabbed were dirty he would slowly and deliberately wipe it clean with the tablecloth, or with his handkerchief. Always without fuss or emotion.[28]

Miller goes on to postulate that Lundgen's sex life must be similarly robot-like:

> He had little humor and almost no imagination. Outwardly he appeared to be a model husband, always ready to cater to his wife's whims, always alert to serve her, always solicitous and protective, at times positively chivalric. I couldn't help but wonder at times what it would be like to be married to this human adding machine. With Karen everything proceeded according to schedule. Intercourse, too, no doubt. Perhaps he kept a secret file reminding him when intercourse was due, together with notes on the results--spiritual, moral, mental and physical.[29]

When Miller discovers that Lundgren, famous for having

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[27] Ibid., p. 323.

[28] Ibid., p. 328.

[29] Ibid., p. 344.

devised a highly complex filing system, has filed away his own old shoes and hats, all indexed and cross-referenced, his judgment that Lundgren is "crazy as a loon" is pronounced not only upon Lundgren, but also, by implication, upon the filing system, the kind of minds that think up such systems, and the kind of society that mass-produces such minds:

> Just as I was about to turn in I noticed on the shelf above the bed a row of hat boxes and shoe boxes. On each one was written an index number, indicating the size, color and condition of the hats and shoes. I opened them to see if they really contained hats and shoes. They did. None of them were in a condition to be worn by anyone but a panhandler. This was the last straw for me.
> 'I tell you,' I groaned 'that guy's batty. Crazy as a loon.'[30]

As Miller and his wife flee Karen's apartment Miller pauses to leave a "farewell note"--scrawled on a map with a broom handle dipped in a paint pot. In a "fitting" postscriptum to the note Miller adds:

> Choosing a sharp-pointed pencil I wrote in a microscopic hand: 'To be filed under C, for catarrh, cleanliness, cautharides, cowbells, chihuahua, cochin-china, constipation, curlicues, crinology, cacchination, coterminous, cow-flop, cicerone, cockroaches, cimex lectularius, cemetaries, crepes Suzette, corn-fed hogs, citrate of magnesia, cowries, cornucopia, castration, crotchets, cuneform, cistern, cognomen, cockaigne, concertina, cotyledons, crapulated, cosine, creosote, crupper, copulation, Clytemnestra, crolgosy--and Blue Label Catsup.'[31]

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[30] Ibid., p. 357.

[31] Ibid.

Despite Miller's contempt for the new order he does not, as many critics allege, sentimentally desire a return to past modes of life, past values. He understands the impossibility or recapturing the past and wants to move forward toward a visionary New World in which true order will be restored. Rather than revive the Old World, then, Miller in fact wants to administer a coup de grace. Part of Miller's effort as a writer is to kill and bury the Old World:

> What's in the seed scares the living piss out of me: a brand new world is coming out of the egg, and no matter how fast I write the Old World doesn't die fast enough. I hear the new machine guns and the millions of bones splintered at once; I see dogs running mad and pigeons dropping with letters tied to their ankles.[32]

Or, in Tropic of Cancer:

> For a hundred years or more the world, our world, has been dying. And not one man, in these last hundred years or so, has been crazy enough to put a bomb up the asshole of creation and set if off. The world is rotting away, dying piecemeal. But it needs the coup de grace, it needs to be blown to smithereens. Not one of us intact, and yet we have in us all the continents and the seas between the continents and the birds of the air. We are going to put it down--the evolution of this world which has died but which has not been buried. . . . It will be enormous, the Book.[33]

Miller detests the new order, but sees that the Old Order, however attractive it may appear in comparison,

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[32] Black Spring, p. 104.

[33] Tropic of Cancer, p. 26.

is in a state of dissolution. Though the new order represents death, any nostalgic attempt to return to the past is, to Miller, a more hideous kind of death. Thus, in The Colossus of Maroussi he delivers this soliloquy after visiting an "aristocratic" woman who has been extolling the glories of the past:

> Madame, I am thinking of you now, if that sweet and fetid stench of the past which you throw off. You are Madame Nostalgia rotting in the cemetery of inverted dreams. You are the black satin ghost of everything which refuses to die a natural death. You are the cheap paper flower carnation of weak and useless womanhood. I repudiate you, your country, your walls, your orchards, your tempered, hand-laundered climate. I call up the malevolent spirits of the jungle to assassinate you in your sleep. I turn the golden torque on you to harass you in your last agonies. You are the white of a rotten egg. You stink.
>
> Madame, there are always two paths to take: one back towards the comfort and security of death, the other forward to nowhere. You would like to fall back amongst your quaint tombstones and familiar cemetery walls. Fall back, then, fall deep and fathomless into the ocean of annihilation. Fall back into the bloody torpor which permits idiots to be crowned as kings. Fall back and writhe in torment with the evolutionary worms. I am going on. . . .[34]

Miller is "going on" to establish a "new world," but not the "New World" of the machine and death, and not even "new" in a chronological sense. More accurately, one should say his desire is not to establish but to re-establish a New World. In Tropic of Capricorn Miller

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[34] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 143.

discusses his prophesy of this world which is quite literally still in the seed, still an "ovarian" world:

> I was describing the New World--unfortunately a little too soon because it had not yet been discovered and nobody could be persuaded that it existed. It was an ovarian world, still hidden away in the Fallopian tubes. Naturally nothing was clearly formulated; there was only the slight suggestion of a backbone visible, and certainly no arms or legs, no hair, no nails, no teeth.[35]

Indeed, nowhere in Miller's writing is this New World clearly formulated. It remains always a "faint suggestion." Yet some characteristics of this world are defined and seem to form the "essence" of the envisioned New World.

To Miller the New World is outside chronological time. It is neither "old" nor "new," but rather "eternal." And while the term does have geographical and historical import[36] it refers largely to a "kingdom within," to a level of spiritual development which will permit the restoration of faculties now dormant--faculties which when awakened will restore man to his full "godlike" stature.

The eternality of Miller's envisioned New World, as well as the fact that it is a "kingdom of heaven within," as it were, is clear in a passage from Tropic of Capricorn:

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[35] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 286.

[36] That is, occasionally Miller does suggest that ancient Greece, for example, did embody the values of this world.

> I say it was a New World I was describing, but like the New World which Columbus discovered it turned out to be far older than any we have known. I saw beneath the superficial physiognomy of skin and bone to the indestructable world which man has always carried within him: it was neither old nor new, really, but the eternally true world which changes from moment to moment.[37]

Another vision of this New World, expressed after an inspirational visit to Delphi in The Colossus of Maroussi, reiterates what was said in Capricorn, but adds the dimension of "spiritual growth." For the New World to exist man must become "restored to his senses":

> It was an impressive moment, to say the least. For a second, so it seemed, the curtain had been lifted on a world which had never really perished but which had rolled away like a cloud and was preserving itself intact, inviolate, until the day when, restored to his senses, man would summon it back to life again.[38]

The idea of the restoration of human powers, sometimes referred to as "faculties," sometimes as "vision," is frequently expressed in Miller's writing. These faculties are part of the unrealized potential of man to which Miller refers again and again[39] and which, when restored, will again elevate man to his proper "godlike" stature:

> At Mycenae the gods once walked the earth, of that there can be no question. And at Mycenae

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[37] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 286.

[38] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 197.

[39] See Chapter I.

> the progeny of these same gods produced a type of man who was artistic to the core and at the same time monstrous in his passions. . . . What happened here is beyond all conjecture. The historians and the archaeologists have woven a slim and altogether unsatisfying fabric to cover the mystery. They piece together fragmentary items which are linked in the customary manner to suit their necessitous logic. Nobody has yet penetrated the secret of the hoary scene. It defies the feeble processes of the intellectual mind. We must await the return of the gods, the restoration of faculties which now lie dormant.[40]

Or, again:

> I am convinced that there are many layers of history and that the final reading will be delayed until the gift of seeing past and future as one is restored to us.[41]

Miller's conception of history and of human evolutionary development is, then, never clearly formulated in an integrated way. Like his ovarian vision of the "New World," Miller's conception of history is only slightly more than a "vague suggestion." Yet certain features are clear.

Miller has a sense of an Old World, or Old Order, which valued creativity and passion, but which is dead, or partly dead, with moldering remains covering the earth. Appealing as the recollection of that world may be, and it is often romanticized and idealized by Miller, its mode of life, its values, are those of a dead world and to become nostalgic is to yield, like the "aristocratic"

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[40] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 86.

[41] Ibid., p. 198.

woman of The Colossus of Maroussi, to a kind of cultural necrophilia. Rather than futilely attempt to re-enter this world or to revive it Miller wants to administer the coup de grace.

As this Old World flounders in its death throes a new world is laboring to be born. But its birth is strangulated, stillborn. For this, to Miller, is the birth of logic, precision, efficiency, the machine--Death, to Miller. It is as if in the passing of the Old World "Life" is dying, and in the coming of the new world "Death" is being born: thus, the apocalyptic tone of so much of his writing, particularly Tropic of Cancer, and the numerous images of death, paralysis, and decay. Thus also his hysterical "Hooray for civilization! Hooray! We will kill you all, everybody, everywhere. Hooray for Death! Hooray! Hooray!"

To Miller this new world must be resisted at all costs. Complicity with it, even justified in terms of the necessity to "earn a living"[42] is the most unforgivable of sins. Not only will self-realization be precluded, not only will one be unable to explore the limitless possibilities of human existence, but, worst of all, he will be lost among the "walking corpses" who make their way through a world designed and controlled by such types as Karen

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[42]See Chapter I, p. 20, for discussion.

Lundgren: human adding machines who devise intricate systems to file and cross reference shoe boxes full of old hats. This instead of becoming a Buddha--or, as Miller insists, surpassing the Buddha.

The urgent necessity to resist the new order of Death is the impelling force behind the militancy of Miller's spiritual anarchism. Contempt for values which stifle personal and artistic development and scorn for an order based upon the superficiality and artificiality of logic and efficiency give rise to Miller's stance as a "rebel."

But militancy is merely one dimension of his anarchism. Miller's vision of the limitless possibilities of man gives rise to a different urgency: the urgency for "self-realization." To Miller, one must "go on" along an individual path of personal liberation, resisting all institutions, traditions, and codes of behavior which define and limit the possibilities of human development. Only by personal experimentation and exploration, only by leading a life of spiritual anarchism, will one be able to attain self-realization.

CHAPTER IV

LIBERATION

Throughout the Tropics books Miller describes a process of liberation. Tropic of Capricorn, dealing with the years Miller worked as an employment manager in New York City, relates his painful disentanglement from a loveless marriage as well as his escape from the "Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company." The work ends with his resolution to flee his native land in order to become an artist. Tropic of Cancer (which chronologically preceded Tropic of Capricorn) "continues" the story in Paris, where Miller lives a bohemian life in an effort to be free of all bourgeois habits, concerns, and values.

To Miller the process of self-realization begins with liberation. To be liberated, in Miller's view, is to penetrate to the core of one's true nature. Liberation consists of freeing oneself from the binding influence of past definitions of oneself based upon societal prescriptions, traditions, institutionalized patterns of behavior, habits, and moral codes. But the goal of liberation lies beyond the freedom from such restrictions. Once free of such binding influences one may then go on to challenge directly--by the experience of one's life--the assumed

limits of "humanness." Thus, as has been suggested earlier and as shall be further developed in the next chapter, beyond liberation lies the quest for a level of attainment, of fulfillment, usually considered "super-human."[1]

Liberation is, then, essentially a process of elimination, of casting off all that is imposed upon one, all that not the true "self." The "technique," as it were, of liberation is to strip away everything that can be stripped away, until the process expends itself and one is left, presumably, with the "undiminishable" core of one's true nature, the "rock-bottom"[2] essence of one's self. Thus, though liberation may appear to be involved with externals insofar as one must struggle against institutions, society, laws, its real significance is inner-directed, internal. The Tropics books, then, are the story of the beginnings of Miller's resistance, the beginnings of his struggle for liberation.

As soon as the books were published in France they were labeled "pornographic." The judgment continued to have legalistic import for almost twenty years, during which time the sexual content of the books was focused upon rather exclusively. Changing standards and

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[1]See Chapter I, pp. 6-9, and Chapter VI.

[2]This term assumes fuller significance when one recalls that Miller speaks of the nature of the self as "rock-like." As shall be explored later in the chapter, then, "rock-bottom" is indeed the essence of the self.

responsible critical attention have made arguments about Miller's "pornography" anachronistic, and the place of sex in the Tropics books can now be considered in proper perspective.

To speak of the "place" of sex in Miller's writing may be somewhat misleading for a couple of reasons. First of all, the term does not come to grips with the multidimensionality of Miller's sex, which shall be discussed shortly. Secondly, it suggests that sex has a purely secondary significance--perhaps symbolical, or metaphorical--in Miller's writing. But Miller's explicit sexual descriptions are born partly of a Whitmanesque delight in the human body itself[3] and to speak of the "place" of sex somewhat distorts the matter.

More importantly, sex in Miller's writing serves no single purpose, but rather a host of purposes. All, however, are related to Miller's spiritual anarchism, and, more directly, all are related to "liberation."

Miller's writing presents a rather complete account of his life extending from the time of his escape from

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[3]Though this observation is found frequently in Miller's criticism, the present writer does not mean to imply that Miller's sexuality could be labeled "Whitmanesque." While there are similarities, there are significant differences. Mainly, one feels quite sure that the poet who found nothing repellent in any part of his body, or in the body of any man "healthy and clean" would nevertheless be displeased with many passages in Miller which denigrate the body, or focus, for example, on the minute physical details of venereal disease.

the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company--or, to choose a possibly more important event, the time of his initial encounters with "Mona"--to the present. Tropic of Capricorn makes some specific references to his life before then, but the picture is sketchy: Miller is generally satisfied with having the reader understand that in the years preceding his marriage and throughout his marriage he was a "walking corpse"--breathing, talking, walking, but emotionally, spiritually, dead.[4] When Miller refers to this period he consistently employs images of imprisonment and death:

> Just as the city itself had become a huge tomb in which men struggled to earn a decent death so my own life came to resemble a tomb which I was constructing out of my own death.[5]

Or, more graphically:

> But going over the bridge the sun setting, the skyscrapers gleaming like phosphorescent cadavers, the remembrance of the past set in . . . remembrance of going back and forth over the bridge, going to a job which was death, returning to a home which was a morgue, memorizing Faust looking down into the cemetery, spitting into the cemetery from the elevated train, the same guard on the platform every morning, an imbecile, the other imbeciles reading their

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[4]This "living death," and the attempt to escape it, was, in Miller's opinion, a main feature of the work of D. H. Lawrence, and was the source of Lawrence's appeal to Miller. For a discussion see "The Universe of Death" in The Cosmological Eye, by Miller.

[5]Henry Miller, Tropic of Capricorn (New York, 1961), p. 68.

> newspapers, new skyscrapers going up,. new tombs to work in and die in. . . .[6]

Describing this same period in the later work, Nexus, Miller speaks of his leaving the Telegraph Company as an escape from prison. Having quit he returns home ecstatic, and Mona asks:

> "Aren't you slightly mad this morning?"
> "Yes, yes that I am. But I could be madder. Why not? When a prisoner is released from his cell should he not go mad? I've served six life-times plus thirty-five and a half years and thirteen days. Now they release me. Pray God its not too late."[7]

Whenever Miller is "trapped" into taking a steady job, or in any way forced to comply with the habits or customs of the bourgeoisie, the images of death and imprisonment return. When, for example, in Cancer Miller is forced by the extremest sort of poverty to accept a teaching job at a boarding school in Dijon, France, he repeatedly speaks of being a prisoner, and of "escape":

> It was spring before I managed to escape from the penitentiary, and then only by a stroke of fortune.[8]

Or, again, when poverty forces him to live in with a Hindu friend in return for performing household chores:

> A crazy Hindu if ever there was one! And parsimonious as a string bean. I'll have a great

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[6]Ibid., p. 50.

[7]Henry Miller, Nexus (New York, 1965), p. 306.

[8]Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer (New York, 1961), p. 260.

> laugh over it when I get out of his clutches, but just now I'm a prisoner.[9]

When Miller escapes from the prison routine of the middle-class work-day, when he comes alive again after his long "living death," he experiences a great upsurge of appetite. Continuing the prisoner, or "slave" references, he shouts:

> "Okay then, breakfast! This morning I'd like a slice of watermelon, the left wing of a turkey, a bit of possum and some good old-fashioned cornpone. . . . Hallelujah!"[10]

Miller's appetite goes far beyond a simple craving for food; it is a hunger for life--often the hunger of a "starving" man. Thus, in Cancer:

> "Yes, a nice little piece of bacon, not too fatty," she says. Zut alors! Throw in some sweet breads, throw in some mountain oysters and some peet clams! Throw in some fried liverwurst while you're at it; I could gobble up the fourteen hundred plays of Lope de Vega one sitting.[11]

And, again in the same work:

> One must burrow into life again in order to put on flesh. The word must become flesh; the soul thirsts. On whatever crumb my eye fastens, I will pounce and devour. If to live is the paramount thing, then I will live, even if I must become a cannibal.[12]

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[9] Ibid., p. 73.

[10] Nexus, p. 307.

[11] Tropic of Cancer, p. 260.

[12] Ibid., p. 90.

Miller is "hungry" not only for food, then, but also for sex, for music, for wine, for art, books, conversation, travel. In Sexus he says, speaking of Mona:

> I'm insatiable. I eat hair, dirty wax, dry blood clots, anything and everything you call yours. Show me your father, with his kites, his race horses, his free passes for the opera: I will eat them all, swallow them alive. Where is the chair you sit in, where is your favorite comb, your toothbrush, your nail file? Trot them out that I may devour them at one gulp. You have a sister more beautiful than yourself, you say. Show her to me--I want to lick the flesh from her bones.[13]

Or, again:

> Sometimes I get so hungry, so rapacious, that I could eat people up. I can't wait for them to tell me things . . . how they feel . . . what they want . . . and so on. I want to chew them alive . . . find out for myself . . . quick . . . all at once.[14]

For Miller, hunger becomes a metaphor for life. To be "hungry" is to be alive, truly alive. Satiety is inertia; lack of hunger, death. Thus, as Miller comes alive again in Capricorn and Cancer after perhaps twenty years of, in his judgment, "living death," he becomes hungry, and sees this hunger as a necessary characteristic of all men who are "reborn," who come to life again. In Capricorn he asserts:

> I felt exactly like Jesus Christ would have felt if he had been taken down from the cross

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[13]Henry Miller, Sexus (New York, 1965), p. 14.

[14]Ibid., p. 578.

> and not permitted to die in the flesh. I am sure that the shock of crucifixion would have been so great that he would have suffered a complete amnesia as regards humanity. I am certain that after his wounds had healed he wouldn't have given a damn about the tribulations of mankind but would have fallen with the greatest relish upon a fresh cup of coffee and a slice of toast, assuming he could have had it.[15]

To Miller the man with "hunger" is a creator, but a desperate creator. He is prepared to destroy, to cause chaos, if necessary, in order to create. He has himself come back to life, and now recognizes that the world all about him is dead. In Cancer Miller asserts:

> The world is pooped out. . . . Who that has a desperate, hungry eye can have the slightest regard for these existent governments, laws, codes, principles, ideals, ideas, totems and taboos?[16]

And, again in the same work:

> If at intervals of centuries there does appear a man with a desperate, hungry look in his eyes, a man who would turn the world upside down in order to create a new race, the love that he brings to the world is turned to bile and he becomes a scourge.[17]

To Miller, sex is part of this all-consuming hunger for life. Moreover, sex is a way of restoring life to the lifeless world, a way of jolting the world out of the "obscenity" of its inertia and paralysis:

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[15] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 67.

[16] Tropic of Cancer, p. 225.

[17] Ibid., p. 224.

> When a hungry, desperate spirit appears and makes the guinea pigs squeal it is because he knows that beneath the hard carapace of indifference there is concealed the ugly gash, the wound that never heals. And he puts the live wire right between the legs; he hits below the belt, scorches the very gizzards. It is no use putting on rubber gloves; all that can be coolly and intellectually handled belongs to the carapace and a man who is intent on creation always dives beneath, to the open wound, to the festering obscene horror . . . The dry, fucked-out crater is obscene. More obscene than anything is inertia. More blasphemous than the bloodiest oath is paralysis. If there is only a gaping wound left it must gash forth though it produce nothing but toads and bats and homunculi.[18]

Thus Miller often describes bars and bordellos as the only "live" places in dreary or dead landscapes. In Cancer, for example, he describes Paris:

> Indigo sky swept clear of fleecy clouds, gaunt trees infinitely extended, their black boughs gesticulating like a sleepwalker. Somber, spectral trees, their trunks pale as cigar ash. A silence supreme and altogether European. Shutters drawn, shops barred. A red glow here and there to mark a tryst.[19]

Or, later in the same work:

> Every bar is alive, throbbing, the dice loaded; the cashiers are perched like vultures on their high stools and the money they handle has a human stink to it. There is no equivalent in the Banque de France for the blood money that passes for currency here, the money that glistens with human sweat, that passes like a forest fire from hand to hand and leaves behind it a smoke and stench. A man who can walk through the Faubourg Montmarte at night

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[18] Ibid., p. 225.

[19] Ibid., p. 5.

> without panting or sweating, without a prayer or a curse on his lips, a man like that has no balls, and if he has, then he ought to be castrated.[20]

Even money--which Miller otherwise detests--assumes a kind of worth in the Paris bars because of the "human stink" it acquires through its association with sex. The association of sex with "humanness" (as opposed to all that is, in Miller's judgment, "inhuman": machinery, logic, efficiency) is an important idea in all of Miller's writing. In The World of Sex sex even assumes a kind of moral dimension as a basis for humanistic compassion:

> It is a natural thing to gravitate toward the bright lights when one comes upon a strange city after dark. My instinct is to move toward the dark places, where the silence is punctuated by ribald shouts, coarse laughter, filthy oaths and meaningless grunts . . . or now and then a sob. The sound of someone sobbing behind a shuttered window reduces me to ashes. I am not only moved to the depths, I am often sexually excited. A woman sobbing in the dark so often means a woman begging for love. I tell myself that her sobs will soon be stifled by a passionate embrace; I want to hear the squals and grunts which follow.[21]

Repeatedly throughout Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn, his two most consistently sexual books, Miller insists that sex without passion has no human significance. Indeed, worthwhile sex is often contrasted with mechanical, passionless "sexual intercourse" (which, as shall be discussed later, is the style of copulation

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[20] Ibid., p. 142.

[21] Henry Miller, The World of Sex (New York, 1965), p. 122.

of the "new order") and mechanical sex is scorned. In Cancer Miller describes witnessing a friend and a whore attempting to copulate:

> As I watch Van Norden tackle her, it seems to me that I'm looking at a machine whose cogs have slipped. Left to themselves, they could go on in this way forever, grinding and slipping, without ever anything happening. Until a hand shuts the motor off. The sight of them coupled like a pair of goats without the least spark of passion, grinding and grinding away for no reason except the fifteen francs, washes away every bit of feeling I have except the inhuman one of satisfying my curiosity. The girl is lying on the edge of the bed and Van Norden is bent over her like a satyr with his two feet solidly planted on the floor. I am sitting on a chair behind him, watching their movements with a cool, scientific detachment; it doesn't matter to me if it should last forever. It's like watching one of those crazy machines which throw newspapers out, millions and billions and trillions of them with their meaningless headlines. . . . I wouldn't be able to differentiate between this phenomenon and the rain falling or a volcano erupting. As long as that spark of passion is missing there is no human significance in the performance.[22]

To Miller sex at its worst is passionless, mechanical; when he remembers one of his most dismal sexual affairs (and also one of his first) he characterizes it as "mechanical":

> I had to wait another two years before I could get my end in again, as they say, and then it wasn't so good because I got a beautiful dose with it, and besides it wasn't in the grass and it wasn't summer, and there was no heat in it but just a cold mechanical fuck for a buck in a dirty little hotel room. . . .[23]

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[22] Tropic of Cancer, p. 129.

[23] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 255.

Miller's passionate sexual affairs stand in total contrast to the mechanical sex. When sex is truly worthwhile to Miller it occurs literally amid showers of hot cinders, or in the midst of tempestuous storms. Consider, for example, his first sexual encounter, related in Tropic of Cancer:

> Anyway, one night I was lying in the grass near the railroad tracks; it was a sweltering summer's night and people were lying about anywhere and everywhere, like panting dogs. I wasn't thinking of Lola at all--I was just mooning there, too hot to think about anything. Suddenly I see a woman coming along the narrow cinderpath. I'm lying sprawled out on the embankment and nobody around that I can notice. The woman is coming along slowly, head down, as though she were dreaming. As she gets close I recognize her. "Lola!" I call. "Lola!" She seems to be really astonished to see me there. "Why, what are you doing here?" she says, and with that she sits down beside me on the embankment. I didn't bother to answer her, I didn't say a word--I just crawled over her and flattened her. "Not here, please" she begged, but I paid no attention. I got my hand between her legs, all tangled up in that thick sporran of hers, and she was sopping wet, like a horse slavering. It was my first fuck, by Jesus, and it had to be that a train would come along and shower hot sparks over us.[24]

In the same work Miller frolics with two women in the Catskill Mountains while a thunderstorm rages. They run about naked beneath the bolts of lightning, copulating in a lake while thunder crashes and rain pours down:

> We had brought our clothes along and we were going to get dressed, the three of us, in this little box. It was frightfully hot and sultry

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[24] Ibid., p. 254.

> and the clouds were gathering for a storm. Agnes--that was Francie's friend--was in a hurry to get dressed.[25]

When the storm begins all become anxious at the danger--one girl, Agnes, particularly so--and Miller becomes a clown:

> We were all thoroughly frightened now and in a quandry as to what to do. Agnes was wringing her hands and praying out loud. . . . I thought she was going to faint or something. Suddenly I got the bright idea of doing a war dance in the rain--to distract them.[26]

When Agnes, beside herself with fear of the storm and puzzlement at Miller's bizarre antics, distractedly jumps into the river, Miller plunges in after her, followed by the other woman, and soon all are engaging in madcapt sex while clinging to bobbing boats in the storm-tossed river.

Such sex, then, contrasts with what Miller calls "sexual intercourse." "Sexual intercourse" is the mechanical, passionless sex performed by the robot-like men and women of the "new order": performed in bedrooms always, and performed routinely, mechanically, like brushing the teeth or emptying the bladder before going to sleep at night. Sexual intercourse is, to Miller, passionless, mechanical, dead:

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[25] Ibid., p. 257.

[26] Ibid., p. 258.

> It is Sunday morning and I am lying blissfully dead to the world on my bed of ferroconcrete. Around the corner is the cemetery, which is to say--the world of sexual intercourse.[27]

In a surrealistic passage Miller links the "historical" beginnings of sexual intercourse with the rise of machines:

> Hard by is a McCormick threshing machine, a reaper and binder with a thirty-six horsepower engine and no cutout. The harvest is in and the workers are counting their wages in the distant fields. This is the flush of dawn on the first day of sexual intercourse.[28]

And when Miller imagines the sound of all the sexual intercourse going on at that moment in the world, he hears the "clanking" of machinery:

> And now I'm on the same bed and the light that's in me refuses to be extinguished. The world of men and women are making merry in the cemetery grounds. They are having sexual intercourse, God bless them, and I am alone in the Land of Fuck. It seems to me that I hear the clanking of a great machine, the linotype bracelets passing through the wringer of sex.[29]

Opposed to "sexual intercourse," then, is Miller's own style of sex, the sex of "the Land of Fuck":

> What is unmentionable is pure fuck and pure cunt: it must be mentioned only in de luxe editions, otherwise the world will fall apart. What holds the world together, as I have learned from bitter experience, is sexual intercourse. But fuck, the real thing, cunt, the real thing, seems to contain

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[27] Ibid., p. 197.

[28] Ibid., p. 193.

[29] Ibid., p. 197.

> some unidentified element which is far more dangerous than nitroglycerin.[30]

Though Miller never clearly defines this psychological, or spiritual,[31] terrain, its main characteristic is precisely the ingredient lacking in sexual intercourse: passion. Whereas the mechanical, passionless "sexual intercourse" of the new order is performed always in bedrooms at night, Miller's sex is enacted in hallways, on dance floors, in taxicabs, while riding in crowded buses, in parks, and sometimes even on the sidewalks of city streets. Though Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn, and Sexus, Miller's most sexual books, abound with details of sexual encounters, few ever occur in bedrooms at night, and few in the usual "female supine" position:

> . . . I went instinctively to the furnished room where the waitress lived with whom I was carrying on a romantic affair. She came to the door in her night shirt, begging me not to go upstairs with her because of the hour. We went inside in the hallway, and leaned against the radiator to keep warm. In a few minutes I had it out and was giving it to her as best I could in that strained position.[32]

Or, again, when Miller meets his most passionate love, "Mara":

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[30] Ibid., p. 192.

[31] "The Land of Fuck" is a "spiritual" terrain in that sex has the potential to jolt one out of the stupor Miller calls "living death," and then provides the impetus for liberation.

[32] Sexus, p. 259.

> We got into a cab and, as it wheeled around, Mara impulsively climbed over me and straddled me. We went into a blind fuck, with the cab lurching and careening, our teeth knocking, tongue bitten, and the juice pouring from her like hot soup. As we passed an open plaza on the other side of the river, just at daybreak, I caught the astonished glance of a cop as we sped by.[33]

When Miller makes love to Mara on a park bench they again encounter a policeman:

> I sat down on the rough bench and Mara seated herself on my lap. She had on the stiff dotted Swiss dress which I liked so much. Underneath it not a stitch. She got off my lap a moment and lifting her dress she straddled me. We had a wonderful close-knit fuck. When it was over we sat for a while without unhitching, just silently chewing one another's lips and ears.
>
> Then we got up and, at the edge of the lake, we washed ourselves with our handkerchiefs. I was drying my cock with the tail of my shirt when Mara suddenly grasped my arm and pointed to something moving behind a bush. All I could see was the gleam of something bright. I quickly buttoned up my pants and taking Mara by the arm we regained the gravel path and started slowly walking in the opposite direction.
>
> "It was a cop, I'm sure," said Mara.[34]

There is, then, an anarchic quality to Miller's sex. He engages in passionate sex with total disregard for standards of propriety or societal customs and taboos. His unorthodox sexual behavior makes him, if not a species of pervert, a kind of "sexual outlaw."

But Miller's sex does more than just make him a kind of outlaw. Because his sexual hunger is rooted in

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[33] Ibid., p. 19.

[34] Ibid., p. 187.

passion and expressed anarchically it serves several purposes important to his spiritual anarchism.

Having partially succumbed[35] to the "paralysis and inertia" of the new world Miller rebels, is reborn, and in his new resolve to live becomes insatiably "hungry." Sexual hunger is an indication that Miller is truly alive, and his desire to escape "living death," his desire truly to live, leads him out of a meaningless job and out of a loveless marriage. Thus, sex becomes, in effect, the main instrument of his liberation.

In various ways sex is also a means of resisting and rebelling against the new order. While the world becomes a steel and concrete tomb filled with logic-minded robots--such as Karen Lundgren[36]--reproducing more steel and concrete, more machines, waging carefully planned and hideously cruel war against each other and mechanically performing sexual intercourse, Miller roams about hungrily in the fleshly, human, passionate Land of Fuck.

Further, it is through sex that the world may avoid becoming what the new order tends to make it: the final obscenity, a "fucked-out crater." Sex, not "sexual intercourse" but the passionate, mystically powerful sex of

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[35] Tropic of Capricorn and Sexus deal most extensively with this aspect of Miller's life.

[36] See Chapter III, pp. 48-50.

"the Land of Fuck," jolts the world out of its paralysis and inertia and "causes things to flow again."

If, as has been contended, sex is the vehicle of Miller's liberation, "Mona" is the embodiment of female sexuality.[37] Thus, in Tropic of Capricorn Miller describes Mona (also called "Mara") as the woman who was to "liberate him:

> Nothing of this which I am now recording was known to me at the time that I was going through the great change. Everything I endured was in the nature of a preparation for that moment when, putting on my hat one evening, I walked out of the office, out of my hitherto private life, and sought the woman who was to liberate me from a living death.[38]

And in Sexus Sylvia, a mysterious, beautiful woman suggests--even before he has met Mona--that he needs a woman to lead him out of the confinements of middle-class life:

> You were afraid that if I did ask you to do something to me you would not be able to refuse. You were perplexed because being in love with one woman, you already felt yourself the potential victim of another. It isn't a woman you need--it is an instrument to liberate yourself. You crave a more adventurous life, you want to break your chains.[39]

In the effort to be totally free of the bourgeois work-a-day world which prohibits experiment and limits

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[37]Later Mona's role changes quite markedly, and she represents a deathlike, stagnating influence. See, for example, Tropic of Capricorn, pp. 242-43.

[38]Tropic of Capricorn, p. 64.

[39]Sexus, p. 51.

experience and growth, he finds a woman, "Mona," whose mysterious sexual allurement extricates him from a loveless marriage, a dull job, neurotic friends, and finally even from the country that to him epitomizes the paralysis and inertia of the new order. Determined to live without the degradation of "earning a living," without money if need be, he walks out of the "Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company" office one bright afternoon and does not ever return. He leaves his wife and young child, severs ties with his friends, his family and, finally, with his country. Layer upon layer of "false self" peel away until the process expends itself in reaching "rock-bottom."

CHAPTER V

THE ROCK-BOTTOM MAN

> It is now the fall of my second year in Paris. I was sent here for a reason I have not yet been able to fathom.
>
> I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive.[1]

Thus, in the opening of Tropic of Cancer Miller describes the contrary aspects of the state of "rock-bottom." On the one hand it is a state of utter desolation, a state of "no money, no resources, no hopes." But at the same time it is, as shall be seen, a state in which the influence of externality is minimized, a state of, in a sense, "self-reliance."[2] Rather than being sunk in despair, then, Miller is, on the contrary "the happiest man alive." If "everything is gone" for Miller, still there is no real loss for everything he had was false, worthless. If he has nothing, he has at least a "clean slate":

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[1]Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer (New York, 1961), p. 1.

[2]Though Miller admires Thoreau, and has been influenced by Thoreau's thinking (see Chapter I for some examples) Miller's "self-reliance" is quite different from Thoreau's. Thoreau used the term mainly within a social context. But for Miller, as shall be seen, the term had cosmic significance.

> Everything which once I thought I had understood crumbled, and I was left with a clean slate. My friends, on the other hand, entrenched themselves more solidly in the little ditch of understanding which they had dug for themselves. They died comfortably in their little bed of understanding, to become useful citizens of the world. I pitied them, and in short order I deserted them one by one, without the slightest regret.[3]

With no money, no resources, no hopes, the possibilities of life do not shrink, but rather expand. In Miller's view the experiment of life can now truly begin for even the most basic of assumed "prerequisites" are gone, and one is left alone, with nothing to rely upon but oneself.[4]

Miller has abandoned the hope that salvation will come through some external agency and feels not despair but relief:

> Somehow the realization that nothing was to be hoped for had a salutary effect on me. For weeks and months, for years, in fact, all my life I had been looking forward to something happening, some extrinsic event that would alter my life, and now suddenly, inspired by the absolute hopelessness of everything, I felt relieved, felt as though a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders.[5]

The absolute futility of waiting for some external agency or event to alter one's life is frequently expressed

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[3]Henry Miller, Tropic of Capricorn (New York, 1961), p. 220.

[4]Being "left alone" had been Miller's deepest fear (see Tropic of Capricorn, p. 225). As he grows toward greater self-realization, however, the fear subsides.

[5]Tropic of Cancer, p. 89.

by Miller in terms of "weather" imagery. Thus, in the opening of Tropic of Cancer Miller says:

> Boris had given me a summary of his views. He is a weather prophet. The weather will continue bad, he says. There will be more calamities, more death, more despair. Not the slightest indication of change anywhere. . . . there is no escape. The weather will not change.[6]

Or, again, a bit later in the same work:

> But it's just because the chances are all against you, just because there is no little hope, that life is sweet over here. Day by day. No yesterdays and no tomorrows. The barometer never changes. . . .[7]

One aspect, then, of Miller's having hit "rock-bottom" involves his abandonment of all hope in external salvation. As such hope dies Miller experiences both a sense of desolation and of relief. Another aspect of "rock-bottom" is similarly ambivalent.

As has been outlined in the previous chapter, in the effort to be "liberated" Miller systematically negates one aspect of his personality and life after another. Thus he severs himself from his job, wife, family and country as well as from all associated values and habits of behavior. When he finally arrives at the "rock-bottom" of this process of negation he has on the one hand nearly annihilated himself, but at the same time has arrived at

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[6] Ibid., p. 1.

[7] Ibid., p. 135.

a viable starting point of self-realization. All that was not his true self has been negated, and if he has not made any positive steps toward self-realization he is at least at a "neutral" point:

> Everything that belongs to the past seems to have fallen into the sea; I have memories, but the images have lost their vividness, they seem dead and desultory, like timebitten mummies stuck in the quagmire. If I try to recall my life in New York I get a few splintered fragments, nightmarish and covered with verdigris. It seems as if my own proper existence had come to an end somewhere, just where exactly I can't make out. I'm not an American any more, nor a New Yorker, and even less a European, or a Parisian. I haven't any allegiance, any responsibilities, any hatreds, any worries, any prejudices, any passion. I'm neither for nor against. I'm a neutral.[8]

Reaching rock-bottom is a kind of death, then ("my own proper existence had come to an end somewhere"), but not a "final" death: it is, rather, the death which precedes rebirth. The idea of "rebirth" (not rebirths through many lives but many rebirths within one life) is central to Miller's thoughts on self-realization and shall be more fully discussed shortly. In Tropic of Capricorn, for example, Miller asserts:

> You have to be wiped out as a human being in order to be born again an individual. You have to be carbonized and mineralized in order to work upwards from the least common denominator of the self.[9]

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[8] Ibid., p. 137.

[9] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 35. On p. 83 of a collection of critical essays on Miller, edited by George Wickes, Henry Miller and the Critics (Carbondale, 1963),

As has been mentioned earlier, the self, to Miller, lies deep within the core of one's being--so deep within it is often referred to by Miller as a "nuclear speck." Liberation, then, is penetrating through all that is "false self" to the infinitesimal self within. When all the false self is cut away and one arrives at "rock-bottom," one arrives at that point beyond which nothing more can be removed, cut away, then the true self spontaneously begins to grow:

> The smell of linoleum, for some strange reason, will always make me fall apart and collapse on the floor. It is the smell of all the unnatural things which were glued together in me, which were assembled, so to say, by negative consent.
>
> It is only after the third meal that the morning gifts, bequeathed by the phony alliance of the ancestors, begin to drop away and the true rock of the self, the happy rock shears up out of the muck of the soul. With nightfall the pinhead universe begins to expand. It expands organically, from an infinitesimal nuclear speck, in the way that minerals or star clusters form.[10]

Once the "rocklike" self begins to grow, its growth continues silently and steadily:

Philip Rahv makes the following comment: "The peculiarly American affirmation voiced by Whitman was thus completely negated in Miller. Total negation instead of total affirmation!"

While Rahv's comment is accurate it nevertheless misses an important point. Miller keeps cutting away to get to the "core" of truth--to find out what is "essential" about himself: this is the direction of his process of self-realization. Whitman expands: what is "essential" to him is what is common to all men. Their effort is the same, then, even if the direction their "search" takes is opposite. And both will, in effect, "stop when they can go no farther."

[10] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 206.

> Just as the slightest breeze can set a vast forest in motion so, by some unfathomable impulse from within, the rocklike self can begin to grow, and in this growth nothing can prevail against it. It's like Jack Frost at work, and the whole world a windowpane. No hint of labor, no sound, no struggle, no rest; relentless, remorseless, unremitting, the growth of the self goes on.[11]

That the self is called "rocklike" rather directly links its nature with the state of "rock-bottom" itself. The present writer has maintained that "rock-bottom" is for Miller a starting point of self-realization. While this is true, Miller's further realization is that, in a sense, the starting point is also the goal itself, and the nature of the true self is "rocklike." Since Miller is not in any sense a "systematic" thinker[12] he does not explore the question of the nature of the self in a methodical, philosophical way. But it is clear from his writing that he means the term "rocklike" self to suggest certain definite features of the nature of the self.

To Miller the self is "rocklike" in the sense of "stable" and "permanent"--the only stable and permanent element, in fact, in an unstable, impermanent world. And Miller means to suggest not only stability in a

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[11] Ibid., p. 207.

[12] As is made clear in Chapter II, Miller deplores "systems" of all types. Thus, he prefers to think in intuitive leaps, with a Whitmanesque disregard for "contradictions."

physicalistic sense,[13] but also emotional, psychological stability. One who has realized his true self lives established in "rocklike" stability, equanamity, while all about him the world is in turbulent motion. One becomes, then, a "happy rock":

> You don't become ecstatic and you are not plunged into violent grief; you don't pray for rain, neither do you dance a jig. You live like a happy rock in the midst of the ocean; you are fixed while everything about you is in turbulent motion.[14]

Miller often speaks of self-realization in the Eastern terms of "enlightenment" or "Nirvana." The "rock" is a point of stability which stops the futile and endless rotation of the "wheel of destiny" (a standard Buddhist image for the futility of life in ignorance), and "plunges the being into full consciousness."[15] And in Hamlet Miller asserts:

> His [Milton's] Paradise represents--like the dream of the Buddhists--a Nirvana where there is no personality and hence no conflict. It is the expression of his wish to triumph over reality, over becoming. To be.[16]

For Miller, then, the self is something separate from the "Wheel of Destiny," and thus is in a sense

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[13] In other words, "imperishable": see Tropic of Capricorn, p. 206.

[14] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 331.

[15] Ibid., p. 332.

[16] Henry Miller, Hamlet (New York, 1943), p. 83.

transcendent.[17] It is associated with pure being, pure existence, "to be" rather than with the activity of the Wheel of Destiny: living, struggling, evolving, "becoming."

To put the whole matter in other terms, the reductionism of Miller's process of self-realization results in his finally identifying with the most basic constituent of his nature--the, in his terms, absolute "least common denominator" of the self--pure being, existence itself. To be "fully realized" in these terms (a matter which shall be more fully examined later) is to be fulfilled with existence itself: to have no needs or desires which would make anything more necessary than just existence itself. One can just "be" and "let things be."[17] Such a level of self-realization, in Miller's judgment, has been attained by very few: some Zen masters, the Buddha, Christ, Lao-Tzu.[18]

This essential identification with pure being, along with influences of Eastern thought, are the basis for his idealization of "doing nothing," "drifting with the

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[17]The question of "passivity," which these terms seem to suggest, is dealt with in Chapter VI.

[18]Yet it is important to note that Miller believes this level of development to be attainable by all. These men are simply those who have reached full realization--but they are not in any other sense a separate category of men.

tide," and a host of other expressions and attitudes which have been erroneously regarded as total passivity or as a kind of nihilism. But the question of Miller's "passivity" as well as his involvement with Eastern thought, principally Zen, will be considered later in the present paper.

To Miller the journey toward the rocklike self is not linear but circular. Again and again Miller arrives at rock-bottom, "dies," and is "born again." Miller believes that through this process the self begins to grow; one is "more and more oneself with each rebirth." Thus Miller's writing, from his earliest to his most recent, is permeated with images of rebirth.

Tropic of Cancer, for example, ends with the arrival of Spring; Tropic of Capricorn ends at Easter; Quiet Days in Clichy ends on the "third or fourth day of Spring," and various stories in Nights of Love and Laughter also conclude with the arrival of Spring. But the motif of rebirth is also built up in a more particularized way.

The process of rebirth is initially linked directly to Mona. As has been discussed in Chapter IV, Mona was, in Miller's judgment, the woman who rescued him from a living death, who precipitated his longed for liberation. In Sexus Miller asserts:

> Something that had been chained down, something that had struggled abortively to assert itself ever since I was a child and had brought my ego into the street for a glance around, now broke loose and went skyrocketing into the blue. Some phenomenal new being was sprouting with alarming

> rapidity from the top of my head, from the double crown which was mine from birth.[19]

And later in Sexus when he marries Mona:

> As I thought of all that lay ahead I began to grow, from within, as if from a small seed. I grew inches in the space of a block. It was in my heart that I felt the seed bursting.[20]

Events and places as well as people can nourish the seed of a new being within one and cause it to burst forth. Thus, in The Colossus of Maroussi Miller claims that realizations inspired by Agamemnon's tomb caused him to be "reborn":

> Other men are quicker to coordinate vision and action. But the point is that in Greece I finally achieved that coordination. I became deflated, restored to proper human proportions, ready to accept my lot and prepared to give of all that I have received. Standing in Agamemnon's tomb I went through a veritable rebirth.[21]

Rebirth continues beyond his involvement with Mona, beyond the circumstances or events which precipitate any particular rebirth, and Miller grows to realize that self-realization comes about only through a cyclical process of "deaths" and "rebirths":

> To be cured we must rise from our graves and throw off the cerements of the dead. Nobody can do it for another--it is a private affair which is best done collectively. We must die as egos

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[19]Henry Miller, Sexus (New York, 1965), p. 21.

[20]Ibid., p. 542.

[21]Henry Miller, The Colossus of Maroussi (New York, 1941), p. 231.

> and be born again in the swarm, not separate and self-hypnotized, but individual and related.[22]

And through this process of death and rebirth one is "more and more oneself":

> What fascinates me is that anything so dead and buried as I was could be resuscitated, and not just once, but inumerable times. And not only that, but each time I faded out I plunged deeper than ever into the void, so that with each resuscitation the miracle becomes greater. And never any stigmata. The man who is reborn is always the same man, more and more himself with each rebirth.[23]

Miller's deaths and rebirths, then, are of various sorts. Sometimes a particular life comes to an end in a natural way: he evolves past it, as, for example, when he meets Mona who leads him out of the confinements of middle-class life. Sometimes rebirths come quickly, in a flash of realization, as happens repeatedly through The Colossus of Maroussi (at Agamemnon's tomb, for example). But most frequently deaths result from the slow, painful process of "hitting rock-bottom." These deaths Miller sometimes terms "crucifixions": such crucifixions differ, however, from Christ's because they are all happy rather than sorrowful events:

> If one isn't crucified, like Christ, if one manages to survive, to go on living above and beyond the sense of desperation and futility, then another curious thing happens. It's as

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[22] Sexus, p. 426.

[23] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 231.

> though one had actually died and actually been resurrected again: one lives a supernormal life, like the Chinese. That is to say, one is unnaturally gay, unnaturally healthy, unnaturally indifferent. The tragic sense is gone: one lives on like a flower, a rock, a tree. . . .[24]

Crucifixions occur, but each is, as Miller subtitled the triology Sexus, Plexus, and Nexus, a "rosy crucifixion":

> The whole drama which the man of today is acting out through suffering does not exist for me: it never did actually. All my calvaries were rosy crucifixions, pseudo-tragedies to keep the fires of hell burning for the real sinners who are in danger of being forgotten.[25]

If one is "more and more oneself with each rebirth," there must be a point at which one would be "most oneself." The goal of the process of rebirth shall be examined in the next chapter.

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[24] Ibid., p. 63.

[25] Ibid., p. 325.

CHAPTER VI

ROSY CRUCIFIXIONS

The "rosy crucifixions," the deaths and rebirths which are a vital part of self-realization, are progressing toward a definite, if sketchily defined, end.[1] That is, if one is "more and more oneself with each rebirth," there must be a point at which one is "most oneself," when the process of self-realization would be in some sense complete. That goal will be examined in the present chapter, but first a closer look at the ongoing process itself might be in order.

Prior to the attainment of the goal of self-realization, at which point, presumably, one would be living one's true nature, Miller (as has been mentioned in Chapter II) plays three principal roles. The roles, which are in a sense the behavioral components of his spiritual anarchism, might be labeled "the clown," "the criminal," and "the saint."[2]

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[1]Though the goal is not clearly defined in the sense of being the logical culmination of the steps leading toward it, the goal is nevertheless compelling for Miller.

[2]Many parallels might be drawn between Miller's work and the work of Jean Genet. These three roles, which

Because Miller deeply distrusts language and the verbalization of feelings and experiences, but at the same time desires to find expression for such feelings and experiences, he is strongly attracted to the non-verbal but highly expressive "clown." Miller sometimes speaks quite literally of being a clown:

> I should have been a clown; it would have afforded me the widest range of expression. But I underestimated the profession. Had I become a clown, or even a vaudeville entertainer, I would have been famous. People would have appreciated me precisely because they would not have understood; but they would have understood that I was not to be understood. That would have been a relief, to say the least.[3]

The clown does not comment upon disorder and anarchy, he is the embodiment of anarchy.[4] Just as the frailty of the china shop becomes emphatically apparent upon the entrance of a bull, so the clown's anarchic behavior reveals the frailty of the existing social

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are intimately interrelated for Miller are similarly interwoven in Genet's work, particularly in Our Lady of the Flowers. Genet's anarchism quite naturally leads him into the life of a criminal, and his criminality, like the criminality of Miller's anarchic pre-school children (see Chapter I), is the basis for a kind of "moral superiority," or "sainthood" (see Sartre's Saint Genet for a lengthy analysis of Genet's criminality as a basis for his "sainthood").

[3]Henry Miller, Tropic of Capricorn (New York, 1961), p. 55.

[4]As Miller has stated in his book about a clown, The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder (New York, 1948): A clown is a poet in action. He is the story which he enacts (p. 5).

order. The clown, for Miller, is a cream-pie-in-the-face of sentimentality, pretentiousness, hypocrisy, and he plays the role even as a child. When one of Miller's childhood friends lay dying of a lingering illness Miller relates:

> Well, at first I was probably sorry for him and perhaps now and then I called at his house to inquire about him; but after a month or two had elapsed I grew quite callous about his suffering. I said to myself he ought to die and the sooner he does the better it will be, and having thought thus I acted accordingly. . . . I remember the funeral too--what a disgraceful affair it was. There they were, friends and relatives all congregated about the bier and all of them bawling like sick monkeys. The mother especially gave me a pain in the ass. She was such a rare, spiritual creature, a Christian Scientist, I believe, and though she didn't believe in disease and didn't believe in death either, she raised such a stink that Christ himself would have risen from the grave. But not her beloved Jack! No, Jack lay there cold as ice and rigid and unbeckonable. He was dead and there were no two ways about it. I knew it and I was glad of it. I didn't waste any tears over it. I couldn't say that he was better off because after all "he" had vanished. He was gone and with him the sufferings he had endured and the sufferings he had unwittingly inflicted on others. Amen! I said to myself, and with that, being slightly hysterical, I let a loud fart--right beside the coffin.[5]

A similar revulsion for pretentiousness and hypocrisy occurs later when Miller attends a concert in Paris. The house is filled with comfortable, overfed bourgeoisie, a few of whom are struggling to keep awake. The rest are

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[5]Tropic of Capricorn, p. 15.

in a stupor of after-dinner convalescence. All are, in Miller's view, complacent, comfortable, "composed to order":

> The music is slipping away from me, now that the drums have ceased. People everywhere are composed to order. Under the exit light is a Werther sunk in despair; he is leaning on his two elbows, his eyes are glazed. . . The woman with the red hat who is dozing over the rail--marvelous if she were to have a hemorrhage! if suddenly she spilled a bucketful on those stiff shirts below. Imagine these bloody no-accounts going home from the concert with blood on their dickies![6]

The "clown" also has another function. Miller becomes a clown when he is at the depths of depression, hopelessness:

> When a situation gets so bad that no solution seems possible there is left only murder or suicide. Or both. These failing one becomes a buffoon.[7]

Thus, at a particularly painful point in his relationship with Mona instead of bringing her a black dress in which to mourn the death of her father Miller finds a large, empty room in the "Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company" and roller skates with a Cuban boy:

> 'Now I'll show you a few fancy turns that I learned in the Tyrol' I said, folding my arms in front of me and raising one leg in the air. The thought that never in her life would Mona suspect what I was doing this minute gave me a demonic joy. As I passed and repassed little Juan, who

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[6]Henry Miller, Tropic of Cancer (New York, 1961), p. 70.

[7]Henry Miller, Nexus (New York, 1965), p. 36.

> was now sitting on the window-sill absorbed in the spectacle, I made faces at him--first sad and mournful, then gay, then insouciant, then hilarious, then meditative, then stern, then idiotic. I tickled myself in the armpits, like a monkey; I waltzed like a trained bear; I squatted low like a cripple; I sang in a cracked key, then shouted like a maniac. . . .
>
> And all the time I was thinking of Mona wandering about in the house of mourning, waiting for her mourning dress, her black gloves, and what not.[8]

Miller, as a clown, is not always so negativistic a figure.[9] Miller also acts the clown out of sheer delight in madcap, zany clowning. When, for example, Miller meets the "half-cracked" mayor of a mountain village in Greece:

> Seeing that he was half-cracked I felt at ease and, since the Durrells were not there to warn me against such antics, I began to do my own cracked song and dance for him, which was to imitate male and female movie stars, a Chinese mandarin, a bronco, a high diver and such like. He seemed to be vastly amused and for some reason was particularly interested in my Chinese performance. I began to talk Chinese to him, not knowing a word of the language, whereupon to my astonishment he answered me in Chinese, his own Chinese, which was just as good as mine. The next day he brought an interpreter with him for the express purpose of telling me a whopping lie, to wit, that some years ago a Chinese junk had been stranded on this very beach and that some four hundred Chinamen had put up on the beach until their boat was repaired. He said he liked the Chinese very much, that they were a

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[8]Henry Miller, Sexus (New York, 1965), p. 527.

[9]Though Miller is, as clown, usually negativistic. For another example, see Nexus, p. 93.

> fine people, and that their language was very musical, very intelligent. I asked did he mean intelligible, but no, he meant intelligent. The Greek language was intelligent too. And the German language. Then I told him I had been in China, which was another lie, and after describing that country I drifted to Africa and told him about the Pygmies with whom I had also lived for a while. He said they had some Pygmies in a neighboring village. It went on like this from one lie to another for several hours, during which we consumed some wine and olives. Then someone produced a flute and we began to dance, a veritable St. Vitus' dance which went on interminably to finish in the sea where we bit one another like crabs and screamed and bellowed in all the tongues of the earth.[10]

Miller's most consistently negative, aggressive pose is the "criminal." As criminal Miller expresses the deeply anarchic hatred for social order which permeates so much of his writing. (The role of the criminal has, to a large extent, been the basis for the simplistic critical view of Miller's anarchism discussed in the first chapter of the present paper.) Miller's criminal behavior is a vital part of his spiritual anarchism for as criminal he is beyond the restrictions and confinements of established society. Miller destroys property, threatens and uses violence against figures of authority, and generally attacks individual and institutional representatives of the established order. As criminal, then, Miller is the perpetual "outsider," and as such free from the conventions which bind those who "belong."

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[10]Henry Miller, The Colossus of Maroussi (New York, 1941), pp. 18-19.

Just as Miller judges himself to be quite "naturally" a clown, so he is a criminal in the same inevitable, natural way:

> The turn of a phrase, the choice of an unfortunate adjective, the facility with which words came to my lips, the allusions to subjects which were taboo--everything conspired to set me off as an outlaw, as an enemy of society. No matter how well things began sooner or later they smelled me out.[11]

And in Sexus a mysterious, clairvoyant woman tells him:

> If you were to act out your thoughts you would probably become a criminal. You have always the choice of going two ways. It is not the moral sense which deters you from going the wrong way--it is your instinct to do only that which will serve you best in the long run.[12]

When Miller accepts a teaching job at a small boarding school for boys in Dijon, France, his behavior toward other professors is characterized by mannerisms of speech and posture typical of a "thirties hoodlum":

> Anyway, I belonged to another hierarchy. They wouldn't even share a louse with the likes of me. They made me so damned irritated, just to look at them, that I used to curse them under my breath when I saw them coming. I used to stand there, leaning against a pillar, with a cigarette in the corner of my mouth and my hat down over my eyes, and when they got within hailing distance I would let squirt a good gob and up with the hat. I didn't even bother to open my trap and bid them the time of day. Under my breath I simply said: 'Fuck you, Jack!' and let it go at that.[13]

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[11] Tropic of Capricorn, p. 55.

[12] Sexus, p. 53.

[13] Tropic of Cancer, p. 251.

And Miller does more than just strike the poses and use the gutter language of criminals. He plans violence, and even uses violence against "enemies."[14] One of his enemies, for example, is a man named Spivak, a co-worker at the "Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company" against whom Miller directs all his hatred of the company:

> Spivak came to mind. He was watching me like a hawk the last few days. My hatred for the telegraph life was concentrated in my hatred for him. . . . Must polish him off somehow before they fire me. I kept thinking how I could lure him to a dark wharf and have some obliging friend push him overboard.[15]

The criminal tone of voice continues as Miller discusses schemes to "get Spivak":

> As soon as Spivak appeared on the scene, no matter in what remote, outlying office, I was tipped off. I used to lie awake nights thinking it out like a safe-cracker--how I would trip him up and bring about his dismissal. I made a vow that I would hang on to the job until I had knifed him. It gave me pleasure to send him phony messages under false names in order to give him a bum steer, covering him with ridicule and causing endless confusion. I even had people write him letters threatening his life. I would get Curley, my chief stooge, to telephone him from time to time, saying that his house was on fire or that his wife had been taken to the hospital. . . . I had a gift for this underhanded sort of warfare.[16]

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[14]Generally the violence Miller commits is not serious, but there are exceptions: the rockfight described in Tropic of Capricorn (see Chapter I, pp. 20-21 of the present paper) results in murder.

[15]Sexus, p. 118.

[16]Ibid., p. 22.

And Miller's gift for the underhanded consists in more than just threats. To what extent violence was ever acted out against Spivak is never completely clear. But, for example, when Miller is forced to leave an apartment because of failure to pay rent he delights in not merely damaging but virtually destroying the apartment:

> In ten minutes the place was a wreck. Everything that could be smeared was smeared with ketchup, vinegar, mustard, flour, broken eggs. On the chairs they pasted the fly paper. The garbage they strewed all over the floor, grinding it in with their heels. Best of all was the ink work. This they splattered over the walls, the rugs and the mirrors. The toilet paper they made garlands of to festoon the bespattered furniture.
>
> Stanley and I, for our part, stood on the table and decorated the ceiling with ketchup and mustard, with flour and cereals which we made into a thick paste. The sheets and covers we ripped with knives and scissors. With the big bread knife we gouged out huge chunks of the horsehair sofa. Around the toilet we spread some moldy marmalade and honey. Everything which could be turned upside down, dismantled, disconnected or torn apart we turned upside down, dismantled, disconnected and ripped apart.[17]

"The saint" is perhaps Miller's most difficult-to-understand role, partly because Miller seems to take seriously certain hardly credible aspects of the role. Though Miller would scorn the Christian examples of saints, throughout his writing he sees parallels between himself and Christ.[18] And like some more conventional

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[17]Henry Miller, Plexus (New York, 1965), p. 300.

[18]For example, the idea of "crucifixions" and the fact (often cited by Miller) that he was born on the 26th

saints Miller shares last crumbs of food with friends, gives last pennies to the poor and even literally gives away the coat off his back in the middle of winter.[19] Repeatedly in his works seers of various sorts--clairvoyants, astrologers--recognize that he is an "extraordinary" man and prophesize that he will "never die," that he will "vanish into light" in Tibet, and so forth. Though Miller is always disbelieving, his disbelief seems based in polite modesty rather than in true incredulity, and he never suspects, as his reader may, that he is being "put on."

But the role of saint has a more important dimension in being interwoven with the goal of self-realization.

As Miller evolves, as he passes through "rosy crucifixions," each life becomes material for his autobiographical writing.[20] Since his writing is so intimately linked with his life, then, the final goal of the process of self-realization--a kind of sainthood--may be expressed in terms of writing.

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of December after a prolonged labor. See p. 88 and p. 230 of Tropic of Capricorn for other parallels drawn by Miller.

[19]Numerous such incidents are described by Alfred Perles in his book My Friend, Henry Miller (New York, 1956).

[20]Miller, in one of his most well-known quotes, has said that he wanted to become a writer but instead was granted only the power to write about the process of becoming a writer (see Henry Miller on Writing, New York, 1964).

To Miller one writes until the symbiotic processes of living and writing culminate in "writing into silence"--writing until one no longer has any personal or artistic need to write: no personal need because one has attained fulfillment, at which point personal needs vanish, and no artistic need because, in Miller's view, on the level of fulfillment one's life becomes itself a work of art. Silence, then, marks the point of fulfillment in the process of self-realization.[21]

Though a writer, Miller is not unduly upset at the prospect of "silence" partly because, unlike most writers, Miller is not in love with words. On the contrary, that language is a grossly inadequate medium for communicating experience is a frequently expressed idea in Miller's writing.[22] Moreover, art in general must never and can never be a substitute for experience; the only justification for art is in augmenting, enriching life:[23]

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[21]As has been mentioned, to Miller the self is identified with pure existence itself, with "pure being." Complete self-realization, then, would, within this context, have to be "contentless" in the way silence may be said to be "contentless." In Miller's view, in the state of complete self-realization (a state Miller often refers to as "Nirvana" or "Grace" or "enlightenment") one simply is.

[22]Thus he speaks, for example, of the "constipation and paralysis" of words and thought. The more general question of his "anti-intellectualism," a closely related matter, will be discussed in the next chapter.

[23]This is the basis of his criticism of Joyce and Proust in "The Universe of Death," an essay in The Cosmological Eye (New York, 1939).

> The art of dreaming when wide awake will be in the power of every man one day. Long before that books will cease to exist, for when men are wide awake and dreaming their powers of communication (with one another and with the spirit that moves all men) will be so enhanced as to make writing seem like the harsh and raucous squawks of an idiot.[24]

And, again:

> And this is what every great artist comes to learn en route--that the process in which he is involved has to do with another dimension of life, that by identifying himself with this process he augments life. In this view of things he is permanently removed--and protected--from that insidious death which seems to triumph all about him . . . through art then, one finally establishes contact with reality: that is the great discovery.[25]

Thus, Miller frequently speaks of his expectation of reaching a point of personal development where writing will be superfluous, as in this passage from The Colossus of Maroussi:

> In the last year or two in Paris I had been hinting to my friends that I would one day give up writing altogether, give it up voluntarily--at the moment when I would feel myself in posession of the greatest power and mastery. The study of Balzac, which was my final work in Paris, had only corroborated a thought which had begun to crystalize in me, namely that the life of the artist, his devotion to art, is the highest and last phase of egotism in man. There are friends who tell me that I will never stop writing, that I can't. But I did stop, for a good interval while in Greece, and I know that I can in the future, any time I wish, and for good. I feel under no compulsion to do any particular thing. I feel, on the contrary, a growing

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[24] Sexus, p. 28.

[25] Ibid., p. 289.

> liberation, supplemented more and more by a desire to serve the world in the highest possible way. What that way is I have not yet determined, but it seems clear to me that I shall pass from art to life, to exemplify whatever I have mastered through art by my living.[26]

And, a bit later in the same work:

> Art, like religion, it now seems to me, is only a preparation, an initiation into a way of life. The goal is liberation, freedom, which means assuming a greater responsibility. To continue writing beyond the point of self-realization seems futile and arresting.[27]

Moreover, Miller associates such "silence" with the highest levels of personal, spiritual attainment:

> I no longer have any illusions about the importance of words. Lao-tzu put all his wisdom into a few indestructible pages. Jesus never wrote a line. As for the Buddha, he is remembered for the wordless sermon he gave while holding a flower for his listeners to regard. . . .[28]

Or, more explicitly:

> And man, when he attains fulfillment, a state of grace, if you like, ceases to play the creator. I mean that he no longer feels compelled to draw, paint, describe in words or music what he sees around him. He can let things be. He discovers, just by looking the world in the face, that everything is a bit of a masterpiece. Why paint? For whom? Enjoy what you see. That's quite enough.[29]

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[26] The Colossus of Maroussi, p. 206.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Henry Miller, Stand Still Like the Hummingbird (New York, 1962), p. 82.

[29] Ibid., p. 38.

As has been suggested earlier in the present paper,[30] then, the end of self-realization in Miller's view recaptures the "divinity" of man; it is a state of total fulfillment, a state of grace in which one can "let things be."[31] Miller's spiritual anarchism does not heed what are traditionally seen to be "human limitations," and his vision of self-realization encompasses what is usually thought to be "superhuman," "divine." Thus, when Miller speaks of fully-realized men he speaks of Zen masters, Hindu saints, the Buddha, Jesus, Lao-tzu. And, in Miller's view, at the level of spiritual development these men represent one would have no further need for artistic expression.

Throughout his writing Miller seems to have every expectation of attaining such a level of development,[32] of writing into the silence of fulfillment. As shall be discussed in the next chapter, only recently, as Miller approaches ninety, has he expressed doubts about attaining the goal of self-realization.

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[30]See Chapter I.

[31]See Chapter V.

[32]Indeed, Miller insists on this with his exhortations to "Surpass the Buddha!" etc.

CHAPTER VII

THE PASSIVE MAN AND THE CRITICS

Present day critics are in general agreement that Miller's early books, primarily Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn, received critical attention out of proportion to their genuine literary significance. With the publication in France of Tropic of Cancer followed by Black Spring and Tropic of Capricorn Miller became a cause célèbre, and the question of the literary significance of the books was diminished by the "larger" question of censorship, artistic freedom vs. legal restriction and so forth. The controversiality of the books centered almost exclusively on their explicit sexual content, and when in the early sixties the question of their suppression was finally settled in the American courts, interest in Miller's work declined.

Thus, many critics contend that though there has been at times a whirlwind of critical activity surrounding Miller, he has nevertheless received little responsible critical attention.[1] Most critics have focused rather

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[1]For example, William Gordon, The Mind and Art of Henry Miller (Baton Rouge, 1967); Kingsley Widmer, Henry

exclusively upon the "sensational" novels--essentially Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn and Sexus--and ignored the more than two dozen other titles. And few critics have looked beyond the sexuality in Miller's writing to judge Miller in some total, comprehensive way.

Consequently, to seek some indication of Miller's significance through a survey of relevant criticism is hardly fruitful. Further difficulty is added by the fact that, as has been mentioned, respected critics have generally remained quiet, if not silent, regarding Miller's merits, and those who have been vocal have disagreed sharply.[2]

Miller (New York, 1963); and George Wickes, ed., Henry Miller and the Critics, all contend that Miller has not received enough responsible criticism.

[2]If there is any point of general agreement, however, it is that Miller is at least an influential minor writer. In his book, Henry Miller (New York, 1963), Kingsley Widmer, for example, notes:

"Critics have rightly noted, for example, that a brilliant contemporary novel, J. P. Donlevy's The Ginger Man has the wild nihilistic humor of the Henry Miller tradition. . . . More generally Miller may have provided a direction of rebel-buffoonery, for such comedies of alienation as Algren's A Walk on the Wild Side, Ellison's Invisible Man, Bellow's Henderson, and, most certainly, the current work of Norman Mailer."

Miller's influence on "the beats" might also have been mentioned. Like Miller beats were anarchic and regarded their anarchism as a means of attaining a high level of spiritual development ("beat" was, Kerouac insisted, short for "beatific). Like Miller beats were attracted to Eastern philosophies, principally Zen, and attempted to "tune in" to an apparently chaotic "higher order," a "truer reality," through jazz and drugs. Many of Kerouac's characters even combine the Milleresque roles of "clown," "criminal," "saint" (Dean Moriarity in On the Road, for example).

One responsible critic who did not remain quiet, however, was George Orwell. Orwell wrote complimentary reviews of Tropic of Cancer and of Black Spring virtually as soon as they were published, and in 1940 wrote a rather lengthy essay entitled "Inside the Whale," which was the first major critical appraisal of Miller's work and of Miller's stature as an artist. The essay is significant, not only as the first lengthy consideration of Miller by a responsible critic, but also because in some ways it set the tone for subsequent criticism.

To Orwell Miller is a kind of archetypal "ordinary man" whose main trait is the main trait of all ordinary men, passivity:

> But precisely because, in one sense, he is passive to experience, Miller is able to get nearer to the ordinary man than is possible to more purposive writers. For the ordinary man is also passive. Within a narrow circle (home life, and perhaps the trade union of local politics) he felt himself master of his fate, but against major events he is as helpless as against the elements. So far from endeavoring to influence the future, he simply lies down and lets things happen to him.[3]

In attempting to assess Miller's place in modern literature Widmer concludes:

"The discordant lyric, the aslant picaresque, the personal revery, the satiric apocalypse, and especially grotesque poetic comedy seem the most likely and responsive forms for the present. Thus, I suggest that, while Miller is a minor writer, he may--in his best work--have a major significance." (p. 157)

[3]George Orwell, "Inside the Whale," in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol I (New York, 1968), p. 500.

Miller's voice, then, is a "voice from the crowd":

> It is a voice from the crowd, from the underling, from the third-class carriage, from the ordinary, non-political, non-moral, passive man.[4]

To Orwell, whatever else might be the limitations of such a voice, it is at least a distinctly human voice, a voice which, like "Prufrock's," keeps alive "the human heritage" by its non-cooperation with all that destroys humanity:

> If I had been a soldier fighting in the Great War, I would sooner have got hold of "Prufrock" than The First Hundred Thousand or Horatio Bottomley's Letters to the Boys in the Trenches. I should have felt, like Mr. Forster, that by simply standing aloof and keeping touch with pre-war emotions, Eliot was carrying on the human heritage. What a relief it would have been at such a time, to read about the hesitations of a middle-aged highbrow with a bald spot! So different from bayonet drill! After the bombs and the food queues and the recruiting posters, a human voice! What a relief!
>
> But, after all, the war of 1914-18 was only a heightened moment in an almost continuous crisis. At this date it hardly even needs a war to bring home to us the disintegration of our society and the increasing helplessness of all decent people. It is for this reason that I think that the passive, non-cooperative attitude implied in Henry Miller's work is justified. Whether or not it is an expression of what people ought to feel, it probably comes somewhere near to expressing what they do feel. Once again it is the human voice among the bomb-explosions, a friendly American voice, "innocent of public-spiritedness." No sermons, merely the subjective truth. And along those lines, apparently, it is still possible for a good novel to be written. Not necessarily an edifying novel, but a novel worth

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[4] Ibid., p. 501.

> reading and likely to be remembered after it is read.[5]

Since Orwell's essay was published in 1940 virtually every major criticism of Miller has dealt with the question of "passivity." Evaluations of the issue vary with different critics but almost all accept, if only tacitly, that Miller does represent "the passive man."

For someone like William Gordon, also a responsible critic and much more recent than Orwell, Miller's passivity is one of the most objectionable features of his work because in Gordon's judgment the necessity for actively choosing is a practical reality of existence:

> His "philosophical writing" presentsus with the artist of life who has in a sense arrived, who already accepts. The novels portray the painful process of birth which it took to get there. The two are in this sense complementary. Still, when Miller goes on one of his flights he is not easy to believe. The "willing suspension of disbelief" for many has been impossible. For them, I suspect, the man Miller is always grinning through the mask, even the tragic mask; and they become uncomfortably aware of what they feel is a pose.[6]

Though the question of passivity is a central, often pivotal, question in Miller criticism, the present writer suggests the question itself might profitably be re-examined in the light of Miller's spiritual anarchism. The answers to the question of Miller's passivity are

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[5] Ibid., p. 524.

[6] Gordon, p. 75.

irrelevant because the question itself is inappropriate and arises only because Miller's anarchic process of self-realization is not fully understood.

More specifically, the question of Miller's passivity arises because that aspect of the process of self-realization called "hitting rock-bottom" (discussed in Chapter V) is not properly understood. As has been suggested, the disintegration of personality Miller repeatedly experiences is, to Miller, a necessary part of the growth of the true self. One aspect after another of Miller's "false self" falls away. Thus, he leaves his wife, family, job, country, friends, even finally leaves Mona herself. Through this entire process Miller may, in his darkest moments, weep, contemplate suicide, bemoan his fate but he never resists the process itself. Thus he is thought to be "accepting," "passive." But Miller views the whole process as irresistable and necessary. The question of acceptance or non-acceptance, the question of "passivity," then, is not an appropriate question.

Another cause for the widespread judgment of "passivity" is critical misunderstanding of the final goal of self-realization, as Miller views it. As has been outlined, the final goal of self-realization consists in identification with existence itself, with "pure being."[7] For this reason, Miller speaks of "doing

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[7]See Chapter VI.

nothing" of "drifting with the tide" and uses a host of other terms which are taken to be expressions of total passivity. But it must be remembered that for Miller the final stage of self-realization recaptures the "divinity" of man; it is a state of total fulfillment and peace. Surely such a state is to be distinguished from the hopelessness and helplessness of "passivity."

In The Mind and Art of Henry Miller William Gordon discusses Miller's envisioned goal of self-realization in terms somewhat similar to those proposed in the present paper. Gordon uses the term "cosmic consciousnes":

> We have finally to examine Miller's cosmic consciousness as an element of his own experience. The feeling of being at one with the universe has been sought after since men have recorded their struggle with themselves and their environment. It has been called in recent psychological literature the "oceanic feeling."[8]

And Gordon, following the main thesis of his book (which is to place Miller within the Romantic tradition) sees "cosmic consciousness" as the latest gift of the romantic idea to the modern world:

> Cosmic consciousness, the experience of unity, is the latest gift of the romantic idea to the modern world. More and more writers have adopted the view that the industrial world is a world of death, that men are, in fact, dying of ennui and restlessness. The Romantics foresaw the dangers which the trends of their time held; those dangers were reinterpreted by Whitman for his times. Miller has attempted to give them new form in our century.[9]

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[8] Gordon, p. 219.

[9] Ibid., p. 220.

Miller himself reacted quite strongly against this assertion of Gordon's, and, indeed, against the entire notion of his being an extension of the Romantic tradition.[10] To Miller such claims ignored, or at least unduly diminished the importance of, one of his most important influences--Zen.

There is some reason to believe Miller exaggerates his involvement with Zen. He did not ever, like some other American bohemians of his time, practice za-zen (Zen meditation) or attend a Zen monastery and initiate formal study with a master. His knowledge of Zen came exclusively through books, chiefly Alan Watts' books on Zen.[11] He was not, then, even widely read in Zen, or in any way a serious student of Zen writings.

Nevertheless, Miller complains that critics have failed to deal adequately with the significance of Zen in his work, and since his involvement with Zen is yet another reason for his alleged "passivity," and since each of Miller's anarchic roles (the rebel, the clown, and the saint) can be seen to correspond to certain main features of Zen a brief look at the appeal of Zen for Miller might be in order.

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[10]See Henry Miller and William Gordon, Artist and Critic (Baton Rouge, 1969).

[11]And of Watts' books, primarily The Spirit of Zen (New York, 1968).

Alan Watts[12] describes Zen as "philosophy without words" and as a method of direct pointing at experience and at the self. He cites a short Zen poem:

> A special transmission outside Scriptures
> No dependence upon words and letters;
> Direct pointing to the mind of man;
> Seeing into one's own nature.[13]

Miller is not an analytic, systematic thinker. Only a philosophy which relied upon intuitive leaps and flashes of understanding could be compatible with his own mind.

Moreover, Miller has been called "anti-intellectual." The charge is not so much false as it is misleading. As has been noted in Chapter I, what has been taken for anti-intellectualism is partly a deep-seated distrust of language. Zen is similarly "anti-intellectual." The reward for giving a thought-out, articulate answer to a Zen master's koan (a kind of illuminating riddle) is generally a solid whack from the master's staff. The koan itself is designed to baffle the intellect (such as, to take the best-known koan, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?") and the answer has no rational connection to the question. Within this framework the question and answer procedure, then, is intended to propel the mind in the direction of the higher truths which are beyond logic

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[12]Though Watts is a westerner, Miller takes him as an authority on Zen.

[13]Alan Watts, The Spirit of Zen (New York, 1958), p. 50.

and rationality. In some ways, then, Zen is the fulfillment of Miller's longing to transcend the "constipation and paralysis" of thought and language.

Historically Zen Buddhism developed as a reaction against the highly formalized and ritualized religion that had grown from the Buddha's teaching. The earliest masters consciously rebelled against what seemed to be an emphasis on doctrine rather than on experience, on the performance of ritual rather than on expansion of consciousness. The quality of rebellion--of unconventionality, iconoclasm--remained as one of the outstanding features of Zen and was no doubt a source of attraction to the rebellious, anarchic Miller. Watts, in the book on Zen most often referred to by Miller, The Spirit of Zen, relates a Zen story illustrative of this spirit of rebelliousness, of iconoclasm:

> One winter night Tan-hsia took shelter in a temple, and finding that the fire was going out he took down one of the wooden figures of the Buddha from the altar and placed it on the embers. When the keeper of the temple discovered what had been done he was furious at such an act of sacrilege and began to scold Tan-hsia for his irreverence. But Tan-hsia merely scratched about among the ashes, remarking, "I am gathering the holy relics from the burnt ashes."
>
> "How," asked the keeper, "can you get holy relics from a wooden Buddha?"
>
> "If there are no holy relics," replied Tan-hsia, "this is certainly not a Buddha and I am committing no sacrilege. May I have the two remaining Buddhas for my fire?"[14]

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[14] Ibid.

Unlike most spiritualistic disciplines Zen is not characterized by solemnity, but is often in fact playful and humorous. Zen masters are frequently described or portrayed playing one of Miller's favorite roles--the clown:

> The particular humour of Zen is found in many of the pictures which the masters have painted of each other. Seldom do we find solemn and dignified personages, but rather lively caricatures of absurdly fat or gnarled little men, roaring with laughter or swearing at some unfortunate disciple who has been unable to find a quick answer for an impossible question. There is one delightful picture of a little bald-head man leaning on a crooked staff with his tiny eyes sparkling with amusement at two cocks having a scrap in the foreground, while another shows the venerated Sixth Patriarch (Hui Neng), wearing a few shabby rags, engaged in pulling some holy scripture to pieces like a wild maniac. Frequently the Zen masters used to refer to each other as 'old rice-bags' and with other uncomplimentary terms, not out of any professional jealousy, but because it amused them to think that they and their wise and venerated brothers were supposed by ordinary standards to be so especially holy, whereas they had all realized that everything was holy, even cooking-pots and odd leaves blown about by the wind, and that there was nothing particularly venerable about themselves at all.[15]

The goal of the Zen initiate is to attain final satori, or enlightenment, and thus, like Miller, a kind of sainthood. For the initiate, the final flash of illumination brings with it complete disintegration of

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[15] Ibid., p. 34.

the sense of "self" and "non-self."[16] He experiences the oneness of all creation, like the "oceanic feeling" of Gordon, and this sense of oneness brings peace beyond description.

According to Watts, satori is most often gained precisely at that point at which the initiate gives up all hope of attaining satori. Thus, the idea of not trying, of "letting go" of "doing nothing" is essential to Zen, and it is an important idea for Miller as well. Miller's writing is filled with phrases (such as "drifting with the flux") which similarly cultivates an attitude of "letting go," but are taken to be expressions of passivity. The "passivity," however, like the "passivity" of "hitting rock-bottom" is deliberate and purposive,[17] not passivity born of submission, weakness, indifference. Watts clarifies the importance of "letting go" in terms of the koan solution which precedes satori:

> Thus when the disciple comes to the final point where the Koan absolutely refuses to be grasped, he comes also to the realization that life can never be grasped, never possessed or made to stay

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[16] As Watts says in the "conclusion" of The Spirit of Zen: "When at last it is realized that the shadow can never be caught, there is a sudden 'turning about,' a flash of satori, and in the light of the sun the dualism of self and shadow vanishes; whereat man perceives that what he was choosing was only the unreal image of the one true Self--of that which he ever was, is and shall be. At last he has found Enlightenment."

[17] See Chapter V.

> still. Whereupon he 'lets go,' and this letting go is the acceptance of life as life, as that which cannot be made anyone's property, which is always free and spontaneous and unlimited. The Koan is a way of presenting the central problem of life in an intensified form. For the final impasse of the Koan, of the living phrase, magnifies the impasse always reached by those who try to clutch anything that is alive in their desire that it may be possessed and made to surrender its own life to theirs. Yet they can never take hold of its life; all that they can have is its corpse, which must in time decay also. Therefore the Zen disciple is given something which cannot be killed by definition and analysis; he must try to grasp it alive, and the moment he realizes, finally and absolutely, that it cannot be grasped, he lets go, understanding in a flash what a fool he has been to deny the right of all things to live by trying to grasp them for his own. Thus at this moment he attains freedom of the spirit, for he realizes the suffering inherent in man's attempt to shut the wind in a box, to keep life alive without letting it live.[18]

Miller never gives any indication within his writing of having attained the goal of self-realization. Though nearing ninety, and with the great outpouring of writing now reduced to a trickle, he has not yet written into his anticipated silence of fulfillment.

There is no indication that those beliefs and attitudes described within the present paper as "spiritual anarchism" have in any way diminished in importance for Miller, but there are signs of doubtfulness that he himself will attain what he has envisioned. In a "Draconian postscript" to a recent collection of critical articles, Henry Miller and the Critics, Miller suggests that the

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[18] Watts, p. 75.

process of self-realization may be endless. He says, alluding to his failure to have attained "silence":

> Whither now, asks the insoluble fish. If I knew, I would have no need to write another word. One keeps searching and seeking, ever onward, and in the back of one's head lies the tormenting thought or the comforting one, if one can reconcile himself to it, that perhaps there is no end to this seeking and searching, that even if one turned oneself inside out there would still be more to reveal, more to discover.[19]

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[19]Henry Miller, postscript, George Wickes, ed., Henry Miller and the Critics (Carbondale, 1963).

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